

## **Chapter Nine**

### **DENOMINATIONS OR APOSTLES?**

The following discussion is offered recognizing that it leaves many questions unanswered. None of us has all the answers, but if Apostles are for us today we may expect the Holy Spirit to enlighten us more in the coming years. Please see Chapter Three for other considerations.

Denominational structures are a natural outgrowth of the need of churches for supervision, protection and fellowship. They have coordinated the efforts of local churches in missionary enterprises as well as other worthwhile projects. They have served a good purpose. Good denominational supervision is better than total independence. On the other hand, there have been some negative results for the local church, such as:

- There has been unnecessary control of internal affairs and a loss of independence.
- At times instead of protecting the local churches from doctrinal deviation they have led their churches into liberalism and skepticism.
- Churches have been obliged to support programs that are contrary to the Word of God.

- Hierarchical patterns of leadership have been established which have no Biblical foundation.
- The method by which leadership is selected has often produced carnal power struggles.
- The denomination has been exalted as a sacrosanct institution. In some cases the “this is the way we believe” supercedes the Word of God.

Denominations inevitably become rigid “old wine skins.” Though the founders were moving with God, succeeding generations are locked into expressions of worship and a governmental structure that limits the freedom of the Spirit. The leaders are administrators rather than anointed prophets.

The New Testament shows us a better way: not large organizational structures but apostolic oversight. In studying the first century local churches we find three principles governing their relationships:

- The local church was **independent**.
- All local churches were **interdependent**.
- Local churches had **apostolic supervision**.

## **A. Three Principles Governing Local Church Relationships:**

**1. Each local church is independent under the leadership of elders.** This is in respect to internal affairs; the ministries, the outreach, both local and missionary, the collection and distribution of monies and the training and discipling of members. Any church guided by the Holy Spirit and the Bible should be able to handle these matters. (Rom. 15:14; I Cor. 5:13; 6:1-7; 16:15, 16; II Cor 8 and 9 18:3-8; 9:1-3]; Phil. 4:14-16:1 Thess. 5:12, 13; Heb. 13:17; I Jn. 2:27)

### **2. All local churches are interdependent.**

No church is totally independent. We are all dependent on each other as individuals and as congregations (I Cor. 12:12-28). In the New Testament we see many examples of the interdependence of the churches:

- between Jerusalem, Judea and Antioch (Acts 11:19-30)
- between Jerusalem and all the churches (Acts 15)
- between all the house churches of Rome (Rom. 16)
- between the churches of Colossae and Laodicea (Col. 4:16)
- between the churches of Achaia, Macedonia and Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-27)

Some churches are exclusive, having no fellowship with other local churches in their area not of their denomination or doctrinal viewpoint. This is unscriptural and evidence of a spirit other than the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Ephesians 4:3 (K.J.), “Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit...” Unity requires an effort to maintain, but it is crucial for a healthy witness to the world (Jn. 17:2 1).

### **3. Every church has apostolic supervision.**

In the New Testament we find apostles as Paul who founded churches, or those as James who supervised churches in Jerusalem and Judea, or as John, who later was with the churches of Asia. The first century churches recognized these men and looked to them for help in solving problems and settling doctrinal disputes.

A local church that refuses an apostolic “covering” in the name of being independent is open for error or extremism. Very likely it will have internal problems it cannot resolve. This spirit of independence might result in a church split. At the least it will produce an unhealthy narrowness and conceit in its leaders and members. Note the example of John’s authority being disputed in III John 9, 10.

## **B. Apostolic Oversight in the New Testament.**

**1. The authority of the apostle was extensive,** but as others have pointed out, it was a **spiritual authority.** Note the following: (1) When the apostle was resident in a local church

he acted as a pastor. (2) When he exercised trans-local authority (as Paul did through his letters), he dealt with questions sent to him by the local leaders. (3) When Paul became aware of doctrinal error he quickly responded with his apostolic authority. (4) When there was gross sin Paul did not hesitate to insist on action on the part of the church leaders (1 Cor. 5, 6).

**2.** Note, however, there was **no organizational hierarchy**. There was no central headquarters as far as we know. The apostles with their assistants provided the supervision, the needed counseling or correction. The apostle was not necessarily fixed. Wherever they were they were recognized as having a certain spiritual authority. We see Apollos at Corinth and Ephesus (I Cor. 1-4, 16); Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21); Paul at Jerusalem (Gal. 2; 1-10; Acts 15 & 21). Note that Paul himself avoided working in another's apostolic area (Rom. 15:20; II Cor 10:13-16), and when in Jerusalem he submitted to the leadership there (Acts 21). Paul, however, did not forbid Apollos from visiting and ministering in his churches (I Cor. 16:12). Peter wrote to the churches in Galatia and Asia, both areas that Paul pioneered (I Pet. 1:1).

