

Christians Have Forgotten This Crucial Aspect of Apostolic Ministry

If you had been walking along the road leading into the city of Lystra on a particular day in A.D. 48, you would have noticed a pitiful sight: a man lying by the roadside bleeding and battered after being stoned by an angry mob. You may also have noticed a group of people standing quietly around him, and if you had asked, "Who in the world is that?" they may well have answered, "That is God's apostle to this city."

Indeed, this was Paul the apostle lying by the roadside, having just been stoned after preaching the gospel in this city (Acts 14:19-20). This incident was, no doubt, in Paul's mind when he later wrote a description of the lot of those earliest apostles, saying, "Even to this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless" (1 Cor. 4:11).

Apostles Experience Unique Suffering

An apostolic calling does not exempt one from suffering and persecution. True apostles, in fact, encounter unique suffering because they often are sent to "plow new ground," that is, to minister in places and in ways that provoke opposition.

God is a kind and loving heavenly Father, but He is not a doting, overprotective parent who shields His children from every difficulty. Those He prepares, He sends into the enemy's territory to declare the Good News and to establish His reign.

This often provokes violent reaction and opposition. This was so with Paul, who encountered great suffering while carrying out his apostolic calling. In 1 Corinthians 4:9-13 Paul

enumerates some of the challenges of being an apostle:

For I think that God has exhibited us, the apostles, last, as if we were sentenced to death. For we have been made a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honorable, but we are despised. Even to this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless. We labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless. Being persecuted, we endure. Being slandered, we encourage. We are made as the filth of the world, and are the refuse of all things to this day.

The pagan Greeks and Romans resented Paul's preaching of an exclusive Savior. The Jews hated him for preaching that God "in Christ" had given Gentiles an equal standing with themselves. He was beaten, stoned, maligned and imprisoned while carrying out the apostolic commission he had received from the Lord.

An Apostle May Not Be the Celebrity-Type

If alive today, the apostle Paul would probably be ostracized by much of the modern American church. He would not be a popular speaker at conferences and seminars, nor would he be a frequent guest on Christian TV. He most likely would not be invited to sit on any of the numerous apostolic councils that are emerging. He just would not fit the criteria of what the modern charismatic church demands of its apostles.

A 2nd-century writer described Paul as being small in stature, bald, with a "hooked" nose, somewhat bow-legged and having eyebrows that met together. To make matters worse, his manner of dress was less than desirable. In the above passage, he describes himself as being "poorly clothed and beaten and homeless" (v. 11).

In addition, Paul himself admits that he is not an impressive preacher or public speaker (2 Cor. 11:6). He obviously lacked the qualities and characteristics that would be necessary to make it as a leader in an Americanized, celebrity-driven Christianity.

To make matters worse, his resume would surely raise some eyebrows. He had been incarcerated on numerous occasions and was vehemently accused of being anti-Semitic (even though he himself was Jewish). More than once he had been arrested and accused of causing civil unrest and instigating riots. He was just not the kind of person with whom the image-conscious churches and ministries of America would want to be associated.

The Secret of His Success

Nonetheless, Paul was the vessel God chose to take the gospel to the Gentile world and to shake an empire for God. According to I Corinthians 1:27, God purposely chooses that which is most “unlikely” according to the standards of this present world. If, therefore, the church is functioning in the values of the present world rather than the values of the kingdom of God, the church will misjudge, marginalize and reject those whom God calls and sends.

True apostles have been dealt with by God and have experienced a breaking of pride, egoism and self-centered confidence. When Paul, for example, described his personal state upon arrival in the pagan city of Corinth, he did not offer a glowing resume that delineated his strengths and successes. Instead, he described his ministry in terms of his frail, human weakness and his radical dependence on God. He wrote:

Brothers, when I came to you, I did not come with superiority of speech or wisdom, declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in

fear and in much trembling. My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

Paul's self-portrait is certainly not the description we would expect of an apostle who is about to shake a city for God. Nonetheless, God's power worked mightily through Paul, and a gifted, powerful and somewhat rowdy church was established in that pagan city.

The key was that Paul did not wallow in his human shortcomings but turned his eyes to the one who was the source of his strength, wisdom and power. In his human weakness, he was made strong by the power of God (2 Cor. 12:9-10). When he finished, people did not say, "Isn't Paul a wonderful preacher and great man of God." Instead, they exclaimed, "Isn't this God that Paul preaches wonderful, powerful and gracious?"

"That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5). Self-made apostles cause people to praise them, while God-called apostles cause people to praise the One who sent them.

True Apostles Are Not Preoccupied With Themselves

An elder shared with me how the young pastor of their church informed the board of elders that he wanted to begin using "Apostle" as a title in front of his name, even though there is no biblical precedent for such. The elders all expressed their opinion that it was not a good idea.

The elder said the young man was so hurt and frustrated by their rebuff that he began to cry. He obviously was not ready for the kind of apostolic ministry Paul described. If he could not handle being rebuffed about wearing a title, how would he ever handle the suffering and rejection that goes with a true

apostolic calling?

True apostles are not preoccupied with titles, status, rank, significance and honor. They are consumed with the commission they have received from the Lord and are willing to go anywhere, face any difficulty and suffer any loss in order to fulfill that commission. This is what Paul expressed to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:22-24:

Now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what shall befall me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But none of these things deter me. Nor do I count my life of value to myself, so that I may joyfully finish my course and the ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.
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This article is derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's book, Pursuing Power: How the Historic Quest for Apostolic Authority and Control Has Divided and Damaged the Church, available from Amazon and his website at .