

APOSTOLIC MULTIPLIERS

Repainting the Role of Apostle for the 21st Century

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What is the first image that comes to mind when you hear the word *apostle*? Do you envision Jesus' 12 original disciples or maybe the Apostle Paul?

Typically, the word *apostle* is associated with Early Church leadership and isn't a common description used among leaders today. In many leadership circles, describing oneself as an apostle is viewed with skepticism. I know I would feel a little uneasy if my pastor asked me to stop referring to him as Pastor John and begin referring to him as Apostle John. Nevertheless, because of the progressive decline of Christianity in our culture, I can't help but wonder if the church needs the apostolic multiplier now more than ever.

For a few moments, let's suspend our judgment around the apostolic terminology, pull out a fresh canvas, and consider repainting the role of the apostle in the 21st century. Let's explore what it might look like to accentuate apostolic leadership and describe the characteristics of leaders who demonstrate an apostolic impulse.

It is interesting to note there is biblical evidence indicating more influential apostles in the Early Church beyond Jesus' 12 original disciples and the Apostle Paul. The New Testament notes an additional 10 apostles, which included: James—the half brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19), Barnabus (Acts 14:14), Apollos (Corinthians 4:6-9), Timothy and Silvanus (I Thessalonians 2:6), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Andronicus and Junia (a female) (Rom. 16:7), and two others who are unnamed (2 Cor. 8:23). Keep in mind, some translations use the word *messenger* to describe these apostolic figureheads, but in each case the Greek word used to label these leaders is *apostoloi*.

There are many reasons why the role of the apostle creates a polarizing effect. For many Protestant denominations, the aversion to identifying apostles within their tribe is likely a leftover from the Reformation age, where Protestant churches strongly opposed hierarchical and authoritarian church leadership structures. Furthermore, there is no shortage of situations where power-hungry apostles have manipulated or abused local congregations, which has deterred many from lifting up the role of the apostle.

Throughout the church age, it may be true that church leaders avoided or refrained from labeling themselves as apostles, but there is no doubt, leaders with an apostolic gift mix or an apostolic impulse have been used to accomplish God's purposes. Dick Iverson once declared, "You won't find 'Apostle' written in large letters on my door. I would rather say that I do apostolic work. It isn't just a title, it's work." This mindset may embody the apostolic ethos necessary to reframe the apostolic conversation. It's less about a title and more about the apostolic work.

In order to clear up the confusion over what an apostle is and does, let's begin by defining the word *apostle*. The Greek word *apostle* (ἀπόστολος) literally means "one who is sent away." This is why New Testament translations often translate *apostle* as messenger or ambassador. In simple terms, an apostle is a "sent one," which could be used to describe any believer who has been sent into a region or people group to announce the Good News of Jesus, make disciples, and start a transgenerational church community. In a broader sense, the term *apostle* could also be used to refer to an individual who is continually raising up and sending out workers into the Lord's harvest.

Truly, if we did not have leaders in the first century with an apostolic impulse, the church would not have carried out Jesus' command in Acts 1:8 to go into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The church would still be in Jerusalem. Apostolic work pushes out the kingdom boundaries and keeps the church from turning inward.

If we can come to terms with the fact that apostolic leadership was needed and is still needed until the final consummation of humanity, then we need to take out our brushes, mix our paint, and clarify what the apostolic picture ought to look like in the 21st century. Let me create a conversation canvas and suggest four characteristics of apostolic multipliers:

1. Apostolic multipliers are all about initiating NEW WORKS in order to bring people to Jesus.

Leaders functioning within the apostolic role see over the horizon. They see the not-yet. Apostolic multipliers do not merely see their community—they see a region or a people group and possess a drive to go there. They are not content with merely reaching their community—they view their community as a catalyst to start new faith communities.

Here we see the distinction between an evangelist and an apostle. An evangelist is eager to convert a populous or people group, but an apostle is eager to make disciples and establish churches. Simply put, the apostolic multiplier leaves church communities in its wake.

