

The Nature of Paul's Apostolic Authority in I and II Corinthians

PENT 0509: Pentecostal Issues

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April 2005

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The Nature of Paul's Apostolic Authority in I and II Corinthians

On the Damascus road...with astonishing suddenness the persecutor of the church became the apostle of Jesus Christ.¹

1. Introduction:

The apostle Paul's letters to the church established by him in the city of Corinth are among the most personal of his letters existing in the New Testament canon. As well as including ethical and moral instructions for believers, aspects of church discipline, and insights into Pauline theology, the two extant letters contain valuable information on Paul's view of his ministerial qualifications and an *apologia* for his apostolic authority. The Gospels and the book of Acts introduce us to the concept of "apostle" as used in the early church, but it is in the Pauline epistles, particularly in the Corinthian letters, that this concept is most broadly developed. By examining these writings, we hope to glean important insights into the nature of apostleship as seen through the eyes of the great "apostle to the Gentiles".

2. Greek origin of concept of "apostle":

The word "apostle" as it appears in the Greek New Testament is *apostolos*, literally "one sent forth", derived from *apo*, "from", and *stello*, "to send".² In classical Greek, *apostolos* first meant a cargo ship or fleet sent out.³ Later it denoted a commander of a naval expedition or a band of colonists sent overseas. Josephus uses the word for a group sent on a mission. Its use seemed to be two-fold: to indicate a commission and to refer to being sent overseas. It was a rather uncommon word before the time of the New

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 74.

² W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), 30.

³ The detailed information to follow on the meaning of the Greek words related to "apostle", as presented in this paper, was gleaned from Verlyn D. Verbrugge, Ed., *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 158-163.

Testament, occurring only once in the Septuagint, once in Josephus, and not at all in Philo.⁴

The verb *apostello*, from which *apostolos* was derived, meant “send away”, or “send off”, with the idea of an envoy or delegation having full powers and being a personal representative of the one sending. The implication is that there is a close connection between the sender and the one being sent. In Stoic philosophy, this idea acquired a religious significance, resulting in the term coming to indicate divine authority. It is used rarely in secular Greek, but is found more commonly in both the New Testament and later Christian writings.⁵ For the noun form of the verb, *apostole*, a “sending” or a “mission”, most modern versions of the New Testament use the English terms “apostleship”, “divine commission”, or “apostolate”.

2.1 Concept of *saliah* in Rabbinic Judaism:

For New Testament exegesis, it is important to also consider the Jewish legal institution of *saliah*, used similarly as *apostello* or *apostole*, but referring to a definite time-limited commission, as a rabbi being sent as a representative of the Sanhedrin or the leader in synagogue prayer being the *saliah* of the community. Judaism in NT times did not know of the concept of officially sent out missionaries and so the term was not used of those trying to win others to Judaism. It is possible that since the Gentile Christians would not have understood the concept of *saliah*, the seldom-used term *apostolos* became prevalent in the early church to describe those who were being sent out by the Lord

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy: In the New Testament and Today*, Rev. Ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 41.

⁵ Roger Stronstad, “A Baker’s Dozen and Many More: Observations on the Roles of Apostles and Prophets in the New Testament”, distributed as course material for PENT 0509, March 2005.

Himself on a divine commission.⁶ “This new title was then used throughout the New Testament of those men whom Christ sent with his authority to found and govern the church, and to write for the church the words of the New Testament Scriptures.”⁷

3. Apostolos in non-Pauline writings of NT:

In the Lukan writings, *apostolos* is used almost exclusively of the twelve disciples of Jesus, the criteria of having been with Jesus since the beginning and being a witness of the resurrection specified by Peter in Acts 1 as necessary for joining the select group. The one exception to this by Luke is in Acts 14:14, where he specifically calls Paul and Barnabas “apostles”. The other Gospels rarely use the term, but when it appears it is often as a synonym for “disciples”, and is used in the sense of the Jewish *saliah* institution. In Hebrews 3:1 the word is used of the Lord Jesus to describe His relation to God. Only in Rev. 21:14 are the Twelve expressly called apostles, “on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” According to Peter’s description of the necessary qualifications for apostleship in Acts 1:22, Paul would not be eligible for apostleship because he had not accompanied Jesus during His earthly ministry.

