

## APOSTOLIC MINISTRY TODAY

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### INTRODUCTION

The evangelical movement has always been characterized as a biblical movement. It has always emphasized the daily reading of the sacred scriptures.

The Catholic church following the Vatican Council II, began to strongly recommend to the faithful the reading of the Bible. Praise God.

As evangelicals we have always been proud to say that *the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice*. On the other hand, the Catholic church affirms that there are three sources of authority in matters of faith, which are: the Bible, tradition and the magisterial ministry of the church. But I discovered that in practice we also have our traditions and our respective magisterial ministry, and that in many matters we depend more upon those elements than on the Bible.

Conceptually, as Christians we all believe and accept that Jesus Christ is the full revelation of God; that the first century apostles and prophets received that revelation, and that through their writings they transmitted that revelation for all generations. We believe that the New Testament is the reliable and divinely inspired register of that revelation. They established the doctrinal and kerygmatic foundation of the church for all times. And that foundation is immutable; it does not allow changes, neither reductions nor additions. We have been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2.20).

However, over the centuries the church started to drift away from that foundation. There were changes, detours, additions, and even practices and teachings contrary to those of Christ and the apostles were introduced. A reformation was urgently needed. And the reformation came.

What was the intention of the reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the intention of every reformation? To return to the Word of God, to the foundation established by the apostles.

Today, has the evangelical movement recovered the totality of biblical truth? Are we free of all error in our doctrine and practice?

My response, as well as that of many, is that we cannot say that we are. Much advance has been made in these centuries. The church has been gradually recovering the truths of the Word, but the reformation has not yet concluded. It should continue until we recover the totality of the Lord's truth. Therefore, we need to continue to read the Scriptures with a broken heart, like children, so that we might receive the revelation of the Spirit, especially concerning the mystery of Christ and his church, until we all reach the unity of the faith and the full knowledge of the Son of God.

### NOW LET US CONSIDER THE SUBJECT THAT CONCERNS US TODAY

Of the ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:13, the evangelical church in general has accepted the validity of the pastor, teacher and evangelist, but not that of apostle or prophet. Why? Because of our traditions and our fears.

That's why we say that the reformation should continue until we fully recover, among other things, the functioning of all the gifts and ministries that God has established in his church. And we praise God that this is happening.

Since the decade of the 60s, in many places in the world there is an insistence concerning the ministries of Ephesians 4:11. In recent years there have been in some places an exaggerated application of apostolic ministry, but abuse should not be a motive for disdaining the ministry, but rather motivate us to seek God for the correct and balanced use of this important ministry gift for the

body of Christ. In many sectors there is a growing conviction that the apostolic and prophetic ministries are valid today.

## **I. THE PRINCIPAL MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE MODEL AND THE TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

There are two basic passages that underscore the principal ministries established by the Lord in the church: 1 Cor. 12.28 and Eph. 4.11-16

1 CORINTHIANS 12.28:

*“And in the church God has appointed first of all APOSTLES, second PROPHETS, third TEACHERS, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues”.*

EPHESIANS 4.11-16:

*“It was he who gave some to be APOSTLES, some to be PROPHETS, some to be EVANGELISTS, and some to be PASTORS and TEACHERS, to 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. Then we will no longer be infants ... Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”*

This text clearly indicates to us the following:

- 1) All these ministries are valid until the building up of the body of Christ is complete, until we all reach the unity of the faith, and until we reach the stature of the fullness of Christ.
- 2) The only head of the church is Jesus Christ, and he has never delegated that function to anyone else. He is living and is governing his church. It is he who gives these gifts to those whom he pleases, with which he prepares his servants for specific ministries in the body.
- 3) The church is a body (not many small bodies), an organism (not an organization). All the body should be well coordinated and united by the joints, and mutually helping each other for their edification and growth.
- 4) The church is edified and should function according to the ministry gifts that Christ places within it, and not according to the statutes or offices established by an organization.

