

APOSTLES & PROPHETS

“What is the most fruitful context for the revelatory gifts to function into local churches?”

David Lyon, June 2013

INTRODUCTION

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus “appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might *be with him* and that he might *send them out*” (Mk 3:14, NIV).¹ The Twelve were an extension of his compassion towards the multitudes (Mt 9:36-10:1), workers sent out with authority to bring in his Kingdom (Lk 9:1-2). They constituted a unique apostolic eyewitness, and in “appointing” them (*poiéō*, to create or make), Jesus was *creating something new*:² they were foundations of a new community, tasked with a new phase of his eschatological mission. After his ascension Jesus gave the gift of apostleship to many others, and Luke’s *historical* account is a record of their actions over the next few decades as they “turned the world upside down” (Ac 17:6, ESV).

In the epistles an accompanying *theology* unfolds, and we discover that the ascended Christ also gave other gifts to his church as expressions of his grace (Eph 4:7-11). Together these ‘fivefold’ gifts equip the church for its ministry (4:12), but there is a unique and particular pairing between *apostles and prophets*: they are foundations upon which the church is built (Eph 2:20), being distinguished from the other gifts by their depth of revelation (Eph 3:5), hence ‘revelatory gifts’. It has long been our conviction that the Chief Apostle and Prophet continues to manifest himself by giving apostles and prophets to his Body.

This paper considers *the context* in which these gifts function most fruitfully,³ and is based on two premises: (i) that the proper context is determined by the function; and (ii) that the biblical evidence is sufficient to determine our practice. The first premise requires us to examine the NT to understand *what* apostles and prophets do and *how* they do they it. The second requires us to acknowledge that whilst

¹ Bible quotations are taken from the NIV 2011, unless otherwise stated.

² *Poiéō* is used of many of the creative acts of Jesus (Kittel, *TDNT*, 895ff), and choosing *twelve* apostles indicates a ‘new nation’.

³ The Collins definition of ‘context’ refers to ‘conditions and circumstances that are relevant’; ‘parts that precede and follow and contribute to the full meaning of something’.

there is more NT evidence concerning apostles than prophets,⁴ and in turn far more concerning Paul than any other apostle,⁵ we do nevertheless have all the evidence *God has seen fit to give us* in his Word.

Our approach, therefore, will be to consider:

1. The texts which specifically join the revelatory gifts together
2. The nature of their revelation and function in building-up the church
3. Other evidence of how they functioned
4. Some implications for our present-day practice

1. “APOSTLES AND PROPHETS”

Apóstolos (apostle/s) and *apostolē* (apostolic) are derived from *apostéllō* (to send out or send forth), which differs from *pémpō* (to send) by its emphasis on the relationship between sender and sent, and in particular by the implications of a commission and authorisation. *Apostéllō* had secular meaning,⁶ but in the NT becomes a theological word for “sending forth to serve God with God’s own authority”,⁷ and an *apóstolos* is one so commissioned - *a person sent with full authority*,⁸ one “entrusted with a mission” and with “powers conferred upon him”.⁹ (Mt 10:1, 28:18f, Lk 9:1, Ac 1:8).

The original sense of *prophétēs* (prophet/s) is ‘one who proclaims’ or ‘one who predicts’,¹⁰ and the NT *prophétēs* is a “proclaimer of a

⁴ *Apóstolos* or *apostole* occur over 80 times, and there are up to 20 named apostles [the Twelve, Matthias (Ac 1:26), Barnabas and Paul (Ac 14:4), James (Gal 1:19), Silas and Timothy (1Th 1:1, 2:6), Andronicus (and Junias?) (Ro 16:7), Epaphroditus (the Philippians’ “messenger”, Phil 2:25) and two “representatives” of churches at 2Co 8:23], together with evidence of many others (1Co 15:7, Rev 2:2). By contrast, *prophétēs* is used of NT prophets on only 16 occasions and at most nine people are named as such [Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and Saul (“prophets and teachers”, Ac 13:1), Judas and Silas (Ac 15:32), Agabus (Ac 11:28, 21:10) and John (Rev 22:9)].

⁵ Barrett, *Signs*, 36 suggests Paul was “deeply, thoughtfully, and passionately convinced of his call to be an apostle”, and that the “scepticism of his rivals and the indifference of his converts” forced him to “work out what his apostleship meant, and on what grounds it rested”.

⁶ Being a nautical term for a fleet sent out from their home-port.

⁷ Rengstorf, in Kittel, *TDNT*, 68.

⁸ *Apóstolos* is akin to the Hebrew *šālūah*, an authorised representative of a religious authority, entrusted and empowered to speak and act on their behalf, so that the one sent is *equivalent to the one who sent him*, effectively carrying their very *presence* (Bittlinger, *Gifts and Ministries*, 55f; Rengstorf, *TDNT*, 70). We note that Matthew and Luke both record the centurion’s faith (Mt 8:5-13, Lk 7:1-10), but whereas Luke says the centurion “sent” (*apostéllō*) elders to Jesus (Lk 7:3), Matthew says *he went himself* (Mt 8:5), perhaps reflecting the Judaic understanding of apostolate: because the centurion sends men *on his behalf*, he is effectively *himself present*.

