

## *Dusting off the Apostolic Function*

By Dan Greene

16,750 of the 26,000 people groups in the world are still without a church!

While recently contemplating this remarkable statistic provided by contemporary missions researchers, my attention was caught by another startling fact. World population growth is now exploding upward at an exponential rate. What has taken the entire history of our planet to reach in population level will now be repeated in a scant thirty years.

Suddenly it became apparent why every time I step off the beaten path in my own people group I run into new pockets of humanity that have sprung up beyond the influence of existing churches. Secularization, the antithesis of Christianization, is spreading like an epidemic, claiming millions of our planet's most recent arrivals. New communities and social subgroups are repeatedly forming where the message again needs to penetrate.

What does this mean to Christians? It means that even 16,750 new messengers of the Gospel will not complete the missionary task. Thousands more are already needed to keep abreast of the population explosion in groups where churches now exist. The task of “preaching the gospel to every creature” is a constantly increasing assignment calling for every God-given resource to be identified and employed to the maximum.

One of the most powerful resources only comes into focus as you reflect on the expansion of the church during the New Testament period. There were two complementary stages. First came *apostles*, mobile missionaries, who overcame religious, cultural, and social barriers in order to lay the foundation for Christianity in new cities and new peoples. Secondly came the *membership* of the churches. By their personal testimonies and changed lives these New Testament believers penetrated the local population in depth as they rubbed shoulders daily with friends, neighbors, and business associates. So vigorous was their witness that occasionally they launched a ministry ahead of the apostles, as happened in Antioch.

Much is being said today about the second stage, and rightly so. Taking the Good News next door is as fundamental as any missions strategy yet devised. Less clear, however, is the existence and potential of the first stage, the apostolic function. Some believe it is altogether extinct, a museum piece in the gallery of church history. Strange, because according to the New Testament record the apostle constitutes one of the greatest dynamics for launching the church in new people groups. Have we so neatly divided up the scriptures that a major function in the church has been left to collect dust? One thing is for sure. If the apostolic gift *is* active in the Body today, we need to bring it into sharper focus because, in view of the immense task before us, the Holy Spirit may shortly be calling some of us to “stir up our gift\*7 and pack our bags.

But what does the Bible say? *Is there really a valid apostolic gift today?* Here are four affirmative reasons that have recently caught my attention in the scriptures.

1. The Great Commission itself implies a continuous repetition of the apostolic role in the future. When Jesus told the twelve to “Go and make disciples in every nation...,” he concluded the assignment by instructing them to teach the new disciples *everything* he had commanded them.

One of his more important commands was the one he had just given: “Go and make disciples...” In other words, what Jesus invested in the twelve was to be reinvested in another generation of believers who in turn would do so among the next. And Jesus himself would accompany *every* generation of believers right to the end of the world. So where does the apostolic mission stop? It doesn't!

It recently occurred to me after taking another group of unbelieving Brazilian students through a year-long trek of John's Gospel that we had virtually been sitting at Jesus' feet, pondering his teaching, accompanying his travels, witnessing his miracles. We had argued over who He was and why He came. Thanks to John, as well as Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we had gone through the same experience that New Testament listeners went through as they heard out the apostles. The unique content of their eyewitness experience is still available to us for use in new apostolic experiences. No wonder the Brazilian students ended up believing.

2. The New Testament names many as apostles besides the twelve. Paul, of course, is the outstanding example, although his special commission on the road to Damascus as well as his use of signs and miracles leads us to categorize him along with the twelve. But there are many others.

Barnabas is named an apostle (Acts 14:4,14). Andronicus and Junias, relatives of Paul, are called apostles (Romans 16:7). The “us apostles” of I Corinthians 4:9 most logically includes Apollos (see vs. 6). Paul includes James, the Lord's brother, in his reference to the “other apostles” (Galatians 1:19). He names Epaphroditus an apostle (translated “messenger”-- Philippians 2:25). His reference to himself and his colleagues who founded the church in Thessalonica as apostles (I Thess. 2:7) appears to have included at least Silas and Timothy.