Through these texts and the teaching of the New Testament in general, we understand that the PRINCIPAL MINISTRY GIFTS that Christ has given to the church are four or five, depending on whether we interpret whether the ministry of pastor and teacher is the same or if there are two different ministries:

- |                   |               |
|-------------------|---------------|
| ▪ APOSTLES        | ▪ APOSTLES    |
| ▪ PROPHETS        | ▪ PROPHETS    |
| ▪ EVANGELISTS     | ▪ EVANGELISTS |
| ▪ PASTOR-TEACHERS | ▪ PASTORS     |
|                   | ▪ TEACHERS    |

### **APOSTLES**

We understand that in the New Testament there are three kinds of apostles:

#### 1. The twelve apostles

These have a unique characteristic because they were personal witnesses of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ. Moreover, they were the direct recipients and transmitters of Jesus’ teachings. When one of the twelve dropped out, Judas Iscariot, his substitute had to be someone that had been with them from the baptism of John until the ascension of Christ (Acts 1:15-26).

#### 2. The other apostles of the first century who, together with the twelve, established the foundation of the church.

The Lord raised up other apostles and prophets apart from the twelve (such as Paul and Barnabas), who together with the twelve received by the Holy Spirit the revelation of the mystery of Christ and his church (Ephesians 3:1-7). They were the channels of the revelation to make us aware of the mystery of Christ, and registered this revelation in the pages of the New Testament. All of them had a FUNCTION AS PIONEERS, which was exclusive and unrepeatable, whose purpose was to establish the immutable doctrinal and kerygmatic foundation of the church for all ages (Eph. 2:20). This revelation is registered in the sacred Scriptures of the New Testament, and does not admit later additions or modifications after the time of the primitive apostles (Gal.1:8-9).

### 3. Apostolic ministry of a permanent nature.

According to Eph. 4:11-16, Christ continues to give to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers until the edification of the body of Christ is complete, until we all reach the unity of the faith, etc. Having pointed out the unique and exclusive character of the first-century apostles, we need to make clear the nature of apostolic ministry:

a) Evangelize. Apostle means “one who is sent”. He is sent to the world. He is a man who is near to the heart of God and burns with God’s very desire that the gospel might reach all the world and every person (Rom. 1:1, 5, 14, 15; 15:18-24).

b) Accompany the evangelization with signs and wonders (2 Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:19)

c) Establish churches (1 Cor. 3:10-11). Evangelization in new areas generates the birth of new churches. This task requires teaching the new communities, training the saints, forming new workers, ordaining elders, etc. Paul indicates that since he was the instrument for raising up the church in Corinth, that fact was the seal of his apostleship among them (1 Cor. 9:2).

d) Supervise the churches with apostolic authority: intercede for them, teach wholesome doctrine, encourage, instruct, correct errors, discipline the impenitent, etc. This supervision and ministry is done through personal visits, letters, and by dispatching apostolic delegates. The purpose of this apostolic covering is to assure that the new churches have a wholesome faith, live in holiness, maintain the unity, serve others in love and evangelize the world.

e) They are to be men with light and revelation from the Lord. We have already shown that the apostles together with the prophets are channels of revelation (Eph. 3:5). This revelation refers to the “*kerygma*” (the complete revelation of the mystery of Christ and the church) and the “*didache*” (the totality of the commandments that reveal the will of God) that was already given by the first apostles and is registered objectively in the sacred scriptures. But today, as always, we need ministries of revelation in two senses:

– To help the saints to understand “what is already revealed”. Through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit God gives to some of his servants light on the ancient truths of the Word, truths that have always been there, were read, but often not understood, because of the overgrowth of erroneous traditions, through cultural and religious conditioning, or due to our natural human limitations. The proper use of this gift has always brought to the church revival and renewal, and its abuse brings heresies.

– Because of the need of a circumstantial and particular orientation. Just as Jesus Christ gave to John a specific message concerning each of the seven churches of Asia, today we face the same need. God is able to reveal to his servants a specific word for a specific church, nation, or individual.

f) To be the principal authority in the ecclesiastical structure. In the lists of ministry gifts, they always appear in first place. In 1 Cor. 12:28, in the Greek, it says textually: “FIRST, apostles; SECOND, prophets; THIRD, teachers; AFTERWARDS ...” This order is not casual but intentional; it reveals the order of the ministries. The apostles, under Christ’s authority, are the principal authority over the churches and the other ministries.

