

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 9

Paul the Apostle

“Apostle.” What does that word conjure up in your mind? Since we are studying this in church, the answer is likely the “twelve” apostles selected by Jesus in the gospels.¹ Maybe since we are studying Paul, your immediate thought is Paul, the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” If we were outside the confines of church, some might think of the Robert Duvall movie, “The Apostle.” Perhaps some from different religious traditions and faiths might answer differently. Muhammad is known in Islam as *rasul*, which means “Apostle of God.” In the Mormon Church, there is a position of “Apostle,” twelve men who “constitute the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”²

So what *exactly* is an apostle? Do we have them today? Were there 12? 13? 14? More? What was/is their job? How did/do they fit into the church? Then we have the ultimate question for this class, what does it mean that Paul was an apostle? These are the questions we consider as we unfold the significance of Paul writing:

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, *called to be an apostle*, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1).

“Paul, *called by the will of God to be an apostle* of Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:1).

“Am I not an *apostle*?” (1 Cor. 9:1).

“Paul, an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*” (2 Cor. 1:1).

“Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (Gal. 1:1).

¹ The names of the apostles are given in different frameworks in the gospels. Simon is also called Peter (Mt 4:18), Cephas (Jn. 1:42), and Simon Barjonah (Mt. 16:17, KJV). James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were renamed Boanerges by Jesus, meaning “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17). Andrew and Philip keep their names, but Matthew is also called Levi (Mk 2:14). Most scholars believe Bartholomew (Mt. 10:3) to be the same person as Nathanael (Jn. 1:43). Mark uses the name Thaddaeus (Mk 3:18) for the same apostle that Luke calls Judas, son of James (Lk. 6:16), and is also called Jude (Jude 1:1). Simon and Thomas are the remaining faithful apostles, with Judas Iscariot as the final twelfth apostle as selected by Jesus (Mk 3:13-19).

² See the Latter Day Saints Bible Dictionary online at <http://scriptures.lds.org/en/bd/a/103>.

“Paul, an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*” (Eph. 1:1).

“Paul, an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God* our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1).

“Paul, an *apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God* according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:1), and

“Paul, a servant of God and an *apostle of Jesus Christ*” (Tit. 1:1).

We should have no doubt that Paul saw his apostleship as significant not only for himself, but for the churches he started and the disciples he mentored. Our hope is to find a greater understanding of some of Paul’s reasons.

In the process, we hope to learn a bit more about how scholars and translators go about their jobs in understanding the meaning of various words and passages in the New Testament. This becomes even more important as we delve into Paul’s theology later in this series. We will need to understand the basics behind scholars’ research approaches to better grasp Paul’s writings, especially those that cover more difficult subjects.

This lesson also demonstrates that one cannot use the transitive theory of mathematics when interpreting Scripture! Remember the transitive theory? If $A = B$ and $B = C$, then A must equal C . Some mistakenly use that approach blindly with Scripture. We will see with the word “apostle” it simply does not work!³ You cannot take every usage of “apostle” in the Bible and assume it always means the same thing!

“APOSTLE”

We shall start by considering what an apostle is. This is the part of this lesson where we can see how scholars go about deducing the meaning Paul might have given to a word he used.

³ It does not work with a lot of scriptures. Consider Matthew 5:22, “whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” Yet Paul will write to the Romans of ones who “became fools” (Rom. 1:22). Paul will also write of fools in 1 Corinthians 3:17-19, 2 Corinthians 11:22. James will accuse “you foolish man” (James 2:20). If we apply the transitive theory, the result is that Paul and James are destined for Hell. Hell (A) is the end of the road for those who say “You Fool!” (B). ($A = B$). “You Fool!” (B) is uttered in some form by Paul and James (C). ($B = C$). Therefore, Paul and James (C) are going to Hell (A). ($A = C$). Silly result, right? We should try to understand these words before we blindly link such verses together.

Our English word *apostle* comes from the Greek word *apostolos* (ἀπόστολος) which means “one sent out.”⁴ Not surprisingly, we get the word “postal” and “post office” from the Greek roots; however, knowing our English “derivatives” of the Greek word is really of no use to the scholar in deducing the original meaning as used by Paul. It is mainly a help to us in remembering the meaning of the word. It gives us an anchor to place the word into our memory bank.

