

APOSTOLIC DIVERSITY **and Crosslink Network Leadership**

One of the things we have been re-discovering in the church recent years is apostolic function. Like other aspects of Christian experience, this ministry was either set aside or institutionalised through the unfolding of Christian history. Even though it is evident in the Bible, we were told that apostolic ministry was either limited to the twelve (which was conveniently extended to Paul). That only accounts for about half of persons mentioned in the New Testament as apostles. Then we were told that apostolic ministry was made obsolete when the canon of Scripture was confirmed at various Councils during the fourth century. Both of these conclusions need to be rejected — the first one, because of simple Biblical evidence and the second, on a non-systemic reading of the New Testament text.

The fact is that apostolic ministry has always been part of the church's experience through the centuries despite our attempts to try and make it fit our various cultural and ecclesial predispositions.¹ We could run a long list of men and women who were anointed by God to provide leadership that has helped the church to stay faithful to its God-ordained task. These heroes of the faith exercised their ministry regardless of formal status or recognition. Sadly, Christian history could be described as a serial attempt by organisations and cultures to make the heavenly kingdom serve the preferences of the earthly kingdoms. As a result, the most prayed prayer in the history of humanity has not been answered: *"Let your kingdom come. Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*² The answer to that prayer is equivalent to the fulfilment of God's original plan, described as a *"new heaven and a new earth."*³ Sadly, a kind of collective cultural captivity has had its way as much with the idea of apostolic ministry as it has with many other important Biblical principles. There is no doubt in my mind that God wants the church to recognise and recover apostolic leadership and the only way for that to happen is for us to re-discover what has been written in Scripture.

Even though it is authored by many different people over many centuries, the Bible provides us with a single coherent narrative from one end to the other. One of the tests of genuine Biblical interpretation is to make sure that the view or views we adopt are consistent with that narrative. It will always be dangerous to hang our understanding on the meaning of a single word or on a small sample of texts. The reality is that any translated language involves subjective choice when we are seeking comparative meaning. This comes into sharp focus when we are considering the New Testament understanding of "apostolic ministry." We must take care, lest we import assumptions that come directly from our worldly culture rather than the kingdom of God.

¹ From the very outset of Christian history, the culture created by the Holy Spirit (i.e. expressing the culture of the kingdom of God) has always been on a collision course with the incumbent ethnic or political traditions and worldview. A slightly rough way to think about this is contained in a quote I heard, but cannot track to any original source: "In the early Christian centuries Christian presence was organic but powerfully shaped its immediate social and political environment. When the Greeks got hold of it they turned it into a philosophy. When the Romans got hold of it, they turned it into a system. When the Europeans got hold of it, they turned it into a culture. When the Americans got hold of it, they turned it into a business." In other words, each broad group moulded kingdom of God values to suit their cultural distinctives.

² Matthew 6:10

³ Rev. 21:1 quoting Isaiah 65:17

My own way to do this is based on a few principles. The first is take the meaning that is consistent with the immediate context. The Bible is a series of small stories and the story will give us the best understanding of the meaning of a word or phrase. Secondly, I assume that the modelling provided by Jesus and then the apostles will ground that meaning in straightforward human experience. The third principle is to make sure the meaning is consistent within the overall Biblical narrative.

Let me ask the simple question:

“When the New Testament uses the term “apostle” in reference to the ministry of one or other of the New Testament characters, what is it that they have and do that marks them as apostolic?”

It is a fact that the New Testament nowhere uses this term with any specific reference to its use in the Hellenistic world. Let me furnish one example. There are some who want to make a comparison, e.g. between a single reference in Josephus⁴ and its use in the New Testament. They like to equate New Testament apostolic leadership with the envoy who takes a group of people to establish a Roman colony somewhere. It is impossible to presume that the New Testament users of the word to have this obscure idea in their minds. What makes it the more absurd is that Jesus never once modelled such a meaning, neither did Paul. Their apostolic ministry represented an entirely different dynamic – in fact, a kingdom of God dynamic. So the New Testament took this word from the Greek language and gave it their own meaning. We can see that meaning as we watch Jesus and Paul exercise apostolic leadership.

The literal meaning of the Greek word “Apostolos” refers to someone sent by a higher authority to carry a message to designated recipients. As I have said, the New Testament itself use gives the word its meaning. The New Testament then goes on to identify people with that role as having special authority from God to fulfil a leadership task. It is interesting and of note that, although more than twenty individuals in the New Testament are referred to as apostles, we know very little about how apostolic leadership was identified. Jesus appointed twelve of his followers as apostles after praying through the night. We don’t know why he chose these specific people. What we know is that he talked about them later in this way, “...those you gave me, and they are yours”⁵ These matters must be at the heart of all the relationships between apostolic leaders and those ‘given to them by God.’

