

The provided text outlines a **functional and relational perspective** on modern apostolic leadership, contrasting it with rigid hierarchical structures or celebrity culture. The author argues that apostolic ministry should be viewed as a **dynamic service** rather than a formal title, prioritising **spiritual parenthood** and proximity over distant authority. By using the **metaphor of a family**, the source suggests that healthy leaders focus on empowering others, planting new churches, and fostering **organic networks** rather than building personal empires. This leadership model emphasises **humility and weakness**, drawing a sharp distinction between "super-apostles" who seek status and genuine workers who serve the church's mission. Ultimately, the text advocates for **recognising apostolic functions** as essential, living components of the church that drive growth through authentic relationships and sacrificial service.

Principles of healthy apostolic leadership

In the NT there are 3 groups of people who are regarded as apostolic:

- The 12 – unique witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
- '*apostles (messengers) of the churches*' sent out by local congregations for specific purposes

- *Post-ascension apostles*, along with prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – Eph 4 – commissioned directly by Jesus after his ascension

It is this third group, commissioned by Jesus after he ascended that is in focus here. Examples of this group include Paul, Silas, Silvanus and Timothy – probably others including Apollos and Junia (feminine).

For example in 1 Thess – the letter opens *Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians...*

1 Thess 2:6 *Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.*

Paul clearly regarded himself and his companions as 'apostles of Christ'. Jesus had sent them, not the churches.

The idea of contemporary apostolic ministry raises red flags for some, as it could suggest placing people on the same level as that of Jesus' original twelve apostles. However, in the NCC world, it is widely recognised that the Twelve were unique witnesses to Jesus' life, teaching, and resurrection. Their inspired writings remain the ultimate authority for the Church through the ages.

When I use the term apostolic ministry, I am thinking of people who have been commissioned by Jesus to do some of the following:

- plant new churches,
- support existing churches by offering support and advice
- create networks of churches that bring leaders and churches together for mutual support and mission

- a term that can be used as an alternative, is perhaps 'extra-local ministry'. People who have a clear ministry but with a wider remit than an existing local church.

Healthy apostolic leadership requires sound theological foundations

I have been involved in Non-denom charismatic churches – NCCs – for most of my Christian life. I have accepted the legitimacy of contemporary apostolic and prophetic ministry. I have seen it go well and I have seen it go wrong but *my commitment to it has been theological*.

The text those of us in NCCs refer to most is Eph 4:7-16.

Sometimes referred to as the 5-fold ministries. Note the gifts here are not spiritual gifts but people given as gifts for the maturing of the Church. Note also that they are gifts given by the ascended Christ. So they are all current and they can't be human appointments. It's only Jesus who can give the Church these people. That's why we differentiated by the 12 Apostles (capital A) and the post-ascension apostles (lower case a) - both commissioned by Jesus with some commonality but also some differences.

1. The hierarchical view.

These gifts are almost like titles. They represent a leadership structure that we have to adhere to be authentic church. Essentially, we are looking at a structure for governance. In

this paradigm the ultimate authority lies with apostles. This view is what critics suggest is at the heart of the so-called NAR. It was promoted by C Peter Wagner in his book *Apostles Today* – subtitle – *biblical government for biblical power*. The mistake here is, of course, the substitution of government for the biblical term kingdom. Two very different concepts. He also makes a link between getting the structure right and experiencing God's power – a link that doesn't seem to be made in the Bible where exercising faith and becoming weak seems to be the crucial issues for experiencing God's power. (Lot of good material in Wagner but, IMO, the mistake he makes is found in the subtitle - an over-emphasis on apostolic governance).

2. The functional view.

The emphasise is not on leadership structure but rather the idea that we need apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral people and teachers in the mix in any local church. Some of these people may also be appointed as leaders (elders and overseers) but not necessarily. Here, apostolic people are necessary because they come with a clarity of vision and they help others develop in their gifts. They also form alliances between people in the church and other churches. Prophetic people will bring the main burdens of the biblical prophets – God's holiness and social justice. Teachers help people know how to live. Pastor will help people feed themselves by leading them to good pastures. You get the idea.

