



Who Are The Apostles?
Week #1: When God Equips The Called

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Christ the Wisdom and Power of God

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ **For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.**

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Define Apostle: Sent One

- **Development of the Term**

Originally used as an **adjective**, describing a dispatch that was usually made by sea.

Or the thing that was sent out:

Thus, in classical and Hellenistic Greek, it is often applied in an impersonal way; for example, referring to a dispatched fleet or an invoice accompanying a shipment. It is used only once in the Septuagint (LXX), referring to the prophet Ahijah (1 Kgs 14:6), and once by Josephus when he is discussing envoys sent to Rome (*Antiquities* 17.300).

- Noun

Of the 79 passages that use “apostle” in the New Testament, 66 are found in Acts and the Epistles (and three in Revelation).

Terminology

The noun “apostle” (ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*) in the New Testament is applied widely:

- to the Twelve (including Matthias) (Matt 10:2; 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:47–49; John 20:19–23)
- to Paul (Rom 16:7; 1 Thess 2:1–7)
- to Jesus (Heb 3:1–6)
- and to missionaries who bear the message of the gospel (1 Cor 9:5; 2 Cor 8:23; Eph 2:20; Phil 2:25; Acts 1:21–26; 13:1–3).

Four Examples of the use of Apostle in N.T.:

1. Jesus and Moses (Heb 3:1–6)

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, **consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession,** ² who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house. ³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴ (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵ **Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later,** ⁶ **but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son.** And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.



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2. the 70 (or 72) sent out by Jesus (**Luke 10:1**);

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go.

3. James & Paul (**1 Cor 15:5-9**)

⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

4. Andronicus and Junia (**Rom 16:7**).

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7)

In his greetings at the end of Romans, Paul describes Andronicus and Junia (Ἰουλιαν, *Ioulian*) as “my compatriots and my fellow prisoners, who are well known to the apostles, who were also in Christ before me” (Rom 16:7).

Critical discussions about Andronicus and Junia typically focus on two questions:

1. Was Ἰουλιαν (*Ioulian*) a woman’s name?
2. Were Andronicus and Junia apostles?

Was Ἰουλιαν (Ioulian) a Woman’s Name?

Church fathers such as Chrysostom (Chrysostom, *Romans*, 31), as well as modern scholars including Mounce (Mounce, *Romans*, 275–76) and Epp (Epp, *Junia*, 23–27) support reading “Junia” as a woman’s name.

- Abernathy states that Ἰουλιαν (*Ioulian*) (or Ἰουλιᾶς, *Ioulias*) was consistently translated as the feminine “Junia” until the 13th century, when the Greek accent shifted to produce Ἰουλιᾶν (*Ioulian*) and the masculine “Junias” (Abernathy, *Romans* 9–16, 369).
- Some commentators (e.g., Murray, *Romans*, 229–30; Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 423–24) believe Paul most likely intended “Junias,” proposing that this is an abbreviated form of the common male name Junianus (Abernathy, *Romans* 9–16, 369).
- Dunn, however, notes that while “Junia” appears in over 250 instances in ancient literature, there is not one instance of “Junias.” Dunn concludes that “the assumption that it must be male is a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity” (Dunn, *Romans* 9–16, 894).

Were Andronicus and Junia Apostles?

Early Church Fathers. Hippolytus lists Andronicus (but not Junia) as one of the 70 apostles whom Jesus sent out in Luke 10 (Hippolytus, *On the Seventy Apostles*). Chrysostom identifies both Andronicus and Junia as apostles, but he does not elaborate on whether they might have been among the 70 or James’ group (Chrysostom, *Romans* 31).

