

Apostles

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[0 : 0 0] So this evening we're going to be continuing the series we started last week on the gifts of the Spirit. Before the summer here at St. Columbus we were looking on our Sunday evenings at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5, the fruit of the Spirit's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so on.

What it looks like to live a life that's led by the Spirit that's rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and so on and so forth. Now last week we started a new series on the gifts of the Spirit. We looked at the fruit of the Spirit, we're now looking at the gifts of the Spirit.

And Derek reminded us last week that every Christian, every follower of Jesus Christ has gifts. That through the Holy Spirit we are all gifted in unique and different ways.

And I think a lot of Christians sometimes struggle with acknowledging that, with accepting that they're gifted. Maybe because they feel like they're not talented or you're not worthy or you're maybe even afraid of what other people might think of you.

And maybe we fall into one of these categories this evening. But the fact is the Bible says that every Christian has a gift, has gifts. You have unique gifts as a Christian.

[1 : 1 5] And perhaps maybe it's part of our culture being Scottish, we struggle to talk about our own abilities, our own gifts. Maybe it makes us a little bit uncomfortable.

Sometimes we have a tendency to understate our abilities and the things that we're good at. But the New Testament is clear that through the Spirit God has equipped us as a church, as individuals, to have gifts.

Each and every one of us. And what that means is that no matter how much we value and love the leadership of an individual, like Derek or Thomas or whoever it is, the church has to be so much more than a one-man band.

Romans chapter 12 verse 6 puts it like this. It says, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. We all have something to offer God and the church.

So clearly it's important that we reflect on what the Bible says about these gifts and that we understand biblical teaching on the spiritual gifts. So last Sunday we did an overview of 1 Corinthians chapter 12, the passage we read earlier, the great spiritual gifts passage.

[2 : 2 7] We thought last week about God as the great gift giver. God is the starting point. God is the one who gives these gifts through the Holy Spirit. And tonight we're going to think for a brief time about the first gift we have listed for us in 1 Corinthians 12, 28.

God has placed in the church, first of all, apostles. And I wanted to think about the gift of apostles by breaking it down into two simple questions. So two points this evening. Mary had three, I've got two.

Well, I've kind of cheated. My second one has like five sub points. But the first one is what is an apostle? I'm going to think about what an apostle is, what the Bible says about apostles. And then secondly, I want us to think about why God gave apostles.

Why should they matter to us this evening? Why are they significant in our lives as Christians? So first of all, why, what is an apostle? Maybe you're sitting here this evening and you have no idea what I'm talking about when I use the word apostle.

Maybe you're hearing about kind of vague idea or a vague understanding of what an apostle is. Or maybe you feel like, you know, all there is to know about the apostles. I think wherever you're at in your understanding, before we jump into it properly, I think it's helpful for us just to reflect on what the Bible actually says about apostles.

[3 : 46] I'm not going to bore you all with the Greek, but the word itself literally means one who is sent. It's someone who is sent. It's a messenger, a kind of representative.

It's a bit like when we have the General Assembly in this building every year, the Queen. She doesn't often come herself, but she sends someone called the Lord High Commissioner, someone who comes and someone who speaks to us as if it was the Queen speaking.

Someone who represents her. In the ancient world, Caesar had a similar kind of thing going on. He would send apostles to speak for him. And if you didn't obey these apostles, you were effectively disobeying Caesar himself.

Now, the Bible tells us in the New Testament that Jesus sent out apostles. He sent out people who functioned in much the same way. The apostles were people who would speak for Jesus with his words and who would act with his authority.

So who were they? Well, we need to look at a couple of key texts. Bear with me as we jump around a little bit. The first one I want to look at is in Matthew chapter 10.

[4 : 54] The first kind of apostle text we have is here. These are the names of the 12 apostles, the disciples who followed Jesus. Simon, Peter, his brother Andrew, James, his brother John, Philip, and Bartholomew, Thomas, and Matthew, the tax collector, James, and Thaddeus, Simon the zealot, and Judas, who ultimately betrayed him.

So these are the guys who followed Jesus around in his earthly ministry. They were his inner core of his followers. And here we have them sent out as apostles. And the point is that there's a distinction made in the Bible between a disciple and an apostle.

There's a difference. All Christians are disciples. If you hear this evening and your faith is in Jesus Christ, you are a disciple. You're a follower, a learner of Jesus Christ. That's literally what the word means.

