

# APOSTOLIC MINISTRIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

## *A White Paper*

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### ***Why has this Paper Been Written?***

There's more and more talk throughout the Church today about apostles and apostolic ministries. The opinions range from "there are none in today's church" to "they govern the Church".

In this paper, we'll focus on what the Bible actually *does* teach about apostles and apostolic ministries. Not every, possible verse or passage will be considered, but no significant verses are deliberately excluded.

The *scope of this paper is limited* to a basic group of Scriptures which tell us about apostles and apostolic ministries. **Our goal is that every person who reads this paper can come to *their own conclusions* about apostolic ministries, directly from the Scriptures involved.**

Most Christians insist that their beliefs in general *are* biblical, even if they cannot show why. Too often, Christians hold on to their beliefs passionately and divisively – *even if they're not biblical!*

There's a *big difference* between what people *think* the Bible teaches and what it *actually teaches*. Mostly, what they believe is what they've *been told* the Bible teaches – by pastors, Sunday School teachers, home group leaders and so forth.

But every Believer in the Body of Christ must learn to draw *their own, personal conclusions* about what the Bible *says* instead of what they've *heard* it says!

The basic message of this white paper is not that nothing should be believed unless the Bible clearly and simply teaches it. No! There are many things the Lord will tell you in your heart and your conscience that are not clearly in the Bible but are clear in His Voice to you. Now – He will not tell you something that truly contradicts what He says in the Bible, but He will tell you many things that are not written in the Scriptures.

He may tell you to change your employment, move to a new region, support a particular ministry, marry a particular person; He may tell you to trust Him in the middle of terrible circumstances, to fast (or to not fast), to stop trying to minister to a particular situation and leave it instead in His Hands. He may even tell you (but not the person next to you) that you're to swear off drinking carbonated beverages ("for you it is a sin") or you're to submit to the spiritual leadership of a particular elder or leader in the Church or you're to tithe to a particular minister or ministry. Every Believer should expect a stream of spiritual communication/communion coming from God into our lives. And though these Words may be confirmed in the Bible, they won't be found clearly and simply in the Bible anywhere. They are the rhema of God (the "conversational Word of God". [cf. Mt 4.4])

When Eph 4 speaks of the "unity of the faith and the knowledge of Jesus Christ", the apostle Paul is telling us to manifest the unity of our faith in Jesus Christ and our (personal, experiential) knowledge of Him – not a unity of doctrinal "faith". Amongst the saints, there cannot be "diversity" in Who we trust – it's only Jesus. But there will always be a wonderful diversity of theological opinion, religious doctrine and spiritual paradigms.

In order to "corral" that diversity and keep it from bringing sectarian divisions into the manifested Body of Christ, we need to remember the advice of Peter Meiderlin (b. A.D. 1582): "In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things Love." And what is "essential" is that which the Bible clearly and simply states; what is "non-essential" is that which is deduced or inferred from what the Bible says. And in every case, what is most "essential" is Love for all the saints.

For this to happen, Believers *must* learn to read the Bible *for themselves*, and not just take other people's *interpretations* for granted. Every Believer is commissioned to "study, to show yourself approved by God, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of Truth." [2Tim 2.15]

Here's a rule we're going to follow for accurately understanding and applying biblical Truth:

"Look for the difference between what the Bible *actually says*, and what people *claim* the Bible says", and, "Take to heart the *first*, and hold the *second* 'at arm's length' (people's mere opinions and speculations.)"

Of course, Scripture should *always* be read and understood in this manner.

For those who wish further resources for studying the Bible for themselves, they can email the authors (Emil and Michele Swift) with their questions at [RDTW@KingdomScribes.net](mailto:RDTW@KingdomScribes.net). RDTW (Rightly Dividing The Word) refers to a browser-based Bible reading tutorial which teaches a simple method for accurately and profoundly understanding and applying the Word of God.

### ***Seeing What the Bible Says – and Doesn't Say...***

Despite there being many teachings today concerning apostolic ministries, the Bible actually says very little about them. The important issue for this report is to note what *the Scriptures* tell us about **apostles**. Personal opinion — though valuable — does *not* overrule the Word of God! Neither does "personal revelation"!

Please understand that this White Paper doesn't delineate how spiritual leaders have to run their churches, religious organizations or apostolic networks. As far as any *humanly engineered organization* goes, whoever is "in charge" of the organization has the right to expect its members to submit to its government.

Our concern isn't with straightening out a group's by-laws, but in getting Believers *everywhere* to **begin at Square One** — agreeing with *what the Bible teaches* about apostles and apostolic ministries. *Let's agree with what the Bible tells us – simply and clearly – drawing a line between what the Word says and our opinions or wishful expectations. Then build with spiritually creative variations from that basis.*

### ***What is an "apostle"?***

First off, nowhere does the Bible define "apostle".\*

The most we can do is try and figure it out based on what the New Testament says apostles *did*. That's sort of like trying to figure out what a "doctor" does by hearing stories from patients. You'd get a fairly good picture about setting broken bones or prescribing pills, but you'd *never* figure out a lot of details about schooling, professional licenses, legal liability,

Every once in a while,  
you'll find this dude  
taking a closer, more  
careful look at a  
particular point.



When you see  
him, *stop and take a  
closer look for  
yourself!*

\* For those who want to "get to the bottom line" there's a *Summary* at the end of this paper and after reading it, you may then want to come back and read the Scriptures which *led* to those conclusions!

clinical research, medical bookkeeping and many other *vital* parts of being a doctor. And if you looked at one "doctor", then another "doctor", the first might never splint a broken bone but spend day-after-day in a laboratory with test tubes and virulent serums! In the same way, when we look at "apostles" in the Gospels and compare them to "apostles" in the rest of the New Testament, we can see that the word "apostle" can refer to significantly different ministries.