**3.** There is no **evidence that apostles were supported financially** by virtue of being apostles. They were no doubt supported by the local church where they were ministering even as other ministers (I Cor. 9:6-14). The gift the Philippian church sent to Paul was unexpected and unusual (Phil. 4:10-18).

### **C. Organizations in an Apostolic Context.**

Structure is necessary for humans to operate effectively. Missionary programs and area-wide projects need organized cooperation between local churches. Scripture shows that organization is of the Lord. The detailed rules concerning the Tabernacle services, the arrangement of Israel's camp and order of march, the system of judges, etc., demonstrate God's desire for organization. If for no other reason, our national government requires it. Furthermore, any group of churches, even those under apostolic supervision, needs a certain amount of organization.

There are, however, certain dangers with organizations whether they be inter-church or para-church. Here are some signs of an organization overstepping its proper limits:

- when the organization controls the believers in matters of conduct that are the responsibility of the local church.
- when the organization becomes obsessed with its own importance.
- when it requires large sums of money for its own existence. (An exception: a Christian college).
- when it is served by the believers rather than serving the needs of the believers.
- when it operates independently of the local church or does not support the local churches or dictates to the local church.
- when it is unsupervised by apostolic authority.

#### **D. Recognizing the True Apostle.**

This is a key problem. There are self-called apostles today, even as there were in John's day (Rev. 2:2). Paul also talked about false apostles in II Corinthians 11:13. There is a danger that carnal men, motivated by ambition, will claim apostleship. It is imperative that these men be exposed. It is also important that the Church understands the characteristics of true apostles so that they will be recognized.

Here are some guidelines:

**1. A true apostle is one sent forth by Jesus, the Lord of the Church.**

The word "apostle" means one sent forth. A self-proclaimed apostle obviously isn't one. But if, as in the case of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:1-4, the Holy Spirit and the church recognize such a one, we may feel assured that he is. Every apostle should have a home church that sends him out. A word of caution is needed: all "utterances" are not from the Holy Spirit and all local churches are not to be depended on to distinguish the true apostle from the false. Therefore other criteria must be used to determine the one sent from the Lord.

**2. The apostle begins his ministry in one of the other ministry-gifts** of Ephesians 4:11. See the example of Paul, Barnabas and Silas (Acts 13: 15:32).

**3. He has a foundational ministry.** (Eph 2:20; I Cor. 3:10; 12:28) The apostle generally founds churches or else several churches spontaneously look to him for apostolic supervision.

**4. He has a revelation of the mystery of the Church** (Eph 3:1-5). In other words, he has a correct concept of the Church which enables him to found the local churches on solid New Testament lines.

**5. He has fruit or a seal** (I Cor. 9:2). Healthy churches properly organized are one of the evidences of an apostolic ministry.

**6. He has a supernatural gift ministry** (II Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:19; 1 Thes. 1:5; Acts 5:12). There have always been apostolic figures in the Church, but the majority had no signs. The modern pentecost with the Holy Spirit's anointing, is making possible the emergence of true apostles with confirming signs.

**7. He lives a life of rectitude** (II Cor. 11:1-15; I Thes. 2:1-12). A false apostle may feign righteousness, but discerning believers will not be taken in. The life of the true apostle will be genuinely holy.

**8. He has patience** (II Cor. 12:12 IK.J.). False apostles are often shown up by a lack of perseverance under adverse conditions. True apostles often receive more than normal opposition but remain firm through it all. See I Corinthians 4:9-13.

**9. He has an authority** (I Cor. 12:28; II Cor. 10:8-18; 13:10:1 Thess 2:6). Jesus gives his apostles a divine authority that is easily recognized. It is not based on arrogance or an overbearing attitude (I Pet. 5:3), but rather on humility.

**10. He is a man of humility.** II Corinthians 10-13 gives us a picture of Paul's humility, and this despite Paul's "boasting" in chapter 11:16-12:6. See also I Thessalonians 2:1-11. False apostles invariably lack humility.

**11. He submits his ministry to other apostles for approval.** (Gal. 2:1-10; Acts 15), and he receives correction from them (Gal. 2:11-21). Everybody, including the apostle, should be accountable to others (Eph. 5:2 1). Those who cannot receive correction disqualify themselves from their ministry.

Is it possible for the Church to return to apostolic oversight rather than denominational control? Is it too idealistic to think we can return to the New Testament pattern? Since the Reformation the Church has come a long way back to what we see in Acts and the Epistles. Can we not believe that Jesus through the Holy Spirit will restore apostles in these last days to complete the Church?

"And he gave some as apostles ...until we all attain... to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." Ephesians 4:11, 13.