I lean heavily towards the second view – that these terms **describe function not formal ranks in a hierarchy**. Nowhere are they used as

titles in the NT – and nowhere does the Bible refer to **the office** of a prophet, pastor, or apostle.

Some take this second, functional view, further and insist that every believer will have an emphasis that is apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic etc. This is consistent with the passage as it is not specifically stated that leadership is in view. However, other passages do suggest these terms are used to refer to specific leaders.

Healthy apostolic leadership requires sound theological grasp of what apostolic ministry is about/not about - or we get the emphasis wrong and risk damage.

Healthy apostolic leadership will focus on others

In 2 Cor Paul spends 3 chapters defending genuine apostolic ministry against the claims of 'super-apostles'. Today, we would call them Christian celebrities.

Celebrity vs. Apostle – what's the difference? **PPT**

Celebrity	Apostle
Lacks proximity Influence without proximity 'Magic aura' we can imbibe	<i>Proximity</i> <i>Relational authority</i> <i>Unimpressive</i>
Expects space to be made for them (focus on self)	<i>Makes space for others</i> <i>(focus on others)</i>
Special	<i>Ordinary – chief of sinners</i>

Gifted/ talent Impressive stage presence	<i>Treasure in earthen vessels</i> <i>Offscourings of the world</i>
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- Proximity – *I who am humble when face-to-face with you* (10:1). He spent time up close.
- Relational authority – *we were the first to come to with the good news* (10:14) - *For though you may have ten thousand teachers in Christ, you do not have many fathers.* (1 Cor 4:15)
- Unimpressive – *his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible* (10:10)
- Makes space for others – *did I commit a sin by humbling myself that you may be exalted?* (11:7) the church in focus to be exalted, not himself.
- Ordinary – *Treasure in earthen vessels*
Offscourings of the world (close link between suffering and apostolic ministry).

God does raise up a Paul, or a Billy Graham, a Wesley or a St Francis, - all of whom I would regard as major apostolic figures - but once we put them on a pedestal we inevitably travel down a sectarian root.

When I think of apostolic people, it is not big names that come to mind. I don't think primarily of megachurch leaders or popular conference speakers.

Those who come to mind are often very ordinary, hardworking people who have planted churches, acted as advisors to local churches and started networks to bring churches and leaders

together for mutual support or mission. I think of people who demonstrate that God's power is made perfect in weakness. People who demonstrate that 'God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confute the wise'.

Healthy apostolic leadership operates through proximity

Clearly we can *teach* others using means of mass communication. Or we can speak at a conference to people we don't know personally. We can certainly *influence* others. But when it comes to apostolic ministry we see that in the NT it was very relational.

The disciples of a rabbi observed his life. Others might hear his teaching but discipleship requires proximity. The aim was also that the student would excel and develop beyond the limitations of the teacher.

One of our challenges is to realise that church for people in the early days was different from what we mainly see today. The challenge is to take what we see in the NT and perhaps the very early post-apostolic period and apply it to the Church and to apostolic ministry today. We should bear in mind that:

- In NT times the Church was tiny.
- Rodney Stark: 1 in 10,000 of Roman Empire by 100.
- But it grew – not through revivals but because of the steady discipleship and sacrificial lifestyle of converts.
- Grew to 1 in 10 by 300.
- From 1 in 10,000 to one in ten in 200 years.

The second factor to take into account – met almost wholly in homes – early on in Acts Hebrew Christians met in homes and in the

Jerusalem Temple but once in gentile territory they made no attempt to create the Christian equivalent of the synagogue. Local home churches networked with one another and there were elders or overseers of the city or region.

Small groups, connected with one another, highly relational. *The terms that predominate in the NT are those of family* – brother, sister, father, mother.

We have to view NT apostolic ministry in the context of these cultural and historical realities – in particular, the issue of proximity is key. Jesus said that we should weigh prophecy partly through our knowledge of the life of the prophet – by their fruits you will know them. This requires being close enough to actually know them.

