

Leading New Testament Scholar Reveals How to Recognize False Apostles

Author's note: This is a guest column by my friend, Craig Keener, one of the world's leading New Testament scholars.

As I speak in various countries, there is increasing concern about “apostles” who compete with each other in rival miracle claims, followings and income. They view apostleship as a high-status and lucrative office to which they may be promoted if successful in lower roles. The complaint is not about using the title “apostle” simply for overseers, the way some churches use “bishop” or “superintendent.” The complaint is about those who demand special recognition.

I do not deny the importance of genuine apostleship. Biblically, it is among the gifts that Christ's church needs to bring us to maturity (Eph 4:11-13). Although the Twelve Apostles are no longer with us, Paul clearly uses the term “apostle” more broadly than that (Rom 11:13, 16:7; 1 Cor. 15:5-7; Gal 1:19; 1 Thess. 2:6). He probably applies it to those involved in cutting-edge, sacrificial, groundbreaking evangelism that lays foundations in new spheres (see Rom. 15:20).

Yet Paul, an apostle, denounced false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13). Jesus commended an ancient church for testing those who claim to be apostles and calling out those who were false (Rev. 2:2). Similarly, Jeremiah, a true prophet, denounced false prophecy, clearly dissociating the true from the false. “‘For what has straw to do with grain?’ declares the Lord” (Jer. 23:28, NIV).

What are some criteria that can help us distinguish true from false apostles?

First, false apostles seek their own honor. They promote themselves more than Jesus. Paul's rivals in Corinth boasted in themselves (2 Cor. 10:17-18, 11:12), and indeed were flashier speakers than Paul (11:6). Yet Paul warns that these "super-apostles" (11:5) are false apostles (11:13), servants of Satan (11:14-15).

Paul also warned church elders that some of them would "arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30; see Mark 3:19). That they draw disciples after themselves, rather than after the Lord Jesus, reveals their deadly error. Jesus warns against seeking titles for ourselves (Matt 23:7-11); the truly greatest must be the servant (Mark 9:35; 10:43). Although true apostles are first in role (1 Cor 12:28), they appear last in terms of worldly status (4:9). As Rolland and Heidi Baker put it, "Our desired direction is always lower still. The apostle is in the lowest position of all."

It is true that we live in a world dominated by marketing. In most capitalist countries with freedom of religion, the religious "market" favors those with adequate promotion. It is right for true teachers to promote God's message that they bring, especially when needed to counter false teaching. At the same time, "we are not peddlers of God's word like so many" (2 Cor 2:17, NRSV); "we don't proclaim ourselves, but instead Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus's sake" (4:5; cf. 1 Pet 5:3). True apostles serve Christ and his people, not seek to dominate them. As Randy Clark says, "Biblical apostleship focuses on serving rather than ruling. Jesus said the greatest of all would be the servant of all."

Second, false apostles exploit the flock. In the Bible, some leaders were in it just for the money (Mic. 3:11), exploiting God's people for greed and forgetting the Lord who bought us (2 Pet. 2:1-3). God's servants must be different (2 Cor. 2:17, 1 Thess. 2:5).

In the late first or early second century, an early Christian writing called the *Didache* urges discernment of true and false apostles, adding: "if he asks for money, he's a false prophet" (Did. 11.6). Of course, funds are necessary; Paul raised money for the church in Jerusalem and welcomed support for his mission (Rom. 15:24, 2 Cor 10:15). But the *Didache's* criterion here seems to be an emergency response to a setting in which pretend apostles were taking advantage of God's people. God will punish those who exploit people (Ezek. 34:2-4, 10; Matt 24:45-51).

Some false ministers avoid even the hardship of saying something unpopular. In Jeremiah's day, false prophets comforted Israel with what they wanted to hear instead of confronting their sin (Jer. 6:14, 8:11). They assumed that because other prophets said it, it must be true (Jer. 23:30). Paul also warns about people following whoever tells them just what they want to hear (see 2 Tim 4:3-4).

Finally, true apostles sacrifice for Christ. This often involves suffering for God's purposes (Matt. 10:2, 9-11, 16-39; Mark 6:8-9; Luke 9:3-4; 10:3-4; 11:49; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Tim. 1:11-12; Rev. 18:20). Although true apostles have signs (Matt. 10:8, Mark 6:7, 2 Cor 12:12), sometimes even false preachers have those (Ex. 7:11, Matt 7:22-23). When Paul wants to distinguish himself from the rival, false apostles trying to sway his converts in Corinth, Paul appeals to his sacrifices and sufferings for the gospel (2 Cor. 11:23-33). Paul had broken new ground, sacrificially reaching the Corinthians for Christ. His rivals, instead of evangelizing new ground or laying new foundations, tried to lure away his converts after themselves (2 Cor. 10:12-16; see Rom 15:20).

True apostles, like true prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers, are gifts to Christ's body to equip all members of the body for their ministries (Eph. 4:11-13). They must honor the body's head, Christ, with whom each member of the body has a direct connection (Eph. 4:15-16). By speaking Christ's true

message, apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers must nurture the body to maturity so that believers are protected against false teachings (Eph. 4:13-14).

In sum, true apostles are sacrificial servants for Christ's body. Those who believe they fill this role today must serve Christ's body sacrificially. Sometimes this sacrifice must include protecting Christ's flock from false apostles.

Craig Keener *is professor of biblical studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and the best-selling author of more than 25 books. His most recent book is Not Afraid of the Antichrist: Why We Don't Believe in a Pretribulation Rapture, co-authored with Michael L. Brown.*