You're a follower of Jesus Christ. But not all disciples are apostles. And that's important, and we'll come back to that. See, in Matthew chapter 10 and in the next text, I think I forgot to put on the screen, Acts chapter 1, the point that's been made is that they have a unique role in the church.

These apostles, these guys who are sort of sent out by Jesus. Acts chapter 1 verse 21, this is after Judas has betrayed Jesus and they have to replace him. It says, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time Jesus was living among us, beginning with John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.

[6 : 25] For one of these must become a witness to the resurrection. So they nominate two men, Joseph called Bar Sabbath and Matthias. And then they prayed, Lord, you know everyone's heart, show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry.

So they cast lots and they fell on Matthias and he's added to the 11 apostles. So part of the criteria for being an apostle is being a witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Okay, we're getting there, one more biblical text. You've also got the apostle Paul. How does Paul fit in? Paul calls himself an apostle, he calls himself one who is sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

Now Paul obviously came later, he wasn't with Jesus as original 12 when he was here on earth. So how does he fit in? How does he meet this criteria for being an apostle?

Well he says in 1 Corinthians 15, this is the last big text we're going to read. He says, for what I received I passed on to you as a first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to Cephas, that's Peter, and then to the 12.

[7 : 43] After that he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also.

For I am the least of the apostles, and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was in me. So clearly Paul is considered in the Bible to be part of this select group of individuals.

He is part of this group of apostles. Now what all of this stuff boils down to is that the gift of apostleship is unique. It's a particular gift for a particular moment in time, and it's given to a certain group of people.

So maybe we're sitting here this evening and we're thinking, well why is any of this really relevant to me and my Christian life this evening? How does any of this stuff affect me tomorrow at work or at uni?

[8 : 51] Why aren't we looking at gifts that we can actually use? Well the reason is that the gift of apostles is such an important starting point. The Bible describes the apostles as the foundation that the church is built on.

And we're going to think now just for a little bit about why God gave us apostles. And there's several reasons. I'm going to suggest five very briefly. The first of all is that the church is built on their foundation.

You and Red for us earlier from Ephesians 2 verse 19 and 20, you're no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Now foundations are important, they're essential. That might seem obvious but it's true. And it's a metaphor that Jesus used in his teaching.

He used the story of the man who built his house on the rock and the man who built his house on the sand. And in both cases the wind comes, the storms come, the waves come, and the house on the rock stands firm and the house on the sand is washed away.

[10 : 00] It's a simple point, the point being that what you build your life on, what you choose to base your life on will have tremendous consequences. And choosing the right foundation is essential.

So right away we see here with the apostles, they are hugely, hugely, hugely important figures and we have to understand them. At the very least because they are the ground on which the church is built.

And for us today that means that St. Columba's here in Edinburgh is built on the foundation of the apostles. It means that St. Columba's is grounded in the work of the apostles, the message of the apostles, the teaching of the apostles.

It means that every individual believing group and congregation and even every individual believer is grounded in the apostles.

There's a document called the Nicene Creed, it's a historical church document. I won't go into the history stuff, it's fascinating but we'll put you all to sleep. But effectively what it was was a document that summarized what the church believed.

[10 : 59] And this is a statement that the church has confessed together, has stated together time and time throughout history. We believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic church.

Now it's important to state right away that Catholic that's with a small c, it just means universal, it's not referring to Rome. And really it's referring to the kind of the global nature of Jesus's church.

It's worldwide, it's not limited to a certain group or denomination or sect. But the church we believe is apostolic. It is grounded in these guys called the apostles.

See sometimes in life the foundation beneath us can feel a little bit flimsy. In our day to day lives it can feel like the ground is about to give way. Sometimes we live our life as Christians, our faith can seem shaky, the people around us can seem inconsistent.

But one thing we have is this amazing, amazing truth that we are part of something so much bigger. Something that is grounded in what God has done through the apostles. God gave the gift of apostles first of all as a foundation for the church.

[12 : 11] Secondly, and related to that and building on that from mixing metaphors a little bit, that God gave the gift of apostles because we need teaching. Imagine for a second that you are a first century Christian and you're believing in Jesus Christ, you're following the church and all the rest of that.

