

# MODERN-DAY APOSTLES

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4–5, 2025)

## Summary

The apostles appointed by Christ in the New Testament fulfilled a unique and foundational role as representative authorities in the Church. Through their work, the Church was established as a Spirit-filled community of believers empowered to worship God, serve others, and bear witness to Jesus.

For over one hundred years, the Assemblies of God has consistently responded that the church maintains an apostolic function without needing formal apostolic offices or titles. The whole church functions apostolically when it works together to advance the gospel and the kingdom of God under the power of the Holy Spirit. This shared ministry includes the work of missionaries and church planters, who spearhead the spread of the gospel and the church wherever it is needed.

## Biblical Apostleship

Confusion and controversy surround the term *apostle* today. The Greek word for apostle, *apostolos*, means one sent out for a specific purpose or mission. The conceptual meaning of the apostle's role derives from the Old Testament, where ambassadors, delegates, and emissaries regularly served to represent a higher authority.

Interpreters typically understand *apostolos* in light of the Hebrew word *shaliach* ("one who is sent"), which was used to describe representatives within Judaism. The Mishnah states, "A man's *shaliach* is like himself" (M. Berakhot 5.5). This meant that if someone's agent or representative made a deal, it was the same as if the person being represented made the deal (similar to the modern concept of power of attorney). The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses *apostolos* to translate the Hebrew word *shaliach* in 1 Kings 14:6.

God sent Jesus to be the representative or apostle of God (John 20:21; Hebrews 3:1). Jesus appointed the Twelve (Mark 3:14–15; Luke 6:12–16), mirroring the twelve tribes as a sign of the restoration of Israel. Along with the seventy (a number signifying the seventy elders of Israel under Moses), Jesus sent them out to preach the good news with specific authority for particular purposes (cf. Matthew 10:1, 5–16; Mark 6:7–11; Luke 9:1–5). The twelve apostles witnessed Jesus' life and resurrection and were personally commissioned by Jesus to serve as representatives (John 20:21). They are often called "the apostles of Christ." Paul also identified himself as an apostle of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:1) and connected his apostleship to his witness of the Risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:8–9). According to Paul, all the apostles saw the Risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:7).

Paul counted apostles as one of the gifts that Jesus gave to the Church, along with prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers in Ephesians 4:11–13. These gifted leaders, taken together, benefited the local church by providing the functions needed to equip, edify, and unify the church. Evaluation of ministry effectiveness was implicitly based on how they contributed to the church’s unity, ministry, and maturity and how well they worked together with the other ministry gifts of Christ in that contribution.

Apostolic functions in the New Testament included dispatch by Jesus to share the gospel and plant the church. New Testament apostles operated in signs and wonders as part of their witness to the gospel (Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4). Due to the difficulty of delivering the gospel to unreached places and people, logistically and spiritually, apostles experienced suffering. Their ability to endure hardship without failing in their witness may also have signified apostleship (2 Corinthians 4:7–11; 12:10). As representatives of Jesus, apostolic workers humbly served and did not abuse their calling, understanding that God has delegated the authority granted to them. Apostles also remained accountable to the church, particularly elders (Acts 15:2).

The Bible provides the names of other appointed apostles, though the term encompassed a generic sense of dispatching representatives on an official mission on behalf of the senders. Some may be distinguished as apostles sent by the church rather than apostles personally appointed by the Risen Lord. Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6–13), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25), Barnabas (Acts 14:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5–6), Andronicus (Romans 16:7), Junia (Romans 16:7), and another unnamed brother with Titus (2 Corinthians 8:22–23) are also counted as apostles.

The apostles personally appointed by the Risen Lord possessed a unique spiritual authority. They passed on the stories and teachings of Jesus that formed the bedrock for church doctrine. The Early Church was formed around their teaching and witness, confirmed by the “wonders and signs”<sup>1</sup> they did (Acts 2:42–43). In dealing with the practical problems of the churches, including the application of their teaching, the apostles often shared leadership with others. For example, “the Twelve” apostles called upon the church of Jerusalem to select the “seven” deacons (Acts 6:2–3). When the Jerusalem Council resolved the schismatic debate over whether the Gentiles should keep the Jewish law, the issue was decided by “the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:4, 6, 22).

In the Jerusalem church, the apostles exercised sole authority early on (Acts 2:42; 4:37), but perhaps because of persecution and travel, they appear less prominently over time. Peter reported the conversion of Cornelius and his household to the “apostles and the believers” (11:1). The “apostles and elders” made up the Jerusalem Council (15:6). When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey, he called on “James, and all the elders”

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(21:18). Elders exercised authority in Jerusalem, as seen in Acts, and elsewhere as seen in the New Testament letters.

