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The Church's One Foundation, Part Two: What Apostles Have

C. Peter Wagner

What makes apostles different from other members of the body of Christ?

This question almost always comes up when I begin conversations on the New Apostolic Reformation. Generally the tone of voice behind the question is not one of opposition to the idea that there might be apostles in the church today, but rather a sincere desire for information. There actually has been much less criticism forthcoming on this subject than I had anticipated. Not that debate is absent. Much stimulating discussion is being carried on both verbally and in print, as would be expected when a new concept like this is being introduced. Iron is sharpening iron. But the nature of the discussions is not adversarial for the most part, although some, unfortunately, have, indeed, labeled it as heresy. For the most part, however, the dialogue reflects a mutual desire to hear clearly what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

I think that there are two important characteristics which set apostles apart from other members of the body of Christ: the *authority* of apostles and the *spheres* of apostolic authority. Let's look at them one at a time.

Apostles Have Unusual Authority

In my book *Churchquake!* I say this: "Of all the radical changes in the New Apostolic Reformation, I regard one of them as the most radical of all. It is so important that I have chosen these words very carefully: *The amount of spiritual authority delegated by*

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the Holy Spirit to individuals."¹ The two operative words in this statement are "authority" and "individuals."

Previously the central locus of authority in our churches has been in groups, not in individuals. Trust has been placed in sessions, consistories, nominating committees, deacon boards, trustees, congregations, presbyteries, associations, general councils, cabinets, conventions, synods, and the like. Rarely has trust for ultimate decisions been invested in individuals such as pastors or apostles. This, however, is changing decisively in the New Apostolic Reformation.

Much information about apostles surfaces in 1 & 2 Corinthians. Among the believers in Corinth, certain factions had determined to undermine the Apostle Paul's apostolic leadership over their church. When he writes his epistles to that church, Paul therefore opens his heart to many things that we might not have discovered had he not been so upset. I will quote quite a bit from the Corinthian letters in this section.

As a starter, Paul finds it necessary to assert his apostolic authority by writing: "For even if I should boast somewhat more about our *authority*, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed" (2 Cor 10:8, emphasis mine). Unquestionably, Paul had unusual authority. However, the next question is: Where did this authority come from?

Paul's authority as an apostle came from the same sources that provide the apostles of today their extraordinary authority. I see five principle sources of apostolic authority. Every *bona fide* apostle will score high on these five components.

1. Apostles Have a Spiritual Gift

Why some should attempt to deny that there is such a thing as a spiritual gift of apostle escapes me, but they do. One of the major New Testament chapters on spiritual gifts is 1 Corinthians 12. This is where we learn that "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased" (1 Cor. 12:18). Spiritual gifts determine precisely what particular function each one of us has in the body of Christ, and God is the one who chooses which gift or gifts we should have. Many different spiritual gifts are discussed in 1 Corinthians 12.

One of those gifts is the gift of apostle. Verse 28 is where Paul asserts that in the church apostles are first and prophets

second, as I mentioned in my previous article. In verse 29, Paul goes on to ask the rhetorical question, "Are all apostles?" The answer is obviously, "No," but just as obviously, the implication is that some *are* apostles. I have heard arguments against regarding apostles as a gift in this particular text, but these arguments do not go on to explain why teachers or administrators or miracles or tongues or helps should not be considered gifts as well, even though they are listed in the same verse. The best interpretation, in my opinion, accepts the gift of apostle along with the other spiritual gifts.

It is God who determines who should receive what gift. This is why Paul, when he asserts that he is a *bona fide* apostle in the verse we looked at above, 2 Cor.10:8, speaks of his authority "*which the Lord gave us.*" No apostolic authority is self-generated. It comes only as God chooses to delegate it.

Leaders of Great Magnitude

A commonly used sociological term for apostles, introduced by Max Weber, is "charismatic leaders." "Charismatic" in this secular sense does not refer to spiritual gifts, but rather to an extraordinary degree of authority inherent in the leader. It is what John Maxwell calls "The Law of E.F. Hutton" in his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Thomas Nelson). When the leader speaks, people listen. I like the description of apostles that I once heard from Jack Whitesell: "Apostles are leaders of great magnitude."

