

Apostolic Succession

The apostles were a unique group of men whose work occupied a limited scope of time. Those who claim to be apostles today are deceivers to be avoided.

“. . . Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20).

“But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 17).



During His earthly ministry, Jesus selected twelve men to be His apostles, a word roughly equivalent to “ambassador.” These men were given authority to speak for Christ following His departure (Gal. 1:12; Eph. 3:5).

But what happened when those original apostles died? Did their authority die with them? Are we now leaderless? Or did the Lord intend that their role be perpetuated throughout history by some process of apostolic succession?

Major segments of modern Christianity hold that we still have apostles today. Those who are called “bishops” in the Roman Catholic Church, the various Orthodox Churches, the Anglican/Episcopal churches, and some branches of Lutheranism, are claimed to be successors in a long line stretching back to the original twelve. Other groups, like the Mormons, have men whom they call apostles, but of a reconstituted variety, without historical linkage.

Are the claims of all these groups valid? Do we have apostles today whose authority can in some way be traced back to the original apostles of Jesus?

First, the fact that so many disparate fellowships claim to have apostles poses a serious difficulty. Catholics, for example, consider Anglican/Episcopal bishoprics to be invalid—and vice versa. Mormon apostles consider Catholic and Anglican apostles to be frauds. Compare the teachings of all these religious bodies, and it’s obvious that *somebody* is lying. They can’t all be true apostles.

Of greater significance are the qualifications of the apostles as defined in the New Testament. First, an apostle had to be someone who had personally witnessed the resurrected Jesus (Ac. 2:32). Paul claimed that he saw Jesus “last of all” (1 Cor. 15:4-8). That rules out any additional apostles beyond his time.

Second, the message taught by the first apostles was validated by the miracles they performed—“the signs of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12). Few modern apostles even bother pretending to have that kind of power. That deficiency alone should be a huge red flag.

Finally, we note that the bishops and apostles of the New Testament were distinct offices, not identical. Those who equate the role and authority of modern bishops to ancient apostles are mangling the evidence.

It is true that Mattathias replaced Judas (Ac. 1:15-26), and a case can be made that Paul replaced James the brother of John (Ac. 12:1-2). But these replacements were merely preserving the size of the original group until their primary mission could be completed—the revelation of the full New Testament.

And therein lies the answer to the riddle. The apostles and prophets of the first century wrote much of what was revealed to them, and that body of instruction was to serve as the standard for believers throughout later generations. In that sense, the apostles and prophets constitute the “foundation” of the church (Eph. 2:20). Our obligation is to “remember the words which were spoken **before** by the apostles” (Jude 17)—the original instructions, not the pronouncements of latter-day imposters.

What produces Christians today? Not an unbroken chain of fallible men going back to the first century, but an infallible seed, *the word of God* that never fades away (1 Pet. 1:22-23).

— David King