The New Testament amply establishes that the twelve were personally assigned to a special position by the Lord as his witnesses with a unique authority, miraculous powers, and inspired memories (Matt. 10:1, II Cor. 12:12, John 14:26). Although these same authenticating characteristics are not mentioned in connection with the other apostles (Paul excepted), it is obvious that the apostolic function was not limited to the twelve even during the New Testament period. This fact strongly suggests the possibility of valid apostolic activity in Spirit-directed outreach to *any* generation.

3. New Testament teaching on spiritual gifts identifies the apostle as one of several gifts in the Body which contribute to the “perfecting of the saints” (Eph 4:11). No distinction is drawn between first-generation believers and later believers. In fact, when Paul urged the Corinthians to “eagerly desire the greater gifts,” the implication was that among them were some potential apostles who needed to go after this particular gift.

It is interesting to remember that the twelve, after all their training and exposure to Jesus, still needed divine power from the Holy Spirit to carry out their assignment. Assuming that the calling to be an apostle is a “manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the common good” (I Cor 12:7), then the eyewitness experience of the twelve was not as critical to their apostolic role as was the grace and power and gift distributed later by the Holy Spirit. Paul's eyewitness experience of Jesus lasted only a matter of seconds. Yet, he proved to be one of the greatest apostles. Why? Because he was called and gifted for this function in the Body.

4. There is a definite pattern throughout the New Testament that only emerges as one reads and rereads it. It is the distinction between the mobile and the local, the apostles and the churches. Compare, for example, the “we” and “you” of I Thessalonians.

We always thank God for all of *you*, mentioning *you* in our prayers (1:2).

As apostles of Christ, *we* could have been a burden to *you*, but *we* were gentle among *you*...

(2:7). When *you* received the word of God which *you* heard from *us*, you accepted it...as the word of God (2:13).

*We* sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage *you* in your faith (3:2).

Now *we* ask *you*, brothers, to respect those who work hard among *you* (5:12).

This pattern of mobile, apostolic missionaries bringing into existence new, local manifestations of the Body of Christ is a powerful biblical principle for the expansion of Christ's kingdom in any generation. Here in Latin America, my Brazilian colleagues have taught me much about contemporary apostleship. They simply took the New Testament pattern at face value and prayerfully separated out several from their midst to carry on the apostolic assignment. The results have been a series of new churches launched in cities and social groups the first generation of converts had no chance of touching.

The question naturally arises as to whether missionaries and apostles are the same thing. Although the word “missionary” comes from the Latin language, and the word “apostle” comes from the Greek, both words in their root forms refer to someone who is “sent.” A missionary, therefore, would be an apostle if he was in fact fulfilling the apostolic function as outlined in scripture.

This raises the second fundamental question: *What specifically is the apostolic function?*

Paul refers to his legitimate sphere of action as an apostle in II Corinthians 10:13-16.

We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will limit our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you...for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ.... Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.

Paul's field of service was a God-given assignment, a *mobile* mission that at one point in time brought the gospel to the Corinthians. However, he anticipated the day when progress among the Corinthian believers would free him to preach the gospel in other regions beyond Corinth.

Here lies the exciting potential of the apostolic role. In going beyond the limits of that which exists, it opens up new ministries, new works, new frontiers. Paul's calling to be an apostle constantly motivated him to “preach the gospel where Christ was not known.” The apostolic function, therefore, is to bring into being that which did not previously exist, to lay the foundation for new local manifestations of the Body of Christ.

The apostle's target is the *unchurched*, not the church or those who have contact with the church. These may be stone-age Indians, university students or corporate executives. In every society there are groups of people whose geographic location, lifestyle, or current state of secularization has placed them beyond the reach of existing churches. Who is going to reach them? In many cases it will be contemporary apostles.

Some basic steps in fulfilling the apostolic calling can be identified in scripture. Each step looks familiar but in fact calls for some surprisingly original thinking.

1. Separate from the existing body. 2. Evangelize the lost. 3. Establish the new believers. 4. Launch the local church. 5. Complete that which is lacking.

1. *Separate from the existing body.* When the Holy Spirit communicated Paul's and Barnabas' unique mission to the leadership of the church in Antioch, He said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). The apostolic mission calls for separation, some distance from existing believers, not out of independence or dissension, but for the purpose of opening up one's life to scores of new relationships with the people eventually to be reached. This is easily understood in the case of a Wycliffe missionary to Central America but is frequently out of focus for missionaries to the large population centers at home and abroad.