For example: some apostles wrote things that became accepted as inspired Scripture (the New Testament), but other apostles wrote nothing, and some Scripture that *was* written wasn't written by apostles (*Mark*, for example.) Some apostles traveled all over the known world, planting churches in "unchurched" areas – and some never left Jerusalem. [See endnote<sup>1</sup>.] Some started new churches and others never did. Some

It's important to see the difference between what the Bible does teach and doesn't teach about apostolic ministries. God's intent is for the ministry of apostles to build up the Body of Christ instead of tearing it down. During this first decade of the 21 century, actual practice in apostolic ministries is shifting into healthier practices already. This white paper intends to help facilitate that "shift" by pointing out the difference between what men say about apostles and what the Scriptures say about them.

corrected errors in the young churches or appointed elders or promoted unity amongst the saints or did signs and wonders – and there are apostles who apparently did none of these things. When you look at what the Bible says each apostle *actually did*, there's no way to come up with a dependable "job description" because the biblical record is too sparse and the actual functions described are too varied from apostle to apostle. *Nowhere does the Bible define "apostle"...* therefore *we* must not "define" an "apostle" *and call it God's Word*. Again – we need to start our ongoing "conversation" about "apostles" by drawing a *clear line* between *what the Bible says* and what *we think the Bible means*.

### **What About the Twelve?**

In the Gospels, Jesus chose the Twelve Apostles. He doesn't say what they were supposed to do (as distinct from, say, *disciples*) but He kept His Apostles close by His side so they could watch Him as He "went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil" [Acts 10:38] In *Lk* 9, Jesus told them to go out into the villages of Galilee and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Yet even this doesn't seem to be a particularly "apostolic" thing to do as in the very next chapter (*Lk* 10), Jesus is telling 70 other disciples to go and do the very same thing.

All in all, *there are only eight places* in *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Lk* translated "apostles" and there's only *one* reference in *John* of the same, Greek word, *apostolos*. There in *John*, it's not even translated "apostle" but "sent" – Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, 'The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is *sent* greater than he that *sent* him.'" [*Jn* 13:16] If you check all of the major translations, *none* of them translate *Jn* 13:16 as "apostle" since it's not really talking about the function or office of the Twelve. The verse (servant not greater than his Lord) applies to *everyone* in the Body of Christ, and in the sense that Jesus is using, *all of us* are "servants, sent" [*apostolos*] into the world for His purposes.

The other eight references are not very informative about "apostolic function":

- *Mt* 10:2 Now the names of the twelve **apostles** are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James *the son of* Zebedee, and John his brother;

- *Mr* 6:30 And the **apostles** gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught.
- *Lu* 6:13 And when it was day, he called *unto him* his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named **apostles**;
- *Lu* 9:10 And the **apostles**, when they were returned, told him all that they had done. And he took them, and went aside privately into a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida.
- *Lu* 11:49 Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and **apostles**, and *some* of them they shall slay and persecute:
- *Lu* 17:5 And the **apostles** said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.
- *Lu* 22:14 And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve **apostles** with him.
- *Lu* 24:10 It was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary *the mother* of James, and other *women that were* with them, which told these things unto the **apostles**.

### ***Are There Apostles Other Than the Twelve?***

Some people say that Scripture *does* "define" who can be an apostle, and that the definition only fits the Twelve Apostle and *no more*. They derive this (mistakenly) from *Acts* 1.21f which says the "Eleven" picked a replacement for Judas. The "criteria" they used was to consider which men amongst the disciples had accompanied them "all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John unto that same day that He was taken up from us", and that from this select group "must one be ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection." So some have *speculated* that these "criteria" must be what are necessary for someone to be an "apostle". [*Acts* 1.22] *Notice*: In a sense, Peter gives one of the *responsibilities* of the *Twelve Apostles* – each one must "bear witness" to the Resurrection of Jesus. Peter (the apostle) "exercises" one aspect of this "apostolic ministry" when, in his second letter, he made known to his congregation "the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ", claiming that he himself was a trustworthy "eyewitness" of Jesus' "majesty".

*Now – notice what the Bible says and what it doesn't say.* For one thing, it *doesn't say* "these are the criteria for anyone who'll ever be recognized as an apostle". It *does* say that these are the criteria for someone *who'll fill Judas' "apostleship" amongst the Twelve!* Furthermore, *Paul himself didn't fit these criteria*, so they must *not* have been some sort of "permanent apostolic requirements". Some people argue that Paul "did fulfill" these same criteria since he "saw Jesus" on the road to Damascus, but even *that* doesn't fit the criteria of being in the group of disciples from John's baptism to Jesus' death, Resurrection and Ascension. So, *as far as the Bible goes*, these criteria can *not* define who can or cannot be an apostle.

The Bible tells us there were *many* apostles who were not of the Twelve (beginning with *Jesus Himself* Who is the "Chief Apostle" and certainly not one of the Twelve!) The apostle Paul never became one of the Twelve Apostles. Other apostles mentioned in *Acts* and various epistles included James the Lord's brother, Matthias, Andronicus, Barnabas, Epaphroditus, Silas, Timothy, Junia, and Apollos. "Junia" (KJV), by the way, is a common woman's name mentioned with others as being "noteworthy amongst the apostles" [*Rom* 16.7]



What made these people "apostles"? *The Bible does not say – anywhere.* Thus, we can *speculate*, but we need to apply the rule to "hold *speculations* at arms' length". What did these apostles *do*? What was their *job descriptions*? There is *none given anywhere* – this I know, for the Bible tells me so!

