

Christ's gifts to His church Apostles and Prophets

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

I was once on holiday in Anglesey, Wales. It was a beautiful day, and the beach where we were relaxing was packed. Whilst we enjoyed the sun, a man and his family arrived with a dinghy, which he proceeded to inflate. When he had finished, he attached the engine, and he and his children took the boat into the shallows. All was going well. But then, instead of starting the boat, which was bouncing up and down on the small waves, he went to his car and returned with a fuel can. He unscrewed the cap while he was in the sea and attempted to refuel his small craft's engine. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, he failed to synchronise the pouring of petrol with the rise and fall of the dinghy. Consequently, some petrol ended up in the sea and, worse still, some went into the boat! His car was only a few yards away on a flat concrete surface, but he chose to refuel in the sea!! It was a vivid reminder of the need for a firm foundation when undertaking tasks of great importance.

Jesus teaches us about good foundations in Matthew's Gospel chapter 7 verses 24-27.

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

Christ our foundation

Later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus asked His disciples at Caesarea Philippi, who men said He was. They replied,

“Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14).

Then he asked

“But who do you say that I am?”

Peter replied,

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Then Jesus declares,

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail [be victorious] against it” (vv.17-18).

Christ is the rock on which His Church is built. When He returned to heaven, and the Holy Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost, the Church was formed. 1 Corinthians 3:11, for example, declares Christ is our foundation.

“For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

This foundation is based on the death and resurrection of our Saviour as described in Hebrews 10:12.

“But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.”

Paul describes Jesus as a chief cornerstone, the foundation upon which His Church is built. He explains that the Church was built up by the foundational ministry of the apostles and prophets in Ephesians 2:19-22.

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

So, let's explore the roles of the apostles and prophets.

The Twelve Apostles

The synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all refer to the twelve apostles Jesus chose (Matthew 10:1-4, Mark 3:13-19, 6:30, Luke 6:12-16). Matthew provides a list:

“Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.”

Mark tells us that the Lord appointed these twelve apostles “that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons”. Note the word “send.” The literal meaning of the word “apostle” is someone who is sent. Jesus is called an apostle in Hebrews 3:1.

“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him.”

John writes in 1 John 4:14,

“The Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world.”

Jesus called the twelve apostles to be with Him as witnesses to His Person and His work. During this period, He also sent them to preach and heal. John expresses the wonder of his experience as an apostle of Jesus Christ in the opening verses of His first letter.

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.”

John and his fellow apostles' experiences prepared them for their foundational ministry of building up the Church of Christ and unfolding the word of God. The apostles were witnesses to the death of Christ. Their lives were in spiritual disarray after Christ's crucifixion. Then the risen Saviour, as the Great Shepherd (Hebrew 13:20), appeared to them. He gradually gathered them around Himself before leading them to Bethany and the Mount of Olives to witness His ascension into heaven. Luke records the event in the last chapter of his Gospel in verses 50-53.

“And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen.”

Luke focuses on the Person of Christ as He ascends into heaven with His hands raised, a sign of His victorious love. He ascends in glory to begin His present high priestly ministry.

At the beginning of Acts, Luke again records the ascension of the Saviour. This time, in verses 4-8, he writes about the Lord commanding His apostles to wait to be sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses, not only in Israel but throughout the world.

“And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.””

Luke also records the angels promising the return of the Saviour in verse 11.

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

The apostles were obedient to the Lord's command. They prayerfully waited until the day of Pentecost for the promise of the Holy Spirit. The twelve were the first to experience the overwhelming indwelling presence of the Spirit of God and miraculously conveying the “wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11). Peter stood in fellowship with the eleven other apostles (v.14), quietened the vast crowds of people in the city, and then preached the Gospel. Three thousand people turned to Christ. The Church was born.

Luke describes the features of the infant Church in Jerusalem in Acts 2:41-45.

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.”

The Lord had taught His twelve apostles and promised that the Holy Spirit would come after He returned to heaven. The features of the Holy Spirit would be that, “He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26). And that He would also guide them into all truth and tell them things to come (John 16:13). His ministry would cover the past, present and future. He would empower the apostles to build Christ’s Church by preaching the Gospel, presenting the risen glorified Christ, and spiritually feeding the Flock of God.

