

Ministry in the Early Christian Church

As we discussed in the previous chapter, Joseph Smith claimed to be restoring the priesthood of primitive first century Christianity. What is so amazing is that the system he came up with bears so little resemblance to the actual ministry of the early church. For example, we find no evidence in the New Testament or the earliest Christian literature for either a Melchizedek or Aaronic priesthood order, or for the specific offices of High Priest or Priest. Nor can we find any reference in the early church for a “priesthood” in general. On the other hand, we do find references to the offices of elder, bishop and deacon. But it must always be remembered that in the RLDS church, even these offices fall under either the Melchizedek or Aaronic order. Therefore, even RLDS elders, teachers or deacons are *primarily* either Melchizedek or Aaronic priesthood members.¹ This is very significant and, as we will show in the following two chapters, negates the legitimacy of even these offices within the RLDS priesthood system.

In this chapter we will first look at the development of “priesthood” in the Christian church. We will spend the rest of the chapter examining the actual ministry of the early Christian church.

The Development of “Priesthood” in the Christian Church

We said above that there was no priesthood in the early Christian church. And yet the Catholic, Orthodox and Coptic churches of today *do* have a priesthood. How can this be? To understand this we need to review the development of “priesthood” in the Christian church.

When Christ inaugurated the first communion service he said, “Take and eat; this is my body.... Drink... This is my blood” (Matt. 26:26–27). As church leaders studied and pondered the meaning of this passage they eventually departed from a symbolic interpretation and began to interpret Jesus’ words quite literally. This ultimately led to the Catholic doctrine of “transubstantiation,” which teaches that the communion elements become transformed into the literal body and blood of Jesus.

Over time the Catholic church also came to see itself as “spiritual Israel,” having altogether replaced natural Israel in the plans and promises of God. This doctrine is called Replacement Theology. Therefore, since (1) they now saw themselves as “spiritual Israel,” (2) Christ was the sacrificial lamb and (3) the communion elements become Jesus’ actual flesh and blood, they then reasoned that they must be sacrificing Christ over and over again each time they celebrate communion. And since Israel required priests to conduct their sacrificial system, the church

1. D&C 104:1–2.

would need priests to conduct its own sacrifice (the communion, or eucharist) which it celebrated at each mass. This doctrine came to be called “the perpetual literal sacrifice of Christ.”²

“The perpetual literal sacrifice of Christ,” however, is pure heresy. This is made abundantly clear in the book of Hebrews. Throughout this book the author illustrates the various ways in which Jesus is far superior to all that Israel held to be holy or sacred. In describing the superiority of Jesus over the Mosaic sacrificial system, together with its integral Levitical priesthood, he says,

*“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered?...Day after day every [Levitical] priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time **one** sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by **one** sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”* (Heb. 10:1–2a, 11–14, emphasis mine)

The Levitical sacrifices were ineffectual, for they could “never take away sins” (v.11). This is one reason they had to be repeated year after year, *perpetually*. Instead, their *real* function was to be “an annual reminder of sins” (v.3). Why? “Because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (v.4). This is why the sacrifice of Christ was infinitely superior. His sacrifice was perfectly effectual; it had to be done just *one* time, with *eternal* effectiveness, “because by **one** sacrifice he has made perfect **forever** those who are being made holy” (v.14). Because of Jesus’ perfect sacrifice “The former regulation [Mosaic law] is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced [faith in Jesus Christ], by which we draw near to God” (Heb. 7:18). Jesus’ perfect work on the cross—*one time*—forever abolished the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices of the Old Testament (Heb. 8:13).

The doctrine of “the perpetual literal sacrifice of Christ” flatly contradicts the entire argument of the book of Hebrews. To teach that Jesus’ sacrifice had to be repeated continuously at every mass is to suggest that it was not at all effective the first time. If we believe it *was* effective the first time, then we must believe that it was performed “*once—for all—for all time.*” No repetition would ever be necessary. It is clear that those who allowed for the doctrine of “the perpetual literal sacrifice of Christ” had no real understanding of the book of Hebrews, or of the gospel itself for that matter.