In trying to understand the meaning of the Greek word as used in the New Testament, scholars have a number of places they turn:

Scholars look to the Greek usage before the writing of the New Testament. In pre-Christian era Greek, *apostolos* is used, but rarely. Its usage is typically a reference to a naval expedition sent out into the sea. Occasionally the word is used of a person, and in those times the person is basically an envoy or ambassador.

Scholars also examine the Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the “Septuagint”) for any usage of the word there, recognizing that Paul was not only familiar with the Septuagint, but actually used it and quoted from it. The word *apostolos* appears only once in the Septuagint/Old Testament. 1 Kings 14:6 reads,

“But when Ahijah heard the sound of her feet, as she came in at the door, he said, “Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why do you pretend to be another? For I am charged [*apostolos*] with unbearable news for you.”

The NIV translates it as, “I have been sent.” The Greek translates a Hebrew word that is used for Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Ezekiel, prophets commissioned and sent by God for certain purposes.

Another important way that scholars deduce the import and meaning of a New Testament Greek word is by examining the word’s usage throughout the various New Testament books. The New Testament uses *apostolos* in 81 places.⁵ To make this count, one must use a Greek concordance rather than an English one, because the Greek word is not always translated as “apostle” in the English! (This is part of our problem in understanding what the Greek *apostolos* means!)

Matthew and Mark each use *apostolos* once.⁶ Luke uses it 6 times in his gospel and 30 times in Acts. John uses it once in his gospel,⁷ and three times in

⁴ The Greek word is derived from a verb *apostollo* (ἀποστέλλω), which means “to send away” or “to send out.”

⁵ Bruder, *Concordance of the Greek New Testament*.

⁶ Some manuscripts have Mark using it not only in 6:30, but also in 3:14, for a total of twice.

Revelation. Paul uses *apostolos* thirty-four times, while Peter uses it three. We find *apostolos* used once in Hebrews and once in Jude.

Rather than turn this into a Master's dissertation on *apostolos* by fully analyzing each usage, we will instead summarize the ways the word is used in several categories:

1. The word is clearly used in a number of places to refer to the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus and commissioned to go into the world taking his message. We see this usage in many places, notably Matthew 10:2 ("The names of the twelve **apostles** are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew..."), and Luke 6:13 ("And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named **apostles**"). These twelve clearly held an office referred to as *apostolos*, as reflected in the Scriptures that speak of the apostles as authorities in the church. For example, in Acts 15, Luke uses *apostolos* five times in that chapter alone. Paul and Barnabas "go up to Jerusalem to the **apostles**" about a question (15:2). Paul and Barnabas are then "welcomed by the church and the **apostles** and the elders" (15:4). The question is posed and "the **apostles** and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter" (15:6). The apostles then assert their authority over the church in verse 22 and 23 as the apostles co-write a letter with the elders instructing Gentiles how to conduct their lives in holiness
2. The word is also used in the sense of a representative or envoy. Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 8:23 of "apostles," although our versions generally do not translate it as such. Paul writes, "As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives [plural of *apostolos*] of the churches and an honor to Christ." This is similar to the usage by John noted in footnote 6 earlier. Paul uses *apostolos* as "messenger" in Philippians 2:25 referring to Epaphroditus.⁸ Some scholars construe this usage as equivalent to the modern term "missionary."⁹ This is likely Paul's meaning when he

⁷ John uses it in a verse where English translators do not translate it "apostle." John uses it in 13:16 translated, "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger [*apostolos*] greater than the one who sent him."

⁸ "I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger [*apostolos*] and minister to my need."

