

# Apostles and Prophets

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## Introduction

The word *prophet* occurs 220 times in the (NASB) Bible. There are no apostles in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament, the word *apostle* occurs 19 times. The plural form occurs 57 times. Also, on three significant occasions, *apostles and prophets* are mentioned together (Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; Revelation 18:20). My only point is, apostles and prophets are a big deal in the Bible, so they deserve some definition and clarification. [This paper will discuss apostles and prophets as presented in the Bible. I will not here discuss the question, "Are there apostles and prophets in the church today?" I have dealt with that question in a separate paper.]

## Prophets

Recognizing a true prophet was not always easy, and often connected to recognizing the true words from God. Also, no one would choose, or desire, to be a true prophet. True prophets were usually persecuted and killed (Luke 13:34). Originally, prophets were identified by the accuracy of their actions or prophetic statements (John 4:19; 9:17). New Testament prophets were also recognized as such by other prophets and apostles (Acts 13:1; 15:32; 21:10; 1 Corinthians 14:37).

**Definition:** In the Bible, a true prophet is a person who received revelation from God in words and passed that revelation along to others. Possibly the best definition of a true prophet is in a prediction that God gave to Moses.

**Deuteronomy 18:18,** *I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*

This Deuteronomy statement was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but it also tells us that a prophet is someone who has received revelation from God in *words* and those *words* are then able to be passed on to God's people. Notice, the example of a prophet in this verse is Moses, who received words from God, and wrote them down in the first five books of the Bible. But there is a question I will leave unanswered. Is someone who received revelation from God, but did not (as far as we know) pass it on, a prophet (like, say, Adam and Cain, Abraham, and Joseph and Mary)? As far as I can tell, that is unknown. But certainly, one who received verbal revelation, and declared it to others, is a prophet. [There were at least three groups called the *sons of the prophets* (2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7) who may have received revelation from God but do not seem to have passed it on to anyone but Elisha.]

## Corollaries to the Definition

1. The message given to a true prophet was always in words. Prophetic revelation was not in mental thoughts, mystical messaging, or mental telepathy, as with the common idea, "God told me (or called me or led me)...".
2. Some prophets wrote Scripture, which is recorded in the Bible. Sometimes that was dictated by God (like the Ten Commandments), and sometimes it was composed by the prophet. When it was composed by the prophet, it is called inspiration, the capacity of prophets to use their own style and personality to compose and write down the revelation of God without error.
  - **2 Samuel 23:1-2,** *Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse declares, the man who was raised on high declares, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue.*
  - **2 Timothy 3:16,** *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.*
  - **2 Peter 1:20-21,** *But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

3. We know the prophecy of a prophet because some inspired prophet recorded it. But many prophets prophesied messages they did not record. Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha gave verbal prophetic messages which they did not write down. John the Baptist proclaimed a message of repentance, and that he was preparing the way for the Messiah, which he did not write down. Agabus, Philip's daughters, and those with the prophetic gifts in the early church at Corinth, Antioch, and Ephesus did not, as far as we know, record any of their prophecy. In these cases, the verbal messages of those prophets were something, using their own style and personality, they composed and spoke without error.
4. False prophets add to or take away from the words of true prophets.
  - **Deuteronomy 18:20**, *But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.*
  - **Revelation 22:18-19**, *I testify to everyone who hears the **words of the prophecy** of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from **the words of the book of this prophecy**, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.*
5. Except for Jesus (Who was a prophet because He was the Son of God), not everything a prophet said was revelation from God. When prophets were not passing on the Word of God, they were not inerrant. For example, Elijah fled to a cave at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19). Moses struck the rock he was told he should speak to (Numbers 20). The Apostle Peter was wrong to not meet with Gentile believers in Antioch (Galatians 2:14) and to cling to the dietary requirements of the Mosaic Law (Acts 10).

