

# Hands up, apostles!

A fresh new look at a Christian calling

In Jesus' mind there's something massive, and something tiny.

What's massive? A harvest of people ready to be saved and discipled. What's tiny? A band of workers willing to do something about it.

"Open your eyes!" pleads Jesus. "Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest right now."

"So," Jesus concludes, "ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers out into his harvest field." Matthew 9:37–38; John 4:35.

## Driven

Here in Matthew 9:38, we need to pause on the biblical word used for "ask".

This is a word with a sense of desperation. It's used, for example, when a man loaded with leprosy pleads with Jesus to make him clean. The word can be translated "pray", "beg", or "beseech".

Also in Matthew 9:38, we must stop on the word used for *send*. This is the heavy-duty Greek word *ekballo*.

*Ekballo* goes way beyond the idea of sending a package or an email. It means to eject, cast out, drive out, thrust out, or expel. It's used for casting out demons. It's used for angry churchmen expelling Jesus from their city. And it's used for Jesus driving money-changers out of the temple.

So look at Jesus' words again—"Ask the Lord of the harvest to *send* workers out."

Jesus' passion in these words raises a question. Can we become so comfortable in

our world and in our religion that Jesus must cry for somebody who will *beg* the Father to *expel* us from our comfort zones and *drive* us into harvest fields that are ready right now?

## Sent

Right after this teaching, Jesus calls his 12 disciples to himself and *sends* them out to preach and heal. This is how he fulfils his mission—"to tell the good news to poor people . . . to announce freedom for prisoners . . . to free those who are beaten down." Matthew 10:1–8; Luke 4:18–19.

The word used in this instance for "send" is not *ekballo*. These 12 disciples do not need to be driven out into the harvest—they're fired up and ready to go!

The word used here is one we recognise—*apostello*. It's the word behind *apostolos*, or *apostle*.

Apostle means a person sent—a delegate, a messenger, or an ambassador.

It's a significant action Jesus takes with his disciples. "He appointed 12 of them and called them apostles." "The apostles gathered around Jesus." "He chose 12 of them and made them apostles." Mark 3:14; 6:30; Luke 6:13.

Normally, we use the word *disciples* to refer to the

12 inner-circle followers during Jesus' ministry; and we use the word *apostles* to refer to the 12 sent ones after Pentecost.

**Apostle means a person sent—a delegate, a messenger, or an ambassador.**



But we must recognise the roots of apostleship in the gospels! “A man came who was sent from God.” John 1:6. This is John the Baptist — an apostle before Jesus starts his public ministry, and before the 12 disciples are called.

And as we see from the scriptures above, our Lord identifies the 12 not only as disciples, but also as apostles. He says to them “Come”, but he also says to them “Go”. Go and find my lost sheep. Go and preach my Gospel. Go and make more disciples.

Almost as soon as the 12 become disciples, they also become apostles. Receivers become messengers. Followers become ambassadors. Learners become teachers. Listeners become preachers. The ones who have experienced healing become healers.

### Destination

Although the title “apostle” is not prominent in the gospels, the idea of being an apostolic *sent one* or *messenger* is all through the gospels.

Can we see ourselves as *sent ones* even if we’re not formally designated as apostles? No doubt about it! Otherwise, why would Jesus call desperately for the Father to *send* — if necessary, *drive* — many more workers into the harvest fields?

Jesus might not need many designated apostles. But he sure needs an army of sent workers!

We talk about the 12 disciples, and we know we’re not in that inner circle. But we realise that in a wider circle, each of us is called and privileged to be a disciple-follower of Jesus.

In a similar way, we may not be formally designated as apostles. But we realise we’re called and privileged to be sent ones and ambassadors for our Lord.

On the far side of lake Galilee, Jesus gives dramatic healing to a man damaged by demons. As soon as the man is healed, he pleads with Jesus to be permitted to join the inner circle of the 12.

But Jesus decides on a better way for this disciple to serve. “Jesus sent him away. He

**Sometimes Jesus sends us to an equally important place—home.**



said to him, ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you.’” Luke 8:38–39.

Sometimes those of us with an apostle spirit don’t have titles, and sometimes we don’t go on mission trips. Sometimes Jesus *sends* us to an equally important place—home.

It’s there we discover our significant mission and greatest success—in the community around us; with our family, neighbours, friends, and people we meet in daily life.

### Success

Apostleship of any kind is difficult, dangerous work. Jesus warns his follower-apostles that Gospel work is warfare, with swords swinging. But he also assures them the Father “counts every hair on your head. So don’t be afraid.” Matthew 10:30–31.

Jesus tells his ambassadors that the defensive and offensive power of his Spirit is theirs for the asking.

“Ask, and it will be given to you. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be

opened to you. . . . How much more will your Father who is in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Luke 11:9–13.

If you're looking for the secret for success as a *sent one*, you'll find it right here.

Success comes to people with an apostle spirit when they ask for the continuous power of the Holy Spirit. Three momentous words capture this experience. Here are the three words: *Christ ... faith ... and prayer*. You might want to study more on these from Matthew 16:13–19; 17:14–20; and 18:18–20.

