

## The Apostle and The Apostleship Part III

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### The Semantic Chaos of the Gospel

Most of our discussion comes from a book Watchman Nee originally published in 1939 titled *Concerning Our Missions*. The original text was written in Chinese by Brother Nee. He was urged to translate the teachings into English and publish the book so others could benefit from the inspired teachings. The final version was published in May 1993 by Living Stream Ministry under the title *The Normal Christian Church Life*.

Brother Nee stated the book recorded *“two conferences we sought in the first place to examine the teaching of God’s Word concerning His churches and His work, and in the second place to review our past missions in the light of our findings.”*

The semantic chaos of the Gospel appears in many discussions within the Body of Christ; the results are what we see in the structure of Christianity today. To truly understand this short excerpt, I have included some of Brother Nee’s introductory words.

*“We trust the readers of this book will bear in mind that its messages, as originally given, were never meant for them. They were intended exclusively for the inner circle of my most intimate associates in the work, but at their request, we share our findings with the wider circle of all our brethren. The book is something private made public; something originally intended for the few now extended to the many; so, we trust our readers will pardon anything that seems unsuited to the wider public.”*

*“We hope this book will not fall into the hands of those who wish to improve their work by improving their methods, without adjusting their relationship to the Lord; but we do hope it will have a message for the humble ones who have learned to live in the power of the Spirit and have no confidence in the flesh.”*

*“It is death to have a wineskin without wine, but it is loss to have wine without a wineskin. We must have the wineskin after we have the wine.”*

“It is not our place to suggest how we think divine work should be done, but rather to ask in everything, “What is the will of the Lord?””

“All spiritual truths, whether pertaining to the inner or outer life, are liable to be legalized. Everything that is of God-whether outward or inward-if in the Spirit is life; if in the letter it is death. **The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6).**”

“May none of my readers use this book as a basis for external adjustments in their work, without letting the cross deal drastically with their natural life. In God’s work everything depends upon the kind of convert produced. On the part of the convert, a real Holy Spirit new birth is essential, and a vital relationship with God.”

I did my best not to add unnecessary commentary to his writings, and to add a reference scripture or two. The Preface and Introduction prepare the mind to be more open to the teaching. As we all know, it is easy to collect parts of a teaching that do not express the full measure of its meaning on a topic. I did my best to capture the essential discussion without introducing any biases.

## **The Apostles in Scripture Days**

The Lord as an apostle was unique, and the twelve, as apostles, were also unique; but neither the Apostle nor the twelve apostles could abide on earth forever. When our Lord departed, He left the twelve to continue His work. Now that the twelve have departed, who are here to carry it on?

The Lord has gone, but the Spirit has come. The Holy Spirit has come to bear all responsibility for God's work on earth. The Son worked for the Father; the Spirit works for the Son. The Son came to accomplish the Father's will; the Spirit has come to accomplish the Son's will. The Son came to glorify the Father; the Spirit has come to glorify the Son. The Father appointed Christ as the Apostle; while on earth, the Son appointed the twelve as apostles.

Now the Son has returned to the Father, and the Spirit is on earth appointing men to be apostles. The apostles appointed by the Holy Spirit cannot join the ranks of those appointed by the Son; nevertheless, they are apostles. The apostles

we read about in Ephesians 4 are clearly not the original twelve, because the Lord appointed them when He was still on earth. In contrast, the apostles in Ephesians 4 were appointed to apostleship after the Lord's ascension, as gifts from the glorified Lord Jesus to His church. The apostles were the personal followers of the Lord Jesus, but now they minister to build up the Body of Christ.

We must clearly distinguish between the apostles who witnessed Christ's resurrection (Acts 2:1:22, 26) and the apostles who minister to the edification of the Body of Christ, for the Body of Christ did not exist before the Cross. There is no doubt that the twelve later received the Ephesian commission, but the twelve, as the twelve, were quite distinct from the apostles mentioned in Ephesians. God clearly had other apostles besides the original twelve. *Note: Imagine the semantic chaos that might cause.*

### **The Meaning of Apostleship**

Since the word "apostle" means "the sent one," apostleship is plain: the office of being sent. Apostles are not primarily men of special gifts; they are men of special commission. Everyone God sends is an apostle. Many God's called are not as gifted as Paul, but if they have received a commission from God, they are just as truly apostles as he was. The apostles were gifted men, but their apostleship was not based upon their gifts; it was based upon their commission. Of course, God will not send anyone who is unequipped, but equipment does not constitute apostleship. If God cared to send out a man totally unequipped, that man would be as much an apostle as a fully equipped one, since apostleship is not based on human qualification but on Divine Commission.

