

# THE APOSTLES

## Definition

The English word “apostle” comes from the Greek word “apostolos” (ἀπόστολος) meaning a messenger or one sent on a mission by another. In this sense the word is used in the LXX (1 Kings 14:6; Isaiah 18:2) and in the New Testament (John 13:16; 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25). In Hebrews 3:1, Jesus is called the *Apostle* and High Priest of our confession. In the New Testament this word was used to identify the disciples who had been originally chosen by Jesus (The Twelve). Later the word usage was broadened to include other Christian leaders who carried on the task of missionary evangelism, e.g., James the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19; 2:9), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Timothy and Silas (1 Thessalonians 2:6,7 cf. 1:1). In the broader sense the term was applied to eminent Christian teachers, e.g., to Adronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7).

The English word “disciple” comes from the Greek word “mathetes” (μαθητής) meaning a learner. It is applied principally to the followers of Jesus (Matthew 5:1; 8:21, etc.); sometimes to those of John the Baptist (Matthew 9:14) and of the Pharisees (Matthew 22:16). It is used in a special manner to indicate The Twelve (Matthew 10:1; 11:1; 20:17) who indeed were disciples before they were apostles.

## The Twelve

The original apostles were chosen by Jesus (Mark 3:14,15; John 15:16) and are recorded by each of the Gospel writers (Matthew 10:1,2,5; 11:1; 20:17; Mark 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; Luke 6:13; 8:1; 22:3; John 6:67,70,71; 20:24). Specifically twelve apostles are listed. The number 12 was most probably with reference to the twelve tribes of Israel and was fixed so that the Apostles were often called simply “the twelve” (Matthew 16:14,17; John 6:67; 20:24; 1 Corinthians 15:5).

The names of The Twelve are listed four times, in Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16 and Acts 1:13, where Matthias was appointed as a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:12-26). Specifically The Twelve are: 1) Simon Peter (Cephas, Bar-jona); 2) Andrew; 3) John; 4) Philip; 5) James (the son of Zebedee and brother of John); 6) Bartholomew (perhaps the same as Nathanael); 7) Thomas (Didymus); 8) Matthew (Levi); 9) Simon Zelotes; 10) Jude (Lebbaeus, Thaddaeus); 11) James the Less (the son of Alphaeus); 12) Judas Iscariot.

## Qualifications

The original qualifications of an apostle are stated by Peter (Acts 1:21,22). Specifically:

1. He was personally acquainted with Jesus’ ministry from His baptism by John to His ascension. Thus the importance of the eyewitness role of the apostles is stressed (Luke 1:2). The greatest possible emphasis is placed upon the historical foundations of the life and work of Jesus. His miracles, teaching, death and resurrection are not fairy-tales, but solidly attested facts which the apostles could certify as eyewitnesses (1 John 1:1-4).
2. The apostolic testimony underlined the importance of the cross and the resurrection. It was public knowledge in first-century Jerusalem that Jesus of Nazareth has been put to death by crucifixion. While the execution was attested by many people, the apostles fearlessly attested the fact of Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:24,32; 4:10; 5:30-32; 13:30). The apostles solemnly maintained that they were witnesses who could vouch for the aliveness of Jesus (Acts 3:5; 10:39-42; 13:31). This was in harmony with the well-known Jewish law of evidence, which demanded that everything be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses - a principle which is repeatedly stated in the Bible (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28).

Two additional qualifications should be noted. These are not directly referred to by Peter but are

assumed as part of his qualifications listed above.

1. He had to be called and commissioned by the risen Lord directly (Mark 3:14,15; John 15:16; 20:21; Acts 26:15-18)
2. He had received the gospel from Jesus Himself (Galatians 1:11-12).

### Authority

The fact that The Twelve were the original eyewitnesses of Jesus (His life, death, and resurrection) gave their message a unique authority. They had been chosen by God and by Jesus as the authorized communicators of the gospel.

As regards to the "Apostolic Office" it seems to have been preeminently that of laying the solid foundation of the church(es). The office ceased, as a matter of course, with its first holders, all continuation of it, from the very conditions of its existence (1 Corinthians 9:1) being impossible. The bishops of the ancient congregations coexisted with, and did not in any sense succeed, the apostles; and when it is claimed for bishops or any church officers that they are their successors it can be understood only chronologically and not officially.

### The Apostolic Age

The "apostolic age" refers to that period of Church history which covers the time between the day of Pentecost and the death of John, the last apostle. The apostolic age lasted as long as the churches were under the immediate guidance of an apostle (c. 100 A.D.). On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended upon the Church (Acts 2), and the apostles became altogether different men, testifying with power of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 13:31). Their first work was the building up of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 3-7), and then they carried the Gospel into Samaria (Acts 8:5-25). With this ends the first period of the apostles' ministry, with its center at Jerusalem, and Peter as its prominent figure. In this age Peter represents Jewish Christianity, Paul Gentile Christianity, and John the union of the two. The center of the second period of the apostolic agency is Antioch, where a church was soon built up, consisting of Jews and Gentiles. Of this and the subsequent period Paul was the central figure, and labored with the other apostles (Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-5). In the third period the twelve almost entirely disappear from the narrative, and we have only bits of personal history.

### The Apostle Paul

The most outstanding figure in carrying out the apostolic commission was the Apostle Paul, whose conversion is recorded three times in Acts (9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:9-18). In Luke's eyes this was an event of great significance in history for Paul, like the original Twelve, was divinely commissioned (Acts 9:15,16; 22:14,15; 26:15-18). Thus Luke broadened his use of the term "apostle" to include Paul and Barnabas, two of the leading missionaries (Acts 14:4,14). Paul had strong convictions about his apostleship (1 Corinthians 1:1; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:1). On several occasions he had to insist that he was an apostle when his credentials were questioned (1 Corinthians 9:1,2; Galatians 1:1; 1:15-2:10). While there were 'false apostles' in the early church (2 Corinthians 11:13; Revelation 2:2), his role was by divine appointment. He had seen the risen Lord, and been called to his work by Jesus Himself.

### References

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