Modern Interpreters. Dunn says the phrase “well known to the apostles” in Rom 16:7 is best interpreted as “prominent among the apostles” (Dunn, *Romans* 9–16, 894). Dunn understands Andronicus and Junia to be a married couple (Dunn, *Romans* 9–16, 895). He counts them among the earliest Palestinian Christians and suggests that they were personally appointed by the risen Christ prior to His ascension, which might include them among the 500 who saw the risen Lord or among the apostles with James (1 Cor 15:7). Dunn remains uncertain about Andronicus and Junia’s connection with Rome; they might have been considered apostles of Rome, or they could have played a role in planting house churches there (Dunn, *Romans* 9–16, 895).

Sanday and Headlam state that Andronicus and Junias were included among a larger body of apostles than the Twelve, suggesting that they were among the Palestinian Jews who dispersed after Stephen’s execution. They present three primary reasons for accepting Andronicus and Junias as apostles (Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 423–424):

1. the church fathers understood them to be apostles
2. the use of the Greek form of *episamos* (ἐπίσημοι, *episēmoi*) literally means “stamped or marked” in a way that made them distinct among the apostles, rather than meaning “well known by the apostles”



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3. the wider use of “apostle,” substantiated by the Didache, allows the title to apply to people outside the Twelve (Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 423).¹

Define Disciple:

DISCIPLE A student, pupil, or learner. In the New Testament it is used for Jesus’ followers. Often references “the Twelve” but also indicates a wider group of followers.

Ordinary: “Everyday People” Not intellectually renowned. Not spiritually astute. Most of them were fishermen. (7?)

- One was a former Zealot (James?) —a radical, determined to overthrow Roman rule.
- Tax collector (Levi/Matthew) —virtually a traitor to the Jewish nation and in collusion with Rome.
- At least four, and possibly seven, were fishermen and close friends from Capernaum, probably having known one another from childhood.
- Others, tradesmen or craftsmen, but we are not told what they did before becoming followers of Christ.
- Most of them were from Galilee, an agricultural region at the intersection of trade routes. And Galilee remained their home base for most of Jesus’ ministry—(not Jerusalem)
- Even Jesus remarked that they were slow learners and somewhat spiritually ignorant. People with human weaknesses.
 - **Luke 24:25-27** *And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. [2 Disciples on the road to Emmaus]*
 - That His power is made perfect in weakness
2 Corinthians 2:8-9
⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

I. Jesus calls them to **Follow Him**:

Matthew 4:18-20

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

¹⁸ *While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.*

Mark 2:14 (Mt. 9:9)

And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.

John 1

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

³⁵ *The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples,³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi”*

¹ Lewis, J. M. (2016). [Apostle, Critical Issues](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



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(which means Teacher), “where are you staying?”³⁹ He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was **Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.** ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter). [WHO WAS THE OTHER DISC? JOHN THE DISCIPLE?]

John 1

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. **He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.”** ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ **Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”** ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹ And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

II. Jesus calls out 12 Disciples:

Disciples. About 1.5 years into His earthly ministry?

Matthew 10:1-4

And he called to him his **twelve disciples and gave them authority** over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. ² The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Luke 6:12-16

¹² In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. ¹³ And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: ¹⁴ Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, ¹⁵ and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶ and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Mark 3:13-19

¹³ And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. ¹⁴ And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and have authority to cast out demons. ¹⁶ He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); ¹⁷ James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); ¹⁸ Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, ¹⁹ and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Jesus sifts out the Followers...

John 6

[Jesus feeds the 5,000 & He walks on water]

I Am the Bread of Life



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²² On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³ Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread^[a] the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.” ⁵⁹ Jesus^[a] said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

The Words of Eternal Life

⁶⁰ **When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”** ⁶¹ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) ⁶⁵ And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

⁶⁶ **After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.** ⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” ⁷¹ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

III. Jesus forms Apostles:

Mark 6

Sending Out the Twelve

⁷ And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them power over unclean spirits. ⁸ He commanded them to take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts— ⁹ but to wear sandals, and not to put on two tunics.

¹⁰ Also He said to them, “In whatever place you enter a house, stay there till you depart from that place. ¹¹ And ^[a] whoever will not receive you nor hear you, when you depart from there, shake off the dust under your feet as a testimony against them. ^[b] Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!”



