Nothing has stirred more interest in Pentecostal-charismatic circles in recent years than the restoration of the “fivefold ministries” that Paul mentions in Ephesians 4: “It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vv. 11-13, NIV). Although most Pentecostals refer to these as “fivefold,” others see them as “fourfold” combining the ministries of pastor-teacher into one. These “ascension gifts,” as they are called in more traditional churches, were given to the church after Jesus ascended to the Father to extend, guide, and mature the church.

We can assume that, at the time Paul wrote, the New Testament church had a clear understanding of these offices—what they required, how they operated and who the people were who filled them. But with the passing of time, the role and operation of these ministries in the everyday life of the church became less and less clear.

Thus, for centuries the offices of pastor and teacher have been familiar ministries in all churches. However, only since the middle of the 19th century, with the success of Charles Finney and other “professional” evangelists of that day, has the office of evangelist gained a popular understanding and acceptance.

The other two offices—apostle and prophet—have been far more elusive for modern Christians. Many have accepted a belief developed throughout the centuries that the age of the apostles and prophets ended around 96 A.D.—about the time that John, the last living apostle, died. Along with this, another belief first stated by St. Augustine (though later retracted), has also been widely accepted—that with the completion of the canon of Scripture, the Lord withdrew miraculous gifts of the Spirit such as tongues, prophecy and healing.

Over time, as the bishops consolidated their power in the church, the office of apostle was almost forgotten. In fact by the second century, apostles and prophets were seen as little more than traveling medicine men with little or no influence or authority. In the Didache (11:3) the following rules were laid down for itinerant “apostles and prophets:”

“Now, as regards apostles and prophets, act strictly according to the precept of the Gospel. Upon his arrival every apostle must be welcomed as the Lord; but he must not stay except one day. In case of necessity, however, he may stay the next day also; but if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. At his departure the apostle must receive nothing except food to last till the next night’s lodging; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.”

In spite of cessationist views and the low esteem showed to those who claimed to be apostles, the idea of a continuing apostleship continued to surface sporadically throughout church history. For example, Mani of Persia (216-274), founder of the Manichee sect in the third century, called himself the “Apostle of Light”—the last apostle of Jesus Christ, he
said, who would ever appear. Like Mani, whose dualistic religion was rejected by the church as heretical, most people in church history who have claimed to be new apostles have been branded as heretics and excommunicated from the church. In fact Mohammad also claimed to be the last apostle and prophet for all time. Many other so-called end time apostles, such as Joseph Smith, have appeared over the centuries, but have been rejected. Yet the question of whether there are contemporary apostles has refused to die. In fact, the modern debate is as lively as ever.

Since 1901, Pentecostals and Charismatics have loudly proclaimed that the charismata, or gifts of the Spirit, are a present-day reality in the church—despite long-standing cessation theories. Millions of modern-day Christians speak in tongues, prophesy, cast out demons and pray for the sick with an expectation of divine healing. These gifts of the Spirit are regarded today as part of the modern Christian experience in a large percentage of the churches of Christendom.

The question many sincere Christians are now asking is this: If the charismata have been restored, why haven’t the prophets and apostles—those offices that the Lord Himself set in the church? After all, as with the gifts of the Spirit, the dispensational limit on the exercise of these offices seems to be more manmade than biblical.

Prophecy has been an integral feature of most Pentecostal and charismatic movements through the years. Yet until recently there has been an extreme reluctance to recognize the office of prophet (although some were ordained to the prophetic office in the Latter Rain movement of the late 1940s and 1950s). In the words of the Anglican charismatic leader Colin Urquhart, “There have been many prophecies but few prophets.” In the past two decades, however, particularly among independent Pentecostals and Charismatics, a sweeping prophetic movement has been ushered in led by such men as Bill Hamon, Rick Joyner, Mike Bickle and Paul Cain.

So what about the office of apostle? When considering the five-fold ministries, the average believer can understand that pastors care for their flock; evangelists preach to the unconverted; teachers instruct their students; prophets prophesy the word of God. But what do apostles do to show that they are apostles? If there are apostles today, who are they?