⁴ One of the classic assumptions made by groups like the International Coalition of Apostles and the Seven Mountains Mandate is to equate apostolic function with a few obscure references to the word in the original Greek world. Here is the quote: *It was Jesus alone who chose the title “apostolos” for those whom He called, authorized, and sent out. Among the earliest uses of the term were the Greek historians who used it to describe an **admiral over a fleet of ships** sent out by his king to discover, explore, conquer, and establish his government in new territories. Jesus’ choice of the word reflects this meaning and stresses its emphasis on “**one sent from another**” or a fully authorized representative, ambassador of the sender. (Lyssichus, Or., 19:21; Demosthenes, Or., 18:107) So, **Apostles are fully authorized representatives or ambassadors of the one who sent them.** © 2015 Dr Ron Cottle and Dr John P. Kelly. See <https://www.icaleaders.com/about-ical/definition-of-apostle/>*

⁵ When Jesus is praying the prayer recorded in John 17, he prays for these apostles he has appointed. One of them was not going to make it, but the other eleven were still committed. We also see his “contract” with them: *“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”*

What we *do* have is an almost limitless set of examples of apostolic ministry happening on just about every page of the Book. What we don't have and don't need is a slick one-sentence definition, or three dot-points or a checklist. Oh no?! As a result, our attempts to recognise and recover Biblical, apostolic function have been the product of cultural preference rather than Word and the Spirit. We have tended to choose a few texts and then overlay them with values that come from our (kingdom of this world) culture. It doesn't happen deliberately but more by default. But when we do that, we miss the wisdom that comes from the whole revelation rather than from a few proof texts. Apostolic leadership will always and only be a relationship. As such it can never be defined by a few sentences.

The "naval commander" idea sounds wonderful to people from western cultural backgrounds. We love going somewhere and taking over. In reality, our ethnocentricity has produced a gospel package overlaid by unredeemed cultural traits. It has sadly plagued missionary enterprise for centuries. When European missionaries were sent to the colonies, e.g. China, they presumed that when Chinese people decided to serve Jesus, they would look like Chinese Britons. This has continued to happen with other missionary sending countries. Instead of carrying a message that has the power to transform every culture into the image of Jesus (i.e. as restored sons and daughters who bear the image of our Creator, Father) and instead of becoming incarnate in a new culture, we import our own - our songs, our liturgical forms and our systems. It is much easier to trust what is familiar to us rather than discover what happens when gospel seeds are sown in different soil. It is the tyranny of the familiar. One of the things that impressed me about the experience of Christianity in China after the Cultural Revolution when foreign missionaries were expelled was the proliferation of Chinese worship songs in place of those that had been imported from Europe. It is also significant that when the foreign missionaries left, the church they had planted exploded. One of the ministries that emerged in that revival was the role of humble, courageous leaders of house church movements who were known for their gift, not their status.

Colonising leadership function is by no means limited to missionary endeavour. It has always been well represented in traditional "Christian" countries. It usually takes the form of franchised denominations and movements. It is essentially the colonisation of a group of people around the agenda of the leader. Whether sacramental or informal, church movements have been built around what I would call adopted tribal cultures. The apostolic function within these movements presumes that a certain set of distinctives are to be commonly adopted. Individuals and groups join this kind of movement on the basis that they see value in those distinctives and are willing to base their ministry on them. I am not suggesting that this is invalid. The success and sustained growth is a testament to their validity. I am merely pointing out that this is only one kind of apostolic leadership. **I have come to refer to it as Type A apostolic ministry.**

We have seen movements formed through the work of godly and anointed leaders. Their leadership gathers some and reproduces others. Two Australian examples of this are the Christian Revival Crusade (Leo Harris) and International Network of Churches (formerly Christian Outreach Centres pioneered by Clark Taylor). Along with C3 and Hillsong, these movements provide a leadership covering that many pastors value. The fact that they are built upon tribal values and styles and are built as a franchise model is a just a fact, not a value judgment. They choose to operate under Type A apostolic leaders.

Crosslink Christian Network operates differently to this.

There are a number of Type A leaders within Crosslink, and they have their own networks of churches and leaders. They function as I have described above. I am suggesting in this presentation that this is not the apostolic form that will work for the Network as a whole. We represent a different leadership approach. I am going to refer to as Type B. Forgive the lack of creativity here.