It is futile for anyone to assume the office of an apostle simply because he thinks he has the needed gifts or ability. It takes more than mere gift and ability to constitute men apostles; it takes nothing less than God Himself, God's Will and God's call. No man can attain to apostleship through natural or other qualifications; God must make him an apostle if he is ever to be one. Whether or not a man is going to be of any spiritual worth, and his work serve any spiritual end, depends upon the sending of God. "A man sent of God" should be the main characteristic of our entering upon His service, and of all our subsequent movements.

Let us turn to the Scriptures. In **Luke 11.49** we read: *“I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute.”* From Genesis to Malachi, we do not find anyone explicitly called an apostle. Yet the men here called apostles lived between Abel and Zacharias (verse 51), so it is clear that God had His apostles even in the Old Testament.

**Luke 11:51 (KJV)** *From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you; It shall be required of this generation.*

Our Lord said, “The servant is not greater than his Lord: neither the apostle (Greek) than he that sent him” (**John 13.16**). Here we have a definition of the term “apostle.” It implies being sent out—that is all; and that is everything. However good human intention may be, it can never replace Divine commission. Today, those the Lord has sent out to preach the Gospel and establish churches call themselves missionaries, not apostles; but “missionary” means the same as “apostle,” i.e., “the sent one.” It is the Latin form of the Greek equivalent, “apostolos.” Since the two words mean the same thing, I fail to see why today's true sent ones prefer to call themselves “missionaries” rather than “apostles.”

*As Brother Nee noted in other missionary work, he went to remote areas of China no one else had reached. Yet he never called himself an apostle, even though the Holy Spirit moved him to witness in areas that had never had the Bible. His most used title was “Brother.”*

## The Evidence of Apostleship

Is there any evidence that God really commissions someone to be an apostle? In **1 Cor. 9.1-2**, Paul addresses our question in his letter to the Corinthian saints, and his argument makes it clear that apostleship has its credentials. “The seal of my apostleship are ye in the Lord,” he writes, as if to say, “If God had not sent me to Corinth, then you would not be saved today, and there would be no church in your city.”

**1 Corinthians 9:1-2 (HCSB)** <sup>1</sup> Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? <sup>2</sup> If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

If God has called a man to be an apostle, **it will be manifest in the fruit of his labors**. Wherever you have:

- ✓ the commission of God, there you have the authority of God:
- ✓ wherever you have the authority of God, there you have the power of God:
- ✓ and wherever you have the power of God, there you have spiritual fruits.

The fruit of our labors proves the validity of our commission. Yet Paul does not think apostleship means numerous converts; it represents spiritual value to the Lord, for He could never send anyone forth for a lesser purpose. The Lord seeks spiritual values, and the purpose of apostleship is to secure them. In this case, the Corinthians represent these values. But did not Paul say here, “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Then are only those who have seen the Lord Jesus in His resurrection manifestations qualified to become apostles?

Let us follow the trend of Paul’s argument carefully: In verse 1, he asks four questions:

- (1) “Am I not free?”
- (2) “Am I not an apostle?”
- (3) “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”
- (4) “Are not ye my work in the Lord?”

An affirmative answer to all four questions was taken for granted, for Paul’s case demanded such an answer. Notice that in pursuing his argument in the second verse, Paul drops two of his questions and follows out the other two. He drops the first and third and takes up the second and fourth, linking them.

For the sake of his reasoning, he sets aside “Am I not free?” and “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” and replies to the questions “Am I not an apostle?” and “Are not ye my work in the Lord?” Paul clearly sought to demonstrate the genuineness of his commission through the blessing that attended his labors, not through his freedom or his having seen the Lord.