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

The biblical definition of the Greek word apostolos is “one sent forth” and encompasses such ideas as messenger, ambassador, and missionary. Perhaps the clearest definition, then, would be “one sent on a special mission.” In the New Testament, the “special mission” was to preach the good news of the gospel. An apostle was sent forth by the Lord Jesus Christ as an ambassador of the good news—a messenger carrying the all-important message of salvation.

In the New Testament, a variety of ministers bore the title of apostle:

1 The unique apostle—Jesus. Hebrews 3:1 speaks of Jesus as “the apostle and high priest of our profession.” He, indeed, was one sent on a special mission to save the world. Of course, there will be no other apostle like the Son of God. He is unique and stands alone!
The twelve apostles. The Bible seems to place “the twelve” in a unique category, as well. This special group of messengers is without parallel in church history; its unique ministry will never be repeated. Some call these the “Apostles of Christ” or the “apostles of the Lamb” because they saw Jesus with their own eyes and were witnesses of His resurrection: (Acts 1:21-22). To these 12 men, Jesus promised a special place in the kingdom: “You who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

Eight other apostles. Some of these are called the “Apostles of the Churches” (2 Corinthians 8:23). After Judas betrayed Jesus and hanged himself, Matthias was chosen to take his place. Later, Paul, who saw the Lord “as one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:8), was also called an apostle. And these two men by no means constituted the end of the list. Paul called James, the brother of Jesus, an apostle (Gal. 1:19). Others were Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Apollos (1 Cor. 4:6-9), Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7) and Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25). Some early church fathers even called Mary Magdalene “the first apostle” because she was the first to see the risen Lord. Others, like Ann Graham Block, claim that Junia was a woman because of the feminine form of her name.

Thus, the identification of at least eight other leaders who were “apostles” clearly puts in question the argument that the apostolic office was limited only to the original twelve (although their unique place in the biblical record is undisputed). Implicitly or explicitly, the Bible gives no less than 20 people the apostolic title.

The “false” apostles. In addition to the 20 people with recognized apostolic ministries, the Scriptures define a category of “false apostles” whose positions were not appointed by God, but usurped by carnal men for their own glory. Paul called these men “deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). He likened them to Satan, who “transformed himself into an angel of light” in order to deceive the elect.

To distinguish between the genuine apostles and the false, the Bible suggests the following criteria:

- True apostles saw Jesus in the flesh and witnessed the resurrection (see 1Cor.9:1).
- True apostles are accompanied by “signs, wonders, and miracles” (2 Corinthians 12:12)
- True apostles equip the saints for the work of the ministry, bring unity to the body, speak the truth in love, and join and knit the whole body together (see Eph. 4:7-16). They are the authoritative teachers of the truths in the Gospels.
- True apostles are ecumenical, with a universal interest in and authority in the whole body of Christ (see Gal. 2:8).
- True apostles are chosen by God, not necessarily elected (see Eph. 1:1).

SEVERAL CHURCH TRADITIONS
Throughout Christian history, there have been differing views concerning the apostolic office. The Roman Catholic view, which developed in sub-apostolic times, is that Christ commissioned the original twelve as a unique, unrepeatable body led by Peter and Paul. The Catholic “Petrine theory” holds that Simon Peter was given a place of primacy.
among the twelve; his successors have been the popes. All other bishops are “successors to the apostles” and exercise a magisterial, pastoral and teaching authority that has been handed down from generation to generation.

Thus, in Catholic theology, all ecclesiastical power is derived from prior generations through apostolic succession. There are no “apostles” as such in succeeding generations, though all authority in the church stems from apostolic succession. This also represents the general belief of the Orthodox churches, with the exception of the claims to papal authority as held by the Western church.

But this view has not kept the Catholic Church from recognizing apostolic-like ministries over the centuries. For instance, missionaries who were the first to bring the gospel to a new people group have been called “apostles” to that group. Thus, St. Augustine of Canterbury is called the “apostle to England,” while St. Patrick is called the “apostle to Ireland.” This tradition is as old as Paul, who called himself “an apostle to the Gentiles.” Over the centuries, there have been thousands of these “apostles to (whatever locale).” Some even today conduct apostolic ministry among remote tribes and peoples.