### ***Are There Apostles Today?***

*The Bible says, in Eph 4.11, that when Christ ascended, He "took captivity captive and gave gifts to men". Now, I don't know what it means that He "took captivity captive" (that's very obscure and we always have to keep clear the difference between speculation about things that are unclear and things that are simple, clear, Bible truth.) But I do know what it means when it says He "gave gifts to men" because it goes on in verse 11 to list them: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. And even though the Bible gives no definitions of these, it does give job descriptions! It just says Christ gave these "gifts" to the church so they could "prepare God's 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." (NIV)*



Most importantly, though, neither here in *Eph 4* nor anywhere else in the Bible does it say these "gifts" will cease. It says in *1Cor 13* that prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease, when Jesus Christ has come again, but no word about any of these ministry "gifts" to the Church ever ceasing.

In fact, we could assume these ministry "gifts" may cease when their job is done – but would you say they've finished their job, of "preparing the saints" to minister effectively until the Body of Christ is raised up in the earth, in full its maturity? (Few people would claim the Church has reach its full maturity, "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.")

So, since there is no biblical passage discontinuing any of these ministry gifts, including apostle, it's safe to conclude that it's O.K. to consider they may still be in operation today.

### ***How Does a Person Become an Apostle Today?***

Probably the same way a person became an apostle in Paul's day – God chooses them.

We could look at how the Eleven chose Matthias (*Acts 1*) to make up the place left empty by Judas' suicide, but that only refers to the Twelve – not to the later apostles. We know Paul became an apostle because God made him one ("Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father..." *Gal 1.1* NIV and "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Savior, and Lord Jesus Christ..." *Tit 1.1* KJV)

It's also important to understand that "apostles" weren't necessarily recognized as such by the entire Church. In *1Cor 9.2*, Paul says the following:

If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

In current discussions of apostolic ministries today, I hear a variety of terms being used that harken back to the abuses of prophetic and apostolic ministries in the '70s and '80s. There needs to be a distinction made between terms that are biblical and terms that are not biblical. For example: "Chain of command" and "divine order" are nowhere to be found in Scripture. It's not that these terms can't have true significance (or false, for that matter) but that when we use them, we more easily stray away from what Scripture actually does say. If these terms are used in the current conversation in the Church about apostolic ministries, they need to be used with conscious recognition of which terms are not biblical.

This suggests that even though Paul knew he was an apostle (called by God), *he wasn't everybody's apostle*. He was an apostle *to the people he had led to the Lord*. Today, we might draw a conclusion that *a person is an apostle, to whoever recognizes that person's "apostleship"*. This touches on another fundamental, spiritual principle: *If there ever **is** a "right" exercise of "spiritual authority" of one saint "over" another – still, no leader has spiritual authority over someone else, unless that person "gives" authority to that spiritual leader*. Paul was an apostle because Jesus called him to that function – but he was only an apostle to the people who *chose to recognize* him as such.

Concerning the other apostles – we don't know how Barnabas or Andronicus or Epaphroditus or Junia or Apollos became apostles because the Bible doesn't tell us. Still, it's not wrong to *speculate* that it may *also* have been "not *from* men nor *by* man, but by Jesus Christ..." That's *speculation* and so we don't want to pretend it's *Scripture* – but it does seem *reasonable* to me. You go right ahead and believe differently if you wish, at least about the things which the Bible doesn't teach *simply and clearly*.

There's an interesting passage about how Stephanas (in Corinth) became a "minister" (not an apostle, but still it gives a glimpse of *one kind of "ordination"* in the early Church.)

I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and *that* they have **addicted** themselves to the ministry of the saints,) that ye **submit** yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with *us*, and laboureth. [1Cor 16.15f]

Two important words here (look them up in a Greek dictionary like *Strong's* or *Vine's*) are "addicted" and "submit". The word which the KJV translates "addicted", in Greek means "ordained" or "appointed". Which means (hmmmm...) that Stephanas' family *ordained themselves* as ministers to the saints.

Church boards, pastors, elders and apostles may not *like it*, but at least two, biblical methods of identifying who can be a leader in a local church carrying some sort of spiritual authority are (1) to be appointed by God (Paul) or (2) to appoint yourself (Stephanas). That should provoke some interesting discussions.

Keep in mind that in this White Paper, we're not trying to tell people how to run their churches, religious organizations or apostolic networks. As far as any *humanly engineered organization* goes, whoever is "in charge" of the organization has the right to expect its members to submit to its government. Our concern isn't with straightening out a group's by-laws, but in getting Believers *everywhere* to *begin their conversation about apostles with what the Bible actually teaches* about apostles and apostolic ministries. *Let's first agree with what the Bible tells us – simply and clearly – and then from then on out, draw a line between what the Word says and what we wish it said in respect to our opinions.*

### **So – What About "Apostolic Government"?**

We didn't get to that second, little word in 1Cor 16.15f, "submit". Let's go there now.

I beseech you, brethren, (ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and *that* they have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints,) that ye **submit** yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with *us*, and laboureth. [1Cor 16.15f]

Apparently, Paul not only saw the "self-appointment" of Stephanas' household as *legitimate*, but he pled for (not ordered! *Read it!*) all the saints at Corinth to "submit" to these people's spiritual ministry. The word translated "submit" from the Greek [*hupotasso*] refers to a *voluntary attitude of giving in, yielding, cooperating, sharing responsibility and carrying a shared burden*. [Robertson's Word Pictures]



Now, in *this* section of this White Paper, we're contradicting one of the major *wrong* beliefs today about apostles and apostolic ministries – the issue of *what kind of authority* apostles can exercise over churches or Believers. Think about it – do we want to ask church leaders or church teachers to describe "apostolic government", *or do we want to ask the Bible?*

Let's ask the *Bible* what "governing authority" it gives to apostles.