2. For apostolic multipliers, church growth isn't only about addition—it's also about MULTIPLICATION.

Leaders with the apostolic gift mix love watching the church grow through the ongoing multiplication of believers, leaders, and churches. This doesn't mean apostolic multipliers aren't concerned about the growth and outreach within their immediate context—they most assuredly are; however, apostolic multipliers demonstrate a heightened awareness and focus on raising up and sending out church initiators. The multiplication-effect comes into view when the apostolic multiplier sends out another apostolic multiplier, who then sends out another apostolic multiplier, who then sends out another apostolic multiplier, et cetera.

Within an apostolic leadership environment, there will be a heightened value around leadership development. However, this leadership development track is not merely a long-term feeder for their localized church system—it is also considered a feeder for the multiplication movement. Simply put, apostolic multipliers are more concerned about their sending capacity than their seating capacity.

3. Apostolic multipliers view their spiritual gifts as a STIMULANT for all other gifts.

Individuals with the apostolic wiring recognize God has uniquely wired them to create new environments so the fullness of the body of Christ can be realized within a local church. This may explain why the Apostle Paul listed the gifting of apostleship first among all spiritual gifts.

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts." (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)

New missional projects and apostolic multipliers are needed in order to unleash all of the gifts in the body of Christ. Without apostolic multipliers, the church may become ingrown or bloated. Apostolic multipliers enjoy starting new churches because more of the body of Christ can be awakened to their potential. They want to see all the leadership gifts flourish in the body of Christ so healthy churches can be born again and again. For this reason, apostolic multipliers receive great joy from disappearing into the background. This aspect of apostleship helps counter the notion that apostolic multipliers are only concerned with the expansion of the kingdom and not the shepherding of souls.

Quite the contrary, apostolic multipliers view themselves as stimulators and relish watching others express their God-given gifts.

If the apostolic multiplier does not have the capability to move from community to community starting new missional projects themselves, they will use their localized influence to spin off new churches, campuses, or venues with leaders they have invested in over a period of time. Apostolic multipliers are always looking for fresh and creative ways to expand the kingdom of God by empowering others throughout their region and beyond.

Churches embracing the apostolic leadership role would do well to avoid creating a ministry description forcing an apostolic multiplier to function as a prophet, evangelist, shepherd, or teacher. Over time, many apostolic multipliers may develop tensions around leading and managing a local church environment. It is important for apostolic multipliers to have the right staffing structure around them so they can function freely in the apostolic gift. To be sure, every apostolic multiplier has their own leadership style and preferences, but it is critical that they have plenty of space and time to devote to overseeing their "sent ones." Simply put, apostolic leaders need to be a part of an environment that is constantly reaching new territory for Christ and equipping leaders to become active within their giftings.

4. Apostolic multipliers see themselves as CONNECTORS within a network of churches.

After starting new churches, the Apostle Paul continued to connect with the leaders of those communities and created networks of churches. The Apostle Paul was a leader of leaders and he prioritized pastoral relationships. Throughout the New Testament, we read about churches working together, giving to one another, and pairing up leaders to be sent into unreached territory. This relational connectedness creates a tight knit bond between apostolic multipliers and local pastors.

The advantage of the apostolic role is highly pragmatic, in that, the apostolic multiplier helps local churches overcome problems and remain focused on Jesus' vision for the church. This is why we see the Apostle Paul consistently writing letters to his churches and counseling them in their attitude and missional priorities.

Unfortunately, this sense of apostolic connectedness can be eclipsed by many organizational and denominational structures. Many apostolic multipliers do not have a way of understanding or expressing their apostolic gift within their denominational system. When this is the case, apostolic multipliers are forced to make a decision; either circumvent their denominational structure and create a

way for the gift of God to be lived out, or continually suppress their apostolic impulse. To be sure, the emergence of the multi-site church and church planting networks has created some space for apostolic multipliers to oversee other leaders and faith communities.

More than ever, we need organizational and denominational structures geared to support apostolic relationships. The paternal bond between apostles and pastors avoids the institutionalization of a collection of churches. Interestingly, in 2 Corinthians 11, the Apostle Paul rattles off his list of apostolic hardships and notes how one of his primary hardships was feeling responsible for the well being of "all the churches." Simply put, apostolic multipliers need to feel responsible for other leaders and church communities.