The Protestant reformers rejected the Catholic view of apostolic succession and busied themselves with the new movement they founded. Most believed that the office of apostle had ended with the early church, with no “successors” as in the Catholic tradition—although some reformers such as Calvin thought that apostles might reappear under certain circumstances. Of apostles, prophets and evangelists, Calvin wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, the Lord “now and again revives them as the need of the times demands.” These offices, however, have no place in “duly constituted churches,” he added. In a similar vein, Luther believed “the apostolic message rather than the office” would remain in the church.

A little-known instance of Protestants sending out “apostles” as missionaries occurred among the Baptists in colonial America. For a time, Baptists in New England ordained “apostles” as missionaries to such Southern colonies as Virginia, Carolina and Georgia. After some time, however, the term “apostle” was dropped for the more traditional term “missionary.”

In general, Protestants have been prone to refer to founders of movements and doctrinal systems as “apostles of” certain movements or theological views. Thus, Luther is often called the “apostle of the Reformation,” or the “apostle of justification by faith.” Similarly, Calvin has been called the “apostle of reformed Christianity,” while Wesley is known as the “apostle of Methodism.” Every new denomination seems to have an “apostle” who served as the founder of the ecclesial body, usually based on a new and unique teaching from Scripture.

In the 19th century, a restorationist movement began in Britain with the avowed purpose of restoring all aspects of New Testament Christianity to the modern church. Led by such people as Lewis Way, John Nelson Darby and Edward Irving, these and others pioneered a restoration of the charismata (such as glossolalia and prophecy) in London. The movement culminated in the creation of the Catholic Apostolic Church in 1832. In addition to the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, the church attempted to restore the fivefold ministries, including the office of apostle.

In due time, the church ordained 12 “apostles” who were to be the end-times equivalent of the 12 chosen by Christ. According to their prophecies, this group would be the last apostles to exist before the rapture of the church. Eventually, however, these
apostles died one by one. When the last one died in 1901, the British church collapsed and practically disappeared. Only in Germany were new apostles ordained to succeed those who had passed away. This church took the name “New Apostolic Church—and today is the third largest body of Christians in Germany (after the Catholic and Lutheran churches).

Another sad case of a modern “apostle” who went over the hill was Alexander Dowie who claimed the title of “apostle” and “Elijah the restorer” just before sinking into dementia.

The earliest name chosen by the Pentecostal movement in America was “Apostolic Faith,” a designation given by Charles Parham to his church in Topeka, Kansas. It was here in 1901 that modern Pentecostalism began with its emphasis on the baptism in the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in other tongues. Parham’s student, William J. Seymour, chose the same name for his Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906.

The words “Apostolic Faith” in this context did not signal a move to restore the office of apostle to the church. Parham, in fact, was extremely critical of any kind of church government, much less a highly centralized system with apostolic authority. Yet, there are those who refer to him as the “apostle of Pentecost.” Seymour has also been called an “apostle of Pentecost” to the world.

In the years that followed the glory days at Azusa Street, Pentecostal missionaries traveled around the world preaching the “latter rain” message of a mighty “Holy Ghost outpouring” before the second coming of Christ. A new generation of Pentecostal “apostles” appeared, such as G.B. Cashwell, the “apostle to the south,” T.B. Barratt, the “apostle to Europe,” W.C. Hoover, the “apostle to Chile,” Ivan Voronaev, the “apostle to the Slavs,” and Lugi Francescon, the “apostle to Italy.”

Other early Pentecostal groups did indeed claim to restore the office of apostle to the church. These included “apostolic churches” in Wales, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States, in which “apostles” were duly elected and ordained just as with any other office in the church. Some of these continue to this day, with colleges of apostles (usually 12) that govern their denominations. Overall, however, Pentecostals have been far more interested in restoring the charismata than in restoring any type of ecclesiastical offices to the church. In the words of David du Plessis, “Pentecostals are more interested in apostolic success rather than in apostolic succession.”