⁹ *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (Doubleday 1992) Vol. 1 at 309. Such scholars also point to the usage in Romans 16:7 which some translators believe includes Andronicus and Junia as "apostles" in a missionary sense as well as the reference to Barnabas as an apostle in Acts 14:14. (Compare Rom. 16:7 "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They

writes of apostles as a role for some in the church, “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers... Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” (1 Cor. 12:28-29).¹⁰

3. In Hebrews 3:1 *apostolos* is used and applied to Christ himself. Hebrews reads, “consider Jesus, the *apostle* and high priest of our confession.” This statement comes in the context of teaching that Jesus was greater than Moses and that people should not abandon the Christian faith and return to basic Judaism. The use of *apostolos* demonstrates that Jesus was the envoy, the personal representative of God, followed up in the passage by the title of “high priest” of our confession. Jesus is both God’s envoy to us, and our representative to God!
4. We are remiss if we fail to point out that Paul writes also of “false apostles” who claimed to be “super apostles” in 2 Corinthians 11:5, 13. Paul’s usage here indicates that he was not concerned with people “pretending” to be part of the chosen twelve. Paul’s concerns were the people who claimed a superlative or special missionary status or commission. To Paul, these claiming superior status as missionaries were in fact false and fake.

We can see from this examination¹¹ that the Greek word *apostolos* carried a variety of meaning, beyond simply a specific church office for Jesus’ chosen twelve (with a replacement of Matthias for Judas Iscariot – Acts 1:24-26). It would never be fair to take the Greek word *apostolos* and assume it must have one meaning or another. We must consider the context in which the word is used.

PAUL, AN APOSTLE

So what kind of apostle was Paul? We can look to Paul to tell us! Paul knew and spoke of the apostles in Jerusalem. In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul wrote of going to “Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me” (Gal. 1:17).

are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me,” in the ESV with the same passage in the NIV, “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.”)

¹⁰ For a discussion on how Paul is listing *functions* within the church rather than “offices,” see Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1987) at 619-620.

¹¹ Scholars can go to other sources to determine the full meaning of words as used, but we have chosen to use the main sources here, in an effort to keep this to a lesson introducing these concepts rather than a thorough evaluation of them.

On this trip Paul “saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19). We should examine carefully these passages, for they speak clearly to Paul’s meaning of himself as an *apostolos*. Paul started the Galatian letter by saying, “Paul, an *apostolos*—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father...” (1:1). Paul then speaks of the twelve in Jerusalem who “were *apostolos* before him,” which itself continues the theme that began the letter. Paul understood himself to be an *apostolos* in the same sense of the word as those in Jerusalem.¹² Paul viewed himself to hold the same “office” of commission as those of the twelve.

How did Paul meet “apostle” criteria? In Acts 1, Peter is urging the apostles to choose a successor to Judas. Peter says the candidate should be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John” (1:21-22). This was also to be one who had witnessed the resurrection (1:22). Paul certainly did not seem to meet the first of these two criteria as a follower from the time of Jesus’ baptism.¹³

Paul does, however, meet Peter’s requirement of witnessing the resurrected Jesus – no question about that! Paul makes that point clearly in 1 Corinthians 15 writing that Jesus was “raised on the third day ... and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve... Last of all... he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles...” (1 Cor. 15:4-9).

Paul often had to defend his apostleship, as Christians in the early church challenged him¹⁴. Paul confirmed his apostleship through his encounter with the risen Jesus (Gal. 1:16; 1 Cor. 9:1-5). Paul also noted that he was called by God to be an apostle of Jesus (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1). In this, Paul was like the twelve, who Christ personally called, each to his work (Mk. 1:16-20; 6:6-8; Mt. 10:1-3).

Paul knew his position in Christ. Not just by his calling, but through his body and life. Paul never felt his apostleship a cause for boasting. He was clear; saying,

¹² We should note here that Paul also seems to include “James the Lord’s brother” as an apostle in Gal. 1:19. That is the sense of the ESV translators. Other versions believe Paul is not including James as an apostle, but rather simply a person of interest. (See, e.g., the NIV: “I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord’s brother.” The passage could fairly be read either way.)

¹³ Some scholars argue that 2 Cor. 5:16 means that Paul in fact did see Jesus prior to the crucifixion. That is a minority view, however, and no scholar seems to argue that Paul actually followed Jesus from the baptism of John forward.