The apostle does not gain authority by attaining a title or by being awarded a hierarchical position. Rather we are talking about a *spiritual* authority conferred by God Himself. But when God chooses to confer it, and when this is recognized both by the apostle and by those around the apostle, this authority is unusual to say the least.

2. Apostles Have an Assignment or a Call

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 12 we read: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). If all apostles have the *gift* of apostle as I argued above, all do not have the same *ministries* or the same *activities*. Not all apostles are called to do the same thing.

My purpose here, however, is simply to point out that when a given apostle knows for sure exactly what ministry or call that God has given him or her, their self-confidence rises accordingly. This is not pride. Their confidence is not in their own ability as much as it is a deep assurance that they are obeying God and acting according to His will. To the degree that this happens, the apostle's authority increases.

3. Apostles Have Extraordinary Character

I have chosen the phrase "extraordinary character" very carefully. I do not mean it as a moralizing admonition that apostles should shape up and behave themselves better in order to prove that they might be *bona fide* apostles. What I mean is that God will not entrust genuine apostolic authority to individuals who have not already attained extraordinary character. There is no such thing as an average apostle. While none of them is perfect, and while all of them have plenty of room for improvement both inwardly and outwardly, all apostles are considerably above average.

For example, at one point, Paul writes to the Philippians about sending them Timothy, a member of his apostolic team, to set things in order there. To help open the door for Timothy's apostolic ministry in Philippi, Paul headlines his principal qualifier in these words: "You know his proven *character*" (Phil. 2:22, emphasis mine).

Christian leaders have an awesome responsibility to live exemplary lives. James writes, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (Jas. 3:1). What this means is that God has a double standard for judgment: one standard for leaders and another for the rest of the body of Christ.

It is interesting to observe that the New Testament contains no list of character or behavioral standards to gain or maintain membership in the church except, of course, a profession of faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Some would suggest that baptism is a requirement and they can make a good biblical argument for their position. At the same time, however, many recognized segments of the church such as Salvation Army or Methodists or Nazarenes or Congregationalists hold baptism much more lightly, not regarding it as an absolute requirement for church membership. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to scold the believers in Cor-

inth for violating a number of Christian character standards, but it is notable that he recommended excommunication for only one individual who persisted in sleeping with his stepmother. The rest, apparently, were allowed to maintain church membership while they were working on improving their character.

Apostles Must Be Blameless

Paul wrote letters to both Timothy and Titus setting forth specific character requirements for church leaders from deacons to elders to bishops. 1 Timothy 3 tells us that believers would not qualify as a bishop, for example, if they were not mature ("not a novice" v.6), serious ("sober minded" v. 2), leading a functional family ("if a man does not know how to care for his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?" v. 5), living a modest lifestyle ("not greedy for money" v. 3), and, right at the top of the list "blameless" (v.2).

In order for apostles, who are regarded as first among Christian leaders (see 1 Cor. 12:28), to gain the high-ranking spiritual responsibility that they have been given they must have met the standards for biblical leadership. They can identify with the Apostle Paul who, answering the objections of some Corinthians to his apostolic authority, wrote: "For I know nothing against myself" (1 Cor. 4:4). These are remarkable words, but only on the basis of such a level of extraordinary character could Paul go on later in the same chapter and say, "Therefore, I urge you, imitate me" (1 Cor. 4:16). True apostles can stand before their followers and say without hesitation, "Imitate me!"

Apostles Are Humble

Such a claim would be presumption if it were not clothed in humility. I believe that true humility is intentional. It is a choice. No one is born humble, as anyone who has been close to 3 or 4 year olds well knows. Humility is learned, and apostles have learned how to be humble. They understand servant leadership. They know that Jesus said that whosoever humbles himself will be exalted. Note that the burden is on the leader to humble himself or herself. If a leader is not humble, they have no one to blame but themselves. If they fail in this area, God will not anoint them with apostolic authority.