⁹ J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan, 1892), 92.

¹⁰ Kittel, *TDNT*, 952.

divinely inspired message".¹¹ Prophets strengthen, encourage, and comfort (1Co 14:3), and make secret things plain (1Co 14:25).

Apostles and prophets are specifically linked together on 7 occasions:

1. In Luke 11 Jesus (perhaps quoting from or adapting an ancient text)¹² tells the Pharisees God “will send them prophets and apostles” whom they will kill and persecute (**Lk 11:49**).
2. Discussing diversity of gifts in 1Corinthians 12, Paul states “God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers...” (**1Co 12:28**).
3. In Ephesians 2, the church is “God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets...” (**Eph 2:20**).
4. In Ephesians 3 Paul speaks of “the mystery made known to me by revelation” (Eph 3:3) and of his “insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.” (**Eph 3:4-5**).
5. In Ephesians 4 the ascended Christ “gave gifts to his people” (Eph 4:8b), namely “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers” (**Eph 4:11**), to “equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (4:12), and this “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” (4:13).
6. In 2 Peter, the author wishes to “stimulate [his “dear friends”] to wholesome thinking” concerning the last days (2Pe 3:1) and therefore urges them to “recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.” (**2Pe 3:2**).
7. In Revelation 18 John sees Babylon destroyed, with witnesses crying out “Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.” (**Rev 18:20**).

Whilst we take “apostles” in each case to refer to gifts of the ascended Christ,¹³ identifying the “prophets” is less straightforward. The immediate context suggests Lk 11:49 is a reference to (or at least *includes*) OT prophets (Lk 11:48-51).¹⁴ Likewise in 2Pe 3:2 (“words

¹¹ Kittel, *TDNT*, 960-963; Vine, *Dictionary*, 904.

¹² Though the parallel passage ascribes the words directly to Jesus (Mt 23:34).

¹³ Some suggest the Lk 11:49 “apostles” include God’s ‘envoys’ more generally.

¹⁴ The order (“prophets and apostles”) probably confirms this.

spoken *in the past* by the holy prophets”, cf. the references to OT prophets at 2Pe 1:16-21), though Peter here also sets forth a *pattern* relevant for apostolic-prophetic functioning today (see below). Rev 18:20 is probably a reference to the ‘joint-witness’ of the OT (prophets) and NT (apostles), though again doesn’t necessarily *exclude* NT prophets.

However, gifts of the ascended Christ (‘NT prophets’) are the “prophets” of 1Co 12:28 and all three Ephesians passages,¹⁵ and the recurring themes in these passages are apostolic-prophetic *revelation* (Eph 3:5) and the consequent role these revelatory gifts have in the *foundations* (1Co 12:28, Eph 2:20) and *building-up* (Eph 4:11) of the church. We therefore now examine these twin themes further:

2. THE APOSTOLIC-PROPHETIC FUNCTION

(a) *Stewards of Revelation*

Firstly, then, apostles and prophets are those to whom the “the mystery of Christ...has now been revealed by the Spirit” (Eph 3:4-5).

NT “mystery” (*mystērion*) is not a ‘mysterious’ thing so much as something “outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension [which] can be made known only by Divine revelation”,¹⁶ and “revealed” is *apokalýpto* (to uncover, unveil, disclose, make bare), in the sense of being “presented to the mind directly”.¹⁷ Here in Eph 3 the *mystērion* concerns the breadth of Christ’s saving power and the Gentile inclusion (Eph 3:5-6). Elsewhere, it is the restoration of all things under Christ (Eph 1:9-10), the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph 3:8-9), the radiant church (Eph 5:27-32), the glorious indwelling Christ (Col 1:26-27, 2:2, 4:3) and his redemptive work (1Ti 3:16), and the imperishable body (1Co 15:51-52). In every respect the mystery now revealed *concerns Christ!*¹⁸

Apostles are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1Co 4:1, NASB), where “servant” is *hypēréteś* (lit. ‘under-rower’; an assistant ministering or rendering service; a subordinate carrying out the will of another),¹⁹ and “stewards” are *oikonomos*

¹⁵ Although OT prophets may constitute *part* of the ‘foundation’ of the church (insofar as they reveal Christ), Eph 2:20 refers principally to those gifts also described at Eph 3:5 and 4:11 (i.e. Paul has the *same* “prophets” in mind throughout the epistle).

¹⁶ Vine, *Dictionary*, 779.

¹⁷ Vine, *Dictionary*, 974.

¹⁸ As Kittel, *TDNT*, 618 also points out, *mystērion* usually has an eschatological context.

¹⁹ Kittel, *TDNT*, 1232; Vine, *Dictionary*, 754.

(managers of a household, often slaves).²⁰ Paul’s commission is to “make plain to everyone the administration (*oikonomía*) of this mystery” (Eph 3:9). Apostles, then, are entrusted with stewardship of a revelation of the mysteries of Christ, and must prove faithful in its discharge (1Co 4:2).