You've experienced what we were thinking about this morning, you've been made alive in Christ, you've been transformed. You maybe have a copy of Old Testament Scriptures but you've got no New Testament. Where do you go if you want to learn more about the cross?

How do you find out how you should relate to the law now that you're a Christian? Or how do you relate to the people around you, the church? See the apostles were given in this unique period in history.

After Jesus Christ has risen from the dead but it's before the New Testament has been finalized, I wonder when we read our New Testaments, do we think about the books inside it?

Do we think about why they are there, why those ones and not other ones? The teaching of the apostles is effectively the New Testament, it's the teaching of Jesus. The Bible says that they were carried along these people by the Holy Spirit, it's what we call the inspiration of Scripture.

[13 : 27] So the message of Paul, the message of Peter, of John, of Matthew, of Mark, and Luke and so on and so forth, is all the message of Jesus Christ. And just as we think about the content of the apostles' teaching, when you read Peter's letters, you don't get a book full of Peter's helpful life advice for a happy life.

When you read Paul, you don't get 10 top tricks to a successful and happy life. It's not just good advice on how to live.

When you read the apostles, you get the gospel, you get the message of Jesus Christ. Paul is not big on his office as an apostle, as his role as an apostle.

He mentions it when he has to, when he's forced to defend himself, but Paul is big on the gospel. The gospel just radiates throughout Paul's writings. It's absolutely fundamental. It's the central thing in the apostles' teaching.

They were fundamentally gospel people. Their life, their actions, their words, their thoughts, their writings, they were all shaped and molded and driven by the gospel.

[14 : 41] So if we are the church that's built on the foundation of the apostles, if we're following on in their tradition, we need to be gospel people. We have to be a gospel church. It might seem obvious, but it's true.

And as we think about the gifts of the Spirit in our Christian lives, we can never separate that from the one who gives those gifts. The one who is the source of the gospel, the God we were thinking about. God is the great gift giver.

At 1 Corinthians 12 verse 4, it says, there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone, it is the same God at work. God is the great gift giver.

Ultimately, it's not because the apostles were awesome. When you read the Bible, you see they were fairly flawed individuals at times. Peter was a fisherman. Paul made tents.

[15 : 44] Matthew was a finance guy. These were normal people chosen by God, commissioned by God, sent out by God, and gifted by God.

And ultimately, it's God's revealed truth that we have through the teaching of the apostles. Okay, thirdly, moving on. The apostles are absolutely crucial for how we understand mission.

That's what the Book of Acts is all about. The Book of Acts is amazing. It's exciting. It's fascinating. You can sit down and you can read it in one sitting. And I'd recommend if you get the chance to do that. It's incredible.

The apostles do incredible things through the Spirit. They speak the gospel message. They perform miracles and healings and all kinds of wonderful signs that point people to Jesus.

They plant churches. What we do here in St. Columas, we, you know, cornerstone a few years ago, in the middle of the West Valley, Haddington, these are not novel things.

[16 : 45] Church planting is not a recent fad. It's profoundly biblical. You read the Book of Acts, you see church planting. The apostles were committed to spreading the gospel by planting new churches and forming new communities of Christians all over the world.

And the mission of the apostles is a mission that we're called through today as Christians. We can't say that their experience is normative for us. In other words, we can't do exactly as they didn't expect to get the exact same results.

They're a very unique group of individuals. But it is absolutely true that we share their sentness. And if Thomas can get away with bigness last week, I'm going to go for sentness as a word.

We share in their sentness. God sends out every single believer to be a Jesus messenger. We all have an amazing message for the people around us, for our family, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues.

There's profoundly good news to share. And we too, like the apostles, have the Holy Spirit. We are sent out with the Holy Spirit inside us. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit living in our lives, each and every one of us.

[18 : 02] It's impossible to be a Christian and not have the Holy Spirit. So we have the gospel of the apostles. We have the Holy Spirit of the apostles.

We have the same message of the apostles. It's life-changing. It's life-transforming. It's a message of good news. It's a message about a person, Jesus Christ. And just like the apostles actually shape the way we think, the way we act, the way we speak, and we should ultimately be driven with that as a result to mission.

So that's mission thirdly. Fourthly, authority. Why did God give the apostles? Well, the church needs authority. And I think instantly today in our society, in our culture, that's a word that people don't like.

It's a word that people may be shrink back from a little bit. We live in a culture that's very much emphasizing individual autonomy, freedom of expression, and the value of self.