A good bit of the authority of an apostle, therefore, comes from extraordinary character clothed in humility.

4. Apostles Have Followers

It should go without saying that all apostles have followers. No followers, no apostle! The fact of the matter is, however, that some ambitious and misguided individuals have assumed the title of "apostle" prematurely. I have heard of some pastors who attend a conference on apostles and apostolic ministry, decide there that it would be nice to be an apostle, return home and have business cards printed with "Apostle So-and-So," and pass out their new business cards at every opportunity. These are the ones who fit the term "self-appointed apostles."

Every true apostle has had their gift and office substantiated by a significant number of visible, mature leaders who have chosen to follow the apostle. An apostle is by definition a leader of leaders. In most cases the apostle heads up an apostolic network of pastors and other leaders who, with a certain amount of sanctified pride, do not hesitate to let others know that they are under a given apostle. This is a public relationship which outsiders can observe, analyze, test, and verify. True apostles are not self-appointed. In a real sense they are appointed by the affirmation and by the ongoing loyalty of their followers.

The followers submit to the apostle voluntarily. No one forces an individual to follow a given apostle. Apostolic networks are not denominational structures in which a pastor's credentialing, status, call to a given church, salary level, promotions, retirement program, educational requirements, and other personal and ministry considerations are determined by a legal structure. Pastors join and remain in a certain apostolic network because they want to be under the apostle. If at any time they feel that they are no longer benefiting from their relationship to the apostle, they are free to leave. In most cases, the apostle will encourage them to do so, because discontented or disloyal followers will weaken the whole network.

A Win-Win Situation

Here is why this relationship works so well. It is a win-win situation that is extremely fulfilling to both the apostle and the follower. If we could take an X-ray look into the minds of the apostle and the follower, here is what we would find. The apostle is thinking, "How can I help this person be everything that God wants them to be?" This is the true, driving motivation of an

apostle. And, as a result, the follower is thinking, "This apostle adds incredible value to my life and to my ministry!" This is an unbeatable combination.

As I personally have logged a good bit of apostolic ministry, I can testify that I consider the greatest accomplishments in my life as what I have helped others to attain. I am well pleased with what God has done with so many of my students. I think of the John Wimbers and the Rick Warrens and the Paul Raders and the John Maxwells and the Walt Kallestads and the Kent Hunters and the Elmer Towns and the Cindy Jacobs, just to name a few. For example, I remember that when Cindy Jacobs' first book, *Possessing the Gates of the Enemy* was released by Chosen Books, it literally gave me more pleasure than any of my own books that were released around that time. By saying this, I do not mean to imply that any of the above would have been at all retarded in their careers if they hadn't paid tuition for my courses. Nevertheless, I do believe that each of them would tell you that I had at least a small piece of the action that got them to where they are.

There is good biblical precedent for this. The apostle Paul said to his followers in Thessalonica that he was gentle with them "as a nursing mother cherishes her own children" (1 Thes. 2:7) and that he charged them "as a father does his own children" (1 Thes. 2:11). Then he went on to say, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" (1 Thes. 2:19). The apostle John said, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 Jn 4). I know that this is authentic apostolic desire because I can personally identify with it. I love it when my investment in the lives and ministries of others pays off!

When this kind of a mutual relationship develops between an apostle and the followers, it builds under the apostle a very secure base for exercising authority.

5. Apostles Have Vision

Apostles know where they are going. Not only that, but they know where the church should be going. Where do they get this vision? They receive revelation from God.

In writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said, "It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Cor. 12:1). Then he told them the story of being taken into the third heaven and learning some

things so awesome that he couldn't even share them with others. He goes on to say that his notorious "thorn in the flesh" was given to him "lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations" that he constantly received from God (see 2 Cor. 12:7).

