



STATEMENT DF070

THE FAULTY FOUNDATION OF THE FIVE - FOLD MINISTRY

It has recently become popular to speak of "the five-fold ministry," a system of church government with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The neo-Pentecostal "Restoration" movement and its offshoot, "Kingdom now" teaching, claims that one of the things which God is "restoring" to the church is this five-fold ministry.

The sole proof text used to support this concept is Ephesians 4:11-13, which states that Christ gave "some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,....until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the full knowledge of the Son of God." The word "until," it is argued, proves that the church today needs apostles and prophets as much as evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

However, it is the "building up" of the church (v.12) which must continue until the church is mature, not all five of the offices listed in verse 11. This is clear when the whole text is read as follows: "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers; [these offices were given] to equip the saints for the work of service, [which work has as its goal] to build up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith...." The offices of apostle and prophet would naturally cease in the church once their role in "equipping the saints" was completed; that is, once the New Testament canon was completed.

Some have objected that there is no reason to bracket off the apostles and prophets from the other three offices listed in verse 11. However, in the very same epistle, Paul states that the church has "been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20) and that Christ's mystery concerning the church was "revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (3:5). These statements indicate that the role of apostles and prophets was fulfilled in the first century.

The New Testament is particularly clear about the temporary role of the apostles, since they were chosen to give eyewitness testimony of the risen Christ (Acts 1:21-26; 5:32; Luke 1:104; 1 Cor. 9:1). Paul indicated that he was the last person to see the risen Christ and receive an apostolic commission (1 Cor. 15:8). The epistles of 2 Peter and Jude, among the very last New Testament writings to be penned, exhort the readers to avoid false doctrines by recalling the teachings of the apostles (2 Pet. 1:12-15; 2:1; 3:2, 14-16; Jude 3-4, 17). Peter and Jude did not say, "Listen to the apostles living today," but instead urged believers to "remember what the apostles said."

I am not arguing that only the Twelve and Paul were apostles. Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Silas (1 Thess. 2:6; cf. 1:1), and Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7) all were apostles of Christ, and thus were no doubt among the more than 500 witnesses to the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). However, none of these persons was chosen as a successor to an earlier apostle (Matthias was Judas's replacement, not his successor, since Judas had forsaken his apostleship, Acts 1:21-26).

There are other senses in which the word "apostle" is used in the New Testament. Certain individuals, including Epaphroditus, were "apostles of the churches" (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). These "apostles" had no authority over the church; they were messengers sent by and subject to their churches. In this latter sense it would be perfectly legitimate to speak of church representatives as "apostles," were it not for the confusion which might result from such usage.

Therefore, in the usual biblical sense of the term, there are no apostles today. Nor are there any prophets in the usual sense, as they were part of the "foundation" laid in the first-century church. This is not to deny the continuing validity of the gift of "prophecy," since Paul does refer to prophesying as a basic activity in which all Christians are urged to participate to the extent God gifts them (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 11:4-5; 12:10; 13:2, 8-9; 14:1-6, 20-33; 1 Thess. 5:20), and in a general functional sense persons exercising this gift are even called "prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32,37). Yet Paul also speaks of specific persons who occupied an office of "prophet" which was second in authority only to apostle (1 Cor.

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12:28-29). It is this office of "prophet," not all prophecy, which I am arguing passed away around the end of the first century.

Finally, some errors on this matter are worse than others. The loose use of the word "apostle" to refer to missionaries or church planters is not a serious error as long as this usage is sharply distinguished from the concept of an apostle who brings new doctrinal revelations and wields unquestionable authority. Nor is it a grievous error to interpret Ephesians 4:11 to refer to "apostles" in this sense of a church planter. The same would apply to those who hold that Ephesians 4:11 refers to the ongoing charismatic activity of prophesying. I do believe these interpretations are mistaken, but they are not in any way antagonistic to Christian faith.

On the other hand, to interpret Ephesians 4:11 as a call for a restoration of the office of apostle of Christ is not only a mistake in exegesis, it opens the door to heresy. To claim that the church today needs visions and revelations through modern apostles and prophets of Christ is to deny the sufficiency of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16) and to place the church at the mercy of false apostles, the likes of whom the apostle Paul warned us about in no uncertain terms (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

The teachers of the "five-fold ministry," in seeking to "restore" a foundation which has never been moved, are actually laying a false foundation which will not support the building up of the body of Christ.