

Apostles, Prophets and Future Church

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built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Ephesians 2:20–21 ESV.

Preamble:

During the last half of the twentieth century, across various evangelical and charismatic streams of the global church, there has been an increased awareness of the ministry of apostles and prophets, and their contemporary restoration according to the New Testament (NT) model.

Despite this fresh awareness, however, there is still some ambiguity as to their role and function. I write from the vantage point of forty years experience in several ‘restoration’ streams that have had various measures of international influence. Flowing in the wake of the Reformation’s attempt to return to a more apostolic Christianity these contemporary movements, likewise, have sought to recover authentic apostolic life and practice. Integral to this has been the recovery of the foundational ministry of apostles and prophets as reflected in the NT. Inevitably, with the shedding of fresh light, this process of recovery has disturbed the more traditional and institutional paradigms of church. Even so, despite some progress in the recovery of these foundational ministries, we are unwise to assume we have appropriated their full and accurate functioning, and that we are immune from old habits.

5 paradigms of the *apostolic*

From my observation of the contemporary church, there are at least five paradigms of the apostolic, which intersect in various expressions and combinations. For various reasons, which we will consider, each of them has limitations. We will then consider, from the biblical data and personal experience, what I suggest might be the optimum expression of apostolic ministry as the body of Christ approximates the full stature of Christ.

Corporate paradigm

First, today’s apostle is often viewed unconsciously through a *corporate paradigm*. A market-driven culture has inevitably produced a market-driven church. Consequently, despite our best attempts to pursue a relational ethos, growth becomes the goal. Utilitarianism and pragmatism kick in as church multiplication subtly overtakes the goal of knowing Christ. Correspondingly, the life of the Spirit is reduced as church planting entrepreneurs and administrators are mistaken for apostles. Even true apostles, unless they live in the fear of the Lord, can cross the invisible line from vision to ambition, as they manoeuvre God’s people toward their goals for growth.

Often allied to this paradigm is espousal of an event-based entertainment culture, producing the hybrid *Entertainer-CEO* leader who brings the house down on Sunday and governs corporate *McChurch* on Monday.

Franchise paradigm

Secondly, today’s apostle is often viewed through a *franchise paradigm*. Some describe this as a “vertical” apostle, in contrast to “horizontal”, the latter being viewed as a catalyst and gatherer of apostles more broadly across the body of Christ; whereas, the former oversee their own church movements. Tragically, in the name of the *apostolic*, these repeat history by displaying denominational attributes in various measures, notably centralised hierarchical leadership and sectarianism.

On the other hand, Ephesians 4 shows that apostles are given to the *whole* body of Christ, not to a particular church movement or network. In other words the true biblical apostle is always catholic (i.e. universal) in their spirit and scope, never sectarian. In fact, the NT shows no evidence of the trans-local *networking of churches*. Rather it demonstrates the trans-local *networking of apostles* only.

At first glance this distinction may seem pedantic. Even so, the loss of this distinction, in my estimation, is instrumental in dividing the body of Christ along sectarian and denominational lines. Apart from hubris, it is the sole source of perpetuating ecclesiastical tribalism. Consequently, under divine genius the NT churches were never configured as church networks (aka *denominations*) or even according to their apostles, but exclusively by their geography – their city. There was no configuration of the NT *ecclesia* beyond their locality – the city. And any identity found in their apostles was roundly rebuked as divisive (1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:1-9). Even so, the trans-local ministry of apostles and their teams across various cities and nations must be preserved; although, now their agenda is exclusively the church of the city.

Therefore, as the body of Christ is restored denominations and church networks will become obsolete. In fact, future church will be post-denominational; and will therefore be pioneered by apostles who capture heaven's DNA for the city whose builder and maker is God – who see with the eye of faith the holy catholic and apostolic church of a city – a church that is denominated by geography, rather than Hollywood celebrity, or sectarian polity, over which Christ is the exclusive head.