We must distinguish the status of the twelve apostles from that of counterfeit apostles. Understanding this distinction is especially important in an age when the word of God is being undermined from within and outside Christendom. False apostles have attempted to distort the truth of Scripture since the apostolic age when Paul warned in 2 Corinthians 11:13-14 of,

“False apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.”

The apostle Paul and other apostles

Paul writes about the gifts of people Christ gave to build His church in Ephesians 4:11-12.

“And He [Christ] Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying [building up] of the body of Christ.”

The ministry of the Twelve Apostles was centred in Jerusalem. But when the great persecution following Stephen’s death happened, the Gospel began to spread rapidly, as the Lord had promised, into Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, NIV). This persecution was led by a young zealot named Saul of Tarsus. He had no idea that God would use his rage against Christ to further God’s Kingdom. God would transform the greatest enemy of Christ’s people into one of Christ’s greatest servants, the apostle Paul.

Saul of Tarsus travelled to Damascus with letters from the High Priest to the synagogues of Damascus to allow him to capture Christians and return them bound to Jerusalem. On the Damascus Road near the city, Jesus appears from glory to save Saul and transform his life. In Acts 9:4 Saul discovered the pain he caused on earth was felt in heaven,

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Blinded physically, as he had been blinded spiritually, he was led into Damascus to await the Saviour’s will. The Lord appears in a vision to instruct a disciple called Ananias, one of those Saul had come to imprison, to visit Saul, heal him of his blindness, baptise him and receive him into the fellowship of the disciples of the Lord at Damascus. Ananias speaks to the Lord about all the harm Saul had done in Jerusalem. But the Lord replies in Acts 9:15-16, that Paul had been chosen to be special witness to Christ.

“Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”

Ananias obeys and visits Saul. The first words Saul heard from Ananias were “Brother Saul.” He belonged to Christ and was a member of His Church. Saul was immediately healed, baptised and received into fellowship as a disciple of Christ amongst the disciples he had come to Damascus to persecute. Saul discovered the love of Christ amongst those he had hated. He later wrote of Christ love for him in Galatians 2:20.

“Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

He immediately began powerfully preaching Christ as the Son of God in the synagogues. As a result, the persecutor became persecuted and the people he sought to imprison saved his life by putting him in a basket and letting him down the city wall and setting he free to escape to Jerusalem. In that city Barnabas brought him to the apostles (v. 27), and Saul continued his powerful witnessing to Christ. His life was threatened again, and he returned to Tarsus.

In the following chapters, we read of how the Gospel eventually spread to Antioch, where there was great blessing. The apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to encourage the disciples. It was a visit that led to “a great number of people” being “added to the Lord.” Barnabas went to Tarsus to bring Saul to help in the work of God at Antioch. It was in that city that the disciples of Christ were first called Christians.

At the beginning of Acts chapter 13, we learn there were several gifted prophets and teachers in Antioch,

“Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.”

As these godly servants waited on the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said in verse 2,

“Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

After fasting and praying, they laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them away to undertake the work the Holy Spirit chose them to do; the first missionary journey. Barnabas and Saul arrived at Iconium and witnessed to Christ in the synagogue. The city was divided over their work. And for the first time, these two servants of God were called “apostles” in recognition of them being sent by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 14: 14 Luke is more specific: “the apostles Barnabas and Paul.”

In most of his letters, Paul refers to being an apostle of Jesus Christ. For example, in Romans, he writes, “Called to be an apostle”, “we have received grace and apostleship”, and “I am an apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 1:1,5 and 11:13). He also calls himself “the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9). But he insists, “I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:5) but adds “in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing” (2 Corinthians 12:11).

In Galatians 2:7-8, Paul explains his apostleship was directed chiefly to the Gentiles as Peter’s apostleship was chiefly to the Jewish people,

“When they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles).”

Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:7 he was appointed as an apostle.

“I was appointed a preacher and an apostle—I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying—a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.”

These verses prove that Paul and others were chosen and sent in the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfil foundational work in building the Church of Christ. This work was confirmed by miracles and signs and, in Paul’s, Peter’s and John’s cases, included the writing of New Testament Scripture. This foundational work was fulfilled in the years following Christ’s ascension and the descending of the Holy Spirit.