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¹² So they went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick, and healed them.

[John the Baptist Beheaded]

Mark 6

³⁰ Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. ³¹ And He said to them, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. ³² So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves.

[Feeding of the 5,000]

Mark 10:32 (32-52)

³² And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, **and those who followed were afraid.** And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him,

NOTE: Where they were at during the crucifixion

Matthew 26:56

⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. ⁵⁶ But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” **Then all the disciples left him and fled.**

Mark 16:9-14

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

⁹ [[Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. ¹⁰ She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. ¹¹ But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

Jesus Appears to Two Disciples

¹² After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. ¹³ And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

The Great Commission

¹⁴ Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

- They did not operate/step into their roles as Apostles until **Acts 2:1-17**

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ **And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.**

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of **God.** ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “**What does this mean?**” ¹³ But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Peter's Sermon at Pentecost

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk,



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as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, ...

Jesus' Investment:

Jesus knew them as the Creator: **John 1:47**

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”

Jesus knew their faults before He chose them. **John 6:70; 13:21-27**

Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.”

- They were trained in months more than years.
- He ‘re-taught’ them what the scriptures really meant. (i.e. forgiveness)
- He gave them moral instruction.
- He taught them about things to come.
- He modeled, taught, and then had them heal the sick, cast out demons, care for the people.

Note: Jesus made no Plan B for Disciples to become the Apostles.

SMALL GROUP:

- What does the fact that the disciples were so “everyday people” mean to you?
- How does the revelation that they began as Followers, grew to be Disciples, and graduated into Apostles affect you today? How should it affect church life?

apostles, symbols of In Christian art, symbols assigned to each of the apostles:

- Andrew: X-shaped cross because was crucified on one;
- Bartholomew: knife because he was flayed alive with one;
- James the Great: scallop shell, pilgrim staff, or a gourd bottle because he is the patron saint of pilgrims;
- James the Less: fuller’s pole because he was killed with one;
- John: cup with a winged serpent because he drank poison after making a sign of the cross;
- Judas Iscariot: bag because he kept money in it;
- Jude: club because he was martyred with it;
- Matthew: hatchet or halberd because he was killed with it;
- Matthias: battleaxe because he was beheaded with it;
- Paul: sword because he was beheaded with one;
- Peter: bunch of keys because Christ gave him the keys of the kingdom;
- Simon: a saw because he was sawn to death;
- Phillip: long staff surmounted with a cross because he suffered death by being suspended by the neck from a pillar;



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- Thomas: lance with which he was pierced through at Mylapore, India.²

Galilee = Near Decapolis

Group of 10 Greek (Hellenistic) cites

Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River (N.W. Jordan & S. Syria)

The cities were not a unified confederation, but they shared close geographical ties, Greek cultural orientation, and economic and trade interests.

Biblical citations are the earliest references to this region in ancient lit.

Mark 5:20 *And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.* [Demonic of Gerasenes]

Mark 7:31 Mentions the region in connection with other Gentile locales in which Jesus had been traveling: Tyre and Sidon. While in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31), Jesus encounters and heals a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment.

Matthew 4:25 *And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.*

Jesus' increased fame, due to His healings and exorcisms, was drawing people from Galilee, Jerusalem, Judaea, from beyond the Jordan, and the Decapolis.

Matthew's reference to the Decapolis contributes to his emphasis on Gentiles being drawn to Jesus from the great distances.

Matthew foreshadows this theme earlier in the Gospel by describing the Magi's arriving from the East to worship the baby Jesus (Matt 2:1–12).

The Decapolis as a general region mainly characterized by a Gentile population and therefore a place of questionable purity. The individuals Jesus encounters in this region are typically ill or demon possessed. While Jesus' ministry only rarely focuses on the Decapolis, His travels to and compassionate acts within this region demonstrate the inclusion of Gentiles.