Without this revelation apostles are reduced to the poverty of a *franchise paradigm* – growing their own empires, rather than seeding and sustaining the church of the city.

Positional paradigm

Thirdly, today's apostle is viewed through a *positional paradigm*. This is reflected in the term “office” of apostle, bishop, elder etc. The word “office” was plucked out of the ecclesiastical atmosphere and imposed on the sacred text by translators (1 Tim 3:1 KJV, NASB, ESV). There is no equivalent word in the Greek manuscripts or any similar concept that answers to it. Rather it was the imposition of Gentilic hierarchical structures on the ministers and *ecclesia* of the new covenant. This was begun by Ignatius and completed by Constantine. We are still in recovery from its effects.

These effects include the subjugation of the believer's priesthood to human priests and intermediaries. Despite the Reformation, priestly and positional mindsets and structures of leadership were merely rechristened, switching titles from *priest* to *pastor*. And now, carrying the same systems and structures with us, we have switched titles from *pastor* to *apostle*.

Despite our best attempts at a relational ethos and language, without consciously jettisoning the *positional paradigm*, and thus *organisational paradigm*, we are destined to unconsciously repeat history, perpetuating various measures of spiritual abuse.

Authentic apostles, viewing the body of Christ organically, will function through horizontal filial relationships, by virtue of gift and character. They will not need honorific titles or organisational positions.

Pastor-teacher paradigm

Fourthly, today's apostle is viewed through a *pastor-teacher paradigm*. Unlike the other paradigms, this is a biblical ministry function that bears much fruit. Despite a notional rejection of this paradigm as the one that leads the apostolic church it is deeply ingrained in its subsequent life and history. This is not to deny its great benefits and legitimacy, as a ministry of Christ to his church, but in its appropriate place. The majority of today's more senior apostolic leaders were trained and moulded by it.

In my view, pastor-teacher types, functioning apostolically, currently lead many if not most, of the more successful and healthy apostolic church networks. Clearly there will be more in their gift-mix, especially gifts of leadership, administration etc, and sometimes the ascension-gift ministry of evangelist. This paradigm is so well established that one particular influential ministry recently advocated that pastors of congregations over a certain size were automatically the apostles of the city. Despite healthy and multiplying churches there are limitations to this paradigm, which we will consider under the next head.

Unfortunately, flowing from the *pastor-teacher paradigm* the Ephesians 4 ascension-gift ministries of *pastor* and *teacher* are often still viewed as *resident* (i.e. local) functioning over a congregation, rather than as *mobile* (i.e. trans-local), functioning out to the larger church. In the *apostolic paradigm* the *pastor* and *teacher* travel with an *apostle*, shepherding the shepherds (i.e. the elder-teams of the local congregations). There is no such thing as a pastor over a congregation.

Apostolic-prophetic paradigm

Lastly, today's apostles may be viewed through an *apostolic-prophetic paradigm*. However, in this paradigm *prophetic*

ministry is usually assimilated, but the *ministry of a prophet* is more problematic. The difference is not fully appreciated, which I will explain momentarily. This, in my estimation, is the source of unease between apostles and prophets in our present functioning. Consequently, at our present stage of restoration the *apostolic-prophetic paradigm* is only partially appropriated. Additionally, I am persuaded that this underlying tension is the cause of the paradigm dissonance discussed to this point. How has this happened?

My answer may disturb some who consider themselves apostles. A re-read of the book of Acts may suggest that a full-blooded NT apostle is firstly a prophet, who is then released into a larger measure of apostolic grace and sphere of responsibility. In fact, their role as a prophet spearheads a spiritual advance, which then requires an apostolic stewardship. Let me explain.

Paul a prototype

Paul was the first apostle to be called by the Lord after his ascension. Before this the only apostles were the disciples whom he called while on earth. Paul therefore became the prototype or model of post-ascension apostles to the present day, in fact, the prototype apostle for the mission to the gentiles, and therefore, strategic for the advance of God's kingdom on earth.

