

What Today's Church Gets Totally Wrong About the Office of Apostle

Jesus never used the English word “apostle,” and it is most likely that he never used the Greek word *apostolos*, from which our English word is derived. This means that our contemporary understanding of the “apostle” is based on a Greek word and concept that was foreign to Jesus and His audience. If, therefore, we want to understand the New Testament apostle, we must trace our English word back to its Hebrew roots.

The Greek *Apostolos*

In our English Bibles, the word “apostle” is translated from the Greek word *apostolos*. In ancient Greek literature, *apostolos* was most often used as a seafaring term and was sometimes combined with *ploion*(ship) to refer to a freighter or transport ship sent out on a special voyage. However, it was also used of military expeditions and, on occasion, of the commander of a particular expedition.

In all these cases the word denoted the act of sending, with little or no emphasis on any authorization from the sender. It was thus often applied to the expedition itself and eventually acquired the meaning of a naval or military expedition. Although of interest, the parallels between *apostolos* in this literature and its usage in the New Testament are minimal (Hyatt, *Pursuing Power*, 20-21).

The Jewish Background of the New Testament

Since the world of Jesus was first century Judaism, not Hellenism, we should not be surprised to find a Jewish background for the use of *apostolos*. In fact, Jesus probably never used *apostolos* since he spoke Hebrew (or possibly

Aramaic) rather than Greek.

Although our English gospels have been translated from Greek manuscripts, it is likely that an original Hebrew gospel lies behind the Greek versions. Papias, a disciple of the apostle John, said, "Matthew put together the oracles of the Lord in the Hebrew language and everyone interpreted them as best they could." The second-century church father, Irenaeus, confirmed this by saying that Matthew issued a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own language.

There is a growing school of New Testament scholars who believe that a Hebrew gospel, no longer in existence, predates our Greek versions, which are actually dependent on it.

Jesus, therefore, probably used the Hebrew word *saliah*, which was then translated *apostolos* in the later Greek versions.

The Hebrew Word for Apostle

In first century Judaism, the *saliah* was a legal, commissioned representative of another, acting in a sort of "power of attorney." The *saliah* represented in his own person, the person and rights of another, in other words, the one who had commissioned him. A *saliah* could even represent a bridegroom in a marriage ceremony and the one who had sent the *saliah* would, thereby, become legally married.

To receive or shame the *saliah* was to receive or shame the one who had sent him. The rabbis summed up the basis of the *saliah* in the oft-quoted statement, "The one sent by a man is as the man himself."

The *saliah* possessed no authority of his own. His authority was derived from the one who had commissioned him. Of utmost importance, therefore, was the subordination of the *saliah* to the will of the one who was sending him. The *saliah* must be one in whom the master or sender had absolute confidence and trust.

The authority of the *saliah* was directly related to and limited by the particular commission that was given. The *saliah* had no authority to pass his commission to another since it did not originate with him and did not belong to him. The *saliah* was characterized by service and faithfulness, not prestige and power.

The institution of the *saliah* was well in place by the first century and most certainly provided the background for the *apostolos* of the Greek New Testament.

The Apostle Is an Authorized Representative of Another

Like the *saliah*, the one distinguishing characteristic of the New Testament apostle is the authorization of the “sent one” by the sender. In Matt. 10:1, for example, Jesus gives authority (Gk. *exousia*) to the Twelve to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons. He then sends them out and assures them that, “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent me” (Matt. 10:40). The commissioning of the Twelve in this passage has obvious parallels with that of the *saliah*.

The Greek word translated “power” in this passage (Matt. 10:1) is *exousia* and is better translated as “authority,” “right” or “privilege.” *Exousia* does not refer to an energy or force, but to the right and authority to act or function. *Dunamis* is the Greek word that refers to an energy or force and is usually translated “power,” as in Acts 1:8.

Matthew obviously uses *exousia* in Matt. 10:1 to refer to the authorization of the Twelve by Jesus. They are authorized to go in His name as His representatives to do and say the things He would do and say if He were there in His own person. They are His “sent ones”—His *saliah*. They are His apostles.

Not all disciples are apostles, but all apostles are disciples. A disciple is a committed learner and follower. The Twelve did not cease to be disciples after they became

apostles. Interestingly, after 10:2 Matthew drops the word “apostle” and uses the word “disciple” for the Twelve throughout the remainder of his gospel.

This would indicate that *apostolos* was not seen as a permanent office or position into which one was placed, but a specific work to which one was called or a particular assignment that one was given. This also indicates that genuine discipleship is a prerequisite for authentic apostolic ministry.