First, we need to understand that "apostolic ministry" and the idea of "governing" or "controlling" churches and people often imposes a *cultural bias into* the understanding of *Scripture* – ideas that are *neither derived from nor faithful to Scripture*. That is, how a culture defines terms like "government" or "authority" or "submit" or "rule" *greatly affects how the people in that culture interpret those words when used in the Bible*. We need to be careful about reading *our* cultural interpretations into *biblical words* since (in fact) the Bible was written originally to an ancient, mid-eastern culture – *not present-day America, Europe, Asia, etc.!*

We're not arguing that apostles have *no* authority, but that the "authority" credited to them today frequently is not biblical and has often been destructive in the lives of individuals and the Church at large. The Bible shows us what true apostolic authority is – and it has nothing to do with control. Instead, it has everything to do with humility and the apostles' "esteeming others more highly than him or her self."

#### Scripture: Eph 4.11ff

One of the major passages teaching about apostles and apostolic ministries is *Eph 4.11ff*. Let's look at it:

And [Jesus] 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 of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Read this passage carefully and look for where this passage talks about either the *authority* or the *government* of the apostles over the rest of the "ministry gifts" or the saints in general.

Did you find it? (Well, if you did, email me and tell me where.) *It doesn't say anything about apostles ruling the Body or heading up its "government"*.

The *closest* thing it says is where it refers to the saints eventually growing up "in all things into Him Who is the Head – Christ..." But it doesn't say the "apostle" is the "head of the Body" but that "Christ" is the Head.

While we're still on the *Eph 4* passage, let's read a comment, typical of many people today. It's an excerpt from an article on apostolic ministries by C. Peter Wagner:

One of the most explicit Scripture verses [sic] about church growth is *Eph 4:16*, which says that the body of which Jesus is the head, is to be "joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causing growth of the body" (italics added)... *Eph 4:8* says that Jesus, when He ascended, "gave gifts to men," and it goes on to tell us that He gave gifted people to the church **on two levels**: (1) the **government level** (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers) in verse 11, and (2) the **ministry [level]** of the saints in general in verse 12.... When the government is in its proper place, biblical unity of the saints emerges and "every part can do its share." (emphasis mine – excerpt from the article, "The New Apostolic Reformation" by C. Peter Wagner; [www.globalharvest.org/index.asp?action=newapostolic](http://www.globalharvest.org/index.asp?action=newapostolic) )

Observe the *leap* in Wagner's interpretation: He directs our attention to *Eph 4*, assures us that this text "goes on to tell us" *something*, and that *something* is that the Church *has two levels of gifted people* – the *government level* and the *ministry level*. But where (in *these verses*) does the Bible describe the five-fold ministries as "governmental"?



It's amazing because the passage says *nothing* about any "levels" of anybody. The concept of "levels", as well as the concept of "government", is *read into this passage*. The true source of these "two levels" is *church history and men's traditions*. It's a classic example of someone *seeing* what they *expect to see* – even though it isn't there.

There *are* two groups mentioned here – no question about that: (1) "ministering gifts" and (2) "ministering saints". But Paul isn't saying that the one group *governs* the other! He's saying that one group *mends* and *prepares* the other for *their* ministry work. The verse spells out the relationship between the two, but says *nothing* about the "governmental authority" of *anybody*. The only "authority" the apostles possess, according to these verses, is *the authority to serve*.

Scripture: 1Cor 3.10,11

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise master builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Some people claim that Paul's "apostolic authority" resulted from his having laid the spiritual foundation for the church at Corinth, as is mentioned here. Notice what the Bible *does say* and what it *doesn't say*. It *does say* that Paul claims to have laid a "foundation", that the "foundation laid" was in Corinth, and that the "foundation" he laid was "Jesus Christ" – and that "no one can lay any foundation" other than Jesus.

It does *not* say any of these three things: (1) It does *not* say that "laying a foundation is an apostolic function" – one may *assume* that but it is *not* stated. And (2) it does *not* that Paul "laid a foundation" in any other church [I ask you – *does it say that?*] And (3) it does *not* say that having laid this "foundation", Paul has any continuing, *governmental authority* over Corinth.

Not only does the Bible *not say* that Paul repeated the "foundation laying" he did in Corinth elsewhere, the Bible also does *not say* "foundation laying" is a *necessary* part of "apostolic

ministry" in general. Does *every* "apostle" have to lay "foundational truth"? *We can't conclude this as a fact from Scripture*. Only as a theoretical *possibility*. Still, if so, then *every* apostle (named in Scripture) would be a "foundation layer" – but Scriptures and existing historical records don't represent *all* the apostles as functioning in this manner. Again, we must be cautious to take a stand on what the Scriptures *clearly state*, but remain flexible about what we *think* is implied by Scriptures.

**Scripture: 1Cor 5.1-5, 13**

Your own members are aware that there is sexual sin going on among them. This kind of sin is not even heard of among unbelievers – a man is actually married to his father's wife. You're being arrogant when you should have been more upset about this. If you had been upset, the man who did this would have been removed from among you. Although I'm not physically present with you, I am with you in spirit. I have already judged the man who did this as though I were present with you. When you have gathered together, I am with you in spirit. Then, in the name of our Lord Jesus, and with his power, hand such a person over to Satan to destroy his corrupt nature so that his spiritual nature may be saved on the day of the Lord... Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

First, we should make it clear that it's *not clear at all* what it means to "hand someone over to Satan". This practice is *not explained* anywhere in the Bible. There is a sense it has to do with *refusing to fellowship* with someone since in v.2 it says to remove this man from their midst. Some interpreters have suggested that – rather than there being some, dark "curse" put on a person – it could be that Paul is saying that people should no longer attempt to minister to that person, allowing Satan to have increased influence over him. But, *Scripture doesn't explain*.