Occasionally people ask us, "Do you go to church?" or "Are your children in Sunday School?" The questions themselves reflect a misunderstanding of the basic truth that as missionaries with our new converts we *are* the church and are in the process of forming new local churches. Initially we will have to do without some of the forms of fellowship to which we were previously accustomed. To set up immediately the activities of our past local church experience as a means to communicate the gospel in a new people group would be the same kind of error as insisting that people learn English as a prerequisite to reading the Bible. It's comfortable for us but puts a high price tag on the gospel.

This principle of separation from the old environment and immersion in the new is well expressed by Paul in I Corinthians 9:20,21: "To those under the law I became like one under the law.... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under God's law)...." Separation is obviously a sensitive issue with many delicate facets. For the apostle it underscores the big difference between extending the old and generating the new.

Notice too that the church in Antioch fasted, prayed, and sent off Paul and Barnabas with their blessing. This attitude of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the sending congregation introduces an issue that has rocked the Christian boat from the first century to the twentieth. It is the issue of *acceptance*, acceptance between two valid but different manifestations of the Body of Christ. The apostle is going to reach new kinds of people with different kinds of habits. Social customs, lifestyles, convictions, and activities are going to vary from one people group to another. The apostle becomes the human link between these differing works, voluntarily obligating himself to get along with both, to "become all things to all men" (I Cor. 9:22). The tension here is inescapable, and with each step of the church-planting process understanding and acceptance become increasingly critical.

2. *Evangelize the lost.* What the apostle must constantly keep in mind is his goal of bringing into being that which does not yet exist. This means evangelizing those who he ultimately hopes to reach. No short-cuts. When Paul decided to go after Ephesian Gentiles outside the reach of the synagogue, he settled into the school of Tyrannus and stayed longer than in any other city during his three missionary journeys. Why did it take so long? These Gentiles, like ones he met in Athens and Corinth, were untouched by Judaism. They were pagan, secularized, biblically ignorant. It took more sowing, watering, waiting, before he could reap.

One of my Brazilian colleagues and now a foundational person in our work is Mario Nitsche. Mario studied the Bible for four years with a persistent apostle before becoming a Christian. Why did it take so long? Mario was an atheist, a disciple of Bertrand Russell, involved in a communist cell group, anti-American. Fortunately the apostle persisted, and today Mario himself is one of the most effective apostles to the secularized that I know.

Now let's get even more specific about this issue of *acceptance* as it affects apostolic evangelism. What will you do if your apostle reports back that he is studying the Bible with a group of bartenders in some entertainment center or with some junior executives in a cigarette manufacturing firm? Will you accept this as a valid beginning? It will help to remember how the Jewish Christians felt when uncircumcised, pork-eating Gentiles began to enter the Body of Christ. Some couldn't stand it! They convened a council in Jerusalem and argued out the validity of this new outreach to Gentiles. Fortunately for those of us who are Gentiles, they decided in favor of the venture and sent out their word of enthusiastic support accompanied by a brief list of precautions.

Hopefully you too will send the word back to your apostle to go for it, to expand his foothold in a world that your world will never touch. *Pray* for those bartenders, that they will be genuinely converted and begin to reach their friends, their associates, and their families. *Offer some help!* *Send* them a Barnabas who will recognize "the evidence of the grace of God, (be) glad, and encourage them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Acts 11:22,23).

3. *Establish the new believers.* Here again the stakes are high in terms of bringing into being that which did not previously exist. For the apostle the challenge is to *not* cut off the new believer from his old circle of family and friends but to help him reach that circle of people.

Apostles working in population centers are frequently urged to bring their believers into an existing local church. That's the right step for evangelism and evangelists of existing bodies, but it's the wrong step for an apostolic work. The apostle is not a recruiter for old teams. His job is forming new clubs and starting new leagues. Furthermore, the new convert's concept of and future contribution to the kingdom of God will be vastly different depending on whether he is parked on the sidelines to watch or shown from the start that he has a vital role to play in a new, valid manifestation of the Body of Christ. Ask any aspiring young ball player if he would rather sit out the game on the bench of an existing team or get some of his friends together on the local sandlot and play ball. That's the difference!