This is God’s order for the church and it is what makes unity possible. The overall direction of the work is the responsibility of the apostles, under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

## **PROPHETS**

There are not many references in the New Testament to this ministry. Among those that exist, we can point out the following:

- 1) In our references to the apostles we already pointed out that the prophets are also channels of revelation. What we have said concerning the grace of the revelation is applicable also to the prophets. For both are mentioned in the N.T. as ministries that receive revelation. (Eph. 2:20; 3:5).
- 2) In the order of the ministry gifts, they occupy the second place, both in 1 Cor. 12:28 and in Eph. 4:11.
- 3) It is evident that the apostle has structural and spiritual authority over the churches that are under his ministry, while the prophet would seem to have mostly spiritual authority.
- 4) Two different profiles of the prophet can be seen:
  - Prophets with the characteristics of Agabus, who apparently moved more in “words of knowledge” concerning persons and circumstances. The Lord revealed to him that a famine was coming over the inhabited earth, so that the disciples of Antioch sent economic help to their brothers in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). On another occasion he revealed that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-11).
  - Prophets with the characteristics of Barnabas, Silas and Judas. Concerning these last two Acts 15:32 tells us: “*Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers*”. I believe that this profile differs somewhat from that of Agabus. Evidently, these developed more the ministry of edification, consolation and confirmation in the churches. Something similar is said of Barnabas in describing his ministry when he arrived in Antioch (Acts 11:23-24). Silas accompanied Paul following his separation from Barnabas, and was for a good time a member of his apostolic team.
- 5) Just as with the apostles, their ministry is both local and translocal.

(I take the liberty here to give a brief description of the other ministries)

### **EVANGELIST**

This term appears three times in the N.T.: Eph.4.11; Acts 21.8 and 2 Tim.4.5.

They work with the apostles, members of the apostolic team. Their function is to evangelize and to communicate the apostolic teachings, establish churches, ordain elders, etc. They are always under the authority of the apostles. This is a translocal ministry.

### **PASTOR-TEACHER / PASTOR or TEACHER**

These are localized ministries to shepherd, teach, preach, care for and govern the flock of God. This gift is required for someone to be ordained as a presbyter (1 Tim. 3.2).

## **II. THE CURRENT NEED FOR APOSTOLIC MINISTRY**

Orville Swindoll in the year 1982 in Argentina, said in teaching on the current validity of the apostolic ministry (pp.3-4):

“... Our current interest is based on the conviction that the extension of the work throughout the country brings into relief the need for apostolic ministry ...

Questions and situations have arisen whose solution is not found in strictly pastoral or evangelistic ministry. For instance:

1) There are situations that do not respond to a relation based merely on “ligaments” (Antioch did not have an initial “ligament” with Jerusalem. Jerusalem does not figure as a “mother church”). There is no clear biblical basis to affirm the authority of a pastor in one city over a pastor in another city (although there might exist a close relationship between them for other reasons).

2) There are congregations that progress well with good pastoral ministry. But to grow with a broad and integral vision, to achieve coherence and normal growth, they recognize that another kind of ministry is necessary that could open the congregation to a larger vision and that could lead them to the realization of that vision without losing the positive aspects achieved through effective pastoral ministry.

3) In classic evangelism there has been lacking a more effective coordination with the integral vision of the

church. As evangelistic ministry involves the church in the extension of the kingdom of God, we believe that there is an implicit need for a larger focus to give it orientation.

4) When we observe in a certain brother gifts and grace (together with a good measure of experience and maturity) for the formation of leaders, the establishment of new congregations, the orientation of pastors and communities with difficulties, etc., is it right to continue limiting such brothers to a completely pastoral ministry? Would it not be more convenient for everyone to recognize such a person for the grace that he has and encourage him to dedicate himself rather to those tasks that contribute to a greater extension?

5) Several questions emerge with regard to problems in the congregations:

- When a difficulty arises in a congregation that goes beyond the capacity or the authority of the local leaders to resolve it, to whom should the brothers appeal in search of a solution?
- What can be done to save a congregation from a disgrace or from falling apart when the local leadership abandons their responsibility, or incurs in sins that discredit them before the community?
- When several pastors in a city or in a community are unable to agree and there is a threat or danger of a division, isn't a ministry that is more than pastoral needed that can act with grace to resolve the situation? Isn't it worthwhile to be able to identify those ministries before a crisis occurs?
- There are situations bogged down in confusion, indisposition, traditionalism and stubbornness, that grow and afflict the entire Christian community and cannot be resolved without a wise ministry with a broad mandate and clarity regarding the goals and methods to use for their full realization. Clearly, in these situations a ministry with a broad scope is needed.