So anything that threatens that, we kind of shrink back from. But Jesus is so clear in the Bible that the church can never be a free-for-all.

[19 : 10] We're not just a group of random individuals. It just happened to meet together every now and then, and saying, and then go home and do our own thing. The church has authority. God has given us authority through the apostles.

Maybe you've ever read the book The Da Vinci Code or watched the movie. It's an interesting take on history. It's profoundly wrong, but it's an interesting story.

It takes a stance that the true Jesus of history has been distorted, and the churches kind of swept him away, and the real Jesus actually got married and had kids and all sorts of other things.

But that way of thinking is actually quite common. People think that we need to get back to the real Jesus. We need to discover the historical, the message of Jesus in here is not the real Jesus. We need to discover the real one.

Part of that is because people don't like the apostles' position on sexuality or church leadership. It's controversial. So some people say, well, you know, I'll follow the teachings of Jesus, but I'll leave the apostles to one side.

[20 : 20] Some denominations today, some parts of the church, they take this view. They say that, well, the apostles, that was then, and this is now. We need to determine truth for ourselves.

God is doing a new thing. But as a church, we have to believe that the whole Bible is the teaching of Jesus. Right from the beginning, right through the end, including the apostles, and it all carries his authority.

It's his living word, how he speaks to us today. My last point this evening is that God gave the apostles to the church for guidance.

The world we live in today desperately needs guidance. Just building on what we were thinking earlier about teaching. How do we know what is true?

How do we know what is true? Our culture today tells us that we need to determine truth for ourselves. Or that what's true for you might not be true for me.

[21 : 17] We have a really subjective view of truth. And it's a common way of thinking. But the gift of the apostles, God gives us these people because he knows that we need guidance.

They're like a spiritual satnav. A kind of godly Google Maps. They keep us going in the right direction. And, well, we make sense of that by thinking, well, what was their primary job?

What was the primary task of the apostles? It was to point people to Jesus. It was to guide people to Jesus Christ. They were to bear witness to his life and his claims.

And through the apostles, you come face to face with the living Jesus Christ. With the resurrected Savior and Lord of this world. So when you go and open your Bible and you read Ephesians, or you read 1 John or James, you come face to face with Jesus.

One of the big reasons the church needs the gift of apostles is false teaching. And that's something you read time and time again in the New Testament. False teaching has been a problem for the church throughout its existence.

[22 : 28] And for example, some groups would say that to become a Christian, you also had to become a Jew. You had to follow the ceremonial law. And if you were a male, you had to get circumcised. That's what the letter of Galatians is dealing with. It's false teaching.

It's guiding people away from that, which is effectively a different gospel, a different Jesus. And this crops up time and time again throughout history.

So God gave the gift of the apostles to point us and guide us to the real living Jesus Christ. I want to close this evening just by reading a verse from 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

It says, Just as we were thinking about last week, as a Christian, God has given you all that you need.

He has given all the gifts that you need as an individual. You might not feel that way sometimes. You might struggle with that, but it's true. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit living inside us.

[23 : 42] The same spirit who brings the words of the apostles to life. The spirit who turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. The same spirit that works through the apostles in all of their teaching and in all of their miracles.

And we share in the apostles' sentness. We are being sent out tomorrow in whatever we are in our workplace or uni or in our social circles, wherever we'll be.

We're sent into a world that is broken, a world that is in many ways in darkness, a world that is a mission field, full of people that need to hear the gospel, that need to hear the message of forgiveness and hope and life that can only be found in Jesus.

We are Jesus' messengers today, and we pray that his spirit would help us and enable us to be faithful gospel messengers. Before we sing again, let's just come before God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we come before you this evening, and we thank you that you are a God who gives gifts to your church. Lord, you are a God who does not leave us to our own devices, you do not leave us to find our own way in life.

[24 : 54] Father, you have given us the greatest gift of all in your Son Jesus Christ. And we praise you Father for his death, his life, his resurrection, and for all that you've achieved for us through Jesus.

We thank you Father for your spirit which lives and seeks to guide us in our hearts. Father, help us to be people who are characterized, people who are, Lord, just driven by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Father, be with us tomorrow in wherever you send us, whether that's studies, whether that's work, whether that's our family or our homes. Father, help us wherever we are to be effective witnesses of your good news.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.