Accordingly, every apostle will have had a personal encounter with and revelation of the risen Jesus. That Jesus was the Christ was “revealed” (*apokalýpto*) to Peter (Mt 16:17), and this apostolic revelation was the rock upon which Jesus would build his church (Mt 16:18).²¹ As soon as Peter received this revelation he was given “the keys of the kingdom” (Mt 16:19), enabling him (and every apostle after him) to *unlock* (uncover, reveal) divine mysteries. His encounter with the transfigured Christ a few days later (Mt 17:1ff) made him an “eyewitness of his majesty” (2Pe 1:16).²² After his resurrection Jesus “showed himself” to the Twelve, proving he was alive (Ac 1:2), Matthias was chosen to reinstate the circle of witnesses (Ac 1:22), and they were *empowered* to “be...witnesses” (Ac 1:8), “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Lk 1:2) - a task they set about immediately (“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact”, Ac 2:32).²³

Likewise, “Jesus...appeared to” Paul; he had “seen the Lord” (Ac 9:17,27), and was appointed “to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth”, so as to “be his witness to all men of what [he had] seen and heard” (Ac 22:14-15). From his earliest epistle, therefore, Paul insists his gospel is not man-made or second-hand; rather, he “received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12, NASB: “revelation of Jesus Christ”)²⁴ who “was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (Gal 1:15-16). Paul’s “revelation” (*apokálypsis*, a “disclosure given from heaven, with heavenly authority, usually of heavenly secrets”)²⁵ was *from Christ and of Christ*; and Jesus wasn’t revealed simply to him but *in him*. This all-consuming revelation was the *source* and *subject* of his commission, and more was promised (“I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you”, Ac 26:16).

Revelation also defines the prophetic ministry. The Sovereign Lord “does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the

²⁰ Vine, *Dictionary*, 1097. See Mt 24:45 for the idea of a slave being in charge of a household.

²¹ The church is built on Peter *himself* only insofar as he forms part of the “foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20).

²² Cf. John’s statement of having “seen with our own eyes...looked at...” (1Jn 1:1)

²³ Also Ac 3:15, 4:20, 4:33, 10:39-41, 13:31.

²⁴ ESV, NKJV, Young, Wycliffe have “revelation of Jesus Christ”; Holman, NIV, NLT have “revelation *from* Jesus Christ”.

²⁵ Dunn, *Galatians*, 53.

prophets” (Amos 3:7), and declares that “when a prophet among you, I reveal myself to him...” (Nu 12:6). The OT “prophetic writings” contain “the revelation of the mystery” of his gospel, “now revealed and made known” (Ro 16:25-26). And in the NT, the “gift of prophecy...can fathom all mysteries (*mystērion*) (1Co 13:2), and the “prophets” are to maintain order when “a revelation” (*apokalýpto*) is received (1Co 14:29ff).

(b) Foundations and Builders

Secondly, and consequently, the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20). God has placed them “first” and “second” (1Co 12:28), and they function “so that the body of Christ may be built up” until we reach the “fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13).

The Eph 2:20 “foundation” is *themélios* (‘basic stone’, here metaphorical and conveying the idea of *edification*),²⁶ and “foundation of” means both *laid by* and *comprising* - apostles and prophets *lay* and *are* foundations. Though the Twelve have a unique foundational place (Rev 21:14), Paul is here speaking of two types of *continuing* ministry necessary for the founding of churches,²⁷ and as we shall see churches are founded on *the revelation* and indeed *the very lives* of apostles and prophets: it’s personal!

Jesus remains “the chief cornerstone” however (Eph 2:20b, cf. 1Pe 2:6), where *akrogōniaios* may be *foundation* stone or *capstone*. He is the “keystone” (NEB) against which all others are aligned, and he cares deeply about the building of his church (Mt 16:18). Apostles and prophets, likewise, are intensely concerned to see that the Cornerstone is properly laid, and everything built “according to the heavenly pattern” (Ex 25:40), for they know anything else will lead to structural damage (cf. Mt 7:24ff). Their foundational role involves ‘revealing the Cornerstone’ - unveiling the mysteries of Christ entrusted to them so that the church can be well built.

The ‘order’ of 1Co 12:28 is not a hierarchy (cf. 1Co 12:12-27) but is *functional* (in ancient texts, such lists denote *priority*),²⁸ and as Fee remarks “it is not so much that one is more important than the other... but that one has *precedence* over the other in the founding and

²⁶ Kittel, *TDNT*, 322.

²⁷ Any other view contradicts Paul’s use of *apóstolos* and *prophétēs* elsewhere in Ephesians where the mystery is “now...revealed” (Eph 3:5), and the ministries needed “until” Christ returns (Eph 4:11).

²⁸ Keener, *Corinthians*, 104.

building-up of the local assembly.”²⁹ Precisely because of their revelation, the revelatory gifts are to be the *first stones* laid in the House. In this way the pattern of Pr 24:3-4 is outworked: “By wisdom [apostles] a house is built, and through understanding [prophets] it is established; through knowledge [teachers] its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures”.