## Transformation

"Keep thinking about Jesus. He is our apostle." Hebrews 3:1.

Eyes on Jesus! Thoughts on Jesus! Faith in Jesus! Communication with Jesus! This is the essence of apostleship. We follow a Chief Apostle, and he is Jesus.



"The living Father sent me. . . . I am from him, and he sent me." John 6:57; 7:29. It's the word *apostello* that's used here, although it's not the only word Jesus uses for sending.

On resurrection night, Apostle Jesus suddenly shows up in a locked room. He stands in the huddle of his petrified disciples. He shows his wounded hands and side as evidence of who he is. John 20:19–22.

Listen to his message: "May peace be with you! The Father has sent me. So now I am sending you."

"Peace." That calms them down. But "send" — that strikes alarm! They have seen where apostleship took their leader — to crucifixion. And now he's sending *them*.

**"Keep thinking about Jesus. He is our apostle."  
Hebrews 3:1.**

But he draws his disciples close to himself and does something mysterious. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This is the Spirit of God that is breathed into Adam on the sixth day of creation week. It transforms Adam from flesh and bone into a living, energised person.

Now it's the first day of resurrection week, and Jesus creates his church.

He breathes his transforming Spirit into lifeless apostles.

Pulsating with this Spirit, his messengers have every ability to go out as the living body of Christ, energised to complete his mission in the world.

## Acts

"Before Jesus left, he gave orders to the apostles he had chosen. He did this through the Holy Spirit." Acts 1:2.

This is Apostle Luke's introduction to the book we call Acts of

the Apostles.

Some suggest a longer and perhaps more accurate title — Acts of the Holy Spirit Through the Apostles.

Look at what fills this book!

Incredible teaching, the baptism of the Spirit, the power of the Spirit, the gifting of the Spirit, witness to Christ, praying, repentance, conversions, Christian community, joy, miracles, church growth, persecution, courage, sacrifice, suffering,

generosity, evangelising, training, church crisis, mission journeys.

These are the stories of *apostleship*.

## Apostles

Apostleship is named as one of the gifts of service from the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 4:11.

What is the role of those who've received this gift? The responsibilities for apostles become clear from the record in Acts—a record that directly reflects the ministry of Jesus.

1. **Witness to Jesus.** “You will be my witnesses from one end of the earth to the other.” “They gave witness that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead.” “We have to speak about the things we’ve seen and heard.” “I have taught you in public and from house to house.” Paul “preached boldly about God’s kingdom. No one could keep him from teaching people about the Lord Jesus Christ.” Acts 1:8; 4:33; 4:20; 20:20; 28:31.
2. **Pray.** “They all came together regularly to pray.” “Paul and Barnabas prayed and fasted.” “We were going to the place of prayer.” Paul “got down on his knees with all of them and prayed”. “There on the beach we got down on our knees to pray.” Paul is strong-minded and independently motivated. At the same time, he is not afraid of the vulnerability and intimacy of communal prayer — “They all cried as they hugged and kissed him.” Acts 1:14; 14:23; 16:16; 20:36; 21:5, 12–14; 20:37.
3. **Follow the Spirit and his gifting.** “The Spirit gave them the ability.” The apostles’ gifting is identified as three activities primarily — *teaching, preaching, and healing*. Their focus in each of these three is good news, a message of hope. They follow the direction of the Spirit for appointments and ministry, sometimes saying No to requests from believers. Acts 2:4; 13:15, 32–39; 16:6–10; 18:20–21; 23:11.
4. **Courageously call people to holiness.** “Turn away from your sins. . . You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” It’s repentance

that opens the way for holiness and power! Remember the Ananias and Sapphira story; the Elymas incident too. Acts 2:38; 5:1–11; 13:9–11.

5. **Appoint, train, and commission leaders.** “The apostles prayed and placed their hands on them. So God’s word spread.” “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church.” Acts 6:6–7; 14:23. Paul selects Timothy and several others and spends a great deal of time teaching, training, and mentoring them for ministry. Multiplying leaders is a chief part of apostles’ work.
6. **Encourage and build up the church.** “They helped the believers gain strength. . . . They placed the elders in the Lord’s care.” Paul “gave strength to the churches”. “He gave strength to all the believers.” Acts 14:21–27; 15:41; 18:23.
7. **Proclaim and protect truth.** When a threat comes to the unfolding impact of the Gospel, Paul and Barnabas stand their ground. They “didn’t agree” with those pushing a dangerous view, and “argued strongly



with them”. Their courage leads to a healthy church process and a landmark decision for truth and grace. Acts 15:1–31.

8. **Stand against injustice.** Paul certainly knows and practices Jesus’ teaching about meekness. But when needed, he also takes a public stand against injustice and abuse. Acts 16:37–39; 22:25–26; 25:8. Galatians 2:9–10 is also worth noting — there Paul reminds us of his passion for the poor.

## Time

As far as we can tell from the New Testament, most ministry roles such as teaching, helping, and leading are carried out by extraordinary people in ordinary life.