These four characteristics of an apostolic multiplier are essential to emphasize as the 21st century church leans into a multiplication movement.

In addition to gaining clarity around the role of the apostle, it is also important to define the other types of leaders needed within a local church setting. In Ephesians 4:11-13, the Apostle Paul listed five types of equipping roles in the body of Christ:

"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

This section of Scripture discloses the five-fold ministry model or the A-STEP model (Apostle, Shepherd, Teacher, Evangelist, Prophet). Many modern voices have attempted to make a distinction between the apostle/evangelist/prophet and the shepherd/teacher.

Grouping the apostle/evangelist/prophet into one category and the shepherd/teacher in another category may not accurately portray the Apostle Paul's original intent. It is more likely the Apostle Paul was using these gift-oriented descriptions to clarify specific ways the body of Christ is equipped. Notice, the Apostle Paul listed the role of the apostle first, which may be for the same reason he listed the apostle first when he mentioned the point about seeking the greater spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:27-31. It is likely that the role of the apostle is listed first because it holds together and makes room for all other essential equipping roles within a church community.

Furthermore, it is important to note how the apostolic role strategically utilizes the functions of the shepherd, teacher, evangelist, and prophet, but the

shepherd, teacher, evangelist, and prophet do not utilize the entrepreneurial functions of the apostle. An apostolic multiplier is passionate about opening up new environments so the shepherd, teacher, evangelist, and prophet can emerge and be useful in a local church context.

As stated earlier, we need to define what we mean by the four other equipping roles. Let me suggest these descriptions for the shepherd, teacher, evangelist, and prophet (STEP):

Shepherds GUIDE and PROTECT God's people and draw the body of Christ into maturity. Shepherds cultivate a loving and spiritually mature network of relationships. Shepherds care deeply about individuals' well-being and fruit-bearing experience in the kingdom of God. They are always willing to be there for someone, especially when they are going through a crisis. They equip the body of Christ by helping people grow into who God wants them to be, even if that means protecting the flock through correction or challenge. Because of a lack of understanding surrounding the other four equipping roles (APET), those called by God to be apostolic multipliers have often been forced to become shepherding pastors, therefore filling shoes that were not theirs to fill. Over time, this dynamic creates a tension in their churches because they struggle to meet their sheep's personal and relational needs.

Teachers UNDERSTAND and EXPLAIN God's truth and wisdom. Teachers help the body of Christ remain biblically grounded and train God's people how to live in the kingdom of God. Teachers contain profound insight and help believers see dynamics in the kingdom of God they have never seen before.

Evangelists RECRUIT people into the kingdom of God and carry a great burden for those who are not yet in a relationship with God. The prime example of an evangelist in the New Testament is Philip. He was one of the men chosen to serve the widows in Acts 6, and he is the only one specifically called an evangelist (Acts 21:8). In Acts 8, Philip obeys the Holy Spirit and brings the Ethiopian Eunuch to a trusting knowledge of Christ. Evangelists use their communication skills in both the public and private realms to explain and express God's love to people who have been shaped by a godless world. Evangelists also love to teach others how to win people to Christ and dread seeing believers' indifference regarding the lost.

Prophets REVEAL God's heart to His people. Prophets give guidance, insight, revelation, interpretation, and application to individuals and the corporate body of Christ. Prophets have an uncanny sense to determine what God is doing in the local context. The prophet is not necessarily fore-telling—the prophet is forth-telling. Prophets have a clear sense of God's will and they are particularly attuned to God's truth for today. They bring correction, a call for obedience, and

challenge the dominant status quo assumptions the church tends to inherit from the culture.

In a day and age where the church seems to be losing ground, it is essential that all five equipping gifts are strategically pursued. The role of the apostolic multiplier must be emphasized and encouraged. Now more than ever, the church must reimagine the role of the apostle and allow these kingdom entrepreneurs to spread the Good News of Jesus and start new faith communities.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Pray for workers of the harvest." (Matthew 9:37) Imagine what might happen to the bride of Christ if she took Jesus' prayer seriously and prayed for apostolic multipliers... We just might see an unstoppable move of God!