Elsewhere, Paul is “a wise builder” (*architektōn*), denoting both *architect* and skilled *craftsman*; hence “wise master builder” (NASB) or “skilled master builder” (ESV), who by God’s grace has “laid a foundation” (*themélios*) (1Co 3:10). Here, the foundation is Christ and the apostles are “fellow workers in God’s service” (1Co 3:9-11) - indicating a partnership with God and one another.³⁰ As architects, they have ‘seen’ the blueprint of the finished structure, and know how it should be built; they use the plumbline to adjust or straighten anything that detracts from the fullness of Christ, and the quality of their work will be tested at Christ’s return (1Co 3:13). Interestingly, where Lk 11:49 has “prophets and apostles”, Matthew’s parallel passage has “prophets and wise men and teachers” (Mt 23:34), making “wise men and teachers” synonymous with “apostles”, and providing a link with Paul’s “wise master builder”.

The fivefold ministries are gifts *from Christ* and *of Christ* to his church³¹ – manifestations and aspects *of himself* given to his Body.³² Because Eph 4:11 doesn’t correspond directly with any other gift-list, many seek to distinguish some of the gifts from others.³³ But Paul presents all five *as a group*, with a common continuing task – namely “to prepare God’s people” (NASB: “the equipping of the saints”) to serve, “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:12). “Equipping” is *katartismós* (perfecting, furnishing, or preparing fully),³⁴ and the emphasis is on the *process* of “putting a thing into the condition in which it ought to be.”³⁵ The fivefold gifts exercise their ministry in such a way that the *whole church* can exercise *theirs* as God intends, thus becoming mature and attaining “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). This is vital, for it points to the *goal* of apostolic-prophetic ministry, which is to see Christ unveiled in the church in such a way that we obtain “fullness” (*plérōma*, completeness,

²⁹ Fee, *First Corinthians*, 619-620, italics mine.

³⁰ The meaning is ambiguous, hence: “God’s fellow-workers” (ESV, NASB, NKJV); “God’s coworkers” (Holman); “we are both God’s workers” (NLT).

³¹ It goes without saying that the fivefold gifts are *never* humanly-appointed offices.

³² Thus, grace has been given to *each one* (Eph 4:7) in the form of those (*relatively few*) who are given to the church as fivefold gifts.

³³ Eg, suggesting some are ‘local’ and others ‘itinerant’; or some continue whilst others have ceased.

³⁴ Vine, *Dictionary*, 857.

³⁵ Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 149.

full measure, abundance, perfection)³⁶ – “the full stature of Christ” (NRSV).

Finally, Peter’s reference to the *words* of the prophets and *commands* of the apostles (2Pe 3:2) indicates how revelatory gifts may function in tandem: as prophets bring revelation concerning *what* God is saying, apostles will instruct or command concerning *how* the revelation is to be evaluated and applied. Prophetic ministry thus stirs the apostolic ministry, which in turn has authority for “building...up” the church (2Co 10:8, 13:10).

In summary, apostles and prophets have been entrusted with revelation of the mysteries of Christ: something of his unsearchable riches, his saving power and resurrection life, his eschatological purpose, and the nature and destiny of his glorious Bride has been unveiled to them and *in them* by the Spirit. This revelation is the source, the subject and the sustaining-hope of their commission and task. It is precisely because of their *revelation* that they function *foundationally*: apostolic revelation is the rock upon which Jesus is building his church. The foundation is Christ the Cornerstone, laid by and revealed in and through his faithful servants and stewards, who know that any other foundation will damage the structure. Apostles function as architects and craftsmen, with wisdom and authority to build-up the churches; prophets work alongside expressing God’s heart and mind. Together they reveal and unveil the Cornerstone, thus equipping the churches to reach maturity and full stature in Christ. Hence, Paul offers two proofs of his apostleship: he has “seen Jesus”; and the churches he has founded and built-up are the result of his ministry, the “seal of his apostleship” (1Co 9:1-2).

3. APOSTOLIC-PROPHETIC FUNCTIONING

What further evidence does the NT provide of *the way* (the *context* in which) apostles and prophets function as they outwork their revelation and stewardship? The following matters are relevant:

1. **They function and feel like fathers.** The Galatians are Paul’s “dear children” for whom he is “in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed” in them (Gal 4:19). The apostles functioned amongst the Thessalonians “as a father...with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging” them (1 Th 2:11-12); moreover, they cared for them “as a nursing mother tenderly cares

³⁶ Kittel, *TNDT*, 870; Vine, *Dictionary*, 477.

for her own children” (1Th 2:7, NASB),³⁷ sharing their very lives (*psyché*, soul) with them because they “loved [them] so much” (1Th 2:8).³⁸ The Corinthians are also “dear children”³⁹ – they have other guardians but only Paul is *their father* (1Co 4:14f). He would “live or die” with (for) them (2Co 7:3); he loves them deeply though they have caused him “great distress and anguish of heart and...many tears” (2Co 2:4); he has “opened wide [his] heart” to them and longs for them to reciprocate (2Co 6:11ff). Why? Because *as a father*, he has pledged them to Christ, and cannot bear to see them “led astray” (2Co 11:3); his intense “concern for all the churches” (2Co 11:28) is that *of a father*, and is vital to our understanding of his apostleship.