In summary, the concept of “priests” and a “priesthood” within the Christian church was an evolutionary one. Its development was directly connected to the development of the heretical doctrine of “the perpetual literal sacrifice of Christ” at each mass. As such, the office of priest

2. This doctrine was affirmed by the Catholic church at its “Council of Trent,” which met during the years of 1545–1563. The canons and decrees of this council have remained authoritative for Catholics ever since. For example, see Canons I, II and III in J. Waterworth, ed. & trans. *The Council of Trent: The canons and decrees of the sacred and ecumenical Council of Trent* (London: Dolman, 1848), p. 158–159.

does not begin appearing in Christian literature until near the end of the second century. It was clearly not a part of first century Christianity.³

A Note on the Priests of Acts 6

It should be stressed that every reference to “priest(s)” in the New Testament refers to members of Israel’s Levitical priesthood. Such is the case with Acts 6:7 which RLDS frequently cite as proof for the existence of the office of priest within the earliest Christian church, “and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (KJV). The priests spoken of here actually refer to Levitical priests who were being converted by coming to faith in Jesus as their Messiah. Most of the initial converts to Christianity were Jews; and this whole first section of Acts describes the success of the gospel among the Jewish community in Jerusalem itself. Only later in Acts does the gospel go out into “all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” according to Jesus’ own prophecy (Acts 1:8). In Acts 6, however, Luke is telling us that among those first Jewish converts were quite a number of their own Levitical priests. In this passage it helps to understand the verb translated “were obedient.” The Greek tense implies a progressive action completed in the past. In this case the New American Standard version provides the most accurate sense “and a great many of the priests *were becoming obedient* to the faith,” or as one Greek scholar put it, “*were making their submission.*”⁴ It is clear then that the text is not talking about converts who came to faith first and *then* became priests in the Christian church. Quite the contrary. It is talking about Levitical priests who were being confronted by the message of Jesus and “were becoming obedient to the faith” as a result. And as they became Christians these Levites actually left their legally transmitted priesthood behind.

The Actual Ministry of the Early Christian Church

Learning to Detect the Counterfeit

People are trained to detect counterfeit currency by first examining *genuine* currency very closely. There are many unique identifying marks of genuine currency which are nearly impossible to reproduce. Once people are able to identify these distinguishing characteristics, counterfeit currency is easily identified; it simply lacks the distinguishing characteristics of the genuine article. Counterfeit currency is not worth the paper it is printed on, except to those who cannot tell the difference. The only currency which has legitimate purchasing power is the real thing.

3. More shall be said about the office of priest in chapter 14, which deals with Israel's Aaronic priesthood. For additional information, see articles in F.L. Cross, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, revised second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 475–477, 1122–1123, 1221.

4. Max Zerwick, S.J., *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, third revised edition translated by Mary Grosvenor, (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), p.369.

This same approach also applies to an evaluation of Christian ministry. The only way we can accurately evaluate the priesthood structure of Joseph Smith is by first coming to understand the actual ministry of the early Christian church. That is what we will be doing during the rest of this chapter.

Grace versus Law

In coming to understand the form and function of early Christian ministry, we must first distinguish it from ministry in the Old Testament. *This is absolutely critical.* The fundamental difference may be succinctly, but accurately described as the difference between *law* and *grace*.

The Old Testament priesthood of Israel was an integral part of the Mosaic law. The Mosaic law authored Israel's priesthood, defined it and gave it the legal authority to administer its various other statutes, especially in connection with the temple and its sacrificial system. This law specified that Israel's priesthood was to be held *only* by Moses' brother Aaron and his male descendants. This authority to administer the various statutes of the Mosaic law was given first to Aaron and his sons. It was then transmitted legally to Aaron's acceptable descendants, generation after generation. This priesthood was created to administer the Mosaic law and was governed entirely by that Law.⁵

In stark contrast to this Old Testament age of Law, Jesus ushered in the Christian age of Grace; the Mosaic law had come to an end in Him. And when the Mosaic law came to an end, so also did the concept of a legally transmitted priesthood authority. While ministry in the Old Testament operated upon the principle of Law, ministry in the Christian church would operate upon the principle of Grace. This grace would now be given to each believer, and would be manifested in various giftings which were to be used in ministry to others in the Christian body, the church. I believe one of the best explanations of this new principle of ministry through grace is given by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:3–8.

“For by the *grace* given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different *gifts*, according to the *grace* given us. If a man's *gift* is *prophesying*, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is *serving*, let him serve; if it is *teaching*, let him teach; if it is *encouraging*, let him encourage; if it is *contributing to the needs of others*, let him give generously; if it is *leadership*, let him govern diligently; if it is *showing mercy*, let him do it cheerfully.”