4. Use of *apostolos* in Pauline epistles:

“Since Paul’s letters are the earliest writings of the NT, and since he uses *apostolos* more than any other NT author, all historical investigations of the origin, meaning and significance of the word properly begin with his letters.”⁸ The most complete picture of the Pauline understanding of the office of apostle is to be found in his

⁶ Verbrugge, 161.

⁷ Grudem, 41.

⁸ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin & Daniel G. Reid, Eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 46.

two extant letters to the Corinthian church and reflects his personal view of what apostleship means to him.

4.1. Paul's concept of others as "apostle":

Those to whom Paul gives the title "apostle" seem to be the Twelve, Cephas (Peter), the brothers of the Lord including James, and Barnabas, in I Cor. 9:5,6 and 15:7.⁹ He may have considered Apollos as a fellow apostle when he writes, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?"(3:5). It is interesting to note that the two he specifically mentions as apostles in 15:5,7, Cephas and James, are the two he went to confer with in Jerusalem three years after his conversion. "His commission was not derived from Jerusalem, but it could not be effectively discharged except in fellowship with Jerusalem."¹⁰

Paul was very clear that he regarded apostleship as being a cooperative effort, where some "plant", and some "water"(3:5-9). He likens his founding of the church at Corinth as laying the foundation, upon which others may build (3:10-12); however, he has a solemn warning for any who would in any way harm that foundation (3:13-15). Paul is not clear if he is referring to the Judaizers who constantly strove to undermine his efforts, or to Peter, who would then have been encroaching on a field that the Lord had assigned to Paul (3:10).

The meaning of the reference to Junias and Andronicus in Romans 16:7 has been disputed because of ambiguities in the Greek wording. The King James Version reads that these two relatives of Paul's "are of note among the apostles", indicating that they may have been apostles themselves; however, other translations show a different shade of

⁹ For purposes of this paper, all Scripture verses will be from I Corinthians NKJV; any references to other books, including II Corinthians, will be noted.

¹⁰ Bruce, 152.

meaning; e.g., the Amplified Version, “they are men held in high esteem among the apostles”; the New Living Translation, “they are respected among the apostles”; and the Living Bible, “they are respected by the apostles”. Everett F. Harrison concludes that, “...occasionally the word {apostle or messenger] is used somewhat broadly to include leaders in Christian work (cf. I Thes. 2:7). To interpret the statement as meaning that these men were outstanding in the estimation of the apostles scarcely does justice to the construction in the Greek.”¹¹

There are other references to “apostle” by Paul that appear to be used in this non-technical sense, that is, as messengers.¹² The reference to Titus and others in II Cor. 8:23 is “apostles” in the Greek, but generally translated as “messengers” (KJV, RSV, Amp), “delegates” (NEB), or “representatives” (NIV) of the churches, in the tradition of the Jewish *saliah*. This could also be true of Paul’s sending of Epaphroditus as an apostle or messenger for practical purposes and not religious, as recorded in Phil. 2:25.

4.2. Paul’s self-concept of “apostle”:

As found in nine out of thirteen of his epistles, Paul begins both letters to the Corinthians with his usual salutation describing himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, “through the instrumentality of God’s sovereign will”.¹³ In the first verse of the first letter, Paul emphasizes his calling (Greek, *kletos*), and contrasts this in verse 2 with the believers at Corinth who are called to be saints or to be holy. He gives no indication that he felt there were any in the Corinthian church who were also called to the office of apostle. Even in his many references to his close companion Timothy, he does not

¹¹ Found in the Romans commentary section of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 164.

¹² Hawthorne et al., 47.