2. **They work closely with the disciples.** The apostles function very *personally* and often *extensively* amongst the churches. The Twelve performed miracles “among the people” (Ac 5:12) and taught “day after day...from house to house” (Ac 5:42); Paul taught “from house to house” (Ac 20:20) and “welcomed all who came to see him” (Ac 28:30). Paul and his companions spent a year in Antioch (11:26), several weeks in Pisidion Antioch (13:42ff), a “considerable time” in Iconium (14:3), a “long time” back in Antioch (14:28), eighteen months in Corinth (18:11), three years in Ephesus (19:8ff, 20:31) and a further three months in Corinth (20:1-3). Notwithstanding obvious logistical factors, the picture is of apostles and prophets being *knowable* and *well known* amongst the disciples, and their ministry certainly *not* outworked in occasional preaching – *they* were foundations!
3. **They embrace emerging gifts.** From a group of “prophets and teachers” (Ac 13:1), Barnabas and Saul are “set apart...for the work” (*érgon*, employment, task),⁴⁰ sent out with prayer and fasting (13:2-3), and later described as *apóstolos* (Ac 14:4,14). Although this troubles some scholars,⁴¹ it is simply the *public*

³⁷ Fee, *Thessalonians*, 65 considers this “a remarkable analogy, unlike anything else in the Pauline corpus”.

³⁸ Paul uses a rare term (*homeiromeno*) variously rendered “affectionately desirous” (ESV), “having so fond an affection for you” (NASB), “affectionately longing” (NKJV), and “desiring you covetingly” (Wycliffe).

³⁹ Likewise, John’s converts (1Jn 2:1).

⁴⁰ Used in the LXX of the creative works of God (Ge 2:2-3)

⁴¹ This is Luke’s only use of *apóstolos* other than for his descriptions of the Twelve, leading some scholars to suggest he had a narrower concept of apostleship than Paul, and perhaps sees Paul and Barnabas here as ‘apostles *of a church*’ (not *of Christ*), or that ‘when prophets were sent out on missions they were known as apostles’. Such views plainly contradict Paul’s self-understanding, and the witness the Twelve (Gal 2), and arise when ‘apostle’ and ‘prophet’ are seen as fixed *offices* rather than developing *gifts*. Luke was well acquainted with Paul’s theology, and differing concepts of apostolicity are hard to imagine. Moreover, his three-time narration of Paul’s conversion and commission is evidence he regards Paul as an apostle of equal standing with the Twelve.

recognition of a God-ordained development that has occurred.⁴² Elsewhere, Silas is presented as a prophet (Ac 15:32), but Paul describes him (and Timothy) as “apostles of Christ” (1Th 2:6); James emerges into a leading role, and is also an *apóstolos* (Gal 1:19, 1Co 15:5ff). Paul’s pastoral epistles instruct and authorise his “true sons” (1Ti 1:2, Tit 1:4) concerning their oversight of churches - they are to stir up their gifts and guard what has been entrusted to them as they develop in their own revelatory callings.⁴³

4. **They work in teams.** Jesus sent the apostles in pairs (Mk 6:7) establishing a fundamental principle, quickly taken up by the Twelve (Ac 3:1ff, 8:15ff), and subsequently seen everywhere. Several aspects of this ‘teamwork’ are notable: (i) The Spirit’s setting apart of Paul and Barnabas (Ac 13:2) indicates an immediate apostolic-prophetic partnership.⁴⁴ Later, Judas and Silas (two prophets, Ac 15:32) accompany Paul and Barnabas (two apostles) and say much to “encourage and strengthen” the church (Ac 15:32, cf. 1Co 14:3). Paul chose Silas to accompany him on his second journey (Ac 15:39-40) and their apostolic-prophetic partnership meant “the churches were strengthened in faith and grew daily in numbers” (Ac 16:5, 15:41). (ii) Barnabas functions alongside Paul in an apostolic-apostolic partnership, and without the need of any ‘separation’ into his own apostolic sphere of operation. (iii) John-Mark joins the apostles as their “helper” (*hypérétēs*, Ac 13:5), and references to “Paul and his companions” (Ac 13:13, 16:6, 17:1, 19:29) indicate many others also joined him (in Macedonia, at least nine companions from several nations are together, Ac 20:4-5).⁴⁵ (iv) Paul “sent” companions into churches as his delegate for a season, or for a task (Eph 6:22, Phil 2:19, 25, Col 4:8, 2Ti 4:12, Tit 3:12). He thus functioned as a *catalyst* amongst colleagues and churches, knowing what was needed in each person and place and (as a father to both), ensuring the right people met the needs or filled the gaps. He and Apollos have unique tasks (1Co 3:6) and perhaps separate ‘spheres’, but share “one purpose” (1Co 3:8);

⁴² Paul knew he had been “set apart from birth” (Gal 1:15), and there were at least 14 years between his later ‘calling’ and subsequent setting apart and recognition by other apostles.

⁴³ Timothy’s apostleship is sometimes disputed as elsewhere he is apparently *excluded* from the apostolate (2Co 1:1, Col 1:1). However, Paul has “no one like him” (Phil 2:20), implies his apostleship in 1Th 2:6, and describes him as “carrying on the *érgon* of the Lord, just as I am” (1Co 16:10, cf. Ac 13:2). Also, despite Luke’s relatively limited use of *apostéllō* he does use it to describe Paul’s sending of Timothy to Macedonia (Ac 19:22).