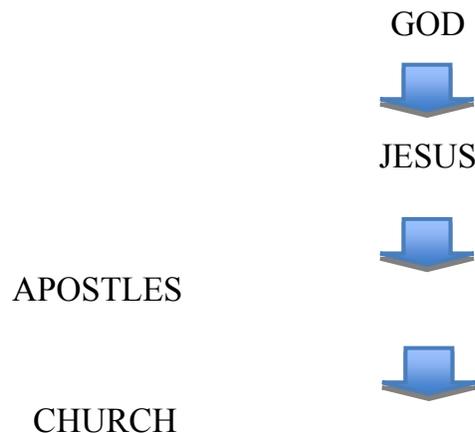
¹⁴ We should note here that Paul never had to defend his apostleship or teaching before the other apostolic leaders. Peter notes that Paul’s writing were considered “scripture” or oracles of God (2 Pet. 3:15-16). The twelve in Jerusalem were not only commending Paul and his teaching in writing (Acts 15:23-29) but were actively sending Paul out in the mission field Acts 15:22).

“may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

It is worth noting that in Revelation 21, the twelve apostles have their names on the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem. There is good reason to believe that the twelve found themselves the new covenant corollary to the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 19:28, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” That might explain Paul’s emphasis to himself as the “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13).

APOSTLES AND THE CHURCH

What does this lesson have to do with the church today? Why is this important? It is important for several reasons. Of course, it is always important to study and better understand Scripture. Sharpening our tools for study is valuable in and of itself. But the lesson has much greater significance for the church than that. Many people consider the writings of the apostles as second rate in importance compared to the “red letter” words of Jesus. However, if we understand the importance of the word “apostle” as more than simply an office, as one of calling, one of personal representation, the earthly envoy of a heavenly master with the authority and instruction of Jesus, then the letters are not so easily minimized.



The design God has left us, as set out in Scripture and history, places God in heaven with Jesus as his personal envoy/messenger (Heb. 3:1). Jesus then picks twelve apostles for the twelve tribes of Israel. With one falling away (Judas), a replacement is chosen meeting all the same criteria as the first twelve. Paul is also included in this grouping as the apostle to the Gentiles.

It is through these apostles that the church is established (Eph. 2:19-20 “the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles”). The apostles had authority (in Mark 6:7, Jesus calls out “the twelve ... and gave them authority”) and power (Acts 1 and 2 show the Pentecost experience; Acts 2:43 “many signs and wonders were being done through the apostles”; Acts 8:18 Simon the Sorcerer sees that “the Spirit was given through the laying on of the *apostles*’ hands”; 2 Cor. 12:12 Paul speaks of the miracles performed through him as “the signs of a true apostle ... signs and wonders and mighty works”). The apostles made major decisions of the church.¹⁵

We are then the church, appropriately relying upon the teachings and writings of the apostles!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Let us be students of the word. The Psalmist understood that God’s “word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). We should study his word with awe, wonder, expectation, and serious minds! It is not to be played with any more lightly than any other “two-edged sword”! (Heb. 4:12).
2. As we read and study Paul, let us read with the confidence that he was writing as God’s emissary or envoy. Paul was not simply writing out of a joy for mission work! God through the Lord Jesus called Paul. God chose Paul for his work, empowering him and giving him authority. Paul “was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher” (2 Tim. 1:11). It is not a surprise that Peter himself viewed Paul’s writings as scripture! (2 Peter 3:15-16 “our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”)
3. The Church is built firmly on the accounts and teachings of the eyewitnesses of our resurrected Lord. These are people who were commissioned by Jesus for the express purpose of establishing the church. They gave up their lives to do so. They put more than their money on the line, they spent their whole earthly existence building and following the Lord’s commission. These were not folks making money off the gospel. They gave themselves fully to the charge that they

¹⁵ See Acts 15, along with many of Paul’s letters where he instructs the church while asserting his calling as an apostle.

received from above. This was never done blindly without the realization of the personal cost! They saw two options:

- a. **“If Christ has not been raised**, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ... If in Christ we have hope in this life only, **we are of all people most to be pitied**” (1 Cor. 15:14-19).
- b. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘all things are put in subjection,’ it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him” (1 Cor. 15:20-27).

Those are the choices. Jesus resurrected or not. Life with meaning or despair. Paul and the apostles saw Jesus; they gave their lives out of conviction of the truth of the resurrection. We are the next generation. As Jesus said, to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn. 20:29). Jesus is blessing us!