¹³ Gaebelein, 189.

generally refer to him as an apostle, but addresses him as a brother or a beloved son. Only in I Thes. 2:6 does Paul indicate he may have regarded Silvanus and Timothy as apostles along with himself - “we might have made demands as apostles of Christ”.¹⁴ His references to apostleship refer chiefly to his own calling and ministry. “...Paul’s pattern of address in his letters always jealously guards the title ‘apostle’ for himself, never allowing it to be applied to...his traveling companions”.¹⁵

Scholars are divided as to who should be regarded as apostles in the NT. Stronstad sees only the Twelve and Paul as holding the office of apostle, while others may function as an apostle in the sense of “missionary” or “sent one”, as noted previously. He writes, “Other than the twelve apostles and Paul, no one else in the New Testament is ever called an apostle, except in the secondary sense of missionary or messenger.”¹⁶ Grudem uses the term in the narrow sense of one with authority to govern the church and write words of Scripture. He considers therefore that the text indicates 15 apostles, by adding Paul, Barnabas and James to the Twelve.¹⁷ Hawthorne et al see a symmetry in I Cor. 15:5-9:

[Christ] appeared	to Cephas,	then to the twelve...
Then he appeared	to James,	then to all the apostles.
Last of all he appeared	also to me [Paul]...	the least of the apostles. ¹⁸

¹⁴ Could this have been Paul’s use of the royal “we”, as often seen in his epistles?

¹⁵ Grudem, 234.

¹⁶ See the Stronstad paper, 13. This view is also found in “Notes on 2 Corinthians”, by Dr. Thomas L. Constable, obtained online at <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/2corinthians.pdf> (March 25, 2005).

¹⁷ Grudem, 234-235.

¹⁸ Hawthorne et al., 46-47.

They see the Twelve as called apostles, while James is grouped with the other apostles, and Paul is added as a latecomer. Wagner broadens the term to include all who give leadership to the Body of Christ, both in NT times and today.¹⁹

5. Paul's understanding of "apostle" in the Corinthian letters:

Paul's understanding of what an apostle was includes one who had seen the Lord and who founded churches (9:1-2), both of which he had done. "If the Damascus Call was the basis of Paul's apostleship, its legitimacy is demonstrated by the quality of his ministry."²⁰ Because much of the text of the Corinthian letters deals with criticisms of Paul's ministry, particularly in the second letter, a picture of his concept of apostleship emerges as we read. The result is a very personal and transparent insight into the meaning of apostleship and of the authority given to him by the Lord Himself. He displays his great love for his followers by emphasizing that this authority was for their "edification and not for destruction", and his most sincere desire that they become "complete", or mature in Christ (II Cor. 3:9-11).

5.1. A divine commission:

A unique feature of Paul's commission as an apostle is that it was not through any human being but by the will of God (1:1), a phrase he echoes repeatedly in the salutations to his letters. In his own mind, "...it was the personal call of the risen Christ that made him an apostle."²¹ In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul is very specific that his apostleship is "not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and by God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). He writes that he was set apart by God's grace before his birth to preach to the heathen and he did not confer with the other apostles for the first three years of his

¹⁹ Peter Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets: the Foundation of the Church* (Gospel Light Publications, 2000).

²⁰ Hawthorne et al., 50.

²¹ Bruce, 145.

ministry (Gal. 1:15-19). He is also very clear that his commission was not due to any personal merit or qualifications on his part (15:9; II Cor. 12:5-11).

This calling or commission is not to baptize but “to preach the gospel” (1:17), an interesting assertion in light of Jesus’ command in Matthew 28 to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Paul sees himself as a minister through whom the Corinthians believed and the one who planted the seed of the gospel amongst them, laying the foundation for future work (3:5-11). He also sees the work of an apostle as preaching in areas where people have never heard the gospel and planting new churches in those fields (Rom. 1:15, 15:20-23).