Paul greatly expands his teaching on spiritual gifts in a small sermon contained in 1 Cor. 12 & 14. The identical concept is concisely summarized by Peter. “Each one should use whatever *gift* he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's *grace* in its *various forms*” (1 Pet. 4:10).

5. Israel's Aaronic priesthood is examined in more detail in chapter 14.

Form Follows Function

In the passage from Romans cited above Paul lists seven of the various *gifts* with which God has *graced* the Church. It is clear that these gifts were to be cultivated by their holder and each one used for the benefit of the whole body. But while these gifts were to be reflective of the various *ministries* of the church, they did not always result in *ordained offices* of ministry. For example, who has ever heard of an ordained *contributor*, *encourager* or *shower of mercy*? And yet these gifts are listed right alongside of *prophecy*, *service* and *leadership*.

Ordained offices of ministry in the early Christian church were created in response to certain needs which arose. Contrary to some popular notions, Jesus did not lay out an organizational structure for His church, complete with specific offices and job descriptions. In fact, other than ordaining and commissioning His twelve Apostles He laid no organizational structure whatsoever. The early Church actually “made it up as they went along.” When a need arose they would create just enough structure, or office of ministry, to support it. The *function* of the Church was primary; the structured *form* came later, and only as a support to its proper functioning.

As a consequence, the ministry of the early Christian church was simply structured and yet somewhat diverse throughout its congregations. This diversity was due in part to the rapid growth of the church, the different backgrounds and needs of its first converts and the lack, as yet, of a developed central government. For example, the ministries of the church at Ephesus are found in chapter 4 of Paul’s letter to them and includes apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers. Of the church at Corinth Paul makes mention of only apostles, prophets and teachers (1 Cor. 12:28).

Below, we will first examine the origin and function of the ordained offices of *elder*, *bishop* and *deacon*. We will then look at the *gifts* of *teaching*, *evangelizing* and *prophesying*. We will conclude by looking at the unique New Testament office of Apostle.

The Offices of Elder, Bishop and Deacon

By far the most common offices in the early Christian church were those of elder, bishop (or overseer) and deacon. They were also the most enduring offices. These ordained offices of ministry arose out of the church’s early need for organization and leadership. We all know that when more than three or four people come together for activity, some form of organization must be devised, as well as some form of leadership. Otherwise chaos would soon prevail. The bigger the group, the greater the need for structured organization and leadership. This is only natural; just look at any corporation. Knowing that the Church had this fundamental need for organization and structure, God provided gifts of “leadership” (Rom. 12:8) and “administration” or “governments” (1 Cor. 12:28). These gifts expressed themselves in the form of the ordained offices of elder and bishop.

Since this need for leadership and organization were universal, so also were these offices. Paul makes clear the universal nature of elders in the church when he explains to Titus. “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). He then goes on to list the qualifications for selecting elders, which he also discusses in 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Together with the apostles, the elders also comprised the Jerusalem counsel of Acts 15, indicating their universal standing as a

class of ministry.

Paul indicates the universal nature of deacons when he addresses the church at Philippi. “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). As with elders, 1 Tim 3 also specifies the qualifications for selecting deacons (vv. 8–13). It is interesting to note that qualifications for selection are specified in scripture for only elders/bishops/overseers and deacons. This fact also attests the universal nature of these offices.

The function of elders (or presbyters) and bishops (or overseers) were identical in the early church, the titles being used interchangeably. This is most clear from Paul’s discussion of them in Titus and Acts where he uses the two terms interchangeably. “An elder [*presbuteros*] must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer [*episkopos*, or bishop] is entrusted with God’s work, he must be...” (Titus 1:6–7). “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders [*presbuteros*]. When they arrived, he said to them...’Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopos*]’ ” (Acts 20:17–18,28).

If elders and bishops performed essentially the same function in the early church, why were two separate titles used? This is a good question. The answer lies in the origin of each name, which we will now look at. We will then look at the origin and function of deacons in the early church.

Presbuteros. In our English translations, the word “elder” comes from the Greek *presbuteros*, from which we also get the English word “presbyter.” It seems that the concept of elders in the Christian church came from its counterpart in the Jewish synagogue, which was administered by a board of elders. This in turn had been carried over from the Old Testament community of Israel where elders, as their name implies, were the elder heads of families and were honored as being full of wisdom and sound judgment.⁶ We tend to find elders in early congregations which sprang from local synagogues.