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is the last reference to apostles in the Book of Acts and does not depict any individual apostle being in control. Rather, “Equality, collegiality, and mutual submission under the leadership of the Holy Spirit appear to have ruled among the brethren during their deliberations and their hearing of the report by Barnabas and Paul ‘about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (15:12). After these deliberations at Jerusalem, Luke does not again mention the apostles, their work, or their persons.”<sup>2</sup>

The opening chapter of Acts reflects a concern to maintain the number of the twelve apostles. Peter looked to the Scriptures and determined that the vacancy created by Judas’s defection and death should be filled. The way the vacancy was filled is highly instructive regarding qualifications. Jesus had personally appeared and given “instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:2). Two qualifying issues stand out: (1) personal commissioning by the Lord, and (2) thorough familiarity with the teachings of Jesus.

No biblical evidence exists that the church ever sought a successor to one of the Twelve after their deaths. For example, the Early Church did not attempt to replace James, son of Zebedee, who was executed by Herod (Acts 12:2). Apart from the criteria set for selecting Matthias (Acts 1:21–26) and the criteria implied in the actions of Jesus and the account of Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3–11), no directions for making such an appointment exist. By contrast, Scripture offers clear qualifications and instructions for appointing elders/overseers and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9) for church authority.

In summary, those apostles personally appointed by Jesus shared a unique authority as representatives of Jesus who could personally testify to the resurrection of Jesus. Their teachings became the basis for Christian doctrine, and the writings that preserve those teachings became the New Testament. The church they established functions apostolically today as it preserves their teaching, furthers the gospel with signs and wonders, and suffers for the sake of the gospel. No Christian leader since those apostles, regardless of title, carries their unique authority.

### **The Question of Apostolic Restoration**

In the Early Church, apostles were not replaced by the appointment of new apostles. Instead, the apostles appointed bishops. By the second century, the Early Church understood bishops as the apostles’ successors. Church leaders such as Irenaeus claimed that the proper succession of bishops guaranteed the truth of apostolic doctrine.

The apostles appointed bishops, who in turn appointed bishops, and so on, to the present day. In other words, if you wanted to find a successor to the apostles for that day, you would

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<sup>2</sup> J. A. Hewett, “Apostles,” in *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Zondervan, 2002), 881.

need only to look for the bishops. They also canonized the New Testament as the teaching of apostles and apostolic associates written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Apostolic succession was meant to guarantee the church's doctrine, but church tradition moved beyond Scripture over time. The Protestant reformers, recognizing the difference between tradition and the Bible, rejected the need for an apostolic succession of bishops. Apostolicity was found in the preaching of God's Word.

Protestants did not look to restore the apostolic office or recognize leaders, such as Luther and Calvin, as new apostles because it was enough to have the teachings of the apostles in Scripture. At most, they regarded those who spread the gospel into new areas as the closest contemporary equivalent to biblical apostleship, though without the same authority.

The early Pentecostal Movement saw itself as an apostolic movement. Many early Pentecostals first identified their movement as the "Apostolic Faith Movement." They believed that the restoration of Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts finished the work of the Protestant Reformation in restoring all that the apostles had taught and practiced. Yet Pentecostals, including the Assemblies of God, did not appoint "apostles" as a formal office.

Pentecostals were wary of giving any individual a title that placed that person above the church or in a role that did not have expressed accountability back to the church. Instead, the Assemblies of God used terms like "superintendent," considering our understanding of *episkopos* (1 Timothy 3:1) as a church-appointed position.

Eventually, some within the Pentecostal Movement felt that the movement suffered from the absence of recognized apostles. From the middle of the twentieth century to the present, independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches sought to build new connections through a shared recognition of apostles within their midst. Toward the end of the twentieth century, leaders within these communities were connected through the teaching of C. Peter Wagner. He proposed a theology for restoring the formal office of apostles, which united those leaders under a common ecclesiology without necessitating more formal organization.

Many of these present-day apostles have exercised significant influence in charismatic circles through books, conferences, worship ministries, etc. Those leaders have also impacted some within the Assemblies of God who have benefited from their ministry. This impact raises the need to answer questions again about restoring the office of apostles.

### **A Consistent Answer to the Question of Apostolic Restoration**

Throughout its history, the Assemblies of God has faced questions about restoring the formal office of apostles today. The first general superintendent, E. N. Bell, argued that "Jesus chose twelve and the Scriptures give these twelve the official name of the apostles, and not every one sent is an apostle in the same sense they were. In that special sense I do not believe there are any living apostles today."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E. N. Bell, "Questions and Answers," *The Weekly Evangel*, August 24, 1918, 9.

