

TWELVE Apostles or More?

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In considering any ‘apostolic ministry’, the Biblical designation of “Twelve Apostles” is of paramount importance. The Twelve have a special ‘status’, clearly set forth in the New Testament. No less than 32 times in the Gospels are they said to number “twelve”; plus Acts 6:2 and 1 Corinthians 15:5, while in Revelation 21:14, the wall of the New Jerusalem is described in these terms: **“And the wall of the city had *twelve* foundations, and on them were the *twelve* names of the *twelve* apostles of the Lamb”** (ESV).

From Twelve to Eleven to Twelve

When Judas dropped out at the end of the Gospels, eleven were left, but special provision was made for that by their Lord. About 120 disciples “continued with one accord in prayer and supplication” (Acts 1). Then Peter, surrounded by this truly prayerful company, and squarely basing his words on the Scriptures, tells them that “of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”

Two were proposed, and they prayed again: “You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two you have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell...” The fact that they then cast their lots must be seen as a valid procedure, inherited from their Old Testament days. The important thing was their confident prayer, based on the Scriptures. It was also the last time that the Lord’s disciples used this OT way of ascertaining God’s will. In chapter 2 the Holy Spirit comes to indwell his church and the procedure is not needed anymore.

Luke finishes the account with these words: “And he (Matthias) was numbered with the eleven apostles”. The ‘twelve apostles’ were complete again. The Holy Spirit’s doings cannot be questioned, but... was this the Holy Spirit’s doing? In fact, the Holy Spirit himself confirms the authenticity of what had been decided and resolved in Acts 1. He inspires Luke on this point in Acts chapters 1, 2 and 6; Paul in 1 Corinthians 15; and John in Revelation 21! And, since then, He is still confirming these things to the attentive Bible-reader.

Foundational and Eternal

When we look at the verses that mention eleven disciples, we find that in Matthew 28:16, Mark 16:14, Luke 24:9 and 33 the “twelve minus one” are mentioned, whereas in Acts 1:26 and 2:14 the “eleven plus one” are referred to. Then, as in 2:14, in 6:2 it is evident that Matthias is fully recognized as being one of “the Twelve”. The same is true in 1 Corinthians 15:5, where Paul

mentions the Twelve, even though, at the time of reference, Matthias hadn't been chosen yet. John completes the picture in Revelation 21:14, giving us to understand something of the foundational and eternal significance of **“the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb”**.

Many mentions of “the apostles” in Acts can only be references to “the Twelve”, even though they are not necessarily called “the Twelve”. Chapter 14 would appear to be the only chapter where others (Barnabas and Paul) are called “apostles”. Peter, in 2 Peter 3:2, and Jude, in verse 17, also appear to allude to “the Twelve”, plus Paul in Ephesians 2:20 - all of them pointing to the unique ministry of “the Twelve”.

In Greek, “apostle” simply means “sent one”, just like “missionary”, which comes from the Latin. Apart from the “Twelve”, there obviously were many more “sent ones” at that time, just as there are today. But in light of the Scriptures, it is important to not forget the unique role and ministry of “the Twelve”. It cannot be replicated.

Apostles Today?

There are different ‘ecclesiastical’ offshoots though, who can't manage without their “twelve apostles”. The “New Apostolic Church”, e.g., based in Germany, has “twelve apostles”, as do the Mormons. The RC and Anglican dogma has it that their “bishops” are part of an unbroken chain of apostolic ministry of many centuries. Thus their bishops, supposedly, are the present day successors of the original Twelve Apostles. I suspect that some Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations may have their 12 apostles too. In fact, more and more (so-called) “Apostles”, “Prophets” and “Bishops” are arising - all over the place.

Then, there are some who believe that Matthias did not really become one of the Twelve – Peter, in Acts 1, obviously made a mistake, they feel... Rather, it was Paul, so they say, who took Judas' place a bit later on... However, as shown, the Scriptures fully confirm that Matthias was one of the Twelve, while Paul never claimed to be.