Getting the controlling metaphor right – the frame through which we should view apostolic ministry – our primary lens – is that of family. The metaphor of the family is the main paradigm for the church. Matt 12:46-50:

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

There are other metaphors – that of friendship, being Christ's body or bride – but the church for Paul at least is most often viewed as family. Similarly John's letters describe believers as fathers, sons, young men (note gender based language).

*** apostolic ministry functions relationally

Healthy apostolic leadership is linked with the metaphor of parenthood

For many in the New Charismatic world, apostles are not regarded as distant authority figures but as spiritual parents, father- or mother-figures to churches and movements.

A striking parallel is found in the Chinese House Churches. Under 1.5m protestants in 1949. 50-100 times that number when China opened up decades later. Many leaders function in ways similar to Western apostles, but are described in familial terms, such as 'uncle'.

For those in the West who find the term 'apostle' difficult, this familial language may offer an alternative way of describing those who start and guide new missional movements.

Interesting conversation recently with John McGinley – Anglican – Myriad goal 10,000 Anglican HCs.

- PhD researched groups in Europe that had planted 8+ churches in the last 5 years.
- Found one common element – emphasis spiritual mothers and fathers. One couple 150 churches – 3,000 people.
- Their method just to invite potential leaders to live with them – 'see how we resolve our arguments in real life'.

Healthy apostolic leadership is non-possessive

According to anthropologists, mother and father are statuses in society with a set of obligations to help children develop into

constructive family members and citizens. Of course, the idea is to allow dependency early on but to work towards independence.

The aim of healthy apostolic ministry is not to create an empire or ministry but to release people. Of course, this doesn't mean abandoning churches we plant but it does mean that we are seeking to create healthy mutually dependent individuals and churches.

In New Charismatic Churches, apostolic input is seen as valuable at every stage of a church's life, though **it tends to be more concentrated during the planting phase** (1 Corinthians 3:6-10).

⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷ So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour.

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

The metaphors here are drawn from agriculture (planting and watering) and construction. Interesting metaphors – growing seeds takes skill and patience – building something requires skill and knowledge of sequencing different elements to create something new.

The agricultural / gardening metaphor is where we get the term 'church planting' from. There is also a hint here of different apostolic people had different roles in planting a church – Paul initiated, planted, but Apollos's input was invaluable in promoting growth.

Healthy apostolic leaders work with others to create teams and networks

In addition to Apollos, others played a significant role in the Corinthian church – see Acts 18. This included Silas, Timothy and Aquila. It is clear from 1 Corinthians that Peter (Cephas) also had an input into the church.

Paul travelled with others, often a large group of companions and co-workers. Teams create the opportunity to draw on a variety of skills. They also provide an environment for learning by observing more experienced people and by participation.

In the past, I travelled a lot with a friend called Dave Day. Dave is excellent in cross-cultural situations. When I am in that context myself I don't think WWJD, because I don't know. I think WWDDD!

Similarly, I worked with John Noble in his network and observed how he made people feel included. Again, when in such situations I think what would John do?

Working together is based on feeling a strong connection. New Church Networks may operate in certain regions but they are primarily relationally based, rather than geographically based.

Networks is a whole topic in itself, but just to say here that drawing people together is seen as an apostolic function – just as Paul worked with different churches and leaders – John in Asia Minor – Peter in Judea and Rome. These connections – relational bonds were strong and represent the unseen architecture of the Spirit as he draws people together.

Apostolic authority & governance

But what was their authority? Did they govern local churches from a distance once they had left? Could they introduce new doctrine?

Contemporary apostolic input never comes close to the authority of Scripture and in healthy situations, the views of those exercising an apostolic role do not outweigh those of local church leaders, pastors, or evangelists, though admittedly some have overstepped these boundaries.

There's a list in 1 Cor 12 where Paul says that God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets and so on. I think this is more of a hierarchy of which gifts are foundational, rather than a list of relative positioning in a church hierarchy.

A couple of caveats here. The first is that if someone founds a church and then moves on, they may, like Paul, retain a watching oversight and act as a senior leader until the church leadership matures. I think that is the situation we see in Paul's letters.

Second, apostolic network leaders have governance in terms of the overall direction of their network. That is right and proper – though it will be a team led entity.

