

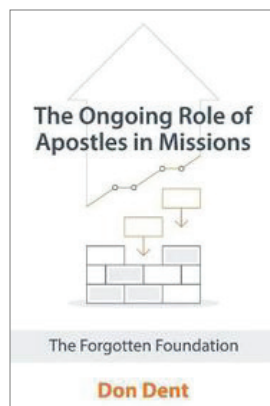
The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions: The Forgotten Foundation

By Don Dent

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Reviewed by William Jackson

William Jackson (pseudonym) has been engaged in church planting among Muslims in South Asia since 2012. He and his family live in a restrictive access country. William taught English to college-age students and is now pursuing another creative access business. He is passionate about evangelism, church formation, vision, strategy, and the development of people around him.



The role of the apostle is alive today and sorely needed for foundational church planting. Dent argues throughout his book that the gift of apostleship is for every age and churches and missions agencies often fail to realize this (Thesis Statement, para. 1). He says that the word *apostle* was used in the early church for missionaries, and the loss of this word today has negatively affected missions today (Chapter Summaries, para. 2). If Dent is correct in his understanding of the gift of apostleship and its relevance in church planting, then the example of Paul and the apostles in the New Testament is worthy of following (Thesis Statement, para. 1). This topic integrates theology, missiology, and Christian History and is important for any Christian seeking to fulfill God's mission on earth.

Dent worked as a Church Planter and later trainer of new missionaries within the International Mission Board (IMB) for more than three decades (Personal Background, para. 1, 2). Dent is concerned that ineffectiveness in missions today is the result of missionaries not building upon an apostolic, New Testament model and foundation (Personal Background, para. 5).

Summary of Content

Dent rightly begins with Scripture to demonstrate that apostles are God's gift for all generations (Chapter Summaries, para. 4). He says that too often we associate the word *apostle* with a role, an office in the Church, but divorce it from its Scriptural emphasis on mission (chap. 1, para. 1). The English word apostle comes from the Greek *apostolos* which always "denotes a man who is sent...with full authority" (chap. 1., sec. 3). The word *missionary* was developed from the Latin word *mitto* (to send) and was popularized during the colonial period when it described the state's and church's sending of envoys on religious assignments (chap. 1., sec. 3). In the Gospels we see that the Twelve were first called apostles because Jesus sent them (chap. 1., "Task and Authority in the Apostles' Commission"). They were commissioned by Jesus to make disciples among every people group.

Apostles lay a foundation upon Christ in new areas of church planting (chap. 2, "Foundation Builders"). Dent describes four groups of apostles in the New Testament: 1) The Twelve, 2) other commissioned eyewitnesses, 3) missionary apostles, and 4) envoys of the churches (chap. 2, "Persons Identified as Apostles"). Scriptures like 1 Cor. 15:7 demonstrate that this group of apostles was larger than the Twelve (chap. 2, "Other Commissioned Eyewitnesses"). Acts 14:4 shows that Luke also considered fellow missionaries to be apostles (chap. 2, "Missionary Activities"). Paul wrote his appreciation to Andronicus and Junias (presumably a woman) as apostles (Rom. 16:7). Many scholars also believe Paul thought of Apollos as an apostle (1 Cor. 3:4-10,22;

chap. 2, "Missionary Apostles"). Dent argues that Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy should also be considered as apostles given their assistance in foundational church planting in Paul's ministry (chap. 2, "Missionary Apostles"; 1 Thes. 2:6-7). Ephesians 4:11 never gives the impression that God's gift of apostles will end before Christ's return (chap. 2, "Gift to the Church").

Dent also surveys the meaning of "apostle" in early Christian literature and trustworthy historical sources. The *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* use the term *apostle* to describe itinerant Gospel preachers who needed hospitality while on their travels (chap. 1, "Early Church Missionaries as Apostles"). Both Origen and Eusebius use the term apostle for people who were involved in foundational church planting. Today, some theologians say that the term apostle is approximate to the word for what we call missionary today (Demarest, Calvin, Oden, Geisler, Keener), while others say that apostles are no longer necessary (Ladd, Erickson, Saucy, Grudem; cf. chap. 1, "The Evangelical Focus on Scriptural Authority"). In more recent times there has been a resurgence of a rediscovery of the leadership pattern in ministry in Eph. 4:11 (Apostle, Prophet, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers – five-fold ministry pattern or APEST) (chap. 1, "Emerging and Missionary Church Advocates).

Unfortunately, the word *apostle* received negative attention when heretics claimed they were apostles, therefore diluting the word, work and office (2 Cor. 11:13; chap. 1, "The Slow Divorce of Task and Authority"). At times the church has assumed that the role of apostles has been antiquated as people thought the fulfillment of the Great Commission had already happened. Ed Stetzer says that when the Reformers rejected apostolic succession, they tacitly deemphasized the sending nature of the church and zeal for missions diminished (chap. 1, "The Slow Divorce of Task and Authority" and "Emerging and Missionary Church Advocates).