6) As the testimony of spiritual renewal and restoration is extended to different areas of the country, at times the case has arisen in which several pastors in the same region want to see spiritual renewal in their congregations. Wouldn't time be gained as well as the promotion of companionship among them if a ministry with translocal characteristics could provide them orientation together?

7) In practice, many Christian groups have recognized the need of a ministry that goes beyond what is strictly pastoral, but they tend to give that function another name, such as bishop, superintendent, district missionary, etc. One of the problems with such a scheme is that, since these titles are not biblical—or they are combined with responsibilities that are not biblically related—we find ourselves without reference points in the Scriptures to define functions and responsibilities. At the same time, this often gives place to unfortunate excesses or to arbitrary definitions. Moreover, this practice gives room for the creation of offices that perpetuate themselves and are sometimes occupied by men who, although they do not possess the necessary grace nor have a vital relationship with the churches and pastors, they carry out an institutional function (here we see the difference between organization and organism).

8) When the need appears to recognize new pastors that have arisen in a congregation, what other ministries would be authorized to grant them public recognition?

Later on, Swindoll speaks of our specific context: (pp. 1-12)

Today in our society we face a Christian context in decadence. There are profound differences and divisions among Christians, both in form and in substance. Many seriously question the action and participation of different ministries. This is a generalization, although, fortunately, there are noteworthy exceptions. But they are exceptions, precisely because they are few and far between.

In this situation, the prophetic ministry becomes quite relevant, since its emphasis is the call to return to divine principles. They lay the plumb line to the current situation and reveal its true state as compared to God's revelation. Pronouncement is made against useless human substitutes. They awaken concern. They bring together action groups in favor of renewal. They clarify the vision; they clarify the spiritual horizon; they focus with clarity on the divine objective.

But **without an apostolic ministry that translates this into reality**, that corrects the errors, that lays the foundation and forms communities, no significant penetration is achieved in the social context. After awakening, we have to put hands to the task. After the vision is clarified, we must proceed to its realization. Once the people are gathered, they must be formed into coherent communities, attractive and with impetus. And all this has to be done with a singular purpose, with clarity and with effective methodology.

Another element of enormous importance, that springs out of apostolic ministry, is the unity and universality of the vision. It is this vision that unifies the work and unites the Christian communities. Together the apostles do the same work, although their activities at different times or in different places may vary considerably. Without an apostolic vision, the churches tend to become distant from each other and dedicate themselves to diverse emphases, according to the particular emphases of their pastors and other ministers in the community. The broad and singular vision of the apostle assures that the different congregations maintain a close brotherly relationship and they help them to perceive their particular activities as complementary rather than give place to competitive attitudes toward each other.

As we focus now on our own situation, we can say that for several years we have experienced a spiritual awakening that obviously has been the product of a prophetic vision and ministry that has acquired great

relevance among us. This has given us greater spiritual discernment and sharpened our vision and our appreciation of God's eternal purpose in the formation of a people for his glory here in the earth. Our understanding today, as regards the divine objective, is much clearer than before. We have received light from heaven and we can better see where we are going.

But we need to have the awareness that vision alone is not sufficient. If we remain thus, we could frustrate God's purpose among us. An apostolic ministry is needed to carry the vision forward, to coordinate the activities and the relationships among the churches, to give the people of God a coherent expression, to discover—and in some places, lay—the true foundation and do all of this within the context in which we live.

### III. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE APOSTOLIC GIFT

Apostle means "one sent". But not all who are sent are apostles. According to the N.T. the apostolic gift includes:

1. The charisma of **revelation** ( Eph. 3.3-5)
  - Revelation concerning the mystery of the kingdom of God
  - Revelation concerning the mystery of Christ
  - Revelation concerning the mystery of the body of Christ: the church
  - Clarity concerning the doctrine of Christ and of the apostles (*Didache*).
2. The charisma of **evangelization**. The apostle is a 'sent one'. Sent where? To the world. When he arrives in a new place what he does is evangelize (Rom. 1.1 y 5).
3. He must move in the **gifts of the Spirit**. (Rom.15.18-19; 2 Cor. 12.12)
4. The charisma of **communication**. The apostle is a 'preacher' and teacher (1Tim. 2.7; 2Tim. 1.11)
5. The charisma of **execution**: This is one of the aspects that differentiates the apostolic and prophetic gifts. The apostle has the gift of executing the vision. He has the gift to lay a foundation, plant churches, form lives, form workers, establish elders and edify the church (1 Cor. 3.10; 9.1-2).
6. The charisma of **government and paternity**: Wisdom, grace and authority to edify, to oversee and supervise, instruct, guide, correct, discipline, cover with full responsibility, patience and perseverance. The content of the epistles clearly indicate this function.