One of the major roles of an apostle is to communicate to the church what the "Spirit is saying to the churches" as we see in the Book of Revelation (see Rev. 2:7). The apostle knows what the Spirit is saying by receiving revelation from God. When this happens, authority increases exponentially. The apostle is announcing the word of the Lord. This is not the *logos* word which we have in the canon of Scripture and which cannot be added to or subtracted from. It is rather the *rhema* word through which God gives us specific direction as to His will for the present and the future.

Apostles who receive the word of the Lord, who translate it into a concrete vision, and who announce to their followers that it is what the Spirit is saying to the churches for this time and for this place, thus open the way for powerful ministry. If they have heard accurately, their followers will confirm to them that the vision is valid and that they want to participate in seeing it fulfilled.

Two Ways to Receive Revelation

There are two ways that revelation from God is communicated to apostles. One of them is that the apostle, like the apostle Paul, receives the revelation directly. I have experienced a good bit of such revelation myself from time to time, although I have never been into the third heaven or even close to my knowledge.

An example of this, just to be concrete for a moment, is the revelation that I received concerning the prayer assignment for the body of Christ to the 40/70 Window. In late 1999, we were finishing the AD2000 Movement's assignment, during the decade of the 1990s, to concentrate our prayers on the 10/40 Window. Our climax was the unparalleled 4-hour, non-stop worship service held in the ancient amphitheater in Ephesus, Turkey on October 1, 1999. No fewer than 5,000 believers from 62 nations joined their hearts and voices together exalting the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. We called it "Celebration Ephesus."

Before and during the event I honestly did not have the slightest idea of how the focus of the worldwide prayer move-

ment would be directed in the future. To be truthful, I was exhausted, and I wanted to spend some time regrouping and taking it easy. As soon as I arrived back in the World Prayer Center in mid-October, however, many of the prayer leaders who were close to me began to admonish me rather relentlessly. "Without a vision, the people perish," they began to tell me. Chuck Pierce then summed it up by saying, "Peter, you are the apostle of the world prayer movement. You are the one responsible for casting the vision for all of us. If you do not seek the Lord for the next vision now, we are in danger of losing the momentum that God has given us for a whole decade." So much for my desired R & R!

Inquiring of the Lord

I did what I knew that I had to do, and I began to inquire of the Lord. "Lord, where do you want us to go in the future?" This was no 40-day, or even 3-day, fast. As I recall, I spoke to God in the shower that morning, and after breakfast the revelation began, thick and fast. Before noon, I was certain that He wanted us to concentrate on the 40/70 Window, which runs from Iceland to the tip of Siberia, for the next five years. I knew that He wanted us to move from "Operation Queen's Palace," which ended in Celebration Ephesus, to "Operation Queen's Domain." I knew that God wanted us to focus on that part of the world which contains, among other things, the largest number of non born-again Christians on the face of the earth, and that the principality of darkness most responsible for neutralizing the power of Christianity in that area was the Queen of Heaven. The surprising thing to me was that previous to that I never had the slightest amount of interest in or attraction to the 40/70 Window.

So I shared these and a few other thoughts with my World Prayer Center staff. You would think I had lit a fireworks display! The immediate, high-voltage affirmation that this was truly what the Spirit is saying to the churches was incredible, in fact a bit overwhelming as far as I was concerned. From that moment new information about the 40/70 Window started pouring in. Intercessor after intercessor began to feel fires of passion to pray for Europe, Eurasia, Russia, the Turkic Belt, Greece, Rome, Poland, and numerous other places rise up in their spirits. Soon after I announced the vision, I was told that three of my personal intercessors had known that we were to shift to the 40/70 Win-

dow some time before I inquired of the Lord, but God did not allow them to tell me.

I have told this story, not to introduce information on the world prayer movement, but to illustrate first hand how an apostle receives direct revelation from God. But the fact that some of my intercessors knew what God had in mind before I did brings up the second way that apostles receive revelation, namely through prophets.