Of the four questions Paul asks, three relate to his person and one to his work. These three are on the same plane, and are quite independent of one another.

Paul was not arguing that because he was free and because he was an apostle, therefore he had seen the Lord: nor was he reasoning that because he was an apostle and because he had seen the Lord, therefore he was free: no-more was he seeking to demonstrate that because he was free and had seen the Lord, therefore he was an apostle.

The facts are that he was free, an apostle, and had seen the Lord. These facts have no essential connection to one another, and it is absurd to connect them. It would be as reasonable to argue that Paul's apostleship rested on his freedom as on his seeing the Lord. If he was not seeking to prove his apostleship by his freedom, he was no more seeking to prove it by having seen the Lord. Apostleship is not based on having seen the Lord in His resurrection manifestations.

Then what is the meaning of **1 Cor. 15:5-9**? "He was seen of Cephas, then of the Twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; . . . after that he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also."

**1 Corinthians 15:5-9 (HCSB)** <sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then He appeared to over 500 brothers at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one abnormally born, He also appeared to me. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

This passage is not meant to provide evidence of apostleship, but evidence of the Lord's resurrection. Paul records the different people to whom the Lord appeared; he is not teaching what effect His appearance had on them. Cephas and James saw the Lord, but they were Cephas and James after they saw the Lord, just as they were Cephas and James before; they did not become Cephas and James by seeing Him. The same applies to the Twelve Apostles and the five hundred brethren. Seeing the Lord did not constitute them Apostles. They were twelve Apostles before they saw the Lord, and twelve Apostles after they saw Him.

The same argument applies to Paul. The facts were that he had seen the Lord, and he was the least of the apostles; but seeing the Lord did not make him the least of the apostles. The five hundred brethren were not apostles before they

saw the Lord, nor were they after. Seeing the Lord in His resurrection manifestations did not constitute them apostles. They were “brethren” before, and they were simply “brethren” after. The Word of God nowhere teaches that seeing the Lord qualifies one for apostleship.

JDR Note: Peter’s qualifications for apostleship - **Acts 1:21-22 (NKJV)** <sup>21</sup>

“Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup>beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.” *Not just seeing.*

But apostleship has its credentials. In **2 Cor. 12:11-12**, Paul writes, “In nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles . . . truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all *patience*, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.” There was abundant evidence of the genuineness of Paul’s apostolic commission: and the signs of an apostle will never be lacking where there is truly an apostolic call.

**2 Corinthians 12:11-12 (HCSB)** <sup>11</sup> I have become a fool; you forced it on me. I should have been endorsed by you, since I am not in any way inferior to the “**super-apostles**,” even though I am nothing. <sup>12</sup> The signs of an apostle were performed with great endurance among you – not only signs but also wonders and miracles. *Emphasis mine*

From the above passage we infer that the evidence of apostleship lies in a two-fold power – spiritual and miraculous. Endurance is the greatest proof of spiritual power and one of the signs of an apostle. The ability to endure steadfastly under continuous pressure tests the reality of an apostolic call. *Emphasis mine*

A true apostle needs to be “strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy” (**Col. 1.11**). Yes, it takes nothing short of “all power according to the might of his glory” to produce “all patience and longsuffering with joy.”

**Colossians 1:11-12 (HCSB)** <sup>11</sup> May you be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light.

But the reality of Paul's apostleship was attested not only by his patient endurance under intense, prolonged pressure, but also by the miraculous power he possessed.

Miraculous power to change situations in the physical world is a necessary manifestation of our knowledge of God in the spiritual realm, and it applies not only to heathen lands, but to every land. To profess to be sent ones of the omnipotent God, and yet stand helpless before situations that challenge His power, is a sad contradiction.

Not all who can work wonders are apostles, for the gifts of healing and miracle-working are given to members of the Body (1 Cor. 12.28) who have no special commission. Still, miraculous and spiritual power are part of the equipment of all who have a true apostolic commission. *End of the excerpt*

**1 Corinthians 12:27-28 (HCSB)** <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. <sup>28</sup> And God has placed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, next miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, managing, various kinds of languages.

