

The Tragic Elimination of Apostolic Ministry

It is tragic when the vast potential of an individual or entity is limited or eliminated because there is no room for their gifts. In the case of a lion, when captured and encaged, it loses its aggressive roar because it is forced to be localized into the confines of a cage. It may be a lion, but it is no different from a house cat because, like a house cat, it no longer has to claim its territory and hunt to satisfy its hunger, and is content to stay confined within a building.

To me, all of this is related to the condition of the local church after it ceases to recognize the ministry and function of apostles. This results in cutting off the pioneering spirit and apostolic call to conquer and expand kingdom influence.

I don't necessarily think people have to use the title of apostle; the function is what is most important.

In the case of church history, centuries ago we replaced the title—and consequently the function—of apostle and replaced it with the office of bishop. This vastly changed the nature and mission of the local and universal church. Apostles in the New Testament were the “sent ones” who, as military generals, were called to lead the church in mission as they were sent out to conquer new territories by planting churches, and kingdom influence, in key cities of the old Greco-Roman world. For example, Paul the Apostle started churches in more than 30 key cities before the commencement of the first century. The office of bishop was primarily meant to oversee and administrate local churches: first starting in a local church (see 1 Timothy 3), which then evolved into overseeing a parish, then a diocese and then a region that included other bishops (hence they became archbishops or metropolitan bishops). However, as bishops became the apostolic successors,

it connoted a change from adventure, pioneering and conquering new territories (e.g. Paul, who prioritized going where Christ was not named as we read in 2 Cor. 10:10-14), to one of settling and maintaining the church and focusing primarily on church life, polity and politics.

Not only that, but after the Protestant Reformation, many—in response to the abuse of the bishops and popes—even eradicated the office of bishop and opted instead for a presbyterian form of government, whether for good or bad, which only recognizes pastors, elders and teachers in the church. The eradication of the bishopric further isolated and fragmented the emerging evangelical church and resulted in numerous denominations and independent local churches. For example, when the Eastern Church split from Roman Catholicism in the 11th century, it remained virtually unified and intact because they kept the bishopric and/or the episcopate.

Getting back to apostolic ministry, it is essential that we recapture the function—if not the title—of apostolic ministry once again so the lions of the church are released from their cages to go out and hunt, metaphorically speaking, and expand kingdom influence. The early church never saw their congregations as separate from the apostolic ministry and function of their recognized apostles. As a matter of fact, for them, local church and mission were inextricably connected to the apostolic, not only in word but in finances. Read 2 Cor. 8 and 9, as well as Phil. 4 to see how local churches founded by Paul the Apostle supported his apostolic calling and ministry—not just their local congregations—and even sent people from their congregations to accompany him on his trips (Epaphroditus in Phil. 2, Barnabas in Acts 13, Silas in Acts 15). Furthermore, Paul would install pastoral elders to care for the local congregations (see Titus 1), and those who developed in the apostolic would travel with Paul to win new territory and establish the churches that were already founded. The epistles and the book of Acts highlight Timothy

and Titus, as well as some others, who functioned apostolically with Paul to oversee churches and perform apostolic mission.

Consequently, with the eradication of the apostolic from the local church, pastors have become the leaders of congregations. This has resulted in the body of Christ being led by caregivers instead of by strategic (military) generals sent out to conquer and establish new territory for the kingdom! The result has been disastrous as churches have now become self-focused and inbred instead of kingdom-focused and mission centered.

The first church was born on Pentecost Sunday with an apostolic/prophetic message by the Apostle Peter. As we read the book of Acts, as long as the church was led by apostles it was constantly expanding and turning culture and cities upside down (see Acts 17:6). The church was born in apostolic mission, and it was meant to continue to be connected to its original mission of preaching the gospel to all creation and discipling nations (see Mark 16:15-18 and Matt. 28:19). As we have seen in the last fifty years, in evangelicalism the focus has now become “church growth,” and the apostolic message of the New Testament has now become watered down to accommodate culture instead of transforming it—of encouraging Christians merely to witness instead of winning others. As a result, we have “mere” Christians who come to be entertained by professional worship teams, instead of disciples who bring Christ in their marketplace mission from Monday to Saturday and don’t depend on inviting their friends to Sunday services to hear their pastor—a professional cleric—preach a salvation message in order for their unsaved friends to get saved.

Contrary to this, in the book of Acts and the gospels, the majority of all ministry, including salvations and healings, took place outside the temple and synagogue. They even had extravagant moves of the Holy Spirit in the streets—without the hype and correct atmosphere we typically need to see God

do a miracle during a Sunday service! Acts 5 shows that even the shadow of the Apostle Peter healed the sick in the streets, and Acts 9 shows how Philip turned a whole city upside down with miracles in the street.

As the church becomes more and more inbred and self-focused—because the apostolic has been rejected—many Sunday messages have to do with “self-actualization” and “self-empowerment,” or motivational messages that build crowds who couldn’t give a hoot about the deteriorating political, social, economic and moral landscape of their communities. As we are lifting up our hands and praising God on Sundays, 3,000 babies are being aborted per day and issues of poverty, injustice and alternate forms of family are being propagated by secular humanists who have captivated the minds of the millennials, while the emergent church is trying to captivate their emotions!

Furthermore, when apostles lead local churches, an apostolic spirit of wisdom, revelation and courage comes upon entire congregations and releases all the saints to the work of the ministry (see Eph. 4:12) to fill up all things in creation (see Eph. 4:10) which produces marketplace apostles and prophets of government, economics, education, science, media and creative innovators that are at the prophetic tip of the spear by applying the biblical worldview (apostolic writings) to their spheres of influence. Hence, when a local church and/or movement of churches is not apostolically led and prophetically influenced they lose influence in their communities and culture because the apostolic mission of the church has been stripped away. Then, they become settlers who shy away from exercising bold faith and taking risks, and are more concerned about maintaining what they have.

While I am not against feeding the flock on Sunday, and having great pastors who establish churches with great programs for their congregations, I am very concerned that we have a great lack of balance because of a lack of apostolic input. Things

have become twisted because of the American consumerist “I, me, my” culture; even some bona fide apostles who lead influential local congregations have become more concerned with building their own empires than for the things of the kingdom.

In conclusion, I believe the following:

- Local churches need to embrace and celebrate the ministry and function of apostolic leaders so their congregations can be connected to an ever expanding horizon of ministry that is called to influence every realm of life and plant centers of influence in every major city of the world, à la Paul the Apostle.
- We need to embody the apostolic spirit in our local churches, so that all the members called to the secular arena will carry with them apostolic revelation and courage so they are not merely witnessing, but transforming their workplaces and culture.
- Local church pastors need the input and inspiration of apostolic leaders to be balanced in regard to their church mission and vision.
- Local churches and movements need to nurture apostolic leaders and financially support them so each local church is connected to apostolic vision and mission that is beyond their community and religious subculture. Thus they will continue to be pioneers instead of settlers who are continually in maintenance mode.

Finally, unless the body of Christ once again celebrates the ministry function of apostle, some of the greatest leaders in our generation will never emerge—or will be repelled—because “like begets like.”

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