

# THE MINISTRY OF THE APOSTLES AND OUR MINISTRY

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Some Lutherans trace the New Testament ministry of the Word back to the office of the Apostles and say that our present ministry of the Word comes to us "from Christ through the Apostles." Others, following C.F.W. Walther in Thesis 7 of his famous theses on ministry, say that the public ministry comes "from Christ through the church." Which of these expressions best reflects the establishment of public ministry as it is recorded in Scripture?

## The Origins of the Public Ministry

Public ministry of the Word did not originate with the Apostles. The public ministry of the Word existed already in the Old Testament. Public proclamation of the word took place already before the Flood (Genesis 4:26, 2 Peter 2:5). After the Flood, but before the establishment of Israel's priesthood, we meet the mysterious priesthood of Melchizedek, who was appointed by God. We also encounter the public ministry of the priests and Levites, who received a public rite of ordination or installation into their ministry. The Old Testament prophets were called directly by God or anointed by another prophet, as Elisha was.

The public ministry of John the Baptist straddled the border between the Old and New Testaments. John was called directly by God, but he was apparently assisted by other ministers who baptized as a part of John's ministry to Israel (John 3:22-26; 4:1; Acts 19:3-4).

Several of Jesus' disciples entered the "public ministry" as disciples of John, and they continued to baptize after they had left John to follow Jesus (John 1:35, 4:2). They were baptizing before they became Apostles and before the great commission to baptize all nations was given in Matthew 28.

## The Origin of the Apostolic Ministry

As noted above, some of the Apostles were disciples of John before they were called by Christ. Others, such as Matthew, were apparently called to be disciples of Jesus without having been followers of John (Mt 9:9). Their calling to become Jesus' disciples apparently took place in several stages (Jn 1:35-42, Lk 5:1-11), each involving greater commitment to the work. After serving for some time as disciples they were called to be apostles.

Luke 6:13 is the most precise statement of their calling as apostles. Literally translated, it says, Jesus "summoned his disciples and having chosen from them twelve, whom he also named apostles..." There was a larger group of followers of Jesus from which he chose twelve to be apostles. They had apparently been called to be full-time disciples before they were called to be apostles (Compare Luke 5:1-11, 27-28 with Luke 6:12-13). Luke separates the commissioning of the Twelve (Luke 9:1) from their calling.

According to Mark 3:13-16 the Apostles were "made" (ἐποίησεν) by Christ. The KJV translated ἐποίησεν "ordained," but the NIV's "appointed" is more accurate. The NIV rendering of Mark 3:14, "He appointed twelve - *designating them apostles*," is based on adopting a variant which appears in  $\aleph$  and B. It may be imported from Luke 6. The King James does not have this phrase. Mark parallels Luke in placing the commissioning of the Twelve into a separate account (Mk 6:7).

Matthew joins the calling and the commissioning of the apostles into one account. In Matthew 10:1 Jesus simply calls his twelve disciples to him, gives them authority, and sends them out. There is no record in any of these accounts that the apostles received a laying-on of hands. At a later time, when he gave them authority to forgive sins, Jesus breathed on them (Jn 20:22).

At first glance, the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and Mark 16 seems to be addressed to the Eleven. At least "the Eleven" is the immediately preceding antecedent of "them" in both passages. It should be noted, however, that many Lutheran commentators connect the giving of the Great Commission with the meeting with

500 disciples mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6 (Lenski, Ylvisaker, among others) and say that the commission was given not just to the apostles, but to the church. Which of these understandings best agrees with the data in the text?

It is not safe to conclude that the Eleven were the only ones present when the Great Commission was given. The accounts in the Gospels frequently omit mention of some of the participants. Mark tells us that Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus (15:43); John informs us that Nicodemus also participated (19:39). Mark tells us that James and John requested special places of honor from Jesus (10:35); Matthew tells us it was actually their mother who made the request on their behalf (20:20). Mark tells us Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus at Jericho (10:46); Matthew informs us that two men were healed (20:29). Mark says Jesus healed a demon-possessed man near Gerasa (5:2); Matthew says there were two (8:28). This type of narration is common enough in the Gospels to warn us against drawing any dogmatic conclusion from the fact that only the Eleven are mentioned as being present at the giving of the Great Commission.

Even if the Eleven were the only ones present when the commission was given, we are not justified in concluding that it was intended only for them. As far as we know, only the Apostles were present when Jesus gave the ministry of the keys (Matthew 16 and 18, John 20), but it is clear that this commission, which is essentially the same as the Great Commission, was not limited to the Twelve. Only the Twelve received the command, "Take, eat, this is my body," but we do not conclude that it was only for them. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul makes it clear that the command given to the Apostles (and apparently also to Paul by special revelation) applied to the Corinthians, and we conclude that it applies also to us.