## Apostles

**Definition:** Apostles were men sent to proclaim revelation from God to the world. Apostles were distinguished in three ways:

1. Apostles were to go to the world with the gospel. The noun ἀποστόλος (*apostolos*) means "... he that is sent." The verb form means "to send." [Strong's Greek Dictionary] Both apostles and prophets proclaimed revelation from God, but prophets were not necessarily sent out with a mission or a message. There were no prophets designated as apostles in the Old Testament because the prophets of the Old Testament were not sent out with a message to the world. There were some sent out, such as Jonah and Amos, but they were only sent out to places connected to Israel.

It has been observed that one word which describes the ministry of the New Testament is "Go." The one word which describes the ministry of the Old Testament is "Come." When God created Israel, anyone who wanted to know about God in the Old Testament, had to come to Israel (Psalm 117). There was no command to the prophets of Israel to go to the world with the revelation of God. But the apostles had a missionary message defined with a mission to go to the lost (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:14-15), as ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20).

2. Apostles were sent with the specific message that God was doing something new, called the church, the age of grace.
  - **Ephesians 3:4-6, 9**, *By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in*

*Christ Jesus through the gospel ... and to bring to light what is **the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God** who created all things...*

The assignment given to the apostles, and passed on to the church, was not only to go and take the message of salvation to the lost, but that the *Gentiles are fellow heirs* of the gospel. This message was a *mystery which for ages has been hidden in God*. The apostles were not just to go, they were to go with a new message about a new age, a new administration, a new dispensation.

3. Apostles were able to do *signs and wonders and miracles*.

- **2 Corinthians 12:12**, *The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.*
- **Hebrews 2:4**, *God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.*

As they went where they were sent, the Apostles performed miracles. Prophets did not necessarily do *signs and wonders and miracles*. For example, the minor prophets received revelation from God but performed no signs, wonders, or miracles. John the Baptist was one of the key prophets in the Bible, and he did no recorded signs, wonders, or miracles. But the apostles did.

## Two Kinds of Apostles

There are two ways the word *apostle* is used in the New Testament. First (chronologically), it refers to the office of the 12 apostles appointed by Jesus (Mark 3:16-19). Second, it refers to others, gifted as an apostle, sent out by Christ after His ascension.

### 1. The Twelve

The twelve apostles are referred to in Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:14; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 14:10, 17, 20; Luke 6:13; 9:1; 22:14; John 6:71; Acts 6:2; and Corinthians 15:4. When discussing the appearance of Jesus after His resurrection, Paul made a distinction between the twelve and the other apostles.

- **1 Corinthians 15:5-8**, *...He appeared to Cephas, then to **the twelve**. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, **then to all the apostles**; and **last of all**, as to one untimely born, He appeared **to me** also.*

Peter added the distinction that the twelve were chosen by Jesus from those who had accompanied them, beginning at the time of John the Baptist until the time of Christ's ascension.

- **Acts 1:21-22**, *Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us...*

The twelve apostles were also prophets, in that they received revelation from God which they passed along to others (Acts 2:1-4).

The twelve apostles remain as a distinct designation all through history until their names are ultimately written on the twelve foundation stones of the New Jerusalem.

- **Revelation 21:14**, *And the wall of the city had **twelve** foundation stones, and on them were the **twelve** names of the **twelve** apostles of the Lamb.*

### Matthias Replaced Judas

Judas betrayed Jesus, and at Peter's initiative, Judas was replaced by Matthias. Peter quoted Psalm 109:8 saying, *let another man take his office*. Peter's word for *office* is the word for "overseer" or "bishop." Since there are 12 apostles, whose names are on the 12 foundation stones of the New

Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14), it seems reasonable to understand these 12 to be those with the office of apostle. Peter described the qualifications for this office in Acts 1:21-22 quoted above.

