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Apostolic Ministry: Introduction

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This study is presented in two sections. The first contains understandings which largely postdate the publication of *Loving the Church ... Blessing the Nations*. The second section is an outline of the material on apostolic ministry found in the book.

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1 – An apostolic injunction: “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” – 2 Timothy 2:24

This study is presented with great respect for the variety of understandings regarding apostolic ministry found within the Body of Christ. It is in no way intended to be dogmatic. It comes from one who is still learning, and seeking to learn more from the insights of other Christians. May the spread of God’s kingdom throughout the earth be advanced by a maturing understanding of the role our Lord designed for apostolic ministry to have in his Church.

2 – How I came to the subject of apostolic ministry: During Antioch Network’s early years we served churches who desired to start new churches among unreached peoples. Some seemed able to engage in this activity rather quickly, whereas others struggled for years with little progress. Why this difference? As we sought the Lord for deeper understanding, we gradually realized that kingdom initiatives require leaders who are called and gifted by God to initiate. What terminology should we use to describe them? Surely they were present in the New Testament, and we preferred to use New Testament terms.

In the context of this pursuit, I slowly came to fuller insight into my own history. During twenty years of senior leadership in an international missionary society, I had been identifying and developing this kind of leader intuitively, without having the vocabulary. This study is informed by my 1) study of Scripture and 2) personal ministry experience.

3 – Four terms we might use to identify these kinds of leaders:

- He is an apostle.
- He is an apostolic leader.
- He is an apostolically-gifted leader.
- He is an apostolic-type leader.

I have come to prefer the terms “apostolic leader” or “apostolically-gifted leader.” These allow for a view that 1) there are apostles today, or 2) that there are leaders today who carry the same kind of calling and characteristics the apostles did. My desire is not to advocate a certain terminology, but to seek to understand and connect with the reality behind whatever terminology is being used. I want to respect those who may prefer a different terminology, and to use the terminology that is appropriate in a given context.

4 – Does the New Testament indicate that there were only 12 apostles?

- Certainly the original twelve hold a unique place.
- The New Testament calls others apostles:
 - Paul – Romans 1:1
 - Barnabas – Acts 14:4, 14
 - James, the Lord’s brother – Galatians 1:19
 - Silvanus and Timothy? – 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:6
 - Andronicus and Junias? – Romans 16:7 (see NIV note)
 - Caution: Some claimed to be apostles but were not – Revelation 2:2

5 – Is the writing of Scripture a defining characteristic of a New Testament apostle?

Among New Testament apostles, it is only clear that Matthew, John, Paul, Peter and James, the Lord’s brother, wrote Scripture. We do not know who wrote Hebrews. Jude may have been written by the apostle Judas (not Iscariot), but more likely the author was Judas, the brother of the Lord. In any event, less than half of those called apostles in the New Testament wrote Scripture.

On the other hand Luke, who is not identified as an apostle, wrote more of the New Testament than anybody else except Paul, if we count by chapters.

6 – Is planting churches a defining characteristic of an apostolic leader? If apostolic leaders are called by God to initiate, we can certainly expect that this will include starting new churches. But the process of kingdom advancement requires initiation in other areas also. And our experience is that some churches are planted by leaders operating in other giftings, such as pastors and teachers.

7 – Apostolic ministry is an important New Testament theme:

- The word *apostolos* (apostle) is used 86 times in the New Testament.
- The word *prophetes* (prophet – referring to NT prophets) is used around 45 times.
- The word *evaggelistes* (evangelist) is used 3 times.
- The word *poimen* (pastor/shepherd) is used 18 times.
- The word *didaskalos* (teacher – referring to NT teachers) is used around 12 times.
- The words *episkopos*, *episcopo*, *episkopeo* (bishop/overseer) are used 11 times.
- The word *presbuteros* (elder – referring to NT elders) is used around 31 times.

We conclude from this that the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures, has left the Church with a substantial amount of information about apostolic leaders and apostolic ministry. We assume that this is intentional, and indicates the importance of the role with which apostolic leaders have been entrusted by the Lord.

