

# WHO ARE THE APOSTLES?

**Who were the New Testament apostles? There are clearly more than the Twelve. Where did Jesus get the idea for having “apostles,” and what change did He make in their role?**

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Mission Nation Publishing Co.

## Prologue

Most Christians know that at a certain point many years ago there were leaders of the church called “apostles.” At the same time most Christians do not know what an “apostle” was, where the concept of “apostle” came from, or how they became apostles or even the names of the Twelve. Even fewer know that the office of the apostle existed before Jesus’ apostles, or that there were Jewish apostles. Or that there are other apostles mentioned in the New Testament, besides the Twelve. Why is this important?

Today one rarely sees urgency in the church, at least the church in North America, to take courageous actions that bring the love of God beyond the four walls of a sanctuary. But there are still parts of the world where this apostolic – missionary urgency is alive. It is the intent of this author to share the history of the first apostles and challenge the present day church to realize the love and the sacrifices missionaries are willing to make. Maybe by encountering the true meaning of the word “apostle” many Christians will be inspired to go out and share their love so that others who do not know Him can meet Jesus

I am most grateful to my wife Lynn, for her insight, for her intelligence, for her love. She is my main encourager.

Rev. Dr. Robert Scudieri

*All Bible verses cited are from the ESV, English Standard Version*

## Foreword

What will the twenty-first century bring for the Christian Mission? The ultimate concern of Mission may be the same, yet the mission enterprise will be a different ballgame with new rules and new kinds of contenders; opponents who will shake-up the very foundations of the Judeo-Christian traditions in the West. A noticeable challenger, for example, is the new age mode of thinking—a Gnosticism of our time and an unprecedented grand syncretism. How will the Church cope with the complicated/complex/inclusive phenomena in the area of “religions” and witness Christ and his saving Gospel to a peculiarly secularized generation is one of the challenging tasks of all Christian theologians, missiologists, mission executives, strategists and missionaries. Both syncretism and universalism are all around us. No less than a “full armor of God” is called for (1Pet 3:15, Eph 6:10-17). Mission must turn its attention to a new direction.

This monograph may enlighten the reader on the nature of the church, first of all, and presents a considerable number of new insights into the meaning of apostle and being apostolic. The author himself takes very seriously this privilege of “sentness” to North America and elsewhere.

One may find all these by reading through this unique undertaking. It is an interesting step forward in search of another new dimension of the real “nature” of the church which may positively strengthen the life of the church and its witness to Jesus Christ. It also clarifies the true identity of the church. At any rate, the result of his deliberation will give much or thought— something to think about! May this search go forward.

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(From the dedication to the original text)

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## Chapter 1: Another Look

*“His purple mantle shone in the reflected light of shimmering gold and jeweled ornaments. With his eyes down, but with great dignity, he slowly stepped to his place in the front where there was a small gold armchair. But he did not sit down until the bishops signaled him and all the others to sit”<sup>i</sup>*

The “he” was Constantine, the emperor of the Roman World in 324-337 AD. To the persecuted Christians he fulfilled the vision in the book of Revelations that the Kingdom of God would come to earth. In 325 AD he acted as host for the first empire wide conference of Christians, the great Council of Nicaea. And he was about to present a new document, a summary of Christian faith, a summary to which he himself would subscribe: The Nicene Creed.

How had this happened? How had the Emperor of the greatest empire on earth become a follower of Christianity, a minor sect begun 300 years before in a far off corner of the world? It was the result of the sacrifice of thousands of Christian missionaries over hundreds of years – missionaries who gave their minds, hearts and lives, just as the Twelve original missionaries of Jesus. Those missionaries were not just the leaders of the church; as a matter of course laity were taught to share their faith. In effect, the church was “apostolic.”

Twenty years ago I wrote a book called APOSTOLIC CHURCH: One, Holy Catholic and Missionary. I wrote it to explain the history of the phrase “apostolic church” and how it came to be used in the Nicene Creed, a creed all orthodox Christians accept. But a lot has happened in the twenty years since I wrote the book.

At the time many Christian congregations in North America believed that only church districts or denominations could plant new churches. Christian churches had been taught, “The districts ‘do’ mission.” The saying was that the regional districts started new churches “on behalf” of congregations – but too often it was “instead of” the local churches. The mission had been taken away from the congregation. There were even some, a small minority, who believed only the ordained pastor should evangelize. I wondered, will these things be the same twenty years from now? This was my original motivation to write the book. It was time for the church to remember the missionary emphasis in the term “apostolic church.”