The account, therefore, does not specify whether others besides the Eleven were present when the Great Commission was given, nor does it rule it out. Regardless of who was present, the account does clearly specify that the command does apply to others besides the Eleven, since it continues long after their lifetime. The question is "Is this command applicable to others because the Apostles transfer this authority to them or because the others are already included in Christ's command along with the Apostles?" We have already seen that the parallel commands concerning the Ministry of the Keys and the Lord's Supper include all Christians. Parallel texts indicate that this is also true of the Great Commission.

At the end of Luke's Gospel (24:45-49), Jesus tells the Eleven that repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. They are his witnesses. They are to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the Holy Spirit. This commission and promise are repeated in Acts 1:4-8. When Pentecost comes, it appears that the outpouring of the Spirit which equips the church for this mission was not limited to the Apostles. Commentators argue about whether the "all" of Acts 2 applies only to the Twelve or the 120 disciples. The quotation from Joel (Acts 2:17-18) seems to favor the wider application of the command and the promise. At any rate, in the book of Acts, many of the examples of the fulfillment of the commission were performed by people other than the Twelve (Acts 8:4, 8:26, 11:19-20).

In Mark's version of the Great Commission the words "those who believe" (16:17) indicate that the command is not limited to the Eleven.

It is clear that Matthew 28 gives no support to the claim that the commission to preach the gospel was given only to the Apostles and that ordinary Christians receive it only when it is given to them by the Apostles or their successors. In his High Priestly Prayer (John 17:20-21) Jesus prays for the Apostles and for those who will *believe in him through the Apostles' message*. Everything we receive from the Apostles we receive through the faith which is worked in us by the message they have left for us, not by some special act of transmission through some select individuals.

## The Relationship of Other Forms of Ministry to the Apostles:

### 1. In Origin

#### The Seventy

Jesus appointed or presented (ἀνέδειξεν) seventy[-two] other disciples to go out as missionaries. There is no indication that this office was derived from that of the apostles. Since the office of "disciple" preceded that of "apostle," it seems more in accord with the accounts to say that the office of apostle was a development from the office of disciple, rather than vice versa.

#### Other leaders

#### 1 Corinthians 12

God "arranged" (ἔθετο) the apostles and other ministers in the church, just as he arranged various members in the body. Compare verses 18 and 28 in the original. The NIV translates the verses differently, but the Greek verb is the same in both cases. The point is not a hierarchy with one member being derived from the another, but diversity arranged by God. The enumeration, "first...second...third," may indicate the impact of these offices on the work of the church or the order in which they typically appeared in a mission field.

#### Ephesians 4:11

Christ has given apostles and other ministers to the church. The same verse governs all offices. Nothing suggests that one office is derived from the preceding one.

#### Acts 1

When Peter and the apostles recognized the need for a replacement for Judas, they did not appoint one themselves. They went to the existing congregation, which nominated (ἔστησαν) two qualified candidates, prayed over them, and, by casting lots (ἔδωκεν κλήρους), left the final choice up to Lord. No ceremony of ordination or installation is reported.

#### Acts 6

When the apostles recognized the need for a new form of ministry to assist them, they did not establish it themselves. They went to the existing congregation and explained the situation. Seven "deacons" were chosen (ἐπισκέψασθε, ἐξελέξαντο) by the congregation and presented to the apostles, who appointed them (or turned over responsibility to them – καταστήσομεν), prayed over them, and laid their hands on them (ἐπέθηκαν τὰς χεῖρας). The deacons' duties were not in the ministry of the Word, but in administration of the congregation's charity work.

#### Acts 9

When Paul was called to be an apostle by Jesus on the road to Damascus, he received laying-on of hands from Ananias, a member of the local congregation. It is, however, unclear if this was a sign of his entry into his office of apostle. The text connects the laying-on of hands with healing from his blindness and receiving of the Holy Spirit. It is unlikely that this laying-on of hands was associated with Paul's entry into his office, since in Galatians he stresses that he did not become an apostle through the agency of any man.

## Acts 13

At the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were set apart (ἀφορίσατε) for their missionary journey by the existing congregation at Antioch or by its prophets and teachers. After fasting and prayer, the prophets or the members of the congregation laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them on their way. It is not clear which of the actions during the commissioning were carried out by the congregation and which were done only by the prophets, but when Paul and Barnabas returned, they reported to the congregation which had sent them (Act 14:27).

## Acts 15:22

The apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose (ἐξελεξαμένους) some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. Note that the role of the congregation in choosing the delegates is specifically mentioned.

## 2 Corinthians 8:19

A brother was chosen (χειροτονηθείς) by the churches to accompany Paul's group as they carried the offering to Jerusalem. The role of the congregation is again explicit.