The extension of the kingdom of God on earth is empowered when:

- the calling to apostolic ministry is correctly understood
- those who carry it are identified and affirmed in it, and
- developed toward maturity, especially in Christlikeness of character, then
- released into their God-given spheres of service.

8 – Apostolic ministry comes forth from the foundation of Apprenticeship to Jesus.

Jesus came to catalyze a movement of the kingdom of God, and he knew exactly how he wanted to go about it. Early on he chose those who would become the initial leaders of the

movement, the original twelve apostles, and called them into a relationship with him that was an apprenticeship in how to live life and how to minister.

The curriculum centered, not on external leadership or ministry skills, but on the spiritual formation of the inner person. These initial apostles, together with others, were to be with him, to learn from him, how to be like him. Our understanding of apostolic leaders must begin, not with Acts or the epistles, but with the gospels. Here we see how Jesus deposited into the lives of his first apprentices the foundations of apostolic ministry.

The essential characteristic of an apostolic leader: Christlikeness. Without Christlikeness of character, we do not yet have New Testament apostolic ministry.

The central focus of all leadership and ministry training that seeks to be New Testament based: to impart principles as to how prospective leaders and ministers can become increasingly formed to be like Jesus in the inner person. God is the one who initiates and advances his kingdom, and he does it through Christlike people. “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you ...” – Galatians 4:19

9 – Looking backwards from Jesus: The “ancient anointings.” Jesus was born into a sacred heritage – the Judeo-Christian line of leaders. While Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel, Esther, Mary and John the Baptist are not known as apostles, they were characterized by qualities found in men and women upon whom God has placed his hand. New Testament apostles were rooted in this legacy.

10 – Looking forwards from Jesus: An informed view of church history. It is sometimes suggested that apostolic ministry was lost to the Church after the age of the original apostles until modern times. It is wise to be careful here. Could the astonishing advances made by the Church through the centuries have taken place without the callings and giftings given by the Spirit for such advance? Could it be that the reality was not lost, but the terminology changed?

11 – Importance of symbols: What does a godly man or woman look like? Various symbols, pictures and examples are stored in our minds. We access them when we consider a question like, “What does a godly person look like?” Is he/she one who has a mass following, leads a large church or organization, draws big crowds, performs “manifestations” or is associated with other external measures of “success”? How do such images compare, for example, with the “heroes of the faith” described in Hebrews 11? Becoming increasingly familiar with those who carried “ancient anointings” enriches our understanding with images of what is real. To be able to correctly identify the authentic is a crucial protection against the counterfeit.

12 – Can women be called and gifted by God in ways that result in them serving in an apostolic role? My own thoughts:

- My understanding is that no New Testament spiritual gift is gender specific.
- The ways in which God has gifted us point to the ways in which he has called us.
- Spiritual gifting and calling, as character matures, will be expressed.
- The mature expression of apostolic calling and gifting will be apostolic ministry.
- In Romans 16:7 Paul introduces us to Junias, a feminine name, and designates her as “outstanding among the apostles.”
- See *Why Not Women: A Biblical Study of Women in Missions, Ministry and Leadership* by Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton

- From my study of Scripture and personal ministry experience I believe women can be called to apostolic ministry. I respect those who would not agree.

13 – **Church structure:** Christians generally agree that the Church has both a local and a universal expression. But different streams have various views and practices when it comes to a trans-local expression or organizational structure. Apostolic ministry is essentially trans-local.

Can we see, at least in embryo, trans-local expressions of the body of Christ in the New Testament – something between the local and the universal? Consider:

- What were Paul, Barnabas and John Mark when they left the local church at Antioch in Acts 13:4 on what is known as “Paul’s first missionary journey?”
- Who was responsible for the formation and protection of doctrine within the young Christian movement? See 1 Timothy 6:3-5.
- How were trans-local issues of discipline handled? See 1 Corinthians 4:14-21.
- Did the training and mentoring of congregational leaders only take place locally? See Acts 16:1-3.
- Did the apostles exercise a trans-local spiritual authority among a number of local assemblies? See Acts 14:21-28.
- Consider this picture of part of Paul’s apostolic band – Romans 16:3-23.

