

THE ROLE, RELATIONSHIP AND AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTLE WITH A LOCAL CHURCH

Role

1. Apostles are foundation builders (Ephesians 2:20). They initiate and co-ordinate the planting of local churches (1 Corinthians 9:1-2). They are spiritual fathers of spiritual fathers (1 Corinthians 4:15).
2. Ephesians 4:11-13 describes the function of an apostle, along with the other five-fold ministry gifts, as:
 - the equipping of God's people for the work of the ministry
 - the edifying/ building-up of Christ's body – the Church
 - the bringing of God's people into unity of the faith (Acts 2:42 – believers were devoted to the *apostles'* doctrine/teaching)
 - the perfecting and maturing of God's people
3. The New Testament pictures the apostolic role as like:
 - an expert builder (1 Corinthians 3:10); and as
 - a caring parent – like both a father (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12) and a mother (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

From these two pictures and how the apostles functioned in the New Testament, the apostolic ministry can be seen to involve:

- i. being a 'building adviser', including specific involvement in the appointment of elders and deacons (Acts 14:23; 6:1-6)
- ii. being a spiritual father to spiritual fathers, ie church leaders.

Simply put, it could be said that the apostle's twin role provides for a local church's strength (as an expert builder) and safety (as a caring father). In the matter of providing safety to a local church, the New Testament apostles were involved in bringing God's judgments into situations (Acts 5:1-11) and instructions concerning disciplinary actions (1 Corinthians 4:21; 5:1-13; 2 Cor.2:1-11).

Relationship

4. The implied relationship of the 'local builders' (ie local church elders) to the 'expert builder' (the apostle) could be deemed to be a consultative one. However, the apostle Paul admonishes church leaders to be careful how they build (1 Corinthians 3:10) and thus it is reasonable to expect that wise, God-fearing leaders will actively seek advice from the apostolic ministry.

In the role of a caring parent, an apostle will at times offer advice; express concerns and appeal to church leaders and even warn churches (as Paul did), whether or not his counsel is specifically sought or heeded (1 Corinthians 4:14; Acts 20:31).

Authority

5. In the New Testament it was the norm that the apostolic ministry had an oversight care for the churches they founded – these churches were the seal of their apostleship (1 Corinthians 9:1-2). However, whilst an apostle's authority is God-given, the elders of a local church come under apostolic authority voluntarily. In 3 John we find an example of this at work in practice.

It seems that the apostle John had a problem with Diotrephes (the lead elder of one of the churches under John's authority) who rejected John's apostolic oversight. Diotrephes however did not have the support of Gaius and other elders who called on John for help, ie whilst Diotrephes (the senior leader) rejected John's God-given apostolic authority, the other elders of the church voluntarily came under John's authority – asking him for his help (3 John 9-10).

Practically, this example suggests the recognition of the apostolic authority by the entire eldership team and the need for some level of relationship between the apostle and other elders and not just a relationship with the senior elder.

6. As submission is voluntarily given to an apostolic ministry (and not something demanded in the manner of Gentile rule – Luke 22:25-26), then it would seem that the local elders have the final authority from God for their church congregation and not the apostle. It does seem however that the apostle's responsibility to God is to seek to bring discipline into local church situations and to warn and appeal to local elders and to congregations in cases of serious sin or serious doctrinal error. If he is not heeded then it would seem that in such situations an apostle's final recourse is to appoint new leadership to the church and urge the people to follow the new leadership. Practically, such action could result in a church split with some still choosing to trust the previous local leaders (who they feel they know better than the apostle), whilst others choose to trust the disciplinary actions of the apostle and follow the new leadership (ie people would vote with their feet).

The Apostolic Ministry today

7. God's Biblical pattern is that He gives gifts of people – some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists and some pastors and teachers – to His church, to help provide for local church congregations in a number of ways. Within the Plumblin family of churches I see at least the following five things provided to our related churches via a mutual committed relationship (rather than merely a loose association or affiliation):

i. Relational *and* functional joining in Christ's wider body

- fellowship can be obtained from local ministers' fraternals but rarely is this an accountable working relationship
- membership of a denomination can provide a functional joining but does not always provide a meaningful personal relationship, especially for a church's senior leaders

ii. Care and Advice, especially for a church's senior leaders

iii. Accountability and thus security and safety for the church in at least three ways:

- apostolic ministry helps ensure a church is not blown off course by the latest fad or wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14)
- provides a watch over leaders' lives
- provides a means of help and appeal for church members in the event of difficulties with their church leaders

iv. Equipping, ie teaching and training (Ephesians 4:12) via church visits, seminars and other events

v. Sharing in the benefits and responsibilities of the apostolic's 'family business'

- benefitting from the resources of the apostolic ministry, eg giftings, help, financially
- contributing towards the wider mission, via shared projects and giving financially to the wider apostolic ministry

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