INDEPENDENT CHARISMATIC VIEWS

Among many independent charismatics, a thirst has developed for the restoration of apostolic authority in the body of Christ. Mountains of tapes and books have been produced, asserting that the fivefold ministries must be restored in power to the modern church. Indeed, many contemporary leaders claim to be “apostles” and freely make the claim to the office. Some even have the title printed on their stationary and calling cards.

In general, charismatics have defined apostolic ministry as applying to any one who has a trans-local ministry, usually when one leaves the pastorate to itinerate in a teaching, or church planting ministry.
THE “NEW APOSTOLIC REFORMATION”

In the last decade Peter Wagner has led what he calls the “new apostolic reformation movement” which he claims is now sweeping the world as the new way leaders are “doing church.” This came out of a conference Wagner led at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1996 called the “National Symposium on the Post-denominational Church.” After years of studying church growth in the “postmodern age,” Wagner concluded that the day of the historic denomination was rapidly coming to a close while while a new generation of “post denominational churches was dawning. Before the conference could convene, however, many critics of the idea, including Jack Hayford, forced Wagner to choose a new name. He finally settled on the term “New Apostolic Churches” to describe what he called a “New Testament model of leadership,’ or indeed “new wineskins” for a new church age.”

These new churches, which many think are in reality “predenominational movements” would have the following “new” features:

1. A new name (“New Apostolic Reformation”)
2. New authority structures (the leaders are called “apostles”)
3. New leadership training (no seminaries, volunteers, homegrown staff, local Bible colleges, etc.)
4. New ministry focus (“vision driven [toward the future] rather than “heritage driven” [toward the past])
5. New worship styles (keyboards, ministry teams, lifted hands, loud praise, overhead projectors, etc.)
6. New prayer forms (concert prayer, singing in the Spirit, etc.)
7. New financing (“finances are abundant, giving is expected…beneficial…cheerful”)
8. New outreach (church planting… compassion for the poor,” etc.)
9. New power orientation (openness to the Holy Spirit and gifts of the Spirit…healing, demonic deliverance, prophecy, etc.)

In his book describing this movement, The New Apostolic Churches, Wagner listed eighteen pastors (or “apostles”) who represented the new movement. Of these, only three, Bill Hybels, Michael Fletcher, and David Kim, do not appear to have Pentecostal or Charismatic backgrounds. Most of them, such as Billy Joe Daugherty, Roberts Liardon, and William Kumuyi, are openly Pentecostal or charismatic. Others have been equally identified as part of the Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal for years. Clearly most of the “New Apostolic Churches” have their roots in classical Pentecostalism and their distinctive features were pioneered by Pentecostals through the years. In 1999, Wagner attempted to organize the movement into an umbrella grouping with the name “International Coalition of Apostles” with Wagner listed as the “Presiding Apostle.” New “apostles” could join and pay $69.00 a month as membership dues. Wagner listed the many types of “apostles” who could be members. They included:

“Vertical Apostles,” which included:
“Ecclesiastical, Functional, Apostolic team members, and Congregational apostles”
“Horizontal Apostles,” which included:
   “Convening, Ambassadorial, Mobilizing, and Territorial apostles”
“Marketplace Apostles.” (undefined)
“Calling Apostles” Those who call Christians together in unity

By 2004, in his forthcoming book, *Aftershock! How the Second Apostolic Age is Changing the Church* Wagner made grandiose claims about this new movement, claiming that the Charismatic Movement was “a vision unfulfilled” and that the new “apostolic renewal” movement had taken its place as the wave of the future.

It seems that most of these networks were planted and inspired by the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement in the first place since almost all of them operate in the gifts of the Spirit. Most of them were previously listed as “denominational Pentecostals” by David Barrett until his *New World Christian Encyclopedia* (2000) began to designate them as “neo-charismatic.” Rather than being part of a “New Apostolic Reformation,” most of them are actually part of the “Pentecostal/Charismatic reformation.” It seems that Wagner has tried to impose a new title for movements that were already dynamic churches originally inspired by the Pentecostals and to create an artificial apostolic structure with himself as “presiding apostle.” Although they claim to be only “apostolic networks,” they are rapidly organizing and developing structures under their claim of apostolic authority. They are in reality new denominations.