Much current teaching on apostolic ministry is informed by independent church images; i.e., streams in which the local congregation is seen as fully autonomous. Many independent churches, by their very nature, may have limited meaningful relationships with trans-local ministers and structures. Hence, when their leaders encounter challenges beyond their experience and capacity to address, trusted overseers may not belong to their immediate relational context. They have no one to whom to turn. This can result in real harm to both the leaders and the congregation.

In wisdom, some leaders within independent churches have established relationships of trust with spiritual fathers and mothers beyond their congregation. These serve them in love with oversight, counsel and spiritual protection. Might this reflect Christ’s intended structure for his Church and the ministry of apostolic leaders?

What is the “right” Church structure? I believe the Holy Spirit can work fruitfully with a great variety of Church structures, when leaders within these structures are growing in Christlikeness and forming their people so. The drive to “be right” presupposes that someone else is wrong, resulting in grievous divisions among us. I “hear” our Lord calling us to love one another, and seek him together for further understanding, in meekness and humility.

Spiritual authority is, in the first instance, expressed relationally. Consider how God the Father exercises his spiritual authority with us and the Church. Yes, in Church history, far too often, there have been leaders who have assumed a posture of institutional power rather than relational servanthood. Jesus addressed this during his in-depth training of the original apostles. ... “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.” (Luke 22:25-26)

Might there be a relationship between the New Testament apostles and the first bishops? To some Christians the term “bishop” carries negative connotations. But the fact that a

leadership role has at times been carried unworthily does not in itself invalidate the role. We have already seen that the designation “apostle” has not always been carried honorably (2 Corinthians 11:13; Revelation 2:2). At the very end of this study I have included some thoughts about apostles and bishops, and would welcome your insights and responses.

14 – Reconciliation and unity: Apostolic leaders walk in a calling that is geographically broad. They typically have an extended relational sphere of influence. When two or more leaders relate to each other with genuine love, in humility esteeming each other better than themselves (another apostolic injunction – Philippians 2:3), their circles of influence tend to move toward each other with the same spirit. The fruit is reconciliation and spiritual unity.

Spiritual unity among Christians is sacred. It is achieved and preserved only at great cost. On the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 it came spontaneously and naturally. But we have had 20 centuries of Church history since then, and we followers of God’s Son have not always treated each other well. Deep wounds divide us that reach back into history. They cannot be quickly or easily healed. They call on us to confess these wrongs, in all truth and humility, and then ask for and extend forgiveness.

Cultivating reconciliation and unity is a process of initiation. We learn how to do this through the understandings Jesus imparted to the original apostles. Apostolic leaders carry the calling, gifting and influence to advance Christian unity.

15 – Some thoughts/observations about apostolic leaders and the “five-fold” ministry callings of Ephesians 4:11-13:

- Apostolic leaders, because of their calling and gifting to initiate, create a context in which other leaders can find their places of ministry. Like the bow of a ship plowing through the water, they create a wake in which others may follow. This positions apostolic leaders to provide Christlike, relational oversight.
- One example: What is the proper relationship between apostolically-gifted leaders and prophetically-gifted ministers? Certainly the apostles are to listen to the prophets. But those gifted prophetically can get out of order (as can we all). They are responsible to pass on, in appropriate ways, what they discern are insights from the Lord, but they are not responsible for how others respond. And prophetic insights can be communicated inappropriately. Godly apostolic leaders, walking in Christlike maturity, insight and humility, can provide an environment of protection and safety for the expression of the prophetic.
- God is love: His kingdom is characterized by relationship and teamwork. Apostolic leaders are to function in fellowship and teamwork with other “five-fold” ministers. They are to lead in a spirit of submissive and honoring brotherhood. This requires, and further develops, “apostolic character.”
- Apostolic leaders often carry one or more of the other callings in a secondary way:
 - Often an apostolic leader has a prophetic dimension to his/her ministry.
 - One called to church planting may well have an evangelistic anointing.
 - Some apostolic leaders initiate and give direction through their teaching.
 - New Testament teaching on pastoral ministry comes mainly through apostles.