Watchman Nee highly regarded T. Austin Sparks as a teacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Below is an excerpt of T. Austin Sparks teaching on Ephesians 4. You will see some of the qualifications for the apostleship.

## **The Apostleship Authority in Christ Jesus** **by T. Austin Sparks**

### **Authority in Christ**

"And He gave some apostles..." (it does not say "to be" apostles). Then we need to know what the apostle represents as a measure of Christ. What is his value in bringing the fullness of Christ through the Body, the Church, the corporate Heavenly Man? **It is impressive to recognize that the apostle stands first on account of the value associated with the apostle.** What are apostles? One word expresses the meaning of apostles: "authority." *Authority comes first. Emphasis mine*

“All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore...” (Matt. 28:18). **Thus, an apostle stands in Divine authority for the setting up, and the carrying on, of the Divine testimony.** *Emphasis mine*

Take the Apostle Paul, who perhaps above all others stands out as an apostle, and you see that his commission and authority were, first of all, to set up the testimony everywhere, and then to maintain it. He tells the Corinthians that if he comes to them in the authority he has received, some will take it badly, because he is invested with this authority to maintain the testimony in purity. *Emphasis mine. End of the excerpt.*

## How Do Modern-Day Apostles Justify Their Office?

Modern-day self-proclaimed or charismatic apostles justify their office and authority through specific biblical passages, functional roles in (*organized*) church leadership, and spiritual fruit rather than claiming the unique, unrepeatable foundation of the original twelve disciples. *Emphasis added*

The primary grounds used to justify a modern-day apostolic office include:

### 1. Scriptural Defense (Ephesians 4:11–13)

- **Ongoing Gifts:** Proponents point to Ephesians 4:11, which lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as gifts given by Christ "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, to the edifying of the body of Christ."
- **Not Capped at the First Century:** Continuationists argue that since the church has not yet reached full unity and maturity, all five ascension-gift offices – including apostles – remain active throughout the entire Church Age.
- **Distinction of Role vs. Foundation:** They separate the *foundational* apostles (the 12 plus Paul, who wrote canon and saw Christ directly) from *functional* apostles today, defining modern apostles in the broader sense of the Greek word *apostolos* (meaning a "sent one," delegate, or messenger). *The Chaos of Semantics*

### 2. Functional & Relational Grounds

- **Church Planting and Oversight:** Modern claimants often justify their title by pointing to practical work: pioneering new congregations, overseeing networks of churches, and setting local ministries in order.
- **Spiritual Fatherhood:** They act as "spiritual fathers" or "spiritual coverings" who mentor younger pastors, provide strategic vision, and offer accountability across multiple ministries rather than exercising dictatorial control.
- **The "Fruit" of Ministry:** Justification is frequently anchored in visible results – such as converted souls, healthy and expanding church networks, and confirmed spiritual leadership recognized by other peers in the body of Christ.

My conclusion is for the above is as Jesus said in **Matthew 6:5b (NLT): “I tell you the truth, that is all the reward they will ever get.”**

**Ephesians 4:11-13 (NLT)** <sup>11</sup> Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. <sup>12</sup> **Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.** <sup>13</sup> This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. *Emphasis mine*

Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will allow those being deceived by false teaching for personal gain to begin judging the fruit of the tree they are eating from. If they see the self-appointed apostle living a life of unrighteousness and demand your commitment, there may be a problem. When you see them struggling to analyze and preach the truth contained in Scripture, there is a fundamental problem. Many boasts about what they have and even imply that if you support them, you will receive the same rewards.

**Apostle Paul, what should we do?**

**Ephesians 4:15-16 (NLT)** <sup>15</sup> Instead, **WE WILL SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE**, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. <sup>16</sup> **He makes the whole body fit together perfectly.** As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so the whole body is healthy, growing, and full of love. *Emphasis mine*

Secondly, remember where we come from and walk in the LIGHT.

**Ephesians 5:8-11 (NKJV)** <sup>8</sup>For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup>(for the fruit of the Spirit *is* in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), <sup>10</sup>finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. <sup>11</sup>And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, **but rather expose *them***. *Emphasis mine*

Most of us will have trouble with that “rather expose them” in the right tone of voice. It is difficult enough to discuss who is an apostle and the apostleship among believers you love.