5.2. A personal encounter with Christ:

This divine commission came about through meeting the risen Lord personally on the road to Damascus (15:8), and was reinforced in the message from the Lord to Ananias, that Saul would carry His name before Gentiles and their kings (Acts 9:15). Paul is adamant that his apostleship meets the same criteria as the others because of this encounter with the Christ (II Cor. 11:5). This was not the typical appearance of the risen Lord to the disciples on the first Easter Sunday, but was of the glorified heavenly Christ a year or two later. “Having seen the Lord and having won converts and having suffered for Christ, Paul could claim to be as good an Apostle as any of the Twelve.”²²

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the scholar Johannes Weiss proposed that Paul indicated he may have had personal knowledge of Christ when he wrote, “even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more” (II Cor. 5:16).²³ Weiss and others postulated that Paul may have seen Jesus during the Holy

²² Matthew Black & H.H.Rowley, Eds., *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible* (London: Routledge, 1962), 959.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98.

Week activities in Jerusalem in the days before his death. Of course, such speculation is impossible to prove, although it seems probable that Paul would have written more about it if it were true, unless his shame at initially rejecting Jesus as Messiah was too great.

Modern scholars view “seeing Jesus after the flesh” in II Cor. 5:16 differently:

- once Paul made his judgments about Jesus strictly on human bases, but now on spiritual realities²⁴
- before his conversion, Paul regarded Christ as merely another man²⁵
- worldly standards no longer count in our understanding of Christ²⁶
- a better translation is “we regarded” (Greek, *egnokamen*), “from a worldly point of view” (Greek *kata sarka*), eliminating the confusion with the physical sense of “after the flesh”²⁷

“After the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost one could know – by the Spirit – both the reality of the resurrection and the power of the risen Lord in one’s life whether or not one had seen Jesus in flesh and blood.”²⁸

5.3. A knowledge of Christ and His teachings:

Paul insists that this gospel that he preaches rests on the same factual basis as that preached by the other apostles (15:10-11). He indicates his knowledge of Christ (II Cor. 10:1); of the institution of the Lord’s Supper (11:23-25); of the crucifixion (2:1-2); of the resurrection appearances of Christ (15:4-8); and, declares he lives his life as an imitation of Christ’s (11:1). His sufficiency is from God who has made him a minister of the new

²⁴ NKJV Study Bible.

²⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: NT; NASV* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 321.

²⁶ New English Bible.

²⁷ Gaebelein, 355.

²⁸ Stanley M. Burgess & Eduard M. Van Der Maas, Eds., *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 320.

covenant (II Cor. 3:6). He has not only received firsthand knowledge of the Lord, but has also been made a “steward of the mysteries of God.”(4:1).

5.4. A foundation of the church:

Paul has a high view of apostleship in relation to the structure of the church. “[He] regarded apostleship as a particular service based upon a special divinely given gift.”²⁹ In 12:28 he writes his list of church offices: “God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues”. The NKJV Study Bible considers this verse to indicate the Twelve who were the foundation of the church, particularly in its doctrine. As founders of churches, the apostles were pre-eminent persons in early Christianity.³⁰ The gifts appear to be ranked in order of honour.³¹ The first three – apostles, prophets, and teachers - are really classes of persons ruling in the church and correspond with the list in Ephesians 4:11.³² They are set apart from the other gifts by “then”, Greek *epeita*, which tend to be functions rather than offices.

Spiritual gifts are available to all and are distributed as the Spirit wills. They are placed in the church to fulfill specific functions, mainly to edify and equip the Body, and are not to exalt the person bearing the gift. In discussing the use of these gifts, Paul indicates his authority over those who would exercise them, including the prophets (14:26-40). This authority is not derived from some special quality within himself (II Cor. 3:5), but from the gospel itself in its truth and power to convict (II Cor. 4:2).³³ This is why Paul is very careful to indicate when he is giving his own opinion in ethical

²⁹ John Heading, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Kilmarnock: John Ritchie, 1965), 17.