16 – Apostolic leaders are a gift of Christ to the people of God (Eph. 4:11-13).

Apostolic Ministry: Section Two

Outline of material from *Loving the Church ... Blessing the Nations*

Chapter 9: Identifying Apostolic Leaders

New Testament Characteristics of Apostolic Leaders

1 – Apostolic leaders are called by God – Galatians 1:1

2 – Apostolic leaders are sent by God – John 20:21-22

apostolos – The Greek word translated “apostle” has the foundational meaning of “one sent forth” – i.e., someone sent on a particular assignment, such as an ambassador, or someone sent with a particular message.

3 – Apostolic leaders are entrusted by God with a specific area of influence – Galatians 2:7.

It is important that they 1) recognize their God-given sphere, and 2) do not move into a sphere God has not given them. There will be other apostolic leaders assigned by God to that sphere whom they can honor and to whom they can submit in love.

4 – Apostolic leaders are gifted by God for the role to which he has called them – 1 Corinthians 12:1, 28

Some terms:

calling – God summoning a person to play a specific role in the work of his kingdom.

gifting – the capacity, given to us by the Holy Spirit, required to fulfill God’s calling. (Our understanding is that “gifting” includes natural abilities, learned skills and spiritual enabling. All are needed to be effective in our calling. All are given to us by God.)

God never calls us to do something he does not gift us to do.

character – Christlikeness in the inner person, expressing itself outwardly.

anointing – Empowering by the Holy Spirit for ministry – God’s hand upon us.

mature ministry – the expression of a person’s calling and gifting, rooted in and nurtured by Christ-like character, and empowered by God’s anointing upon the person.

apostolic calling + apostolic gifting + Christ-like character + God’s anointing + God’s circumstances and timing = mature apostolic ministry.

5 – Apostolic leaders carry vision given to them by God – Acts 20:22-23

6 – Apostolic leaders see the big picture – Romans 15:23-26

Strategic vision begins with the big picture. It works from the general to the specific.

7 – Apostolic leaders have faith for things beyond themselves – Romans 4:18

8 – Apostolic leaders initiate new works of God – Romans 15:23

9 – Apostolic leaders lay foundations for these new works – 1 Corinthians 3:10

The God-given ability to lay foundations carries with it the ability to repair them.

10 – Apostolic leaders identify, develop and establish new leaders for these new works – Acts 14:23

11 – Apostolic leaders are often sought to provide apostolic ministry to works they were not involved in starting – Romans 1:13

12 – Apostolic leaders have strong personalities that enable them to overcome huge obstacles – 2 Corinthians 11:23-30. Such strengths must be refined and matured through extended experience of the cross.

13 – Apostolic leaders are tested – 2 Timothy 2:8-10

14 – Apostolic leaders carry a keen sense of personal weakness – 2 Corinthians 12:9

15 – Apostolic leaders are channels through whom God performs the miraculous – 2 Corinthians 12:12

16 – Apostolic leaders are holy in character – 1 Corinthians 4:12-13

Without holiness in character, we do not have biblical apostolic ministry.

17 – Apostolic leaders are spiritual fathers/mothers – 1 Corinthians 4:15

Identifying Potential Apostolic Leaders

Traits to look for in younger leaders and potential leaders:

- They want to take on new initiatives.
- They have their own ideas of what they want to do.
- They influence people easily and gain a following.
- They do not fit the mold; they color outside the lines.
- They have a genuine hunger for a deeper relationship with God.
- They show impressive spiritual insight.
- They have noticeable areas of character immaturity.
- They are broad in their horizons and think beyond “our” church.
- They thrive on doing things that are challenging and risky.
- They claim loyalty to “our” church yet seem critical and impatient.
- They easily become overcommitted.
- We see real potential in them but are unsure how far we can trust them.