This leadership model is committed to precisely the same goals, but the culture and process is different. Instead of offering a ministry agenda as a leadership package, the offer is to journey alongside someone to help them do better what God has called them to do. It doesn't come with a franchised agenda but a willingness to mentor through relationship. The relationship provides an opportunity for the apostolic leader to *discover* the call and anointing God on a pastor, leader or group of leaders. Based upon that knowledge the apostolic person will impart wisdom and insight that enables the leader(s) to move along the pathway assumed by their unique calling toward the end goal. The leadership capacity required will be the same. The way it is delivered, and the outcome will be entirely different. The person receiving Type B apostolic support might well end up doing things entirely differently from the apostolic mentor.

There is a danger in using parent/child relationships as a metaphor, simply because no apostolic relationship should be modelled on a parent to pre-adult child. It will always need to be an adult to adult relationship. With such a distinction, it is clear that each child in the family are not created by God to replicate the parents. They are different and need to be mentored and supported differently in order to fulfil their God-given vocation. The challenge then is to encourage and support them as they press toward that goal and to refrain from forcing them into a pre-determined mould.

One of the clear examples of this can be seen in Paul's relationship with different churches and leaders. The churches face various issues. With the Galatians, he addresses the intimidation of traditional Jewish legalism. With the Corinthians, it is division and immorality. With the Thessalonians, there are matters relating to the second coming of Christ. With Philemon, it has to do with the issue of treating a slave as a brother. And so on. The same is true for Jesus when he exercises apostolic leadership with the seven churches in Asia Minor. Each church is different, and the role of apostolic leadership is not to impose a common agenda but to help them deal with the different issues threatening their ability to reach two Biblical goals: the fulness of Christ⁶ and the completion of the Great Commission.⁷

That's what convinces me that the role of apostolic leadership is to see present circumstances from the vantage point of the ultimate goal. No doubt there were good leaders among the Galatian churches, but it took an apostolic insight to expose the fact that they had set aside the genuine gospel for a false one. The personality cults developed in Corinth caused deep divisions. Paul saw what was happening through the lens of the call to be one and in the context of the big picture. He was able to help them see what they couldn't see.

⁶ Ephesians 3,4 Paul describes the church in terms of its calling to reveal the purposes of God to the human and spiritual realms; then he calls them to see the love of Christ as the means and then equipped saints doing the work of ministry as the way to attain to the fullness of Christ.

⁷ Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8

So, I would roughly describe Type B apostolic function as having a capacity to come alongside Christian leaders without a personal agenda but with a capacity to help them move forward toward the goals revealed in Scripture. Just like an accountant looking at a set of financial reports, the apostolic capacity will immediately see where the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats from the broader and longer perspective. Apostolic leadership happens when, through the vehicle of a mutually valued relationship, issues are clarified and exposed so that the ministry can move further along its unique pathway toward the end goal. Our western culture wants to suggest to us that we should all dream our own dream. That is not the case for the church. There is only one Head, and that will never be any one of us. There is only one Book and it will never be the one we have written. There is only one enabling power, and it will never be the fantastic abilities any of us might possess. It will only ever be Holy Spirit power.

I think about the end goal for any church like I would if I was flying an aircraft toward its destination. That destination can be precisely represented by two coordinates, a longitudinal and a latitudinal. As I have said but want to say again, in the case of the church there are also two coordinates: the first is the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4); the second is the fulfilment of the Great Commission (Matthew 28 etc.). The more a church becomes likened to the fullness of Christ, the closer they are to the goal. The more the gospel is proclaimed to all people (locally and globally) the closer they are to the same goal. These days, if you are flying a small aircraft, most pilots use a GPS as support to their other navigation instruments. The GPS will tell them whether they are on track and how far they have to go.

So, the Type B apostolic leadership is one that comes alongside, builds the relationship and through that awareness discovers the grace and calling upon an individual leader or a collection of leaders in a church. In this case, the task will be to create a leadership agenda that will see the leader(s) enabled to move along their God-ordained pathway toward their God-ordained end goal. I don't want to draw a competitive comparison between these two types of apostolic ministry as if one is more worthy than the other. I have no authorisation for that. With Type A apostolic function, the agenda and process are much more likely to reside either in the central leader or in a pre-developed set of operatives - e.g. franchised values and styles of ministry. I would suggest that Type A apostolic people have generally developed an agenda and offer that agenda to anyone who desires to join their particular stream (movement or ?). Again, I want to stress that this is neither worse nor bad. It is just a fact. It is possible for leaders and churches to join such a movement even if they do not have a close relationship with the central leader (or leadership council in the case of traditional denominations). The enablement is considered to be within the agenda being offered.