### IV. REQUISITES FOR FUNCTIONING IN AN APOSTOLIC MINISTRY

1. Have a call, a personal conviction from the Lord. (1 Cor.1.1).
2. Have a recognized ministry in a presbytery in the edification of a local congregation, such as Barnabas and Saul in Antioch (Acts 13.1-3).
3. Recognition by presbyters or churches that accept his ministry and apostolic authority.
4. To be joined to and subject to an apostolic network that confirms and recognizes his ministry.

### V. BURDEN AND PASSION OF AN APOSTLE

1. Have a burden and passion for the extension of God's kingdom. He is a man on the frontier; his burden and passion is to fill every place with the gospel, to reach new places. (Rom.15.18-24)
2. Have a burden and passion to make known to all the mystery that has been revealed. That all might know god, his plan and eternal purpose, the unsearchable riches of Christ ... (Eph. 3.8-11).
3. Be zealous for the church to be edified with holy doctrine and according to the revelation of the Word. (Gal.1.6-9; 1 Tim. 1.3-4; 2 Tim. 2.2; 4.1-5)
4. Have a burden and passion for the unity of the church. He sees division as horrible, as a grotesque caricature of the new creation. (1 Cor. 1.12-13; Eph 2.14-16). For an apostle the unity of the church is not an optional accessory of the church; it has to do with its very essence and nature.
5. Have a burden and passion for the quality and holiness of the church. He is zealous that the church be built with gold, silver and precious stones. He preaches, exhorts, and teaches so as to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus (Col.1.28)

6. Have a burden and passion that all the church might reach its fullness in Christ. (Eph. 3.19-20; 4.13)

#### **VI. SPIRITUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN APOSTLE**

1. He is a man of faith. Even though God's objectives are elevated and humanly impossible to reach, he never says it can't be done. His language is always one of faith: Phil.1.6; 4.13; Eph. 3.20; 4.13; 5.27.
2. He is diligent and sacrificial. The cost and suffering does not matter to him in order to reach his objectives (2 Cor.11.23-28).
3. He is a spiritual man, not carnal. He is not jealous, greedy, with personal ambitions (1 Cor. 2.16 – 3.3). He does not seek his own, he knows very well that the churches he plants and cares for do not belong to him, but to Christ (2 Cor.11.2).
4. He is passionate for Christ. (Phil. 3.7-14). Christ is his life, his passion, his love, his goal. Christ is all he wants to gain; he is thirsty to know him and be like him.

A word for the spouses of apostles: My greatest appreciation, respect and honor for your worthy task as his ideal helper, support and coworker in the ministry. Your reward will be exceedingly great.

#### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE APOSTOLIC MINISTRY**

1. This is ministry, which literally means service, (in Greek, '*diakonias*'). It is not carnal or human hierarchy but an authority and function for the purpose of building the church. Jesus taught us that the greatest should be the servant of all.
2. With the exception of Christ who ordained the twelve as apostles, we do not find in the N.T. an official ordination of apostles nor of prophets or evangelists. These arise gradually in the exercise of their function and then are recognized. Such is the case of Philip who in Acts 8 evangelizes Samaria, but not until Acts 21.8 is he called an 'evangelist'. The same thing occurs with Barnabas and Saul; in Acts 13 they receive prayer with the laying on of hands but they are not ordained 'apostles'. Only in Acts 14.4, following evidence of their fruits in their apostolic ministry are they referred to as such.
3. The title is not important, but rather the function. He that has an apostolic gift in time will give evidence of this grace before the church and before other ministers. When that is the case, don't worry about an official recognition; flow in faith and grace in that which God has given you. The greatest evidence is the fruit.