⁴⁴ Notwithstanding that both are later recognised as apostles (Ac 14:4,14). Barnabas was a prophet or teacher (Ac 13:1) - but his ministry of encouragement (Ac 4:36, 11:23), ‘initiatory’ actions (Ac 11:25), and being the first-named at Ac 13:1, all suggest a prophetic ministry.

⁴⁵ FF Bruce, *The Pauline Circle* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1985), 8-9 suggests Paul “attracted friends around him as a magnet attracts iron filings”, and he notes seventy named associates.

they are allies, not rivals.⁴⁶ (v) Prophets also travelled together (Ac 11:27),⁴⁷ bringing revelation to churches (Ac 11:28f) or to apostles (Ac 21:10).⁴⁸ (vi) Lastly, we note that whilst Paul was ‘alone’ in Corinth he worked as a tentmaker and taught every Sabbath (Ac 18:3-4), but as soon as Silas and Timothy rejoined him, he “devoted himself exclusively to preaching [and] testifying” (Ac 18:5), for eighteen months (Ac 18:11). Aside from any practical matters, it seems Paul *functioned more fruitfully* when he was with friends and companions, and especially when the apostolic-prophetic partnership was in operation.

5. **They recognise different types and measures of gift.** The fivefold ministries are given “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7, NASB), where “measure” is *métron* (proportion, determined extent, a portion measured off).⁴⁹ Paul speaks of “different gifts according to the grace given us” (Ro 12:6), and an “allotted...*métron* of faith” (Ro 12:3, NASB), and instructs the church to recognise gifts and “let them...” function fruitfully (Ro 12:6-8). Thus, apostles and prophets function within a God-determined *measure* (or portion) of *grace-gift* and *faith*, and the NT provides examples of such differences. Eg: (i) Paul travels extensively, whereas James seems to be based in Jerusalem (Ac 15, 21:18, Gal 1:19);⁵⁰ (ii) Paul’s apostolic measure enlarges beyond Barnabas’s;⁵¹ (iii) Paul leads a team, whereas Barnabas functions within Paul’s sphere; (iv) some are “prophets” whereas others “prophesy” (Ac 21:9-10); (v) some, perhaps, are Eph 2:20 ‘foundational’ prophets whilst others function within local churches (1Co 14:29ff); and (vi) some may be ‘*apóstolos* of churches’ (NIV: “messenger” at Phil 2:25 and “representatives” 2Co 8:23) - though note that Epaphroditus is said to have “almost died for the *érgon* of Christ” (Phil 2:30, cf. Ac 13:2) and the brothers are “an honour to Christ” (2Co 8:23). The glorious consequence of all this is that as ministries function according to their *respective* measures, the church matures into “the *whole* measure (*métron*) of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

⁴⁶ Apollos was “a great help” in Corinth (Ac 18:27ff) and Paul tells the Corinthians they are impoverishing themselves by preferring one apostle over the other (1Co 3:22, 4:6).

⁴⁷ Though it is an interesting question as to whether this continued *after* the emergence of the mixed-gift teams from Ac 13 onwards.

⁴⁸ This mirrors the OT, where prophets helped *the people* and *the elders* to “build and prosper” (Ezra 5:1-2, 6:14).

⁴⁹ Vine, *Dictionary*, 734; Kittel, *TDNT*, 590f.

⁵⁰ That James was ‘resident’ in Jerusalem is to some extent conjecture: whilst we have no evidence of him travelling widely, his epistle to Jews “scattered among the nations” (Jas 1:1) may indicate that he fulfilled a commission beyond Jerusalem.

⁵¹ Luke indicates this following their ministry in Cyprus (Ac 13:4ff) by changing the order to “Paul and Barnabas” on almost every occasion thereafter.

6. **They operate in ‘spheres’.** Paul also refers to “the measure (*métron*) of the sphere which God apportioned” to him and his colleagues (2Co 10:13, NASB),⁵² and his hope that their “sphere of activity” will expand (10:15) so they can preach beyond Corinth, rather than “in someone else’s territory” (10:16, NASB: “the sphere of another”). “Sphere” is *kanōn* (rule, standard), denoting God-apportioned ‘limits of responsibility’,⁵³ and whilst it can be geographic,⁵⁴ this seems unlikely here. Paul is setting forth a *rule* or *standard* for his apostleship in line with his task and commission: he will pioneer in unreached Gentile territories, within his God-ordained limits (and not “on someone else’s foundation”, Ro 15:20). The Gal 2 agreement contains a similar sense of ‘spheres’: Paul has been “entrusted” with an apostleship to the Gentiles, as has Peter to the Jews (Gal 2:7), and again it is unlikely the division was along strict ethnic or geographic lines,⁵⁵ rather a sense of being ‘responsible for’ the interests of Gentiles and Jews respectively. They recognised a distinction God had already made in their ministries, and their respective commissions focused them without *limiting* them.
7. **They lay down a body of teaching.** The early church was “devoted...to the apostles’ teaching” (Ac 2:42). The verb is *proskarteréō*, (‘to be strong towards’), conveying intense persistence and ‘holding fast to’,⁵⁶ and “teaching” (NKJV: “doctrine”) is *didaché* (‘that which is taught’),⁵⁷ with the idea is of a unified *body of teaching*. The Twelve are later charged with having filled Jerusalem with their *didaché* (Ac 5:28), which they regard as their obligation as witnesses (Ac 5:32). Paul teaches uniformly in “all the churches” (1Co 7:17, 4:17, 14:33), reminds the Romans of “the form of *didaché* to which [they] were entrusted” (Ro 6:17) and is accused of bringing a new *didaché* into Athens (Ac 17:19). At the heart of the apostolic doctrine are the Acts 2:38 foundations,⁵⁸ and the apostles ensure these are carefully laid in every church, correcting error and filling gaps wherever necessary (Ac 8:15ff, 10:47f, 18:26, 19:2ff).
8. **They submit their doctrine to peers.** The apostolic doctrine was formed, tested and communicated by peer-groups. The *didaché* of