The Type B apostolic ministry depends on the quality of the relationship for many reasons. Only through such a relationship can we discover what is sacred to that leader's (or group of leader's), i.e. their unique call and anointing. Some we can see over time, but so much more will only become visible when the relationship is such that they are willing to share their heart. This same relationship will be needed if the apostolic person is going to be free to provide insight and prophetic impartation. Co-dependence won't provide a foundation for this. It must be an inter-dependence that has been forged because the two people have determined to work out how to go for and get the best. This is especially true where there are generational factors involved. Younger people often find it hard work to figure out how to navigate toward a close relationship with older people. It's the same for older people. I love the very human

factors described in the relationship between the older Elijah and his apprentice, Elisha. When he goes and throws his mantle over the farm boy, the story goes like this:

“Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye,” he said, “and then I will come with you.” “Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?””⁸

The young man is a bit overawed by the old bloke, and the old bloke is not all that convinced that this plan from God is going to work. Such are the dynamics of multi-generational relationships. The need to be deliberately nurtured and ways have to be found to overcome the hindrances.

Not only so, but this relationship needs to be mutual. I am always disappointed when apostolic people carry a kind of arrogance or sense of self-importance that presumes some form of hierarchy. It's the same when the younger person takes on a servile posture. It isn't a hierarchical relationship, and it is not a case of some "boy" carrying the bags of the "man". The motive on the part of the Type B apostolic person can only be to see the other leader prosper in their ministry. If Elisha did more miracles than Elijah, then Elijah should feel that he has done his job; and Elisha should be willing to honour Elijah's role in the matter. Both should be grateful, above all, that God's purposes were being enabled through what they did. It doesn't matter whether anyone else sees the role of the Type B apostolic leader. Paul was very specific on this point. When someone suggested that Paul should need a letter of recommendation to exercise ministry in Corinth, this was what he said,

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.⁹

I am convinced that leadership within a Network like Crosslink needs to be cast much more as what I have described as Type B apostolic ministry. Crosslink is a pioneering work with a mandate to give expression to the kingdom of God. It will always involve a wide variety of churches and ministries. At the same time, leadership and movement forward are critical. It will also continue to be true that Crosslink will have members who are, themselves, Type A apostolic leaders with their own networks. Often leaders of large churches will be Type A apostolic types. Their churches and adjunct congregations will work according to the agenda and style of the main church and reflect those features that are sponsored by the main leader and leadership group. Those leaders will not necessarily be suitable for leadership in the Network as a whole. It has nothing to do with their godliness or gifting. It would be like asking a gynaecologist to do brain surgery. There is nothing to say that they couldn't do it. What would need to be recognised is the fact that what works well as a leadership style in their own church doesn't work the same way in a Network like Crosslink.

I think Crosslink is in need of a greater capacity of leadership. I am also aware that such leadership needs to take into account what works and what doesn't work. If I am giving leadership to Crosslink pastors, I can't just offer them MY agenda as the vehicle through which they should expect to draw closer to achieving their goal. I have to offer the relationship that

⁸ See First Kings 19:20

⁹ Second Corinthians 2:1-3

gains mutual awareness and trust. Out of that relationship, I can offer leadership encouragement and input. I am keen to see how and from whom this leadership capacity might be increased. Part of the requirement is to keep seeing what God is doing in and through the Network as a whole. I am conscious that this is an apostolic a prophetic calling. If the church is built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets,¹⁰ then I am committed to seeing how this will find better expression among us.

I think we are in the middle of a very critical stage of our development. Each stage is marked by its own challenges and has its own price tag. Like the parable of the treasure in the field, we are usually called up to set aside what we already have (i.e. what is familiar and comforting) for what we have never had. All of that depends on courageous, godly, faith-filled, leadership. It needs to be offered in a way that adds value to the testimony for which God has raised up churches and ministries. Otherwise, we are just a credentialing organisation or a virtual entity with no substance. If greater leadership capacity is to be offered, then it needs to be offered after the manner of the Type B apostolic ministry I have described. We have experienced great favour over these past twenty-plus years. I am jealous for us to experience more of that favour so that we will be able to move forward at this time.

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December 2018

¹⁰ See Ephesians 2:20