In family life, work, worship, and everyday activities, each of these people moves with the attitude of a servant of God.

And, they prioritise and plan so they can give good portions of time for specific service, using their gifting as God's Spirit leads.



By distinction, designated apostles serve largely full-time, pausing in some cases to rebuild funds through regular work.

"I have spent time with you," says Paul. Acts 20:25. It's an immense blessing to the early church, to have apostles not restricted by the demands of other employment.

The blessing really does rest on apostles' ability to stop and spend large amounts of *time* with people and churches. One day ... three days ... several days ... "some time" ... three weeks ... three months ... "a long time" ... a year ... a year and a half ... two years.

It is not just hours ticking by. When the

apostles give their time, they give themselves. When possible, their spouses join them in the ministry and the giving. 1 Corinthians 9:5.

Apostles' work is *relationship* work. They regard church members as their own "dear children". With the earnest hearts of parents, they mentor men like Timothy, Barnabas, and John Mark. They disciple and publicly affirm women like Priscilla, Phoebe, and Lydia.

## Distraction

Soon after Pentecost, other legitimate needs threaten to distract the apostles from their specific calling. It's a crisis, and the apostles meet it head-on.

They quickly recognise that it "wouldn't be right for us to give up teaching God's word". So the apostles ask the church to appoint other leaders who have roles defined in a different way. This permits the apostles to continue their two principal ministries of *prayer* and *the Word*, without distraction. Acts 6:2–7.

Is distraction an issue in our time? Over the decades, have we allowed ourselves to be taken off course? Do we now need to redefine the role of full-time ambassadors for Christ who are commissioned and supported by the church?

These days we call our full-time, church-supported ambassadors "pastors" rather than "apostles". Pastors is a good word in our context. It comes from the idea of the Good Shepherd, and it's mentioned along with apostles in Ephesians 4:11.

As we saw on the previous page, in Acts we can identify eight responsibilities that describe the apostleship role. Could these provide an essential, biblical description that applies to the full-time pastoral role today?

And, in a wider application, could these responsibilities provide pointers for all of us as disciples of Christ, as we integrate the spirit of *sent ones* into our everyday lives?

## Paul

The rest of the New Testament consists of letters from the apostles, written to the churches or to individuals. A treasure!

You have to love Paul's testimony in particular. Here's a taste of it. . . .

"I have been appointed to be an apostle. God set me apart to tell others his good news. . . . I serve God with my whole heart. . . . God knows that I always remember you in my prayers. . . . I long to see you. I want to make you strong by giving you a gift from the Holy Spirit. . . . We do not preach about ourselves. We preach about Jesus Christ. . . . We serve him in the power of the Holy Spirit. . . . My task was to preach to the non-Jews. Peter's task was to preach to the Jews. . . . I serve the church." Romans 1:1, 9–11; 2 Corinthians 4:5; 6:6; Galatians 2:7; Colossians 1:25.

Paul is sure of his calling, but at the same time he admits his human weakness. "What a terrible failure I am! . . . My heart is full of sorrow. . . . I am asking you through the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. . . . When I came to you, I was weak and afraid and trembling all over. . . . We have become the world's garbage. . . . I'm not even fit to be called an apostle. . . . I am the worst sinner of all. . . . Every day I am concerned about all the churches. It is a very heavy load. . . . My dear children, I am in pain for you." Romans 7:24; 9:2; 15:30; 1 Corinthians 2:3; 4:13; 15:9; 1 Timothy 1:15; 2 Corinthians 11:28; Galatians 4:19.

This is the heart of an apostle—continuous interaction between heavenly power and earthly pain.

Paul puts the struggle together in amazing words that summarise his experience as a disciple and an apostle.



"For me, being right with God does not come from the law. It comes because I believe in Christ. . . . I have not yet been made perfect. But I move on to take hold of what Christ Jesus took hold of me for. . . . But here is one thing I do. I forget what is behind me. I push hard toward what is ahead of me. I move on toward the goal to win the prize. God has appointed me to win it. The heavenly prize is Christ Jesus himself." Philippians 3:9–14.

## Response

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord. He said, 'Who will I send? Who will go for us?'"

"I said, 'Here I am. Send me!'" Isaiah 6:8.

Sent ones—*driven* out if necessary by prayer, the Spirit, and the Word. Workers who say "Yes, Jesus!—we will go into ripe harvest fields."

They become messengers, ambassadors for Heaven. Delegates on a mission.

Some of these are called for full-time ministry of prayer and the Word. Or, for other full-time ministries as God directs. They are commissioned to give their time and them-

selves for witness, for blessing the world, and for building up the church.

In a wider circle, disciples in ordinary life—who have regular jobs and other responsibilities—realise they also are gifted to share good news and to bless people in Jesus' name.

This is the spirit of apostles—*sent ones* who have eyes fixed on Apostle Jesus.

Now that you have finished reading this article and you are thinking about what you have read, do you hear the question from the Lord—"Who will I send?"

Raise your hand if you will respond, "Send me!"

See also the companion articles, *Hands up, disciples!* and *Training disciples in everyday life*.