³⁰ Hawthorne et al., 48.

³¹ Ryrie, 306.

³² Gaebelien, 266.

³³ For more on this thought, see Verbrugge, 160.

matters (7:10, 12). In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul does not refer to church leadership in the form of elders, deacons, bishops, etc., as sometimes seen in other NT letters. His main premise is his own right to be their founder and leader.

5.5 A demonstration of signs of apostleship:

Because Paul has received the Spirit of Christ, he can speak the things that the Spirit reveals to him, imparting to him even “the mind of Christ” (2:12-16). After detailing a heavenly encounter in Paradise, he reaffirms that he exhibits the signs of an apostle “in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds”, from the Greek *dynameis*, “mighty deeds” (II Cor. 12:12). “This combination shows that he was engaged in all the groundbreaking activities of the apostles.”³⁴ He states that he does not come behind any of the eminent apostles and when he visits them again he will prove to them that it is Christ speaking in him (II Cor. 13:1-3).

6. Paul’s defense of his apostleship:

In his letters to the Corinthian church, Paul responds to those who challenge his authority as an apostle by mounting a defense, or *apologia*, of his rights in apostleship. While the writing of I Corinthians dispelled some of the problems in the church, opposition to the apostle Paul persisted and his critics continued to speak out against him, resulting in the need for the writing of II Corinthians. One man in particular seems to have been the ringleader of the opposition to Paul’s apostolic authority by not only denouncing his rights as an apostle, but also claiming equal authority to Paul’s.³⁵

It would appear that Paul’s apostolic claims were belittled on two fronts – the “spiritual party” who thought he was too influenced by old Jewish taboos and traditions,

³⁴ Roy B. Zuck, Ed., *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 151.

³⁵ Constable, 1.

and the Judaizers who emphasized the weakness of his commission compared to the other apostles, especially Peter. Some scholars think that while Paul does not seem irritated by being compared to Apollos (see chapter 3 of I Corinthians), he does appear to be concerned that the Petrine party was attempting to build on his foundation at Corinth.³⁶

Chapter 7 in II Corinthians indicates Paul's relief that the stern letters he has had to write them previously have resulted in their repentance – he has won them back, much to his relief. But then chapter 9 “suddenly gives way to one of sharp remonstrance and almost violent defence of [his] apostleship.”³⁷ Chapters 10 to 13 differ so markedly in tone that many scholars believe it was written before chapters 1 to 9 and constitutes his “severe letter” which he found difficult to write (II Cor. 2:4). The section is a launch into a vigorous and spirited defense of his role as an apostle by detailing the supernatural working of the Lord in his life and ministry.

6.1. Challenges to Paul's apostolic authority:

Paul's antagonists in II Corinthians may have been in one of three categories: an official delegation from Jerusalem; a semi-official delegation which left Jerusalem with approval from the Twelve but misrepresented them; or, self-appointed agents from Judea who appealed to the authority of the Twelve, particularly Peter, to defend their Judaizing actions.³⁸ There seems no doubt that the ultimate goal was to undermine Paul's work in Corinth and so destroy his apostolic authority. The challenges to this authority that he faced included: his boldness in his letters as contrasted with his meekness in person (II Cor. 10:1-12); his boasting of his authority (II Cor.10: 13-14); and, his insult to the church in not accepting payment from them (II Cor.11:7-15). Other questions arose

³⁶ Black & Rowley, 938.

³⁷ Ibid., 931.

³⁸ Gaebelin, 313.

because of charges that he did not carry letters of recommendation (II Cor. 3:1-3); that he was not successful in reaching his own people (II Cor. 3:14-4:4); that he was an unimpressive speaker (II Cor. 10:10-11); and, even that he may have been using the Jerusalem collection for personal gain (II Cor. 8:18-21; 12:16-18).