In Acts 13 we discover him functioning first as a *prophet* and *teacher* at Antioch before being separated by the Holy Spirit as an *apostle*. While he was unquestionably called as an apostle from birth a process became evident for it to occur. He was not released by God to function as an apostle before being released as a prophet. My argument is that this sequence, and its restoration, is significant for the mission to the gentiles. Even so, it must not be construed as a humanly engineered career track of promotion to apostle after serving successfully as a prophet.

Prophet's ministry

To understand this we must clarify what a prophet is. Because of our present state of recovery there is a deficit in the body of Christ in this regard. We have mistaken prophets as merely prognosticators and purveyors of personal prophecy. Prediction, however, is only one small element of their brief. In fact, this is where we have failed to distinguish between *prophetic ministry* and the *ministry of a prophet*. The former is an expression of a mature gift of prophecy, often complemented by the word of knowledge, or healing (1 Cor 12), which may generate a full-time ministry, while the latter is the Ephesians 4 ascension ministry of a prophet. You may ask how we are to tell the difference?

The ministry of a prophet is distinguished by the weight of a message. Flowing out of grace-based holiness it has *gravitas*, bringing revelation, correction, and alignment to the body of Christ. Through them the word of the Lord dismantles strongholds that resist the kingdom of God. They move in and impart the spirit of the fear of the Lord. A prophetic ministry, by contrast, is more focussed in personal prophecy, edification, exhortation, and comfort. The latter gets words *from* the Lord, whereas the former carries the word *of* the Lord.

Prophet's message

You may also ask, what the prophet's message is. God sends the new covenant prophet, like their old covenant counterpart, to his people as a *covenant-mediator*, to call them back to covenant fidelity and remind them of its *stipulations* (commands) and *sanctions* (blessings and curses).

When Jesus was asked to sum up the covenant he re-stated its stipulations, quoting from Deuteronomy 6: "to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, body and strength, and also to love our neighbour as ourselves." This was the fulfilling of all the law and the prophets. Regardless of its various administrations (i.e. Adamic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, Messianic, New) the ministry of the prophets has always been to call the people of God back to the Lord and to his covenant.

Paul in the mould of the prophets

Therefore, in the mould of the classical prophets, Paul encounters the Lord in a vision and is called as his voice to the nations (Acts 9:1-31; 26:12-23). Additionally, he ascends to the third heaven, receiving revelations that are unlawful to utter. He operates in the gift-mix of a prophet – in the word of knowledge, the discerning of spirits, the working of miracles and prophecy. In fellowship with the prophets of old, his prophetic witness through the proclamation of the gospel of God's kingdom is not only accompanied by signs and wonders, but also persecution and suffering.

As a prophet Paul calls, through the gospel, a people back to the Lord and his covenant from among the nations, which in God's timing precipitates commissioning as an apostle to a greater geographical sphere of responsibility. This is accompanied by an increased measure of grace and authority to build them as the new covenant temple in the Spirit. Also, as a prophet, Paul is regularly led through visions, angels, and prophecy in his apostolic assignment to the nations. In fact, some scholars have gone as far to describe apostles as prophets on circuit. Therefore, as a prophet with an apostolic assignment, Paul received a prophetic revelation so as to lay the foundations of the new covenant, opening a new era of the kingdom of God on earth. As Rousas Rushdoony points out, commenting on the uniqueness of Paul's call, "Paul...asserts his *prophetic apostleship*. The Old Testament prophets spoke directly from God... . Paul was very familiar with this prophetic power, and he himself manifests it and asserts it. He is the New Testament prophet, in that he alone, like the prophets who said, "Thus saith the Lord," speaks from the Lord."

Therefore, as demonstrated through Paul as the prototype post-ascension apostle to the gentiles, one cannot be fully apostolic without being in some measure prophetic. Consequently, when apostles emerge and function through an *apostolic-prophetic paradigm* there will be no tension between the two. By nature apostles will be inherently prophetic.