Some suggest appointing Matthias by lot was a mistake on Peter's part, because Matthias did no recorded miracles, and we hear no more about him. That is not exactly true. First, remember Peter was designated by Jesus as having authority in the early church (Matthew 16:18-19; 18:18). And they prayed, *show which one of these two You have chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship* (Acts 1:24). It is not exactly true that Matthias did no miracles. When the Holy Spirit was miraculously poured out on the day of Pentecost, *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues. All here would certainly include all the apostles, which would include Matthias.* The idea that Matthias was not referred to again is also not exactly true. There is no mention of any of the apostles by name, except Peter, James, and John. But in Acts 1–9, before the conversion of Paul, the word *apostles* occurs 20 times, the first time is in Acts 1:2 where it is the 11 at the ascension of Christ. The other 19 times it refers to the twelve, all of which included Matthias. For example,

- **Acts 4:33**, *And with great power [the word usually used for miracles] the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.*
- **Acts 6:2**, *So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables."*

## 2. Those Gifted As An Apostle

Paul told us about a (chronologically) second use of the word "apostle" as a gift or calling. This included Paul (Acts 9:15; Ephesians 1:1; 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 15:8-9; Galatians 1:1; 2:6-9), James (1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19), and Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Corinthians 9:6). It may also have included Andronicus and Junias (Romans 16:7), possibly also Silas, Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:7), and Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6, 9). Although Paul consistently calls himself an apostle of this sort, he is not the only one. Luke uses the word *apostles*, both of the twelve and of the gifted apostles beyond the twelve. Actually, Luke is the one who calls Barnabas an apostle (Acts 14:14).

Paul was an apostle who received verbal revelation from God (Acts 9 and 22). We have no record of any of the others gifted as an apostle (i.e. beyond the 12), who received revelation from God. It seems that, although the 12 were also prophets, those gifted apostles may or may not also be prophets. In the case of those gifted apostles who were not prophets, they were sent out with the message of an apostle who was also a prophet.

Paul, and the author of Hebrews, and Jesus told us that true apostles could also do miracles:

- **2 Corinthians 12:12**, *The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.*
- **Hebrews 2:4**, *God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.*
- **Matthew 10:8**, *Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give.*

## The Prominence of the Apostle Paul

When we read Acts 9, we are introduced to a man by the name of Paul, who identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1). Paul is like the twelve in that:

1. He witnessed an appearance of Jesus after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:8).
2. He was sent out as a witness by Jesus personally (Acts 9:15; 22:10).
3. He had power from God to do miracles, signs, and wonders (2 Corinthians 12:12).
4. He associated with, and was in fellowship with, the twelve (Galatians 2:2; Acts 15:4).

There are also some things unique to Paul's apostleship:

1. Paul identified himself as an apostle to the Gentiles. Although *the twelve* also ministered to Gentiles, their original focus was on Jews, and in the future Millennial Kingdom, they will be *judging the twelve tribes of Israel* (Matthew 19:28).
2. Paul regularly made a case for his being an apostle. He often defended his apostleship against someone or some group that was questioning it (1 Corinthians 9:1-3; 1 Timothy 2:7). The twelve never did that. The twelve defended the truth against false teachers, but never the fact that they were apostles.
3. The twelve witnessed Jesus in His resurrected body in a real-life, this-world, normal appearance, the way you and I see each other. Then they witnessed Him bodily ascend into the clouds. Paul witnessed Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus after His bodily appearances on earth and His ascension.
4. Paul used the word *apostle* to describe other church leaders, sent out for ministry. The twelve never did that. [Note, Luke also extended the title *apostle* to Barnabas (Acts 14:14).]
5. Paul did not meet Peter's qualification for the twelve because he was not one of those *who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us...* (Acts 1:21-22).

Certainly, Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. He not only was commissioned as an apostle, but he was also a prophet in that he received verbal revelation from God and was inspired of God to write Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16).

## Conclusion

Prophets are people who received verbal revelation from God and communicated that revelation to others. Apostles were men who were sent by God to the world. Some apostles were prophets and some were not. There are two kinds of apostles: the twelve apostles and those gifted as apostles. Some of the apostles and some of the prophets wrote their revelation down as inerrant Scripture, and some delivered it orally. In either case, they used their own style and personality to compose and deliver a message *moved by the Holy Spirit*, without error.

There are three main differences between apostles and prophets:

The apostles were sent out by God to

- (1) tell the world about the gospel, and
- (2) to announce a new dispensation called the church, and
- (3) to confirm their message by signs and wonders

There were 12 with the office of apostle, who were also prophets, and others gifted as apostles, some of whom were probably not prophets, but they were all sent out with this new revelation.