Dent describes the Apostle Phase of church planting as one where evangelism is prominent and people are first coming to Christ in an unreached area. New believers are then discipled and the apostles look

for local church leaders to provide leadership for new congregations (chap. 3, "The Apostle Phase and Established Church Phase Compared"). Dent says that miraculous signs, suffering, sacrifice and struggle will most likely be needed and occur in the Apostle Phase of church planting (chap. 3, "The Apostle Phase and Established Church Phase Compared"). He argues that, because the apostle role is needed today, Paul's ministry model should be examined and used contextually since he was an effective church planter we have significant information on (chap. 4, "Paul as Missionary Model"). There are certainly characteristics and social statuses that Paul had that we do not, but principles from his ministry can be applied today. His plans of evangelism, follow up, teaching and leadership development are clearly written in the New Testament (chap. 4, "Foundation of Paul's Strategy"). Paul was not a lone ranger, but developed church planting teams throughout his ministry, something worth emulating today (chap. 4, "Foundation of Paul's Strategy").

Evaluation

Don Dent's writing style helps the reader through complex theological issues in a succinct manner. Dent does not seek to vilify those who disagree with them, but to demonstrate that he understands the complexities of this discussion on the word apostle. He thoughtfully interacts with the Scriptures' use of *apostle*, making the case for his view of its biblical meaning while tactfully acknowledging opposing viewpoints. I think he aptly fulfills his thesis, demonstrating that the loss of the word apostle and its connection to its task of discipling individuals in all people groups negatively affects missions today.

Dent compiles a vast amount of resources to show how the word apostle is used in the New Testament and later Christian sources. He shows that the work of apostles as foundation builders in the church has continued throughout history. I am thankful to be a part of a missions organization that affirms and applies most of Paul's missions strategies listed by Dent. Chapter 4 provides detailed information for the church

planter seeking to apply Paul's principles, ideas, strategy and plans in ministry.

While not a weakness to the book, some readers may not fully agree with Dent, theologically and / or missiologically. His exegesis on Ephesians 4:11, that the five types of leaders in the church continue until Christ's return, is one that not all will find tenable. (I, however do.) I enjoyed Dent's discussion on miracles and their possible involvement in foundational church planting (chap. 3, "Signs – Suffering – Sacrifice – Struggle") along with his survey of missionaries on their experience with miracles (Appendix 1, para. 1).

Relevance for the Practitioner

This book will benefit the global church for multiple reasons I'll list below. Apostolically minded Church planters among unreached peoples will find this book affirming to their gift-set. Missions agencies whose main goal is church planting among UPGs should consider if their Team Leaders are apostolic in nature. It seems most ideal to begin a foundational church planting work with such an individual, coupled with other spiritual gifts once the ground has broken. The role of the apostolic leader is also addressed in *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities*, where Greg Livingstone suggests the apostolic leader consider forming their team with an equal distribution of the leadership gifts presented in Eph. 4:11 (Livingstone 1993, 211). As a ministry develops a foundation upon Christ, the Apostle should prayerfully consider if they need to move on and let the Pastors and Teachers nourish the church and or movement.

Dent's book will also benefit churches in already reached areas as they consider developing the men and women in their congregation according to Eph. 4:11. In most Churches in the West, I see heavy utilization of the Pastor and Teacher roles, but a failure to develop the Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists among them. For such churches, reading through this book will help develop and free such individuals to

minister according to the gifts God has given them. Throughout the book, Dent encourages the reader to strongly consider Paul's ministry methods and apply them. Paul admonished the Corinthians to imitate him (1 Cor. 11:1) and the Philippians to follow his example (Phil. 3:17). This gives me reason to contemplate to what extent we are to follow and imitate Paul's ministry today?

As a church planter myself, I would have benefitted from reading this book prior to beginning our ministry among an unreached Muslim people group. I had wondered about the gift of apostle and why it was hard to connect with churches who were not passionate about reproducing themselves. Had I understood the gifting of apostle and its inclusion in Eph. 4:11 as a primal leadership gift in the church, I would have become more confident in who God created me to be. This book will assist those who are apostles, who find it difficult when church leaders do not affirm their giftings, and free them to create new ministries in line with this inherent desire to preach the Gospel and make disciples where Christ has not been named (Rom. 15:20). As our church planting team continues ministry and disciples are made, I believe God wants me to develop other teammates and see what leadership gifts God has given them to build the unity of the church (Eph. 4:13). Ministry is certainly not a "one-man show."

Recommendation

I highly recommend this book to all believers serious about affirming various leadership gifts so that the body of Christ is unified (Eph. 4:11-13). There are biblical reasons to believe the gift of apostle still exists today, and Dent provides the rationale for this and a healthy boundary to this term. This book serves the whole church so that apostles are affirmed, developed and released to plant churches whose foundation is built upon Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-11).

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Selected Bibliography

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