How do we deal with today's apostles, i.e. the mushrooming self-appointed type?

The Lord commended the Ephesian Christians for their discernment - they weren't gullible: **“You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars...”** (Rev. 2:2). Likewise, Paul never brushed such inconvenient matters under the carpet; God showed him how to tackle the “new apostles” in his day – and the congregations were put on alert. We read of that in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12. Nothing new under the sun...

The Twelve in the New Testament

There is no doubt that Paul understood the ministry of ‘apostles’ to be of a universal nature. In Ephesians 2, he penned these words: “having been ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets***, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

God's one Ekklesia has one foundation – it is the foundation of the prophets and apostles (cf. Lk. 11:49), and, of course, whereas the (Old Testament) prophets are of an unspecified number, the (NT) apostles were “the Twelve”.

The **Twelve**, for the very first time, are mentioned as such three times in Matthew 10:1-5, when the Lord chooses them and then commissions them. Then, after the gospels, between the Ascension and Pentecost, these same men, the twelve apostles (Matthias having taken Judas' place) are mentioned seven times as "apostles", even though, in this case, Luke omits the designation of "Twelve" (Acts 1 & 2). When in 2:42, Luke writes about the "apostles' doctrine", who could doubt that the doctrine of the Twelve is in view?

Ephesians Four

So, in Ephesians 4:10-12, how about the identity of the "apostles"? They are listed first in the five basic ministries. Here again, there cannot be any reasonable doubt - they are obviously the Twelve, on whose 'universal foundation' all the others do their 'local building', i.e., exercising the other four basic ministries. **"He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things. And He himself gave some to be APOSTLES, some prophets, some evangelists, and some shepherds and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ..., that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro..., but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him..."**

We should notice that it is the Risen Lord who gave to the "saints" these five specific ministries: whether apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds or teachers... These are the saints' ministries; no saint is excluded from a valid involvement: **"to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift"**. Sufficient, supernatural grace was needed, and given, for a supernatural work; i.e., a work to be realized, first on one universal level, then on many local levels.

Right on the Day of Pentecost, Peter explains in his inspired discourse – quoting extensively from Joel 2, Psalms 16 and 110 - that **all** of the saints are involved. Paul, in Ephesians 4, goes on to explain that, among the saints, some were 'apostles' for founding (even from before Pentecost), others were to be 'prophets' for proclaiming, some 'evangelists' for establishing, some 'shepherds' for pastoring, and some 'teachers' for imparting.

What for?

In other words, our Risen Lord gave these five living ministries for what?

For the equipping of the saints...

But, equipping the 'saints', for what?

For the work of ministry...

Ministry for what?

For the edifying of the body of Christ...

Edifying of the 'body', for what?

That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro...

No longer 'children'..., for what?

That we may grow up in all things into Him...

By the grace of God then, the Christian must be sure he is not **"tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting** (whether they call themselves "apostles", bishops", "prophets", "pastors" or whatever), **but, speaking the truth in love, ... grows up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what EVERY joint supplies, according to**

the effective working by which EVERY part does its share, causing growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

So how about Paul Himself Being an Apostle?

Here we face an interesting question. And Paul doesn't leave us in doubt concerning the answer. He makes it very clear that he is called by Christ to do the work of an apostle. Twenty-one times does he refer to himself as an “apostle”, i.e., in ten of his epistles. Especially in 1 Corinthians 9 he puts great emphasis on the fact of his apostleship, an apostleship just as real as that of the Twelve.

Writing about the Lord's resurrection, he clearly excludes himself from “the apostles” who had seen the Lord, when he, Paul, wasn't around yet. Even so, in the following verse he says that having eventually also seen the Lord, he was still added to them, “as... one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:7-8).

But right in Romans 1:1-6 in the first verses written by him (as we find them in the NT), we hit on the key to his apostleship: “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son Jesus Christ... declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through him we have received grace and **apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations** for his name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ...” In verse 13, he adds: “that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. Note that “**Gentiles**” and “**nations**” (in verse 6), are both translated from one Greek word, in other words, they are interchangeable.