The Use of *Apostello* in the New Testament

Apostello is the verb form of *apostolos* and means, “to send.” *Apostello* is distinguished from *pempo*, the more general term for “send,” in that, like *apostolos*, it emphasizes the authorization of the sent one by the sender. It often reveals the apostolic nature of a mission even though the one sent is not referred to as an *apostolos*.

In Acts 9:10-16, for example, a “disciple” named Ananias is instructed by God in a vision to go and lay hands on Saul of Tarsus that he might receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias is given the exact address where Saul is residing and is told that Saul is praying.

Ananias obeys and when he enters the house he informs Saul that, “the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the way as you came, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:17b). The use of the word *apostello* highlights the fact that Ananias is aware that he is not there of his own initiative. He is there as a sent one, an authorized representative of Jesus Christ. He is there on assignment.

This incident also reveals the very fluid and functional nature of apostolic ministry, for there is no evidence that Ananias functioned in apostolic ministry apart from this one situation.

Apostolic Ministry Is a Gift and Calling

During the first century, apostolic ministry was fluid and dynamic, characterized by service. Any disciple might receive an apostolic commission from the risen Lord. By the end of the first century, however, the church had begun to institutionalize, with ministries being turned into offices and service being replaced with power. In this process, the apostolic was absorbed into the office of the bishop.

Jesus, however, did not leave His church with authoritative offices and structure. He left His church with an authoritative message and the Holy Spirit to lead and guide in how best to convey that message in the many various situations his disciples would find themselves. This is what Professor Burnett Streeter was referring to when he wrote,

Whatever else is disputable, there is, I submit, one result from which there is no escape. In the primitive church there was no single system of church order laid down by the apostles. During the first hundred years of Christianity, the church was an organism alive and growing—changing its organization to meet changing needs. Uniformity was a later development.

The emphasis of Jesus to His apostles was on service, and on their willingness to speak, act and even suffer, if necessary, on His behalf. There is no talk of office and power. Commenting on this, the mammoth *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says,

We are thus prevented by the sayings of Jesus Himself from trying to deduce from His authorization for word and action an official congregational office fulfilled in terms of law. To be precise, we should not use the word office at all in this context; we should speak of commission in the sense of authorization which is limited in time and space, and which is conditioned materially rather than personally, as in the

Jewish concept of saliah.

John G. Lake, a true modern apostle to South Africa, got it right when he wrote, "The modern conception of an apostle is usually that he is a big church boss, but that was not the conception Jesus left. An apostle was not to be a big boss; he was to be like his Lord—a servant of all."

Come Down Off Your Thrones

While sitting on the platform of one of the best-known ministries in the country, I heard the Holy Spirit speak in my heart, "You need to come down off your thrones."

Unbeknownst to me there were, at that very moment, individuals on that platform who were secretly plotting to oust the leadership who had founded that ministry and led it, at great sacrifice, for more than 50 years

The ouster failed but caused much hurt and painful separation. I was able to later share that word with the leadership of that ministry. I later realized that "Come down off your thrones" was a timely word, not only for that situation, but for the church and its leaders everywhere.

This is what Jesus did in the Incarnation. He came down off His throne. Phil. 2:5-7 says, "who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But He emptied Himself, taking upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men."

Paul tells us in Phil. 2:5 that this attitude of humility demonstrated by Jesus in the Incarnation is an attitude that all believers are to emulate. It is also the attitude of a *saliah*, or apostle, for Jesus said in John 8:42b, "for I came from God and proceeded into the world. I did not come of My own authority, but He sent Me." in this verse is from the Greek verb *apostello*.

Conclusion

The Hebrew *saliah* could be a slave or a committed servant, but above all was one in whom the master had complete trust to represent him and his interests. It was not about power, but about faithfulness and trust.

Charles Finney, who was a lawyer at the time of His conversion, saw himself as representing God's case before an unbelieving church and world. In other words, Finney saw himself as a *saliah*, representing in himself the cause and interest of the Savior.

What about us? Are we more concerned with God's interests than our own? Do we see the apostolic as a path to personal affluence and power? Or do we see it as an opportunity of service in representing our Lord in every situation of life?

What was of utmost importance for the New Testament *saliah*, or apostle, was trustworthiness, and a commitment to serve the interests of the one who was sending him, or her, as the case may have been. Until our talk of faithfulness and service to the Lord supersedes all our rhetoric of apostolic order and authority, we have no biblical basis for calling ourselves "apostolic." {eoa}

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 . Dr. Hyatt has a message for the church in America concerning another Great Awakening in the land. You can check this out on his website at