⁵² NIV: “Sphere of service”; also “area of influence” (ESV), “area of authority” (NLT), or “field” (earlier NIV).

⁵³ Kittel, *TDNT*, 414.

⁵⁴ Keener *Corinthians*, 222.

⁵⁵ Peter subsequently reaches Gentiles (Ac 10-11) and Paul reaches Jews (Ac 14:1) without any sense of trespass.

⁵⁶ Vine, *Dictionary*, 238; Kittel, *TDNT*, 417.

⁵⁷ Kittel, *TDNT*, 166.

⁵⁸ Cf. the Heb 6:2 foundational “instructions” (*didaché*).

Acts 2 was that of *the apostles* (not of any individual). The Acts 15 Council met to ensure doctrinal consistency between Jerusalem and Antioch, and Paul set his gospel before those who were “apostles before [he] was” (Gal 1:17, 2:2) because he understood the dangers of ‘independence’ and the importance of apostolic and doctrinal unity for the credibility of the mission, and indeed for the very *nature of the church*.⁵⁹ True apostles guard the original witness (1Co 11:23) and prize apostolic unity, and all are ultimately judged by the gospel itself, for if they abandon orthodoxy they risk falling “under God’s curse” (Gal 1:8f).

9. **They have authority.** The apostles function with authority *necessary for* and *commensurate with* their task (being those ‘sent with full authority’), and exercise this within the sphere of their relationships (2Co 10:13f). Jesus gave the Twelve “authority” to fulfil their mission (Mk 3:15, 6:7, Mt 28:18f) where the word is *exousia* (the right to exercise power; the power of rule or government).⁶⁰ Paul has *exousia* for building up churches (but *not* for tearing them down) (2Co 10:8, 13:10), and instructs his delegate to “encourage and rebuke with all authority” (Tit 2:15).⁶¹ Elsewhere, he points out that as apostles they “could have asserted [their] authority” (1Th 2:6). The word here is *báros* (weight, burden),⁶² and the phrase (lit. could have been ‘with weight’) is also translated “could have made demands”,⁶³ referring perhaps to their right to *financial* support (2Th 3:7-9), or more generally to the fact that they were “invested with authority over life and doctrine” and in a position to make themselves “formidable”.⁶⁴ Either way, as fathers they preferred to act gently (1Th 2:7), rather than ‘throwing their weight around’ (cf. “shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or...in love and with a gentle spirit?”, 1Co 4:21). Paul’s authority is used not “to strengthen *his* hold over [them], but only to strengthen *their* grip on the gospel.”⁶⁵
10. **They establish government.** Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders for [the disciples] in each church” as a vital aspect of foundation-laying, an extension of their apostolic government and fatherly care into the locality, and a fitting conclusion to their first

⁵⁹ Paul is at pains to show the Galatians he hasn’t somehow ‘broken away’ from the other apostles to pursue his own (circumcision-free) gospel. To set his gospel before the Jerusalem apostles was to submit it to the toughest of tests, but he was confident that men who loved the Word and the Spirit as he did would see what he had seen.

⁶⁰ Vine, *Dictionary*, 91.

⁶¹ “Authority” here is *epitagé* (an injunction, mandate, command).

⁶² Kittel, *TDNT*, 95-96; Vine, *Dictionary*, 159.

⁶³ ESV, NKJV, NLT.

⁶⁴ Hendriksen, *Thessalonians*, 63f.

⁶⁵ Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 477, italics mine.

missionary journey (Ac 14:23).⁶⁶ Titus is to “straighten out what was left unfinished” by appointing elders (Tit 1:5). The elders thus carried an authority from God (Ac 20:28) and an allotment from the apostles, and the relationship between apostle(s) and elders was warm, informal, affectionate and paternal (cf. Ac 20:17-38).

11. They involve the elders and churches in their commission.

After their first journey, the apostles “gathered the church together” to report back (Ac 14:27). Later, the elders at Lystra release Timothy to join Paul’s team (Ac 16:1-3).⁶⁷ Paul’s “partnership in the gospel” with the Philippian elders and people (Phil 1:1,5) involved their prayer and financial support (Phil 1:19, 4:15ff), and their dear friendship (Phil 4:1). Elsewhere, the Corinthians would help enlarge Paul’s operations (2Co 10:15) and the Romans would assist him to Spain (Ro 15:24). In this way, the apostles lifted the sights of the local churches beyond their locality and involved them in world mission, so that the whole church became ‘apostolic’.