This passage *seems* to show Paul acting "apostolically". There's no doubt that Paul isn't simply "recommending" a course of action here, but is *demanding* that this incestuous man be *disfellowshipped* and "handed over to Satan" in hopes of an eventual deliverance. Note though, that neither the Scripture nor Paul actually *says* this is an "apostolic action". No matter how much a person might want to *read that into this passage*, it simply *doesn't say so*.

Still, Paul, the apostle, is *"exercising authority" here*.



But *that doesn't mean that Paul exercises this kind of "apostolic command" as a normal pattern of behavior*. In fact, the Bible doesn't say if what Paul did could not (in fact) be done by another spiritually mature brother or sister. Is it necessarily "apostolic" to speak the Word of the Lord in correction to others in the Body of Christ?

Let's draw the line *clearly* about what we *do* know. Paul is writing a letter of correction and reproof to *the most spiritually dysfunctional church in the New Testament*. Thus, the question has to be answered as to whether Paul *habitually* exercises this kind of "apostolic command" with the churches he founded, or if he does so *only in the most extreme of dysfunctional circumstances*.

On another occasion, Paul likewise "delivered" others up to Satan. In *1Tim 1:20* we read the following:

Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Observe that Paul makes no claim to have "delivered unto Satan" these men *as an apostolic act*. In other words, *we cannot assume that "delivering people to Satan" is a function of "apostolic government"*. We only see that in at least two instances, *an apostle did this*, but there's no indication that any other spiritual leader might not do so if deemed necessary.

Thus, from Scripture we know that Paul *commanded* an action be taken by the Corinthian saints, but *we don't know from Scripture* that it was exclusively a "governmental" act of an apostle.

Actually, in his other letters, when Paul is *directing people to act in particular ways*, he does so as a *recommendation* or as his seeking to *influence* the Believers. For example, here are five out of fifteen instances of Paul "exercising apostolic authority":

- *Rom 12.1* I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service.
- *Rom 15.30* Now I beseech you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me;
- *Rom 16.17* Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them.
- *1Cor 1.10* Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment.
- *1Cor 4.16* I beseech you therefore, be ye imitators of me.

There *is* an example (of sorts) in Paul's letter to Philemon about the slave, Onesimus. Paul doesn't *claim* to be acting "apostolically", but he *is* claiming to have a degree of *command* over Philemon in the following:

*Christ makes me bold enough to **order** you to do the right thing. However, I would prefer to make an appeal on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an old man and now a prisoner for Christ Jesus, appeal to you for my child Onesimus. I became his spiritual father here in prison. Philemon 1.8-10*

Paying attention to what Scripture *does* and *does not* say, it *does not* say that Paul has *any authority* (apostolic or otherwise) *to order Philemon to do anything*. (READ it.) It says that Jesus has *emboldened Paul* so much that Paul has considered "ordering" Philemon to "do the right thing". But even in light of the importance of Philemon's response (he *could*, legally, *kill* the returning slave), yet Paul *still hesitated to exercise any "command authority" he might have*, but instead opted to exercise an "authority" of *influence*.



There are four instances where Paul essentially says, "I order you..." Here are all four:

*1Cor 7.17* But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And these are my orders in all my churches.

*1Cor 11.34* And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation. And the rest I will set in order when I come.

*1Cor 16.1* Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have ordered the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.

*Tit 1.5* For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.

Notice that even though 7.17 and 16.1 are in the letter to Corinth, they both refer to Paul's having left "orders" in other churches as well. In 7.17, he says he has "ordered" in *all* his churches that whatever marital state a person is in when they become a Christian, they are to remain in that state. And in 16.1, Paul says that he's "ordering" Corinth just as he "ordered" the churches in Galatia, to collect money as an offering for other saints in need.

But where does Scripture "give apostolic authority" to Paul, and where does Scripture *not* give it? In these two instances, *Paul is "apostolically" correcting serious sins*: (1) neglecting to help care for needy saints elsewhere, and (2) divorcing one's spouse because he or she hasn't also become a Christian.

The other two instances of Paul "ordering" Believers are in 11.34 and *Tit 1.5*. Again, 11.34 is the result of Paul correcting a vile sin (turning the Lord's Supper into an occasion to despise other, poorer Believers), and setting up an initial structure for elders in churches that were brand new (in Crete.)

What can we say for certain the Bible says about "apostolic command"? We're shown examples of the apostle Paul giving order to churches (1) *in the face of grievous sin*, and (2) *in the face of extreme, spiritual immaturity*.



But none of these provide a basis for a continuing apostolic "control" over churches or saints who are mature. They're examples of using a "strong hand" in cases of serious, spiritual immaturity. If we were to apply these examples to *today*, it would lend credence to an "apostle" stepping into a local church situation either (1) to establish spiritual leadership where the church is so young they as yet have none, and (2) to correct serious sin.

The idea that an "apostle" can "command" and "order" saints *on a regular basis* is *not supported* by any of these passages. In fact, Paul's "normal" and much more frequent pattern was to *lead by example, by influence or by request* ("beseech"). His use of an "apostolic command" is, in fact, rare and used for spiritually extreme situations.

The apostle Peter demonstrates a similar reticence to approve of *controlling* people with a "command style" of "spiritual authority". Though the old apostle is *not* talking about "apostolic authority" in this passage, he is talking about *how spiritual authority must be exercised in the Family of God*. *1Pet 5. 2-3* says the following:

Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, *not of constraint*, but willingly, according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; *neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you*, but making yourselves *examples* to the flock.

Peter thus advocates *avoiding any sense of domination or control* in the local church. The "constraint" referred to here is not referring to "constraint" over the "flock", but *over the leaders*. That is – Peter says, "Don't *tend the flock because someone has **ordered** you to do it, but do it **willingly***." Then Peter talks about not exercising control over the flock, saying that when the leaders tend the flock, they are *not to "lord it over" them, but lead them through example*.