Episkopos. The word “bishop” in our English Bible comes from the Greek *episkopos*, which is also rendered “overseer.” It connotes the idea of a presiding officer or superintendent.⁷ It may be that predominantly Gentile congregations brought with them this title from their fraternities or clubs, since “To administer the funds of these organizations [was] a matter of prime importance, ...the officer charged with this duty was termed an *episkopos*.”⁸

While the first century church had elders and bishops on the same standing, the second century would see two separate offices emerge, with bishops receiving the preeminence. Bishops became the leading ruler of individual congregations, and later on, of all the churches in a given city or region, while elders retained the lower role of “teacher.”⁹ We find roughly this same kind of separation carried over into many Presbyterian churches today, which distinguish between

6. Walter Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 699–700.

7. Bauer, p.299.

8. Unger, p.296.

9. For additional background on the role of elders and bishops in the early Christian church see Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, (New York: Dorset Press, 1986), pp. 45–46; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500*, revised edition, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), pp. 115–116; Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, pp. 295–296; Cross, p. 1119.

“ruling” and “teaching” elders.

Diakonos. Our English word “deacon” comes from the Greek *diakonos*, which, in its general usage, connotes the idea of a *servant* or *table-waiter*.¹⁰ It in turn comes from the Greek verb *diakoneo* which means “to wait upon someone at a table,” or simply “waiter.”¹¹ The seven servants chosen in Acts 6:1–6 are generally viewed as the first deacons in the Christian church. This makes sense when we look at the reason for their appointment. When “the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food,” the apostles concluded “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to *wait on tables*. Brothers, choose seven men from among you...” (Acts 6:1–3). The apostles’ phrase “to wait on tables” includes the verb *diakoneo*, from which the name “deacon” derives.

Accordingly, the office of deacon in the church retained the functions of servant, helper or assistant to the elders/bishops who were thus freed up to minister the weightier matters, such as teaching the word of God. Their primary duties were to minister to the poor and oversee temporal affairs. Nonetheless, they also had an array of more significant duties in the early church, such as (1) assisting elders/bishops in the service of the sanctuary, (2) distributing the Eucharist (communion), (3) administering baptism, (4) receiving offerings and (5) teaching new converts, in addition to a number of other minor responsibilities.¹²

The Gifts of Teaching, Evangelism and Prophecy

As we discussed above, God has graced the Christian church with a variety of gifts. These gifts have been distributed throughout His body for the benefit of all (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Pet. 4:10). We have just seen how certain gifts of leadership and service manifested in the ordained offices of elder, bishop and deacon. Other gifts, however, did not always result in ordained offices. Good examples of this are the gifts of teaching, evangelizing and prophesying. We will now take a look at how these gifts were expressed in the early Christian church.

Teaching. Teaching is one of the most fundamental gifts expressed in the church. People do not naturally understand the things of God, we must all be taught. “ ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ” (Isa. 55:8–9). This is what led King David to plead, “Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long” (Ps. 25:4–6). It is not surprising, then, that as a part of His “Great Commission,” Jesus instructed His church to “Go and make disciples of all nations...*teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28:19–20). Teaching, therefore, is an indispensable part of the discipling process.

10. Bauer, p.184.

11. *Ibid*, p.184.

12. In addition to the references already cited, the following works were used in the foregoing discussion of ministry in the early church, Chadwick, p.45–53; Latourette, p.115–118,132; Unger “Deacons,” p.249, “Elder,” pp.295–296; Cross, “Presbyter,” p.1119.

God has always provided the means whereby people might be taught of Him. In ancient Israel the Levitical priests were to “teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses” (Lev. 10:11). Over time this role came to be shared by a separate, well-educated class of men referred to as “scribes,” or professional “teachers of the law” (i.e. Matt. 23). Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry as an itinerant teacher. He was often recognized as such by being called “Rabbi,” a title of respect which means literally “master” or “my teacher.”

Itinerant teaching was very popular in the first century. Teachers would often travel from place to place instructing their followers in various matters. In return for their labor, they would receive material support. Unfortunately, not all itinerant teachers taught the truth of the gospel. There were also a variety of false teachers who perverted the gospel. These false teachers included those who subscribed to various forms of Gnosticism, some of whom taught that Jesus only *seemed* to be human, that He was really just an apparition or spirit. The Apostle John specifically warns the church not to take in or support these kinds of false teachers.

“Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. ...Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.” (2 John 7–11)

On the other hand, there were legitimate Christian teachers who operated in the same manner. A notable example of this is the teacher Apollos. We first meet Apollos in Acts 18. There we learn that he was an Alexandrian Jew who was well versed in the scriptures and had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. He later traveled to Ephesus where he was further instructed by Priscilla and Aquila. After this further instruction he continued traveling and teaching. “When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:27–28). Later we find Apollos at Corinth, where Paul says he was useful by watering the seed he had planted there (Acts 19:1; 1 Cor. 3:4–8). His “watering” was the sound teaching he was doing, through which he became a major figure in the church at Corinth. Apollos’ teaching complimented the work Paul had already done there. Still later we find Apollos traveling again when Paul admonishes Titus to “Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way and see that they have everything they need” (Titus 3:13).

While there were those whose special gift was teaching, like Apollos, the function of teaching was actually fundamental to all Christian ministry. It was one of the important functions of elders, bishops and deacons as discussed above. The goal was to spread the teaching of Jesus to as many people as possible. To accomplish this, effective teachers sought to multiply themselves through the lives of others, as Paul counseled Timothy, “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” (2 Tim. 2:2). Timothy was to recruit and develop others who would also be qualified to teach; he was to be a “master teacher”—a “teacher of teachers.”

Evangelism. The English word *gospel* comes to us from the Old English *godspel* which means “good (*god*) tidings (*spel*).” This in turn comes from the Greek *euangelion* which literally

means “good news,” and is translated in our Bibles most often as simply “the gospel.” An *evangelist* is one who actively promotes the *euangelion*, the good news, or gospel, about Jesus Christ. He is one who “announces good news.” In a very real way, every Christian is to be an evangelist by sharing with others the good news of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ.

To be especially effective at announcing, or promoting the gospel is a spiritual gift from God. Those who were so gifted were termed evangelists. That this spiritual gifting had a prominent place in the early church is made clear by Paul in Ephesians 4:7–13. “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.’...It was he who gave [gifts to] some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service.”

The gift of evangelizing was often exercised in addition to other gifts and callings. Philip and Timothy are examples of this. Above we discussed the first seven deacons of the Christian church (Acts 6:1–6). Philip was one of these men. Later in the book of Acts we find Philip also functioning as an evangelist as he “traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea” (Acts 8:40). Still later, Paul meets Philip in Caesarea on his third missionary journey and stays at his house. “We reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven” (Acts 21:8). This not only confirms that Philip was one of the original seven deacons, but that he performed the function of an evangelist all at the same time.

Timothy is another good example. In 1 Timothy 4:13–14 we find Paul giving him specific instructions about his ministry. “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.” In 2 Timothy 4:5, however, we find Paul’s instruction has been enlarged to include the work of evangelism. “Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” In Timothy’s case we find that evangelism was only one of several functions he performed as a Christian leader. Another of his important duties was that of teaching, which was discussed above.

Prophecy. After a lengthy discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12, Paul concludes by saying, “Earnestly desire the greater gifts” (v. 31, NAS). This is exactly what the early church did. And prophecy was the one gift sought above all others. The Lord was gracious to these desires and bestowed the church with the gift of prophecy in abundance. Though many early Christians experienced the gift of prophecy from time to time, only those who were unusually gifted were regarded as *prophets*.

A careful reading of the New Testament, especially the book of Acts, will show that the gift of prophecy was instrumental in guiding many, many actions of the early church. For example, the gospel first went to the Gentiles by a gift of prophecy given jointly to Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10. Paul’s conversion and baptism were accompanied by a gift of prophecy given jointly to Ananias and himself in Acts 9. Paul and Barnabas were set apart and commissioned for their first missionary journey by a gift of prophecy in Acts 13. In this case the prophetic message was received by five men who were regarded as both “prophets and teachers” (v. 1). Philip the deacon-evangelist (remember him?) had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). At Caesarea a prophet by the name of Agabus gave an Old Testament-style prophecy of Paul’s

upcoming capture by the Jerusalem Jews and subsequent arrest by the Roman authorities (Acts 21:10–11, 27–33). And there are many more examples.

In addition to these examples, the gift of prophecy also often accompanied the “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” where the prophecy might come in the form of tongues. This happened first to the disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), to Cornelius and his household—the first Gentile converts (Acts 10:44–46)—and to the early disciples of Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7). Because of these notable examples, the gift of prophecy came to be a normal expectation of a person’s baptism in the Holy Spirit.