Randy Clark's survey on governance. Responses from 22 major leaders in the new churches. Clark himself has written that governmental authority is only appropriate where an apostolic leader is the founder of that particular church.

The survey itself is sometimes unclear and difficult to interpret but overall it is reassuring in that most hold non-authoritarian views on apostleship (the 21). However, one respondent regards apostles as 'God's generals' who must be obeyed. It is highly concerning that such authoritarian views exist, even if they are minority views and

more concerning that the other 21 have not to my knowledge challenged this major leader.

In the light of this issue I had a conversation with someone from CTF who confirmed that their apostolic leadership do not have the power to veto any decision of a local church's leadership. Their role is advisory.

We could, of course, usefully compare authority as exercised in most NCC circles with that in the Catholic Church. That's beyond my pay grade.

Final word to John Wimber

In my research I have come across 8 approaches to the idea of a contemporary apostolic ministry. So when we use this term we may well have slightly different things in mind. I prefer the term apostolic ministry to calling someone an apostle – mainly because apostle is a loaded term and the energy expended in debating it often produces more heat than light.

A few networks, such as Vineyard, are similarly cautious about using the term apostle, preferring to focus on the function of the apostolic *role* rather than an official apostolic *office* in Church leadership.

John Wimber, who founded Vineyard, believed some people can **function** as apostles today. He saw the five ministries listed in Ephesians 4 - apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher - as foundational for Vineyard's life and mission.

We have seen that in line with Wimber's caution, the New Testament never uses the terms apostle or prophet to describe a fixed church *office* in the way that elders and overseers are seen as appointed roles. Instead, apostolic ministry is depicted as a way an

individual *functions* in areas such as building the church, planting new congregations, and forming networks of leaders and churches.

Who's your favourite anthropologist – Paul Hiebert. GiHC – missionary anthropology. He differentiates mechanistic and organic systems. My watch is a mechanistic system (so is a car or a computer). They rely on stability and equilibrium. Change is a bad thing – if a change occurs in my watch it stops working.

Organic systems by contrast are living – my heart, societies, beehives – and if they remain static they don't thrive. They have to adapt to change or die.

Mechanistic systems develop when they are replaced by a new improved model. Organic systems grow, change, adapt and reproduce. When they reproduce the result is something new and to some extent different.

Apostolic ministry is an integral part of organic church systems. Even if they are not labelled as such -- we need to recognise that if a church operates more like an organisation than a family, a mechanistic system, then spiritual motherhood and fatherhood is relegated and issues such as governance, budgets and keeping the show on the road tend to take precedence.

Second. Where churches resemble mechanistic systems, apostolic ministry is unlikely to arise as it is seen as being disruptive. Keeping things running smoothly becomes more important than mission or the call of God.

I am not suggesting that we should turn the clock back and imitate the NT exactly – though that would be nice – rather I am suggesting that when we think about what apostolic ministry might look like today, we need to make several shifts in our thinking. I believe that this includes many of us in the New Churches, especially if we easily fall prey to believing our own publicity.

Apostolic ministry is certainly dangerous when in the hands of people with personality disorders, those interested in power and celebrity. But if we can recognise and reintegrate apostolic ministry the potential is great. Apostolic ministry can be viewed as a threat: St Patrick is a good example. Called to Ireland through a vision, Patrick almost single-handedly saw about 40 of the 150 Irish tribes turn to Christ. Yet his writing demonstrates that there was great pressure from colleagues back in Britain to come to his senses and leave Ireland for a ministry back home.

Apostolic ministry is not in need of restoration - Wagner was wrong on that score – but it is in need of recognition. In Protestant circles, apostolic people have tended to create what we've labelled parachurch organisations - because we often don't know what to do with them as they are potentially disruptive to the status quo.

In the Catholic Church many have founded new orders, monastic orders or lay associations, prayer networks, communities.

Apostolic ministry has never gone away because it depends more on the call of God, than the recognition of the Church. It is no more important than pastoral ministry, or teaching ministry, but neither is it less important and I believe it is helpful if we recognise such people. It does, of course, need to be carried out in healthy ways, apostolic people need humility and accountability and, as indicated, they need to work relationally.