“When his authority is challenged, Paul points to the validating marks that he shares with other apostles.”³⁹ He sees his primary credential as having seen the Lord (9:1; 15:7); he waived his right to financial remuneration (9:12); he exhibited the “signs of the apostles” evident in church planting (II Cor. 12:12); his preaching was in the power of the Spirit (2:4); he has successfully planted new churches (9:2); he is a faithful witness to the gospel (4:1-2); and, he has endured many missionary hardships (4:9-13). One of his strongest arguments to those who would say he is not an apostle is the Corinthians themselves who were the seal of his apostleship (9:2) “He expected them to accept him as an apostle – though others did not – because they were really the seal that stamped his apostleship in the Lord as genuine.”⁴⁰

6.2. Paul’s rights as an apostle:

Through the use of several rhetorical questions in I Corinthians 9, Paul indicates the rights that he and others, such as Barnabas, had the authority to exercise. These rights include: food and drink, to have a wife join them on their travels, and to work to make a living (9:1-12). He continues on to explain that he will not exercise these rights in order that the gospel is not hindered (9:12-18). He examines and explores the paradox of apostolic freedom: “It is not essentially freedom from restraint but freedom for service –

³⁹ Hawthorne et al., 55.

⁴⁰ Gaebelien, 242.

a possibility of constructive activity” (9:19-23).⁴¹ He sees his apostolic service as a race to be run, even as an athlete disciplines his body, and sacrifices all in order to win the prize (9:24-27). Paul had not insisted on his rights, as he did not wish any charge of self-interest to hinder the spread of the gospel – being under commission to preach, he did so free of charge.⁴²

6.3. The role of suffering:

The aspect of suffering in the life of an apostle is one considered by Paul many times in his writings. He feels that God has condemned the apostles to death and has made them a spectacle, (Greek, *theatron*), before men, and fools for Christ’s sake (4:6-10). Verse 9 gives the picture of the apostolic band as condemned men being led forth by a conqueror, alluding to the figure of captives being tortured and exposed to wild animals in the colosseum.⁴³ He continues on to list their numerous hardships – weakness, hunger, thirst, poor clothing, homelessness, hard labor, as well as being reviled, persecuted, defamed, and made as the filth of the world (4:11-13). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul again lists the marks of his ministry – tribulations, needs, distresses, stripes, imprisonments, tumults, sleeplessness, fastings, and being unknown, dying, sorrowful, and poor (II Cor. 6:4-10). He considers that the sufferings of Christ are reproduced in an apostle who is true to him (II Cor. 1:5).

Just as Jesus’ power was manifest only after his suffering on the cross, so the power of God announced by the apostles comes only through the weakness they display. Thus, Paul’s weakness is precisely the proof that he is a valid apostle.⁴⁴

⁴¹ From the New American Bible commentary on I Corinthians, found online March 28, 2005, at <http://www.nccbuscc.org/nab/bible/1corinthians/1corinthians9.htm>

⁴² Black & Rowley, 959.

⁴³ Gaebelien, 213.

⁴⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, & Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 350.

Paul later lists his many sufferings for Christ as a contrast between a true apostle and a false one (II Cor. 11:22-33). One can almost feel his frustration at having his qualifications repeatedly attacked while at the same time the Lord is bestowing upon him more and more supernatural experiences and visitations. God has revealed to him through the Spirit the deep things of God that, “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man” (2:9-10). He admits that his “thorn in the flesh” was a messenger from Satan to keep him humble because of the great revelations he was receiving from God (II Cor. 12:7).

6.4. The uniqueness of apostolic authority:

Paul is clear that in spite of not walking with the Lord during His time on earth, he received the message he preaches directly from the Lord (15:3), in contrast to some of his teachings that were not divine revelations (7:25). The very way in which he gives commands that are not necessarily from the Lord (7:12) reveals his consciousness of apostolic inspiration and authority.⁴⁵ He reaffirms that he is delivering this message as an “ambassador for Christ” (II Cor. 5:20). He regards his apostleship as being a “servant of Christ” and a steward or bearer of the mysteries of God (4:1), and in this regard will be judged by God alone (4:4). He makes requests “through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:10); he teaches “by the word of the Lord” (7:10); and he defines his authority as “given by the Lord” (II Cor. 10:8). His view of his apostleship is closely linked with his view of authority: *exousia*, defined as “ability”, “freedom”, or “right”. Paul applies this term to himself to indicate a right that stems from his commission as apostle to the

⁴⁵ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, Vol.6, Acts to Revelation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 110.