We must distinguish the role of the twelve apostles and the other apostles from the more generic way the word apostle is used today. The New Testament describes the twelve apostles’ and associated apostles’ unique roles, special relationship with the Saviour, the descent of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the Gospel, and the teaching and writing of the word of God. God’s work in them and through them was fundamental to establishing the timeless teaching of God word.

However, some may use the name “apostle” to describe outstanding servants of God. Some even claim to be apostles. But this does not fit with use of the word “apostle” in Scripture. Ephesians 2:20 describes their ministry as being fulfilled and completed at the beginning of the history of the Church.

“Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

This was a foundation never to be repeated, a foundation that would characterise the building of the true Church of Christ until it too is completed.

Christ the chief cornerstone was the stone that determined the building’s horizontal and vertical directions and dimensions. He said, “I will build my Church.” The building was constructed on Christ, the chief cornerstone, and build up by the ministry of the twelve apostles, supported by other New Testament apostles and prophets.

Prophets

John the Baptist completed the ministry of the Old Testament prophets, which was fulfilled by his announcement of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. The words of the Old Testament prophets are referred to throughout the New Testament. The first recorded New Testament prophets came from the church in Jerusalem. Among them was Agabus, who, by the Holy Spirit, foretold a great famine. This resulted in relief being sent to Jerusalem. As we have seen, the next mention is at the beginning of Acts chapter 13.

“Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.”

We noticed later in the same chapter that Barnabas and Saul are named apostles indicating that a person could be an apostle, prophet, and teacher. Prophets declared God’s mind regarding the past, present, and future. Teachers applied God’s word to the hearts and minds of God’s people. The “prophesying” by the New Testament prophets centred on declaring the word of God and His

grace already accomplished in Christ, and foretelling God's future purposes. New Testament prophets fulfilled the vital role of revealing God's mind at a time when the oral tradition of teaching the apostles' doctrine was prevalent, and the New Testament Scriptures were being completed.

There was the ever-present danger of false teaching, so the ministry of the prophets was tested against apostles' doctrine in Acts 2:42, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." This doctrine was supported by the concentration of the Twelve Apostles in Jerusalem, who gave themselves "continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). The testing of teaching was applied in the local churches as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge."

The apostles' doctrine came directly from the Saviour as Luke records in the final chapter of his Gospel and verses 27 and 44-45.

"And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. ... "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures."

This was confirmed by the revelation of the Holy Spirit which the Lord speaks of in John 14:26 the Helper who would teach them all things.

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

This body of teaching was the template against which local churches had to test the genuineness of prophetic teaching. Soon, the letters of Paul, Peter and John were circulated, and the New Testament emerged. The New Testament writings completed the Bible. In John 16:13, the Saviour had promised the twelve apostles that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth.

"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come."

The Scriptures were completed within the apostolic age. The ministry of the New Testament prophets supported the ministry of the apostles by proclaiming and teaching that which was consistent with the apostles' doctrine revealed by the Holy Spirit. It was the truth of the word of God which sanctified the people of God, fulfilling the Saviour's prayer, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

This truth has its source in God the Father, "Your word is truth"; God the Son, "I am the way, the truth, and the life"; and God the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of Truth." The apostles and prophets bore witness to this by expanding the kingdom of God and establishing and sustaining local churches.

The Holy Spirit imparted the completed Scriptures, which were proclaimed and preserved by the apostles and prophets. This was foundational to the building of Christ's Church and still is. The apostles' ministry emerged from their personal experience of the Saviour on earth which we read about in 1 John 1:1-2.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands

have handled, concerning the Word of life— the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us.”

And, in the case of the Apostle Paul, encountered in the Lord’s appearance in glory (1 Corinthians 15:8).

“Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.”

Many have tried to diminish, distort, disregard, and ignore this testimony under the illusion they could improve and develop what is the truth of God with their own ideas and thinking, and removing Christ from Christianity. Jude foresaw this danger and wrote in the third verse of his letter,

“I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

The apostles and prophets were charged with communicating the faith “once delivered to the saints.” This foundation was completed within the apostolic age. It is for us receive its blessing, apply and obey its truth, preach and teach its message, and demonstrate its reality in Christ-centred and fruitful lives for God.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Apostles and Prophets, Talk number T1367.

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