Then, in verse 5, Peter brings in the Greek term we referred to earlier, *hupotasso*:

Likewise, all of you who are younger, **submit** yourselves unto those who are older. Yes, all of you **be subject** one to another and be clothed with humility – because God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble.



Look carefully at this verse. The words "submit" and "be subject" *are both the exact, same word – hupotasso – which refers to a voluntary attitude of giving in, yielding, cooperating, sharing responsibility and carrying a burden.*  
[Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament]

Peter is *not* describing some sort of "one way" authority structure, some "chain-of-command", in which the younger are simply to "submit" themselves to the elders in the congregation. No! He tells the younger to submit to the elders, *then he tells everyone – including the elders – to submit to one another*. Again, Peter *avoids any sense of domination or control* of some members of the Body of Christ over other members of the Body. This is the same principle of humility taught elsewhere, such as "each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (*Phil 2.4*) and "be **subject** [*hupotasso*] to one another in the fear of Christ." (*Eph 5.21*)

Other than showing Paul dealing with the most severely dysfunctional local church in the New Testament, there are *no* instances in which the Scriptures tie together "apostolic ministry" and "control over the flock".

In fact, another illuminating passage which refers to the exercise of *spiritual oversight* – even though there's no mention of its being "apostolic" – is in *Heb 13. 7 & 17*:

Remember those who **rule** over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God: follow their faith, considering the result of their way of life... **Obey** them that have the **rule** over you, and **submit** yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

This instruction *has nothing to do with how "submission" is typically understood in our culture*.

In most cultures, there is a very strong association between "submission" and "control". But the book of *Hebrews* wasn't written to our culture, but to a Mediterranean society 2,000

years ago! The intent of the words "obey", "rule" and "submit" (translated from the Greek) are different than the ones used in English.

The word "obey" (*peitho*) means "to trust, have confidence" in your leaders. The word "rule" (*hegeomai*) refers to a leader or person who has *influence* over others. And "submit" (*peitho*) means to *listen* to, to allow yourself to be *persuaded*.



When you put these three terms together, there's no sense of *subjection* (personal or "spiritual") or of *control*. The sense is more moderate, more agreeable than is implied by a *chain-of-command* mentality. The role of the true, spiritual leader is never to *order* or *command*, but instead to *invite*, *persuade* and *influence*.

In this new season of church people talking again about "shepherding", "discipleship", "spiritual covering" and "submission", every Believer must determine for themselves and their families what is the difference between "submission" and "subjection". *Jms 3.17* says that the wisdom which is from Heaven "is first holy, then gentle, readily giving way in argument, full of peace and mercy." No subjection or domination evident here.

Thus, *Heb 13* is showing true, spiritual submission: Spiritual submission is not *control*, but *influence*; spiritual submission is you, submitting yourself, to *influence* — never *control*. Again, *there is no verse about any "apostolic authority" that countermands this instruction.*

#### Scripture: 1Cor 12.28

Many people argue that there is some sort of "apostolic government" in the Church from the following passage in *1Cor 12.28*:

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, divers kinds of tongues.

It's quite clear that Paul writes that "apostles" have been "set" "first" "in the church". But does this mean they have been set *in governmental authority* over the church?

According to *Strong's Greek Dictionary*, "first" can mean either "first in rank, honor, influence" or "first in time or place". Nothing in this verse (or its larger context) *demand*s that we read "first" as one or the other. In other words, if someone chooses to say that this verse *demand*s that we recognize apostles as "first in rank"... they're *wrong*. They're *reading into the verse what they want to find there*.

If there are two, basic meanings of the word "first", *we have to accept that there are two, different possible meanings* – there is *not* a "dogmatic" conclusion to be drawn.

Besides – even if one were to claim that apostles were "first in rank", the Greek allows for this to be "first in influence", not necessarily "the boss". And with both *1Pet* and *Heb 13*, there's ample support for the idea that apostles are "first in influence".

In fact, the idea that apostles aren't "first in rank" but "*first in time or place*" is easily supportable as well. After all, wherever Paul and his ministry team traveled and planted churches, chronologically *the apostle came before anyone else in the newly founded*

*churches*. Paul, the apostle, *started* these churches – he was the *first*, followed by many converts.

There is a certain, potentially misleading "sleight-of-hand" in *1Cor 12.28*: People read about apostles being "first", then scan down the verse and notice the word, "governments" – *and assume it's talking about "apostolic government"*. But this flies in the face of the clear reading of this verse. In fact, "governments" *cannot* be referring to "apostles" – it's listed as one of the spiritual gifts [*charisma*] that *follows* the "apostles", "prophets", "teachers", etc.

### Scripture: **2Cor 1.23f**

A *powerful* statement from Paul offers *tremendous clarity* to the distinction between his preference between "ordering" people as opposed to "influencing" those who were willing to *yield* to his influence:



"Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. *Not that we have dominion* [*kurieuo* - to be lord over] over your faith, but instead we are *fellow-workers* [*sunergos* - a companion in labor] for your joy; for by faith you stand."

Read it carefully. Even though it *could* be argued that in Corinth, Crete, Galatia – Paul "commanded" the saints, here he unmistakably *denies* that he has any right to *dominate* or *control* any of the saints. He *edifies* the saints, considering *all of them along with himself* as being on *one "level"*. Here there is *no hint of standing on some "level" that's "above" other saints* – they are "fellow workers". As has been said often through the years, "the highest calling in Christians' lives *is brother and sister.*"

A final note on apostolic authority: A close friend has drawn an interesting parallel between "apostolic authority" and the American form of government. This parallel is *not Scripture* but it is a useful illustration.