During the twenty years since the book was published, I became more convinced that the concept behind the book was important, but the book needed updating and expanding.

Because the church in North America had become ingrown, God had to find more efficient ways to bring His gospel of love and forgiveness to America. If the churches in North America did not see themselves as missions, God would raise up others. As a

result, in America we have been blessed with missionaries coming from many parts of the world, some due to persecution and war, some sent by the churches in their homelands to care for previous migrants and others simply to reach an increasingly secular America with the God of Love.

Their stories are rarely told. For that reason Mission Nation Publishing Co. has started a project called “Missionaries to America.” The goal of the project is to tell the marvelous stories of some of these missionaries to America, so that we can see these men and women for what they are: gifts of God.

There are also lessons for mission work to be learned. The apostles show us in their work and in their lives how they carried out the greatest mission feat this world has ever seen – the growth of a small cluster of under one hundred believers into the official religion of the world in the fourth century. What might we learn for our own day as we remember the ministry of the apostles?

This is the first of three books – the present book will focus on the rarely discussed history of the term “apostle,” from Greek usage to Hebrew to Jesus, to mission work after Christ’s ascension and down to today. Book Two will show how missionaries evolved in the second and third centuries, and even as the church grew, the title “apostle” began to lose a sense of “outreach.” In Book Three we will meet the emperor Constantine and see how “apostolic” lost its missionary emphasis and came to mean the church that believed what the apostles taught.

Maybe the Lord will have mercy on us and fill us again with an urgency to open the doors of our churches and send Christians out to fill the world with His great love.

### **The Journey Begins**

It was on January 3, 1991 that I began my voyage to Rome, Constantinople and Nicaea without ever leaving the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut. On a six month study leave from my then role as a mission director for a 160 congregation Lutheran district, I had eight University libraries with over four million books to search, and three specific goals:

1. To search for the origin of the term apostolic church.
2. To investigate the missionary emphasis implied in that term.
3. To give the church a new way of looking at these important words.

I focused on the term “apostle,” where did this designation come from? How was it used before Jesus began authorizing His apostles? How did Jesus use the term? What did He keep? What did He change? Who were the Jewish apostles? What was the mission of an apostle? What does this have to do with today?

I began my research in Nicaea, a small town about thirty miles south of the old Roman capital of Nicomedia. I wanted to know what the Council of Nicaea, convened in

AD 325, meant when it called the church “apostolic.” To do this I would have to know the origins and function of the apostles.

To find out I followed the trail from the first use of the concept of the apostle by the Greeks, then to the system of apostles used by the Jews, and finally to the Twelve and the other apostles named in the New Testament (those besides the Twelve). The trail leads to the opposing sect that co-opted the term, and finally down to today.

The first clue came from early Greek usage. The earliest written instance of the Greek word, “*apostolos*” was as a naval term. Greek “seafarers used “*apostolos*” to designate a ship, one that had been sent on a specific mission. Later it became a term used for a fleet *sent* on a naval expedition.” Eventually, according to Walter Schmithals, it referred to a company of colonists- people *sent* from the security of their homes.<sup>ii</sup>

In the fifth century BC the Father of History, Herodotus, employs the term “*apostolos*” to mean an authorized agent “who has been sent.” (Herodotus 1:21).<sup>iii</sup>

Schmithals says that the Jewish historian Josephus (late 1<sup>st</sup> century) uses “*apostolos*” to refer to messengers sent to Rome, “Who of necessity had to travel by ship.”<sup>iv</sup>

The basic meaning of the apostle was one who was sent, one who went out, on a mission assigned by someone else. They were not agents who stayed inside – they left the security of their families, their houses, their jobs.

In all these periods “apostle” carries at least two meanings, one of which has been forgotten by too many – but not by all.

### **For Further Reading:**

“*From Constantine to Julian.*” Leitzmann, Hans. vol. 3 of *A History of the Early Church*. Cleveland: World, 1964.

*The office of the Apostle in the Early Church*. Schmithals, Walter. Nashville: Abingdon, 1969

*A History of Christian Missions*. Stephen Neill (rev. for the Second Edition by Owen Chadwick). Penguin Books, London, 1987.

*The Apostolic Imperative*. Carl. E Braaten. Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1985.

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## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Leitzmann, Hans. "From Constantine to Julian." vol. 3 of *A History of the Early Church*. Cleveland: World, 1964. p. 117.

<sup>ii</sup> Schmithals, Walter. *The office of the Apostle in the Early Church*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1969. P.96

<sup>iii</sup> Op cit. p. 97

<sup>iv</sup> Op cit. p. 97