A family atmosphere is initially more appropriate than a church atmosphere. The emphasis in establishing new believers needs to be on the nurture of the individual and not on the visibility of the program. This emphasis is beautifully reflected in Paul's work among the Thessalonians.

As an apostle of Christ...we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children (2:7).

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children (2:11).

It is in the environment of a spiritual family, under the care of spiritual parents, that the basic needs of the new Christians are best met and where he develops a healthy concept of his own potential as a future parent in the kingdom. Time is essential! Spiritual growth, like physical growth, can be retarded, but it cannot be accelerated.

4. *Launch the local church.* Essentially this means creating a permanent environment in which the newly established believers can mature and exercise the attitudes and gifts to which the Holy Spirit is motivating them. Here it is easy for apostolic people to lose their way. Two wrong turns are frequently taken:

a. Extending the apostolic role so long that the new work becomes chronically dependent on the apostle's personal presence and so that spiritually-gifted laymen never perceive their usefulness and responsibility as future shepherds to the growing flock.

b. Cutting the apostolic role so short that the majority of converts are abandoned as spiritual orphans, too early separated from the environment in which they came to Christ. Excessive recruiting to the apostolic vision may not only deplete the internal leadership of the potential new work but also misdirect future prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers into assignments for which they are not fitted. According to Ephesians 4, the apostle, as well as other gifted people, are *given to the Body*. They owe it to the fruit of their evangelism to stick with them until all are established in a maturing, local fellowship with solid leadership.

What is the right turn? Launch the local church! Opinions as to what the local church should look like are so diverse and yet so firmly held that many details must be here left to the reader's discretion. Among the initial steps, however, the following two are fundamental:

a. Create some simple forms of fellowship beyond the level of family or small group in which *all* the new Christians can maintain regular contact with each other, developing their walk with the Lord and benefiting from the teaching and experience of the more mature. Form and frequency may vary, but the basic principle remains the same. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..." (Heb. 10:24,25). In this broader fellowship the biblically-imperative influence of gifts *other* than the apostolic gift contributes increasingly to the process of edification. The visibility of the apostle begins to diminish.

b. Identify and train leadership. Here the apostle puts in one of his most vital strokes. Paul summarized the principle in II Timothy 2:2: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." Timothy was to reinvest the content of his own training from Paul in several faithful men, equipping them in turn to teach others. Without this strategic step so clearly modeled by Jesus and the disciples, the new church will never get up on its feet and moving. Eventually a body of local leadership should be identified and given the permanent task of caring for the church, thus signalling the time for the apostle to move on to other fields.

5. "*Complete that which is lacking.*" With these words to Titus, Paul put the finishing touches to his church-planting mission on Crete (Titus 1:5). The apostle who gives birth to a work always has a unique authority among those believers. They are his spiritual children. With this authority, however, comes a responsibility to pray, visit, correspond, or send a competent representative to help those churches reach maturity. Most of the New Testament is exactly this--the apostles, by message and messenger, bringing their works to completion. Timothy and Titus model this step for us, not as pastors, but as representatives of the apostle Paul, left temporarily on the scene to assist in the development of permanent local leadership and to meet specific needs.

## Conclusion

Given the existence of the mobile and the local as valid, complementary, biblical functions, the implications for the church today are tremendous. Missionaries who are truly fulfilling the apostolic role cannot be dismissed as “parachurch.” Neither are they a temporary measure to fill in where local churches have failed. They have a legitimate, God-given function *beyond* the reach of local churches. They constitute a powerful resource for multiplying churches across geographical, cultural, social, and numerical barriers.

Another implication to be considered is demographic. As the population continues to leap upward, we will need to become accustomed to the idea of apostolic missionaries going across town as well as across oceans. Here in Brazil the sprawling metropolitan giant of Sao Paulo can be crossed by car in one hour. Its fourteen million inhabitants, however, number more than all the people that lived in all the cities where Paul evangelized during his three missionary journeys put together. Mass media and rapid transportation are important, but they will never take the place of fresh apostolic activity. Remember Paul's observation: “Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (I Cor. 4:15).

Clearly God has not forgotten about the 16,750 people groups without a church nor the growing number of people and communities within the “reached” groups who also need messengers. Hopefully a clearer vision of the apostolic function will enable us to send and be sent as His messengers with increasing freedom and conviction.