Apostles Hear through Prophets

God can, and does, reveal His plans directly to apostles, but He also reveals them to prophets who, in turn, communicate them to apostles. In another article I will go into considerable detail as to how apostles and prophets must be hitched together in order to function as the foundation of the church, so I will not elaborate much on it here. I will say, however, that I have been surprised at finding that some apostles are not particularly inclined to team up with prophets. I think that by not establishing close, working relationships with prophets, some apostles unnecessarily handicap themselves.

At this point, I'm not yet sure of the balance. In other words, how much revelation should be expected to come directly or how much through prophets? My hunch is that it would probably vary from apostle to apostle. In my case, I would say that a good bit more than half of the revelation that I have received has come through prophets, a number of whom also serve Doris and me as personal intercessors. But I am sure that other apostles would have different reports as well.

The authority of an apostle, in summary, does not derive from holding a position or a title. It comes, pure and simple, from a divine anointing!

Apostles Have Determined Spheres

As I suggested at the beginning of the article, the two most distinguishing features of apostles, in my opinion, are the unusual *authority* that they have and the *spheres* that they are assigned. The bulk of the article has dealt with the authority of apostles and the sources from which it is derived. However, this second area of "spheres" is also extremely important, and I want to explain it briefly, but with as much detail as necessary.

One of the reasons why Paul wrote to the Corinthians was to

remind them, in no uncertain terms, that he was an apostle and that he had been given authority over them. In both of his letters to the Corinthians, Paul brings up the issue of spheres. The authority of an apostle is only operative within the sphere of ministry that God has assigned. When apostles get outside of their appointed sphere of ministry, they do not have any more authority than any other member of the body of Christ.

In First Corinthians, Paul says: "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? *If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you*" (1 Cor. 9:1-2, emphasis mine). What is Paul affirming here? He is saying, apparently, that he is not an apostle over the whole church everywhere. And this was the case. Paul was not an apostle of Jerusalem or of Rome or of Alexandria. These were not his assigned apostolic spheres. But Corinth certainly was, as was Philippi and Ephesus and Lystra and Crete and other places.

By the time he writes Second Corinthians, Paul is ready to elaborate a bit more on the matter of apostolic spheres. Chapter 10 has more detail on this than any other part of the Bible. He says, "We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the *sphere* which God appointed us—a *sphere* which especially includes you" (2 Cor. 10:13, emphasis mine). Recognizing that apostolic ministry is not effective outside of the designated spheres, Paul goes on to write, "For we are not extending ourselves beyond our sphere" (2 Cor. 10:14). Then when he suggested that he would go to the "regions beyond," he said that he would avoid "another man's sphere of accomplishment" (2 Cor. 10:16; and that he would not "build on another man's foundation" (Rom 15:20).

Varieties of Apostolic Spheres

When Paul wrote about apostolic spheres, he was referring to ecclesiastical spheres and geographical or territorial spheres. These are very common, but I have also observed that certain apostles have functional spheres as well. This gives us at least three approaches toward accurately defining and describing apostolic spheres:

- *Ecclesiastical Spheres.* These perhaps are the most common of all apostolic spheres. In them, apostles have authority over a certain number of churches and possibly their derivative ministries.

- *Functional Spheres.* A functional sphere would include leaders in a certain arena of Christian ministry. For example, there might be an apostle over worship leaders who minister in a number of different churches. This apostle is not in a position of authority over churches, but over individuals with similar gifts and callings. This functional apostolic authority does not remove the need for worship leaders to be under apostolic authority in the churches they represent as well.
- *Geographical or Territorial Spheres.* Paul's ecclesiastical sphere was also territorial as we saw earlier. Functional spheres can also be territorial, such as an apostle of worship leaders in Spain who would not have the same authority over worship leaders in Germany.

It is important to recognize that these spheres are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I am not trying to put apostles in rigid boxes. What I am trying to do, however, is to provide conceptual frameworks, with corresponding terminology, that will help us sort out what we are beginning to observe more frequently, as the New Apostolic Reformation develops before our eyes, in order to understand better what God is beginning to do in this hour.

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NOTES

¹. C. Peter Wagner, *Churchquake!* (Ventura CA: Regal Books, 1999), p. 75.