His observation is that (constitutionally), American government is a *democracy* during peacetime, but if we come under "siege", we operate under *martial law*. And in the US, the person who is at the head of our country in peacetime (the President) is the same person who directs martial forces during a time of threat (commander-in-chief of the armed forces.)

This offers an appealing framework for understanding that "apostolic authority" – during "spiritual peacetime" – can be a leadership that is *collegiate* and *non-authoritarian*, and yet – during a time of spiritual crisis or fledgling immaturity – can become a temporarily "authoritarian" leadership.

Still, we can't avoid the question, "Who determines what a spiritual crisis is?" Another friend suggests we might take a look at *Acts 15.20, 29* in which James and the brothers in Jerusalem put three (maybe four) restrictions on Paul's, Gentile converts: They were to abstain from (1) food offered to idols, (2) blood, (3) eating the meat of strangled animals, and (4) sexual immorality. When we look at various instances of Paul's warnings and "guarding" the saints from sin, most errors fall into these areas. It *could* be that a spiritual crisis would have to be practicing anything in violation to one of these mandates.

But understand this: It's not hard to imagine a carnal leader in a congregation (network, whatever) declaring that someone else has brought about a "spiritual crisis" and must "be brought under apostolic reproof"... However you cut it, the argument that apostles can "exercise authority" in times of spiritual crises runs against the *general* and *overwhelming* evidence on how they exercised authority, and added to the lack of a *clear, biblical definition* for "spiritual crisis", this line of thinking can easily lend itself to spiritual abuse.

### ***Jargon alert — "Government"***

A note of warning, though, is appropriate here about using the term "government" along with "apostles", "apostleships", etc. This word has implications that are *not easily supported by Scripture*. When church leaders today refer to "apostolic government", there *can be* a biblically appropriate meaning — but that *appropriate* meaning is easily expressed with words which don't carry any *inappropriate* implications.

The term, "apostolic government", carries an uncomfortable precedent of being used *and seriously abused* in the '70s and '80s, primarily associated with "shepherding congregations". Even apart from that historical abuse, the way Americans use the word, "government", make it a poor choice for describing apostolic oversight. Normal, American usage attaches to the term "government" or "governor" *implications of control*. In the Bible, when describing the function of apostolic ministries, such implications are not normative. *Oversight*, yes — *control*, no.

Wikipedia gives the American usage of "government" as "the ruling power in a political society," as well as referring to the *organizational apparatus* through which a governing body functions and exercises *control*. "Government, with the authority to *make laws*, to *adjudicate disputes*, and to *issue administrative decisions*, and with a *monopoly of authorized force where it fails to persuade*, is an indispensable means, proximately, to the peace of communal life."

*Governmental control of this nature* over the Body of Christ and the people of God is clearly *prohibited* by Jesus (the Head) during the Last Supper. (Lk 22. 25-27) Instead, leaders in the Church are called to *model, persuade, plead, affirm*, etc. the people of God. Biblical "rule" refers to "influence" and "persuasion" *but never control*.

Having watched the heartbreaking fruit of unbiblical "submission" in previous years, we feel it's *urgent* to urge church leaders today to set aside that so badly abused jargon and substitute a more cautious, more biblically *precise* vocabulary.

### ***Apostolic Company***

In fact, there *is* a biblically accurate alternative for "government", and that is from *Acts*: the word, "company". For example, *Acts* 21.8: "The next day we that were of Paul's *company* departed..." This is the Greek word, *peri*, and simply means "those around Paul". This word (1) acknowledges that this is an identifiable group apart from other groups, and (2) is joined together with the apostle and his apostleship (the apostle's identified mission.)

To refer to the group of people who have gathered around an apostle, having joined themselves to that apostle's mission, as an "apostolic company" gives the necessary sense of identified group structure, but *with none of the negative implications of the term "government"*.

**Summary Conclusions:**

If you "jumped here" from the beginning, understand that the Scriptural support for these conclusions have already been given in the body of this paper, above.

- (1) Nowhere does the Bible define "apostle"... therefore we must not "define" an "apostle" and call it God's Word.
- (2) No two apostles will look the same or minister the same. (We see this by simply comparing what we know about Peter to Paul to Barnabas and to other apostles. This variety also fits the pattern of *1Cor 12.4-11*.)
- (3) "Apostolic authority" operates as do all spiritual "rulers" in the Church – primarily as mature, spiritual guides, leading into spiritual maturity those Believers who yield to their counsel (*Heb 13. 7 & 17*). The only, biblical exceptions are possibly in times of *spiritual crisis* or *fledgling immaturity*. Nowhere in the Bible can "apostolic authority" be shown to parallel natural, human authority. There is no demonstrable, biblical support for "apostolic succession" or any other ecclesiastical "church authority". In fact, any leader in a church who tries to make out apostolic ministry to be *controlling* is merely trying to *fit the work of the apostle into the traditions of men* (which Jesus emphatically renounces in *Mt 20.25, Mk 10.42 & Lk 22.25*.) Apostolic authority *edifies & builds*; it *encourages & comforts*, much as does the prophetic ministries in the Church. (*1Cor 14.3*)
- (4) Nowhere in the New Testament is there any support to their being an "apostolate" as an institutional church office which is capable of being passed on (apostolic succession). Nor is the idea of a "ruling apostolate" consistent with the leadership depicted from *Acts* through the Epistles – a leadership that is *collegiate* and *non-authoritarian*. Such church leadership is, moreover, faithfully consistent with the teachings on spiritual leaders being leaders in *humility* and *servanthood*.
- (5) "Apostleship" does not a "government" make... "Apostleship" (Greek, "αποστολε"), used four times in the New Testament, is used three times of Paul. In the context of these three verses, "apostleship" doesn't refer to the "office" Paul "filled" but instead refers to *the mission the apostle is sent on...* i.e. Paul's "apostleship" was his divine commission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.
- (6) In line with (3) is the important observation that *nowhere does the Bible directly link apostles (or the "five-fold") with "government" or "governors" of individuals in the Body of Christ*.
- (7) The role of an apostle (along with the other "five-fold gifts") is *expressly delineated* in *Eph 4.11ff* – it is [*kartartismos*] to *mend* the saints, to *prepare* them, *build* them up or *complete* them for *their ministry works*. This is the *closest thing to a definition of "apostle" found in the Bible, yet is also the working "definition" for the other five-fold ministry gifts*.
- (8) Wuest (*Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*) and others point out *historical* references from Paul's day, to the use of the word "apostol" (the Greek word for "apostle") as an *ambassador* representing another person (king?) or power (kingdom?) – namely