Chapter 10: The Character of Apostolic Leaders

1 – The apostolic leader is like Jesus – Hebrews 3:1; 1 Corinthians 11:1

2 – The apostolic leader is a servant – Luke 22:24-27

Every spiritual gift is a servant gift, given by God to empower us to serve others. The gift of leadership is no exception. God energizes his leaders to provide for the group the godly leadership it so needs. If someone else is providing this, the godly leader happily remains in the background. When it is not being provided, he/she steps forward.

3 – The apostolic leader renounces his own life/self – Matthew 16:24-25

4 – The apostolic leader walks in humility – Philippians 2:5, 8

5 – The apostolic leader carries spiritual authority with gracious restraint–Luke 22:31-32

True spiritual authority is spiritual and relational influence rather than hierarchical power.

6 – The apostolic leader models the life of love – John 15:12-14

Chapter 11: Developing Apostolic Leaders

Components in Paul's Development as an Apostolic Leader

1 – God laid sovereign foundations in Paul's life:

- He was born a Jew.
- He was born a Roman citizen.
- He was formed in and by the Greek-speaking, Gentile world.

2 – He was grounded in the Scriptures – Acts 22:3

3 – He experienced life-transforming experiences with God – Acts 9:3-9

4 – He seized early ministry opportunities – Acts 9:19-20

5 – He learned the reality of suffering – Acts 9:23

6 – God led him into desert seasons – Galatians 1:15-24

7 – God gave him mentors – Acts 9:10-18, 27; 11:25-26; Galatians 1:18-19; Acts 13:1

8 – Paul experienced life and ministry in community – the local church – Acts 11:25-26

Summary: How should we approach developing potential apostolic leaders?

1 – Look for men and women who more or less fit the profile given in the chapter on identifying apostolic leaders. Keep an eye on them. Look for God's confirmation.

2 – Free them to minister early, but set clear boundaries. Establish appropriate supervision and protection that are exercised relationally.

3 – As they minister, address issues that arise in the context of a loving, caring, supportive relationship.

4 – Know that there will be mistakes, some more costly than others. Be available to them during these times. Here is where immaturity can do real damage.

5 – Link them with mentors.

6 – If they are not authentically rooted in church life, steer them in that direction.

7 – As they mature, extend their boundaries.

8 – Be alert to seasons in the desert developing. Help them to understand the nature and purpose of these.

Chapter 12: Releasing Apostolic Leaders

Six Factors in Paul's Apostolic Release

1 – Paul's calling and gifting had been expressed and seasoned over years of ministry. Perhaps ten years had elapsed between God's call on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-16) and Paul's mature release in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).

2 – Paul's calling was confirmed by other godly leaders – Acts 13:2.

3 – The timing of Paul's release was confirmed by other godly leaders – Acts 13:2.

4 – Paul's release came with the blessing of a local church – Acts 13:1.

5 – Paul's release came in the context of a team – Acts 13:4-5.

6 – The organizational structure that was the vehicle for Paul's release was different than the organizational structure of the local church.

Paul, Barnabas and John Mark, when they went out from Antioch, were not a local church.

Chapter 13: Apostolic Organizational Structures

1 – Paul's apostolic teams were one with the local church.

- Paul and Barnabas were main teachers and leaders in the church at Antioch – Acts 11:25-26; 13:1-3.
- The team of Paul, Barnabas and John Mark was formed within the church at Antioch – Acts 3:1-5.
- This team was sent out from the church at Antioch.

- Their ministry produced new local churches – Acts 14:23.
- In whatever location they found themselves, the local church was home and family to them – Acts 14:26-28.

2 – Paul’s apostolic teams had an identity separate from the local church.