Gentiles. He uses his authority to state that he has given orders to the churches in Galatia (16:1).

Paul's use of *parakeleo*, signifying an appeal by one who has the authority to command but the tact not to do so, is his approach to instructing his churches in order to build up and not tear down (1:10; 4:13-16; 16:15; II Cor. 10:8).⁴⁶ In spite of Paul's unusual supernatural experiences with the Lord, he does not seem to suggest that his special position as an apostle exalts him above others or gives him any extra access to spiritual gifts (12:25-28). He sees himself as one who nurtures, encourages and exhorts his children (4:15; II Cor. 12:14-16); however, he warns those at Corinth who would take advantage of his good nature, that he will use harsher means of correction if necessary, in accordance with the authority given him "by the Lord" (4:21; II Cor. 13:10). He even commands the Corinthians to discipline the individual who had publicly challenged his authority (II Cor. 2:5-11; 7:9-13).

7. False apostles:

In II Corinthians 11:5-15, an interesting passage is found regarding other apostles. Paul begins by saying, "I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles." It would at first appear that he is referring to the Jerusalem apostles, with whom he was often comparing his apostleship and its validity. If the entire context of the chapter is considered, some scholars feel that he was referring to "super apostles", or apostolic emissaries who claimed to represent the mother church.⁴⁷ The NKJV Study Bible considers this to be a sarcastic reference to Paul's opponents at Corinth who had an

⁴⁶ Hawthorne et al, 56.

⁴⁷ Black & Rowley, 967.

inflated opinion of themselves.⁴⁸ Others view verse 5 as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the eminent apostles in Jerusalem.⁴⁹ The most balanced view found is that the expression is either a description of the Twelve used by Paul's opponents and quoted by him; or, more probably, the apostle's ironical description of the exalted view of the Twelve held by the "false apostles".⁵⁰

These "false apostles" are found further on in the passage in verse 13, where Paul uses the Greek word *pseudapostolos*, calling them deceitful workers and agents of Satan who attempted to deceive the church by pretending to be the very apostles of Christ. He could have been referring to the previous "super apostles" from verse 5 who might have been sent on some errand from the mother church, but insisted on calling themselves "apostles".⁵¹ Like the itinerant preachers of their day, these intruders at Corinth seem to have received some financial compensation and used it as proof of their claim to apostleship. Paul's practice of not taking money from the church may have been an embarrassment for them, escalating their attacks on his rights as an apostle. "Those who vaunted their apostleship and vainly sought equality with him were in fact 'false apostles', apostolic pretenders who passed themselves off as 'righteous servants' of Christ while in reality they were agents of Satan."⁵²

8. Limits of apostleship:

Scholars who do not believe that the office of apostle is for today cite 15:8 as proof that apostleship ended with Paul. He discusses Jesus' resurrection appearances to

⁴⁸ See the note on verse 5 of II Cor. 11 in the NKJV Study Bible (Nashville: Nelson, 1991). Charles Ryrie also holds with this view in his Study Bible.

⁴⁹ Verbrugge, 163.

⁵⁰ Gaebelein, 386.

⁵¹ This is the interpretation of Black & Rowley, 967.

⁵² Gaebelein, 388.