Apostolic product flows from prophetic purpose

Apostolic product will emanate from *prophetic purpose*. Nehemiah's rebuilding of Jerusalem, for example, was both catalysed and contextualised by Jeremiah's seventy-year prophecy concerning the captivity and restoration (Jer 25:8-11; 29:10). And then during the post-exilic restoration Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi continued to provide the same prophetic catalyst and context for the re-building (Ezr 5:1-2; 6:14). Likewise, in the final restoration of all things the ministry and message of the prophet will provide the necessary revelation and blueprint (Eph 2:20-3:5). Therefore, *apostolic product* without *prophetic purpose* is pointless. It is, in fact, the foundation upon which all apostles should build.

As it was with the first, so will it be with the last. The wise master-builder (*architecton*) of Paul's day was both architect and builder (1 Cor 3:10). Paul, as a prophet, received the blueprint for God's house; but as an apostle, constructed it. The former flows from the spirit of revelation; the latter from the spirit of wisdom. As a type of Christ's apostleship, Moses also reflects this dual function. He not only received the pattern in the mount, as a prophet; but also, as an apostle, built the house (Heb 3:1-2; Deut 34:10). We can now see how easily the apostle and prophet are the joint foundation of the living temple (Eph 2:20).

Moving between the two functions

This is not to deny some are apostles and some are prophets. I am not suggesting that all prophets are called as apostles, but I am suggesting that all true apostles will function as prophets, in some measure. Apostles will move between the two functions depending on circumstances and the leading of the Spirit (the *Didache* also carries hints of this overlap).

Nor am I suggesting that apostles will not function in the other ascension-gift ministries of Ephesians 4. Clearly, we see today apostles who are pastors, or evangelists, or teachers to the body of Christ, which is appropriate. What I am suggesting is that as we approach this climax of the ages and the "fullness of the gentiles" (i.e. the final harvest of the nations: see Rom 11:25; Lk 21:24) we will see a restoration of the kind of apostleship that opened the gentile era. "The first shall be last" in that the first mode of apostleship will be the last to be restored.

Primary role of apostles

In concluding this chapter, a word must be said concerning the primary role of apostles as stewards of the "faith once delivered to the saints" (Jd 3). Christ sends apostles to the church and to the nations with the mandate and prime responsibility for not only the expansion, but also the continuity of Christ's kingdom on earth (Rom 1:5, 14-16; 16:25-26). This is pre-eminently a discipling and teaching mandate and ministry. A revelation of God and his purposes was given to the first apostles and enscripturated, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as sacred text. It is the responsibility of apostles, as teachers, to perpetuate the gospel through faithfully teaching the word of God. Christianity has content, a body of truth, which is to be conveyed to each generation. This is the true meaning of "apostolic succession". It is not the succession of apostolic office, but of the apostolic faith. True apostles therefore are not church planters only, or entrepreneurs, CEOs, and administrators. Like Paul, they are prophets and teachers. Even so, as Paul underlined, we have many teachers but not many fathers. This calls for the discipling side of the apostolic equation where apostles invest themselves in those who have the character and the grace to do likewise, and thus ensure the expansion and continuity of the faith.

Recalibration necessary

In light of the above some recalibration will be necessary. Many apostles, under the weight of the dominant paradigms, are prophets in denial. Many others currently graced to function apostolically may be pastor-teachers, or supports and governments, as members of an apostolic team.

We are grateful for a generation of apostles who have emerged through the *pastor-teacher paradigm*. Even so, as the full day comes and the body of Christ approaches full stature we will see a supernatural proliferation of *apostle-prophets* released in the Pauline mould. Only then will the gentile mission be completed – the fullness of Christ revealed and the nations filled with the knowledge of his glory.

I trust these brief thoughts may be sufficient to stir a fresh pursuit and a fuller appropriation of all God has destined for his people through the ministry of apostles and prophets.

May the future come today!

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