12. They have a goal. In all the detail of *how* they function, we must not lose sight of *why*: the apostles and prophets *have a goal in their sights* – which is nothing less than “the whole measure of the fullness (*plérōma*) of Christ” in the churches (Eph 4:13). As stewards of revelation concerning the mysteries of Christ, their longing is to see him fully formed in his church (Gal 4:19). They labour “to present everyone perfect in Christ” (Col 1:28f) as they reveal and unveil Him. They have ‘seen something’ (“his body, the *plérōma* of him”, Eph 1:23), and it pulls and pushes them on; they measure everything against their revelation of Christ and his ultimate purpose. Their prayer and goal is that Jesus will be fully manifest in His Body, so that the church “may be filled to the measure of all the *plérōma* of God.” (Eph 3:19, cf. Col 1:19), a Bride ready for the return of her Lord and the start of her mission in the age to come!...

In summary, the NT apostles and prophets function into the churches by working closely, personally and often extensively with the disciples. Their relationships are warm, loving and paternal, as they share their

⁶⁶ The phrase in Ac 14:23 is translated ‘appointed elders *for them*’ (Amp, ESV, NASB, NIV, NRSV), ‘appointed elders *in every church*’ (ASV, Holman, NLT), or ‘appointed elders *for each church*’ (CEB). The idea that elders were appointed *for the apostles* is hard to justify *from this text*, although the concept of elders being an extension of the founding apostolic government into a locality is valid (cf. Paul’s instructions to the elders in Acts 20, the cooperation of the elders at Lystra with Paul in Acts 16, etc).

⁶⁷ Luke reference to “the brothers at Lystra” (Ac 16:2) can be taken as a reference to elders on the basis of Ac 14:21-23.

lives and involve them in the apostolic commission. Though the apostolic-prophetic partnership is at the core, their teams embrace a variety of gifts, and their teamwork is functional and flexible; they serve as friends and companions - recognising gifts, honouring differences, acknowledging interdependence, and making space for each one to function fruitfully. Different commissions and spheres are evident, and apostolic unity is prized: they submit their doctrine to the wider apostolate, and lay down a unified body of teaching in the churches, to which the disciples hold fast. The apostles function with considerable authority for building-up the churches, but don't throw their weight around. They invest some of this authority into the elderships, who represent them in the localities, and with whom they also have warm relationships. Their goal in all this is to see Christ unveiled and fully-formed in the churches, so as to present Him with a mature Bride at his return.

4. IMPLICATIONS

There are many obvious factors that make our present situation different from that of the first-generation church (logistics of travel and communication, technology, our possession of the NT “eyewitness” scriptures, etc.). However, the *most fruitful* context for revelatory gifts to function into local churches today is surely the most *biblically-faithful* context? This means apostles and prophets functioning as revealers of Christ in the founding and building-up of churches, working alongside friends and gifted colleagues, within spheres of commission where they are loved as fathers, able to exercise authority within warm relationships, joined in partnership with the elders and churches, etc.

In light of this, several questions warrant further discussion:

1. **Church-Building:** Are we involving apostles and prophets sufficiently at the founding of churches? Are elders seeking to build churches with too little direct help from the revelatory gifts? Do we need to re-emphasise biblical concepts and practices of apostolic authority? Do elders crave apostolic-prophetic input, evaluation and ‘plumbline’ adjustments into the churches and if not why not?
2. **Apostles & Elders:** Do elderships see themselves as an extension of apostolic government and fatherly care? Should elders (and apostles) be more explicit in expressing this and if so how? What is the proper balance between ongoing apostolic involvement and allowing competent elderships to function as their representatives locally?

3. **Revelatory Input:** How appropriate is an occasional hour's preaching for enabling apostles and prophets to *share their revelation* with the church? How can we make better use of Q&A times, meals together, weekends away, input over several weeks, teaching from house-to-house, etc.? Are elders restricting revelatory input to the leadership at the expense of the whole church? Do elders draw upon the revelatory gifts *for the revelation they carry*, or for smaller matters? Should prophets always be asked to preach? Or simply to wait on God for His word to the church? Who should take the initiative in involving prophets in the church?
4. **Setting Apart for 'The Work':** Is the function of some revelatory ministries restricted by their local church responsibilities? Should we make more room for some to function as apostolic 'delegates' or 'apprentices', releasing them from local responsibilities so that they can be 'sent' to complete a task elsewhere for a season, or to serve alongside a mature apostle?
5. **Fivefold Gifts:** Do we place undue emphasis on the revelatory gifts, at the expense of seeing how *all five* can function together? How can we be more effective in releasing evangelists, teachers and pastors to the Body?
6. **Apostolic Doctrine:** What is the most effective setting for apostles to spend time with the elders discussing doctrine and interpreting the Word, thus enabling a more uniform teaching of apostolic doctrine? Are we allowing some areas of doctrine to be set by local elders? Are there settings ('forums') where apostles (from within and across spheres) can submit doctrine and revelation for evaluation by others?
7. **The Apostolic Commission:** How can we be more intentional about involving churches in the wider apostolic work and commission? Do the elderships think *corporately*, seeking to enlarge the apostolic sphere and putting resources and people at the apostle's disposal? How can news of the wider work be more effectively shared?

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