Cephas, then to the Twelve, then to over 500 believers, then to James and all the apostles, and “last of all” to Paul, as “one born out of due time”. This seems to indicate a span of resurrection appearances that began with Cephas and ended with Paul. He considers himself not only “the last”, but also “the least” of all the apostles. If we consider that the New Testament office of apostle had the two criteria of having seen the resurrection and having been commissioned by Jesus Christ Himself, then indeed Paul probably was the last of the apostles. In various places he defends his apostleship by reiterating that he fulfills these two requirements. He never gives any indication that new apostles are being commissioned or that the office is one to which believers can strive. “The NT never betrays any understanding of the apostolate as an institutionalized church office, capable of being passed on.”⁵³

9. Contemporary issues:

The current teaching that the church today should be re-discovering the apostolic office as its foundation is difficult to sustain by Scripture.⁵⁴ Paul states that as an apostle he laid the foundation for the church at Corinth, but subsequently others would build on it. This seems to indicate that 1st Century apostles were laying the foundation of the church of Christ at that time. How often can one lay a foundation? Are we still today laying more foundations for the church? Or can we assume that Paul’s silence on this matter is an indication that he did not believe the Lord was actively raising up more apostles as time progressed? If he believed the apostolic office was to continue, would he not have encouraged his people in Corinth to seek for it, as he did with the gift of prophecy? An argument from silence may be more powerful than any other. “Those

⁵³ Verbrugge, 163.

⁵⁴ For a detailed examination of this view, see Peter Wagner, *Apostles & Prophets: The Foundation of the Church* (Gospel Light Publications, 2000).

who interpret the New Testament data to indicate an apostolic ministry beyond the baker's dozen [i.e., the Twelve plus Paul], either then or now, have created a fictional ministry which has no basis in fact."⁵⁵

"In place of living apostles present in the church to teach and govern it, we have instead the writings of the apostles in the books of the New Testament."⁵⁶ Is the church today weakened because of its neglect of the apostolic office, as some believe? Not according to the writings of the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth. Rather than teaching that new apostles should be raised up, his main concerns were purity of thoughts and actions, walking in the Spirit, and doing all things in the church decently and in order, as led by the Holy Spirit. Those who would claim the title of "apostle" for themselves today might be more readily accepted by the church if they have less concern about the authority aspect of apostleship and more of the humble attitude of Paul in II Cor. 12:15: "And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls".⁵⁷

10. Summary:

The use of the word *apostolos* is confined mainly to the NT writings, and is found chiefly in Paul's epistles. As these are thought to have been among the earliest of the NT writings, they are extremely important in establishing the significance of the concept of apostleship. While there were apostles before Paul, even as early as the times of the Gospels, it seems that other writers were influenced by the non-technical use of *apostolos*, in the Jewish sense of the institution of *saliah*. Paul's use of *apostolos*,

⁵⁵ See the Stronstad paper, 13.

⁵⁶ Grudem, 235. This idea of apostolic authority coming to us today through their writings and not through succession, is also found in *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Eds. Ronald F. Youngblood, F.F.Bruce, & R.K.Harrison (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 92.

⁵⁷ In a Tyndale Seminary course with Roger Stronstad (January 2002), his reply to the question of apostolic office today was very interesting: "Anyone I have encountered who wants to be called an apostle, also wants power and absolute control", which is very different from the attitude of the apostle Paul as portrayed in the letters to the Corinthian church.

“...takes on a special character from the unique circumstances associated with the rise of early Christianity.”⁵⁸

While the two letters of Paul to the Corinthian church reflect the rise of opposition to his recognition as an apostle of Christ, his defense gives us a clearer picture of apostolic commissions, rights, and authority in the early church. Paul himself sought to limit the extent of the number of apostles by calling many who would use the title false. He did not indicate in any of his letters that believers should seek for this office, or that the church should continue to make new apostles. He declared himself to be the last apostle who had seen the Lord, effectively closing the door on any others who would claim this office. Both letters to the Corinthian church, “...share the same apostolic premise: the ways of God are unlike the ways of the world, as demonstrated in Christ and now in the apostolic ministry of Paul.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Hawthorne et al., 50.

⁵⁹ Achtemeier et al., 354.

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