In Romans 15:15-16, Paul declares: “the grace that is given to me of God, that I should be **the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles**, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost.”

And then, in Galatians 1:15-16: “It pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him **among the Gentiles**”.

In Acts we find three accounts of his conversion on the Damascus road – when he was still known as Saul of Tarsus - and how the Lord right then and there called him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Mission Spearhead

In Acts 10, Peter had been the Lord's instrument to open the locks that kept the gates closed to the Gentiles. Had not Jesus given him the keys for that (Mt. 16:19)? Peter had already used these keys in Acts 2 for the Jews, and in Acts 8 for the Samaritans. Then, in the case of Cornelius and a house packed with Gentiles, the gate was opened to them as well.

At that very time, Paul comes into the picture. The Lord needed him to now spearhead the Gospel on its way to the Gentiles, far and wide. In Acts 1:8, Jesus had told the apostles: “you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” But our Lord was fully aware that Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria would keep

the Twelve occupied, while the Gentiles – “to the end of the earth” - would be calling and beckoning for a messenger, like the Macedonian man did in Acts 16:9. Paul realized that, from his mother’s womb, the Lord had all of that worked out (Gal. 1:15). And, as he was converted very near to Damascus, a Gentile city, *that* is where he started to preach.

Yet, right from the beginning, all through his missionary experience, he would go to the Jews first, being well aware though of that special God-given call and ministry among the Gentiles. And so, as soon as the Jews would reject his message – it happened over and over - Paul would turn to the Gentiles, who, on the whole, were much more open to God’s message of salvation in Christ, than the Jews were. The Holy Spirit would enlighten him again and again, showing him this divine plan and purpose in the Scriptures. He comments on that in Romans 15:8-21.

Eventually John describes the innumerable crowd of Gentiles who, during the Great Tribulation are saved through the testimony of the 144,000 Israelites:

“Behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7).

Twelve Tribes plus...

We must remember that the twelve tribes of Israel, though often designated as “the twelve tribes”, even in Revelation 7 and 21, were in reality 13 tribes. Joseph’s descendants, instead of becoming one tribe, became two: Ephraim and Manasseh. The one tribe that then became distinct, set apart from the twelve, was the tribe of Levi. God needed an intermediary between him and the 12 tribes. The Levites, with Aaron and his descendants, the priests, plus all their helpers, were thus ‘set aside’ for ever.

Similarly, God needed one apostle who would have a distinct, church-planting ministry among the Gentiles, yet working along with the Twelve. Peter may have had and may have used the “keys” given to him by his Lord in a truly strategic way, but Paul was God’s on-going ‘key-apostle’ to the Gentiles. It may be said that God needed Paul, and used him, to keep the Twelve focused on the new mission realities, i.e., focused not just on Jews and Samaritans, but on that immense field beyond the Jews: “to the end of the earth”.

More passages about Paul and his calling to the Gentiles:

Acts 9:15; 13:47-48; 14:27; 15:3, 7; 18:6; 21:19; 22:21; 26:17; 28:28;

Romans 11:13; 15:8-21;

Galatians 1:11-17; 2:2, 7-9;

2 Timothy 1:11.

Where to Find the *Twelve* in the Gospels

Matthew 10:1-2, 5; 11:1; 19:28; 20:17; 26:14, 20, 47;

Mark 3:14; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 10:32; 11:11; 14:10, 17, 20, 43;

Luke 6:13; 8:1; 9:1, 12; 18:31; 22:3, 14, 30, 47;

John 6:67, 70-71; 20:24.

Having said all this, we must **not** think that Christians are called to focus on a Peter or a Paul, i.e., in worship and obedience. Rather, let us heed Hebrews 3:1-2 (ISV):

“Therefore, holy brothers,
partners in a heavenly calling,
keep your focus on Jesus,
the Apostle and High Priest
of our confession.
He was faithful to the One
who appointed him...”