At the same time, the Assemblies of God recognized the partial existence of apostolic ministry regarding spreading the gospel and planting or revitalizing the church. Donald Gee answered the question, “Are There Apostles Today?” Gee wrote, “In one sense the answer must be in the negative. . . . there no longer remains any foundation to be laid, in the sense in which it was being finally completed by the first apostles.” Yet he also recognized that ministers can fulfill certain apostolic functions in missions, evangelism, and revivalism. In that regard, the Assemblies of God does believe that some ministers are “today fulfilling in a precious measure the same type of God-given ministry. Let no one deny them the recognition which is their due because they neither call themselves, nor are called by others, ‘apostles.’ Like every other ministry-gift of Christ, the office consists not in name, but in power.”<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after World War II, the new “Latter Rain Movement” threatened to split the Assemblies of God over the issue of restoring a formal office of modern-day apostles, among others. The Assemblies of God passed Resolution 7 in response. It stated, “We disapprove of those extreme teachings and practices which, being unfounded Scripturally, serve only to break fellowship of like minded faith . . . to wit . . . The erroneous teaching that the Church is built on the foundation of present-day apostles and prophets.”<sup>5</sup>

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Assemblies of God again faced the question of recognizing a formal office of modern-day apostles. They explained that since the New Testament does not provide guidance for the appointment of future apostles, such contemporary offices are deemed unnecessary to the health and growth of the church or to maintain its apostolic nature.

For over one hundred years, the Assemblies of God has consistently responded that the church maintains an apostolic function without needing apostolic offices or titles. At the same time, they have recognized that missions and church planting are more uniquely representative of the apostolic function of the church.

Christ promised the apostles that they would bear witness to Jesus throughout the world when the Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). According to the Assemblies of God Constitution Article V, item 10. “The Church and Its Mission,” in the Statement of Fundamental Truths, “The Assemblies of God exists expressly to give continuing emphasis to this reason for being in the New Testament apostolic pattern by teaching and encouraging believers to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.”

A Spirit-filled church that operates in the power of the Spirit to bear witness to Christ to the “ends of the earth” is an apostolic church. Apostolic churches are founded on the scriptural testimony of the apostles and apostolic associates. They further the gospel, the Church, and the kingdom of God through their preparation and support of missionaries and church planters who plant faith communities in fresh ground. Their apostolic gifting is

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Gee, *The Ministry-Gifts of Christ* (Gospel Publishing House, 1930), 34–37.

<sup>5</sup> 1949 General Council Minutes, 26.

especially evident through the use of signs and wonders as churches are planted and by their ability to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel.

### **Guidelines**

1. The apostolic nature of the church is guaranteed by adherence to Scripture, faithfully transmitted by the apostles of Jesus Christ in their foundational roles, and vital participation in the life and ministry of the Holy Spirit, who baptized, gifted, and led the first apostles to spread the gospel to all the world.
2. The function of apostles occurs wherever the Church of Jesus Christ is established among the unevangelized. It is neither uncommon nor inappropriate to recognize church planters and missionaries operating in apostolic capacities, particularly through signs and wonders. As Pentecostals, we fervently desire a generation of men and women who function apostolically: to take the gospel with signs following to people at home and abroad who have not yet heard or understood that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
3. Some churches outside the Assemblies of God may, in good faith and careful biblical definition, choose to name certain leaders apostles. Recognizing that the word *apostle* is used in different ways in the New Testament, we do not recognize the authority of modern-day apostles as equal to that of the apostles personally appointed by Jesus, including Paul. Contemporary apostles, for example, do not have the authority to add new teachings to the canon of Scripture or the Christian faith. However, in line with biblical apostleship, they may exercise empowerment to plant the Church and spread the gospel with signs and wonders, endure suffering faithfully as an example of Christ, and provide godly leadership in cooperation with other leaders so that the Church is equipped for ministry, mature in faith, and unified in the Spirit.
4. Within the Assemblies of God, persons are not recognized by the title of apostles. It is possible that individuals may attach that title to themselves to assert dominance and control over believers while leaving themselves unaccountable to the members in their care or the spiritual eldership of their fellowship (2 Corinthians 11:12–14). We look with grave concern at those who do not work toward the maturity of a local church body that governs itself under the authority of the Holy Spirit and the guidelines of Scripture. Such leaders prefer more authoritarian structures where their words or decrees are unchallenged. The church must never forget that leadership gifts should not exalt leaders; they are meant to equip all of God’s people for ministry.
5. We encourage our churches to heed the following provision of the General Council Bylaws: “Pastors and leaders of assemblies should make proper investigation of

persons who seek to gain entrance to teach, minister, or pastor. Use of the platform should be denied until spiritual integrity and reliability have been determined” (Article VI, Section 3).