I view this movement with the following reservations because of my studies of church history:

1. This movement fails to appreciate and recognize the fantastic missionary accomplishments of the Pentecostal “denominations” such as the Assemblies of God. It also fails to distinguish between the dynamic and growing Pentecostal denominations and the mainline ones that are slowly dwindling away.
2. Many of these post denominational networks are simply incipient denominations themselves.
3. Having an unaccountable “apostle” intervening between a church’s constituted authorities and a minister can cause conflicts of authority which could lead to confusion similar to the shepherding-discipleship controversy of the 1980’s.
4. The appointing of “territorial apostles” who are unknown to most of the Christian community in a particular area can be dangerous and divisive.
5. In church history, most apostolic movements such as the Irvingite movement of the 1830’s and the various twentieth century Pentecostal groups that ordained “apostles” have been notable for their lack of growth and missionary success.
6. When individuals have claimed the title of “apostle” or “Elijah” it sometimes has resulted from an exaggerated ego or, in some cases, actual mental dementia.
7. There have been some cases of American or British groups offering indigenous Pentecostal and Charismatic churches large sums of money to come under their “Apostolic covering.”

In spite of these reservations, the apostolic movement might yet inspire some persons to truly exercise the function of apostle in bringing the gospel to as yet unreached
peoples. Although I respect Peter Wagner for his tremendous contributions to the growth of evangelicalism and even to the Pentecostal movement, I am disappointed in the fact that he has attempted to place himself at the head (“presiding apostle”) of an organization designed for all those who claim to have apostolic ministries.

As interest in the apostolic emphasis has spread, more books and articles have appeared in major Christian journals analyzing the movement. In fact, the *Ministries Today* magazine devoted an entire issue to the topic in November 2004. Although generally favorable, these articles raised some serious questions about the movement. Dr. Doug Beacham, an official of the Pentecostal Holiness Church addressed Wagner’s apparent disdain for denominations in an article named “The Leadership.” Although he sees a bright future for some denominations, he contends that “20th century Charismatic/Pentecostal wineskins must be adapted to hold 21st-century wine.”

In the same issue, David Moore, an adjunct professor at Regent University, states positively that “we need present-day apostles, and the New Apostolic Reformation is a genuine expression of God’s renewing work in His church.” He warns the new apostolic movement, however, of the excesses of the Discipleship/Shepherding that divided the Charismatic movement in the 1970’s. As a former devotee of the movement, he experienced many of the problems that caused massive confusion at that time. He sees “great danger in ‘triumphalism’—seeing one’s movement as the ‘cutting edge’ of what God is doing today.” “This mind-set,” he explains, “especially if coupled with success, tends to devalue those who don’t see it their way, or worse, write off critics as old-fashioned defenders of ‘tradition’ unwilling to embrace God’s new move.”

YES—AND NO

This brings us back to the original question: Are there genuine apostles in the earth today? The answer would seem to be yes—and no. No, there are no people living today like the original twelve who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These “apostles of Christ” were and will remain unique in salvation history. And yes, there are apostles abroad today who are carrying out the same mission as the apostles in the New Testament. Who are they? The nearest parallel to the New Testament and historic use of the term of apostle are those missionaries—often unnamed, untouted—who are bringing the message of the gospel for the first time to previously unreached peoples and tribes. They are busy translating Scripture and planting new churches where none exist. They have little time to consider their apostolic office.

It is axiomatic to say that anyone who claims to be an apostle probably is not one. An apostle is not self-appointed or elected by any ecclesiastical body, but is chosen by the Lord Himself. As Lewi Pethrus, founder of the famous Filadelphia Church in Stockholm, Sweden, has said, anyone who claims apostleship is suspect. The one most likely to be an apostle is he who, like John the Baptist, claims only to be “a voice crying in the wilderness.”

Who are the apostles today? Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Where do we find apostolic ministry—and apostolic results? These are what the modern church needs—far more than names to carry as a title or warm bodies to fill an office.
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