*one who is sent on a commission* who is given both *credentials of authenticity* and the *responsibility of executing the orders of the one sending him*. Again – keep the difference clear between what *the Bible actually says*, and *what ideas people import into the Bible*. Valuable as is Wuest's research into non-biblical, historical references – *they're non-biblical!* Don't build dogmatic doctrine on non-biblical information.

- (9) It's safe to say that these terms – *apostles, prophets, etc.* – are not *titles*, but *functions*. They don't describe *identities*, but *activities*. For example – Paul was an apostle not because some group ordained him and entitled him "apostle", but because certain people received him in that function. In fact, to those who did not receive him in that function, he was not their "apostle".

## In Conclusion



Now, if you are a member of an "apostolic network", the leaders of that "network" **can exercise whatever form of "rule" they choose and to which its members agree**. If you *join* a religious organization and *agree* that its leaders can tell you what to believe, you better do it. The Bible does tell us to obey the "boss" over any *earthly* organization that we're a part of – if we're part of the Roman Empire and the Emperor is Nero, submit to him (and pay your taxes) and trust God to watch over you. If you're a slave, then submit to your master and trust God to watch over you. Those examples (and others) are in the Bible, but they represent spiritual principles which parallel modern circumstances in respect to other organizations of which you are part (willingly or unwillingly.)

*For example:* If you accept employment in someone's business, obey the Boss to whatever degree the terms of your employment or the labor laws of the state demand. If you join a lodge ("Lions", "Kiwanis", "Rotary", etc.), and the "Boss" is a committee, obey them to whatever degree the By-Laws demand. If you join a church (which is a religious organization and is *not* the Body of Christ), and if the "Boss" is the Pastor or a Board, obey the Pastor or the Board to whatever degree the By-Laws demand. Be agreeable or get out. Don't stay in, in rebellion against the organization's recognized, legal government.



*But these only apply to you when you join or are a part of someone's organization.* Remember to (1) *stick with what the Bible teaches* and (2) *identify the difference between what people speculate and what is taught in the Word.*

When it comes to what the Bible says about the exercise of authority in the *Church*, it will always be as Jesus said, "*not as the Gentiles exercise authority.*" [Lk 22.26] Godly leadership and authority is *persuasive but not demanding, corrective but not controlling*. It is an "authority" in which leaders *lead*, in which they *persuade* and *model godliness* – and to which God asks the saints to *yield, to follow, to cooperate, to share responsibility and carry a shared burden...*

Always remembering --

The Bible assigns to leaders in the Church *no constraint* and *no control* over the saints – *apostolic or otherwise*.



Em&M Ministries

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*Special Note from our ministry:* Though the five ministry gifts of *Eph 4* have been restored by God to the Church today, He did not include instructions on their functions or explanations as to the precise nature of their ministries. Em&M Ministries takes a stand that many such "explanations" that have been proposed in the last half-century tend to be *deeply flawed* by people's personal desires and expectations. The common temptation is to argue from *what is known* to *what we wish we knew*. Thus, an "apostle" (unknown) is compared to a "church planter", a "missionary", a "spiritual administrator" or "president", a "father" or some other familiar role in society. But not so with us. Though we're not concerned if *others* choose to use these parallels, we are *careful* to define the nature and function according to *what little Scriptures says*, and *cautious* about going very far beyond the clear word of Scripture. For example, many people treat "apostle" as an "office" in the "church" holding powerful authority and control over people's lives – even though Paul himself did not so exercise his "apostlehood" or his "apostleship" in this fashion. But exercising authority as "kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship" is *assumed* by many to be the nature of authority as exercised by "apostles". All of the five-fold "equippers" to the Body *do* have authority from God... They have authority to *serve* – but not to *control* or *subjugate*. Therefore, whenever teaching passes beyond the meager examples Scripture gives to us, in Em&M Ministries, we will continue to hold loosely and humbly to such extra-biblical "theories" about the functions of these five-fold, ministry gifts.

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<sup>i</sup> *Note about "planting churches":* The term, "church planting", is found nowhere in Scripture. To say that "apostles plant churches" is not only popular opinion *which is undefined in the Bible*, it also may not even be biblical in any clear sense. Nowhere does the Word say Paul went to one region or another "to plant a church". One of the clearest statements to be found is in 1Cor 3.10 in which Paul writes that in Corinth, he "laid the foundation", and that that "foundation" was Christ. "Planting a church" is typically viewed as an *organizational activity*, whereas "laying the Foundation" is a *spiritual activity* -- it is, in fact, introducing the people of a region to the Foundation *Himself*, Who is a Person, the Person of Jesus Christ. Setting in place an *organization* is not at all the same as *birthing an organism*. Paul fostered a *Relationship* in which he introduced people to the Foundation, then taught the new Believers how to *build upon that Foundation* ("and so do not build upon it wood, hay and stubble.") es