There are two cases in which the role of the congregation is not explicitly mentioned:

## Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas appointed (χειροτονήσαντες) elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

χειροτονέω means to elect by a show of hands, to elect, or simply to choose. Some have argued that an election by the congregations, arranged by Paul, is intended here, but it seems more likely that this verse simply states that pastors were chosen by Paul and Barnabas. This does not necessarily exclude a role by the congregation.

## Titus 1:5

Paul left Titus in Crete to straighten out what was left unfinished (ἐπιδιορθώση τὰ λείποντα) and appoint (καταστήσης) elders in every town. The respective roles of Titus and the congregations in this process are not specified, but it seems clear that Titus took the lead.

In both of these cases the congregations involved were young, immature mission congregations. In these circumstances it was necessary for the "mission pastors" to give more direction to the congregations, just as is often the case in our mission congregations.

There is one case which is ambiguous, that of Timothy:

"Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14). The laying on of hands, which is apparently ordination, was done by the elders, which may be a group of pastors, but which may also approximate our church council. The gift Timothy receives is most likely his pastoral office. It was given by means of (διὰ) a prophetic message at the

time when (μετὰ) the elders laid their hands on Timothy. This does not tell how Timothy was chosen or where and when this took place. A role of the congregation is not excluded.

"I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6). This could refer to Timothy's ordination and point to Paul as the presiding pastor at that event, but it is more likely that this passage is parallel to Acts 8 and 19 where apostles give gifts of the Spirit to converts. The agent is different than in the preceding passage (Paul, not the elders), and the function of the laying on of hands is different (here it is a means of bestowing gifts (δῶν); there it is symbolic accompaniment (μετὰ) of a prophetic message).

### Conclusion

The faithful ministry is always apostolic in its doctrine (Eph 2:20, Mt 10:40), and all true believers are always apostolic in their faith (Eph 2:20, John 17:20-21). However, nothing in Scripture indicates that the office of pastor or any other public ministry of the Word is derived from the apostolic office. Christ appointed other servants of the Word without connecting their office to that of the apostles. (Lk 10:1,16, cf. AP, Trg. p 243). Nothing in the New Testament indicates that the other forms of the ministry current in the New Testament-era derived from the office of the Apostles, although there was a certain priority to the office of the apostles (Eph 2:20, 4:11, 1 Cor 12:28).

As noted above, holders of other offices of ministry were sometimes appointed by the Apostles, acting as leaders and representatives of the church. In such cases, however, the Apostles normally worked through the local congregation. Even while the Apostles were on the scene, ministers of the gospel were appointed by Christ through the church, not through the Apostles without the church. "By Christ through the church" is the origin of all forms of ministry in the New Testament, except in the few cases where there was a direct call from Christ.

## **The Relationship of Other Forms Of Ministry to the Apostles:**

### **2. In Character**

How does the office of the Apostles compare with that of other ministers of the Word? Does it have distinct characteristics?

The Apostles were called directly by Christ. This, however, was not unique to them, but was shared by the Seventy.

The ministry of the keys was given to the Apostles (in 20:22). The ministry of the keys was also given to the church (Mt 18:17-20).

The Apostles were given the gift of inspiration, but only three of the twelve wrote inspired books. At least four non-apostles wrote inspired books of the New Testament.

The Apostles were given power over sicknesses and demons and authority to preach. The Seventy were given power over sicknesses and demons and authority to preach (Lk 10:9,17). The Seventy received the same assurance as the apostles, "He that listens to you, listens to me (Lk 10:16). Mark 16:17-18 seems to include others besides the Apostles in the outpouring of special gifts.

The Apostles could give spiritual gifts to others through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17 and 19:6, 2 Timothy 1:6). Apostles were identified by the signs of an apostle (2 Cor 12:12). It appears that only the Apostles were able to give such gifts to others, and that the giving of these gifts ended when there were no more apostles. The only passage that challenges this viewpoint is the role of Ananias, when he laid hands on Paul in Acts 9.

The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). This is said of no one else. The twelve apostles have a special relation to Israel in time and in eternity (Mt 19:28, Gal 2:7-9). This is not true of other New Testament ministers.

Apostles had to have been with Jesus during his whole ministry from the time of his baptism and to have been witnesses of his resurrection. At least one disciple who possessed the qualifications to become an apostle did not become an apostle (Acts 1). Paul, as an apostle born out of due time, did not possess the first qualification, but he received the second in a special way.

The Apostles counted themselves among the pastors of the church (1 Peter 5:1, 2 Jn 1, 3 Jn 1).

The Apostles are distinguished from all other ministers of the gospel by being given the special title of Apostle by Jesus, by having a unique role as a foundation of the church, by being assigned a special role as leaders of Israel, and by being specially designated witnesses of Jesus' resurrection.

