

## STATEMENT DA165

## APOSTLES FOR TODAY?

It is sometimes claimed (for example, by the Mormon church, and by the Christian organization known as Gospel Outreach) that God intends for the church to have the office of apostle operative today. The Scriptures, however, indicate that the apostleship was strictly a first-century office.

Jesus trained the Twelve to be preachers, teachers, and evangelists for Him after His death and resurrection (John 14:17; Matthew 16:18-19; 18:17-18; etc.). The apostles would speak with authority, not only because they had the Holy Spirit teaching them, but also because they were eyewitnesses of the saving events of Christ's death and resurrection (John 14:26; 15:26-27).

The apostles, therefore, were trained by Jesus to play a vital and unrepeatable role in the history of the church. While the Holy Spirit still dwells in the church, there are no more apostles, since an apostle was required to have been an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21-26; 5:32; Luke 1:1-4; Ephesians 3:4-5; I Corinthians 9:1). Given the fact that no one living during the past eighteen centuries has seen the risen Jesus (despite the claims of persons such as Joseph Smith), it is impossible that during this period we should have "apostles."

The New Testament indicates rather clearly that the apostleship did end in the first century. In Paul's recounting of the resurrection appearances, he ends with his own, saying, "and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me" (I Corinthians 15:8). Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the church as "having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). Just as we do not lay new cornerstones from time to time to replace the old one, so too, we do not lay a new foundation of apostles and prophets over and over. The foundation of the apostolic witness to Christ and the prophetic revelations which pointed to and interpreted the saving acts of Christ has been laid; it does not need to be laid again. Whenever teachers come along with "new revelations from God," they are attempting to lay a foundation which has already been laid (see I Corinthians 3:11).

It is sometimes argued that Paul clearly implies the perpetuity of apostles and prophets in Ephesians 4:11-13. On a superficial reading of the passage, it might seem to be saying that Christ gave apostles and prophets to the church "until we all attain to the unity of the faith," thus implying that these offices continue until the church is perfected. This interpretation is incorrect, though, for the following reasons: (1) Paul has already set apostles and prophets in a class by themselves in Ephesians 2:20. (2) If apostles and prophets were intended by Christ to continue until the church was perfected, how is it that a second generation of apostles was never chosen?

Why did not the New Testament apostles appoint successors for themselves? And how is it that God's purpose in establishing the church could be so completely frustrated (Matthew 16:18; Jude 3)? (3) The point of Ephesians 4:11-13 is that "the building up of the body of Christ" (vs. 12) will continue "until" the church is matured (vs. 13). The first-century apostles and prophets have fully "equipped" (vs. 12a) the church with the revelations given in the New Testament, combined with the Old Testament, so that all of the information the church needs to do its tasks is contained in Scripture (II Timothy 3:16-17).

The Epistle of Jude also bears witness to the first-century Christian conviction that the days of the apostles and of gospel revelations were foundational and not ongoing. Jude speaks of "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The expression "once for all" clearly indicates that the "delivery" of the faith is complete, so that we should not look for a new revelation. Indeed, the new teachings of certain persons (Jude 4) are condemned for this very reason. The way to avoid the trap of heresy, says Jude, is to "remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 17). When Jude was writing, the apostles were either a phenomenon of the past, or were fast becoming so.

The apostle Peter also made it clear that he thought the apostolic period was ending in his day. II Peter appears to have been written by Peter as he awaited martyrdom. In this epistle, he does not urge his readers to look to the next apostle or apostles for

leadership, but rather to remember the apostolic message after he is gone (II Peter 1:12-15). Like Jude, Peter warns of false teachers who will take advantage of the lack of apostolic presence, and "secretly introduce destructive heresies" (2:1). The

solution, says Peter, is to "remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles" (3:2). They are to seek diligently to follow the teachings of the apostles, particularly Paul, despite the fact that he is often misinterpreted by "the untaught and unstable" (3:14-16). Therefore, Peter did not look for the continuation of apostolic authority, but rather for the church to follow what the departing apostles had taught. Like Jude, he does not say, "Listen to the apostles living today" (as the Mormons and other groups with apostles say), but instead urges us, "Remember what the apostles said."

That the apostleship was confined to the first-century church does not necessarily mean that only the Twelve and Paul were apostles. Barnabas (Acts 14:14) was certainly an apostle, as was Silas (I Thessalonians 2:6; cf. 1:1); Andronicus and Junia may also have been apostles (Romans 16:7). That Timothy is not included as an apostle in I Thessalonians 2:6 is implied by 3:1-2, where "we" means Paul and Silas distinct from Timothy.

We know that Timothy was not an apostolic eyewitness of the risen Jesus, because he was led to Christ by Paul (I Timothy 1:12; 18; II Timothy 1:2; 2:1-2). There is no reason to doubt that Barnabas, Silas, Andronicus, and Junia may not all have been among the over 500 witnesses to the resurrection of Christ (I Corinthians 15:6), and thus "apostles" in the strict sense.

Finally, the word "apostle" appears to be used in the sense of a church's missionary in Philippians 2:25 (of Epaphroditus, whom Paul calls "your apostle") and II Corinthians 8:23 ("apostles of the churches"). If so, these men have neither ecclesiastical authority nor revelational gifts; they are simply missionaries. This is not the sense in which "apostle" is used by those claiming to have restored the apostleship to the church.

We conclude, then, that the apostleship ended with the death of the apostles appointed by Christ Himself in the first century. With them died the authority to speak definitively for God. We should therefore reject the claims of any religious organization or teacher who claims that the office of apostle has been restored to the church today.

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