- Paul and Barnabas left the church in Antioch. It was the Holy Spirit who separated them and sent them out – Acts 13:4.
- Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra, Iconium and Derbe, where they established churches. They subsequently left each of these places, although they later returned for ministry visits – Acts 14:21-22; 15:36.
- Timothy left his church in Lystra to join Paul’s team. Church leaders in Lystra and Iconium concurred – Acts 16:1-3.
- Paul left the church at Ephesus, where he had spent three years, apparently never to return – Acts 20:25, 31.

3 – Paul’s apostolic teams were called to a different kind of ministry than the local church.

- Initiation: Paul and his companions were directed by God to preach the gospel to Europeans for the first time – Acts 16:10.
- Laying foundations: Paul invested himself in establishing the church at Ephesus. From there the whole province of Asia was reached – Acts 20:20; 19:10.
- Repairing foundations: Paul corrected inaccuracies that were generated by another apostle, Peter – Galatians 2:11-13.
- Oversight: Paul, along with other team members, exercised gracious, relationship-based oversight of groups of churches – Acts 18:18-23.

4 – Paul’s apostolic teams were a different kind of organizational structure than a local church.

- They made their own decisions, led by the Holy Spirit, regarding what their movements and tasks were to be – Acts 16:6-10.
- They were responsible for their own funding. They worked at trades and received gifts – Philippians 4:14-19.
- They did their own recruiting, in collaboration with the appropriate church leaders – Acts 16:1-3.
- They operated in a broad and diverse geographic area – 2 Timothy 4:9-13.

The church at Antioch

Designed to be stationary
 Focused on local issues
 Valued stability
 Wanted to grow where it was
 Financed by its members
 Led by God through its leaders
 Linked with the team spiritually

Paul’s team

Designed to be mobile
 Focused on cross-cultural issues
 Valued advance, even if risky
 Wanted to go to new locations
 Responsible for its own finances
 Led by God through its leaders
 Linked with the church spiritually

With respect to the church, the New Testament mission structure allowed for:

- Seamless fellowship
- Separate identity

New Testament apostolic teams were:

- One with the local church in relationship
- Different from the local church in purpose

The New Testament Church was one community with two structures.

Is There Any Connection between Apostles and Bishops? Some Thoughts:

1 – Bishops appear in Church history in the generation immediately following that of the New Testament apostles. It seems that Polycarp was installed as Bishop of Smyrna by the apostle John and Ignatius as Bishop of Antioch by the apostle Peter. Surely John and Peter were aware of the significance of what they were doing.

2 – In Acts 1:15-26 we find the account of Matthias being chosen and added to the eleven apostles in the place of Judas. The NIV records Peter, outlining the necessity of this move in Acts 1:20, quoting from Psalm 109:8, saying, “.... May another take his place of leadership.”

The Greek word translated here “place of leadership” is *episcopé*, the word from which our English word “episcopal” comes, referring to the ministry of bishops. What was Luke trying to communicate by selecting this term? The English Standard Version, whose doctrinal perspective is that of “classical evangelical orthodoxy” (see Introduction, page 10), and therefore rooted to a significant degree in an independent church tradition, translates the word “office.” The King James Version, formed in the context of the Church of England and other historic traditions, uses the word “bishopric.”

Is there basis to translate *episcopé* as “office of bishop” or “office of overseer”? In the New Testament, I suggest, there were those who exercised oversight with respect to a single congregation, but also those called of God to serve a number of congregations with oversight. Both roles are needed.

I don’t mean to make more of this than is warranted, but only to suggest that it is possible that Luke’s use of *episcopé* points to a connection between apostle and bishop.

3 – Thesis: The New Testament records both local and trans-local ministry and church structure. The trans-local role was filled by apostles. In the post-New Testament era it was filled by bishops. God’s pattern is for bishops to function in similar ways to the New Testament apostles:

- They are to be Christlike in character.
- They are not lord it over the flock, but to reflect Christ in humility and servanthood.
- They are to serve collegially with other bishops, honoring one another in love.
- They are to provide spiritual covering to local churches and their leaders.
- They are to mentor, protect and release younger leaders.
- They are to be spiritual fathers.