**1 John 1:7 (NKJV)** But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

The simplicity of God’s goal is summed up in a couple of paragraphs.

### **The Great Transition from One Humanity to Another** **by T. Austin-Sparks**

What is the Church? It is the aggregate of new creation people, men and women, Jews and Gentiles, everything, not remaining as they are naturally, Jews and Gentiles and so on, but just **one new Man, one new Humanity**. That is the Church! And which humanity is it? That touches on the function, doesn't it? There's the nature. *Emphasis mine*

Oh, *take this, dear friends, take this to heart*: what is God doing? What is He after? Is He after making a new institution called "the Church", a new ecclesiasticism, something that has a denominator amongst men (may I?), the Baptist church, the Methodist church, the Presbyterian church?

What a contradiction in terms! Any of them! Pentecostal church. (I must say these things really to get this revision going, this mental revision, this heart revision.) Is God doing that? Is that what God is doing? *Not a bit of it!* He is not in it at all. He is only with the people, not with the thing.

But God is doing this spiritually, as He did at the beginning. He is staying and proceeding, proceeding with His concept: **"Let Us make *Man*, let Us make *Man*!"** **The Church is the one new Man: "Let Us make a Man," not an institution or any of the things the Church is called.** No, "Let Us make a Man," and that's what He is doing with you and with me, not trying to make us any of the many things Christians are called and the names by which they go. He is just working on us to make us **"the *Man*."** *Emphasis mine*

- ✓ Christ Jesus the Chief Cornerstone as sent by God the Father, and sending the Holy Spirit.
- ✓ The Apostles as stones laying on the foundation of Christ and the eyewitness testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- ✓ The prophets give expression of the mind of the Lord, adding to the testimony the apostles had laid. The Lord's mind is the only mind in this "new man," this Heavenly Man. You must renew your mind in the spirit if you are to come to the Lord's mind. The Lord's mind comes through an instrument called a prophet. He interprets the mind of the Lord.
- ✓ The evangelist is the one to make God known through the Gospel, to disclose the heart of God in grace, and the function of the evangelist is to secure material for the expression of the Heavenly Man corporately.
- ✓ Pastors and teachers, these two are brought together. Material is being gathered, and the corporate Heavenly Man is progressively being brought into being and coming to His eternal completeness. The next need is for pastors and teachers, and their function is to adjust and fit that Heavenly Man. Adjustment is brought about by teaching, by instruction. The purpose of instruction is to adjust us, to bring us into our place, into our right relationship, to help us understand Christ, our relationship to Him, and our relationship to one another in Him. The instruction concerns matter such as the believer's resources in Christ and all that is signified by the Heavenly Man. This is the teacher's work. The pastor is one whose function is to fit, to shepherd, to nurture. Building up by right adjustment to revealed truth is what we have here.

T. Austin Sparks warns us about trying to be too technical.

If this sounds like technique to you, may we urge you to get away from teaching, and anything like a system of truth, and get the Lord in view. Keep the Lord Himself in view, and see that the one thing which governs all is

Christ's coming into ever greater fulness of life and expression in this universe by means of the Church which is His Body.

### **Mini-Conclusion: The Apostle and the Apostleship**

If this was a thesis, I would probably get a D- because I did not come to a final conclusion on the subject matter. I do have one though. I have a hard time trusted anyone who publicly takes on the title as apostle and declare his apostleship. The work of the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ Jesus.

**John 16:12-15 (HCSB)** <sup>12</sup>“I still have many things to tell you, but you can't bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. For He will not speak on His own, but He will speak whatever He hears. He will also declare to you what is to come. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify Me, because He will take from what is Mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>Everything the Father has is Mine. This is why I told you that He takes from what is Mine and will declare it to you.

**2 Corinthians 13:14 (NKJV)** The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit *be* with you all. Amen.

*Disclaimer: Most of the content has had some grammatical enhancements by the Grammarly tool. The true meaning and essence were not changed.*