We will conclude our discussion of the gift of prophecy in the early church, and of spiritual gifts in general, with the following insights from scholar Kilian McDonnell.

“The charisms involved a wide range of gifts—Irenaeus said they were too numerous to list. *Most highly prized were the prophetic gifts.* Whether tongues be included as one of the prophetic gifts is an academic distinction. In Acts 2, Peter identifies tongues as part of prophecy; in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul distinguishes them from prophecy, though he considers interpreted tongues virtually equivalent to prophecy, indicating their close connection. *The evidence from the first four centuries indicates that as late as the mid-fourth century the gift of prophecy was expected and sought at baptism.*

“There were other less spectacular charisms [gifts], of course, like ‘administration’ and ‘assistance.’ Today these ‘service charisms’ are more readily accepted in the church, but often more as ‘jobs to be done’ than as Spirit-anointed ministries proceeding from a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit. The charisms are not ‘things,’ nor are they to be identified with merely human talents, though these may be informed by the charisms. They are the movement of the Holy Spirit. The one who exercises them properly yields to the Holy Spirit and thus serves the growth of charity both in self and others.” (emphasis added)¹³

The New Testament Office of Apostle

The title of Apostle comes from the Greek *apostolos*. Before the time of Christ this simply meant *ambassador, delegate* or *messenger*.¹⁴ The Jews had apostles which “carried about encyclical letters from their rulers.”¹⁵ As the King of Israel, it was only fitting that Jesus would commission twelve special messengers to carry his message of peace and forgiveness to the twelve tribes of Israel. Ever since that time the term Apostle has come to refer to a member of this special band of messengers who carried the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

At the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus selected these twelve men so that they might accompany Him the entire time. This was very important, because later on these men would be responsible for carrying the message of all that Jesus had done. It was important that they be with Him the entire time so that they would be sure to have the complete message. Having been an eyewitness of Jesus, therefore, became a necessary criteria for becoming an Apostle. When Judas Iscariot committed suicide this criteria was used to select his replacement. According to Peter, “It

13. Kilian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 323–324.

14. Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 99.

15. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, p. 72.

is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21–22).

According to this same criteria Paul defended his own role as an Apostle, based on his own personal experience with the risen Christ. "He [Christ] appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born" (1 Cor. 15:7–8); "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor. 9:1); "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:11).

The gospel of Jesus Christ "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). However, when the gospel is distorted through false teaching, it loses its power to save. The gospel was in fact being distorted by false teaching in the churches of Galatia. Paul says that this resulted in their actual "deserting" of Christ and "turning to a *different* gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:6–7). This is why Paul so adamantly proclaimed, "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8). The integrity of the gospel must be preserved if it is to retain its saving power.

This is why the ministry of the Apostles was so vital: they could be relied on for the accurate story of Jesus Christ. Not only had they been eyewitnesses of His ministry, they had also been commissioned by the King as His special emissaries to announce the important message of forgiveness of sin through faith in His name. Their commission did not come from a legally transmitted authority; Jesus had "cancelled the written code [the law]...he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). Rather, it was based on God's sovereign *grace* whereby He *gifted* them to be special messengers of His new covenant. The fact that they had been eyewitnesses of His ministry would guarantee the accuracy of the message. Jesus assured them of this when He said, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things *and will remind you of everything I have said to you*" (John 14:26).

The message of the Apostles (the gospel of Christ) was initially transmitted orally, beginning at Pentecost. By the end of the first century their testimony had been committed to writing, which resulted in the books of our present New Testament. The church continued to have Apostles as long as it had eyewitnesses of Christ. There were a number of other Apostles beyond the original twelve called by Jesus. We read above about Matthias replacing Judas (Acts 1:21–26). In addition there were Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and James the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:19). However, when all of the eyewitnesses of Jesus had passed away, so too did the office of Apostle; there was no one left who met the criteria. Their message had been successfully put in writing and had been transmitted to the surviving leaders of the early church. This means that what Paul told Timothy is even more true today, "The holy scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

Over time the title of apostle came to be used in a wider sense to include prominent teachers and church leaders. It also came to recognize the leader of the first Christian mission to a particular country.¹⁶ Some churches today use the term to designate leaders who are "sent out" or

16. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 74.

otherwise commissioned to initiate a new church or other Christian work in a new location. Still other churches use the term in their corporate name to indicate that they teach the fundamental truths of the gospel which were taught by the original Apostles as recorded in the New Testament.