They are distinguished from subsequent ministers of the gospel by a direct call from Christ, by the special gifts of healing and power over demons, and by the gift of inspiration. These gifts were, however, shared with contemporaries of the apostles, who were in direct contact with Christ or the apostles. With the possible exception of Ananias, only the apostles were able give these gifts to others.

The Apostles had a special calling as world missionaries. We have a detailed account of how that calling was fulfilled for only one apostle, Paul. We do not know if the other apostles were missionaries-at-large or whether they had territorial assignments from Christ, from the church, or by mutual agreement.

### **Appendix 1 Apostles and Disciples**

"Apostle" basically means "a messenger sent on a mission." The underlying meaning is best reflected in John 13:16, "a messenger (ἀπόστολος) is not greater than the one sending him." In this sense Jesus is once called an "apostle" sent by the Father (Heb 3:1).

As a title of messengers to the church, "apostle" is largely limited to the Twelve, plus Paul, during the time after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. John's gospel does not use the term at all. Mark and Matthew use it only in connection with the calling and commissioning of the Twelve. Only Luke's Gospel uses it as a name for the Twelve in a context other than their calling. It uses the term in this way only three times. "Apostle" is the common name for the Twelve plus Paul in Acts (about 27 times).

Barnabas and Paul together are labeled "apostles" on one occasion during their first missionary journey (Acts 14:14). On two occasions delegates chosen to represent churches are called "apostles" (2 Cor 8:23, Plp 2:25). Two disputed passages may refer to others as apostles (Rm 16:7, Gal 1:19). This is the extent of evidence for a wider use of the term "apostle."

"Disciple" is the common term for the twelve apostles in all four gospels, occurring about 200 times. It is also used often for the larger group of Jesus' followers from whom the Twelve were chosen. In Acts "disciple" is the common name for all believers. This usage does not occur in the epistles, where terms like "saints" supplant "disciple."

"The Twelve" (or the Eleven) occurs about 30 times in the gospels, sometimes combined with "apostles" or "disciples." It occurs only once in Acts (6:2) and once in the epistles (1 Cor 15:5).

### **Appendix 2 The Confessions**

It has been our policy in this series of articles on ministry to base each study only on the Scriptures, without reference to the views of other writers. We will make one exception here, since some have claimed that the Lutheran Confessions compel us to hold the position that the pastoral ministry is derived from the office of the apostles, citing especially the statement, "the office of the ministry proceeds from the general call of the apostles" (Tractate 11, Trig. p 507).

The first thing to observe is that these words do not even occur in Melancthon's Latin original. They were added to the German translation of Veit Dietrich. (On the tangled relationship between the German and Latin texts of this document, see pages 60-61 of the Triglotta.) The complete absence of these words from

Melanchthon's original make it highly unlikely that the Tractate intended to assert the derivation of the pastoral office from the office of the apostles. An examination of the context in both the Latin and the German makes this certain.

The Latin says that in Galatians Paul "teaches that the authority of the ministry *depends upon the Word of God*, and the Peter was not superior to the other apostles, and it was not from this one individual that ordination or confirmation was to be sought." (All emphases added.)

The German paraphrases, "the office of the ministry proceeds from the general call of the apostles, and that it is not necessary for all to have the call or confirmation of this one person, Peter, alone."

It is clear that both renderings are making the same point: the public ministry derives from the Word of Christ, given to the church, not from a special authority given to an individual or to a group of individuals. It is, therefore, certain that the pope has no such authority. The emphasis here is on general call, not on general call of the apostles. There is no intention to set the role of the apostles against or above the role of the church in the matter of choosing ministers. The intention is to deny a hierarchical authority of anyone, except Christ, over the church.

This is obvious from the next sentence, "In I Cor. 3:6 Paul makes all ministers (*Kirchendiener*) equal and teaches that the church is superior to the ministers. Hence the superiority or lordship over the church or the rest of the ministers is not ascribed to Peter in preference to the other apostles . ... Let neither the other ministers nor Peter assume for themselves lordship or authority over the church." It is clearly not the intention of the confession to say that although Christ does not establish the ministry through the authority of Peter, he does establish it through the authority of the apostles or the ministerium, but to say that he establishes the ministry through the church. This is explicitly stated in the following sections of the Tractate.

The historical section asserts: "the Council of Nice determined that bishops should be elected by their own churches, in the presence of some neighboring bishop or of several" (13, p. 507).

The exegetical section asserts: Christ "grants the keys principally and *immediately to the Church*, just as also the Church has principally the right of calling" (24, p 511). The German, which is much more rambling here, also asserts: "the Church has the power to ordain ministers of the Church."

Far from opposing the formula "from. Christ through the Church," the Tractate has as one of its fundamental aims the assertion of this very point.