1. Damascus	4. Scythopolis	8. Pella
2. Philadelphia	5. Gadara	9. Gerasa
3. Raphana	6. Hippos	10. Canatha
	7. Dium	

An older view understood these Decapolis cities as representing a united confederation or league. No evidence exists, however, that these cities banded together for military, political, or economic purposes.

Cities of the Decapolis were connected by their geographical proximity and shared Greek culture:
Locations: frequently traveled roads, and some were established at strategic road junctions...near plateaus or acropolises that would allow for fortifications...located near a warm spring known for its healing qualities...these cities were located near fertile valleys, rivers, and conducive micro-climates.

² Kurian, G. T. (2001). In [Nelson's new Christian dictionary: the authoritative resource on the Christian world](#). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.



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All the cities became influential centers of Hellenistic culture and thought.

Jesus grew up around here.....WHY?

The origin of the Decapolis is frequently traced to the Hellenistic period under Alexander the Great and his successors, the Seleucids and the Ptolemies (Egypt).

Then, Judaeen Hasmonean kingdom: The cultural and religious tensions between the Judaeans and the local population of the Decapolis cities created animosity until the entry of the Romans into the region.

Roman general Pompey (64–63 BC). He was credited with “liberating” the Decapolis cities from the control of Hasmonean rule and establishing Roman power and influence in the region. Pompey created a system for ensuring loyalty to Rome.

By liberating the cities of the Decapolis and allowing a level of self-governance, he weakened the Hasmonean Kingdom and also ensured the positive support of the local populace toward Roman policies.

Later tradition suggests that one of the cities of the Decapolis served as a safe haven for Christians fleeing from the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Pella became an important Christian center in the Byzantine period.

Christianity had a growing influence on the cities from the fourth—seventh centuries AD.

17 churches have been unearthed in the city of Gerasa[results of demoniac testimony?].

All the cities had at least one theater.

Other typical Graeco-Roman features include forums, temples, and baths. Scythopolis, the largest of the cities, also had a hippodrome (a horse-race and athletic stadium) along with an amphitheater.

Greek temples and the worship centers of the gods and goddesses flourished during the Roman period in Decapolis cities. The archaeological remains of the large colonnaded oval Roman forum at Gerasa (modern day Jerash) today illustrate the status and prominence of a Decapolis city.

Seismic activity can be frequent and intense near the Jordan Rift Valley. One of the most significant earthquakes occurred in AD 749. It devastated the cities of Hippos, Pella, Jerash, and Scythopolis. Even today, persons walking among the ruins and excavated remains of these cities can recognize the aftermath of the earthquake in columns laid over like fallen dominos.

NOTES:

apostle (Gk., one who is sent) 1. One of the 12 disciples chosen by Christ: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Thomas, James the Less, Jude, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Simon, and Judas (replaced by Matthias). Paul claimed the title for himself on the basis of a direct commission from the risen Christ (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:1) and used it also of James, the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1:19).³

What Is an Apostle?

The word *apostle* means “one who is sent out.” In the New Testament, there are two primary usages of the word *apostle*. The first is in specifically referring to the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. The second is in generically referring to other individuals who are sent out to be messengers/ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

³ Kurian, G. T. (2001). In *Nelson’s new Christian dictionary: the authoritative resource on the Christian world*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.



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The twelve apostles held a unique position. In referring to the New Jerusalem, Revelation 21:14 states, “The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” The twelve apostles are also referred to in Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:14; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 14:10, 17, 23; Luke 6:13; 9:1; 22:14; John 6:71; Acts 6:2; and 1 Corinthians 15:5. It was these twelve apostles who were the first messengers of the gospel after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was these twelve apostles who were the foundation of the church—with Jesus being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

This specific type of apostle is not present in the church today. The qualifications of this type of apostle were: (1) to have been an witness of the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1), (2) to have been explicitly chosen by the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:15), and (3) to have the ability to perform signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 2 Corinthians 12:12). The role of the twelve apostles, laying the foundation of the church, would also argue for their uniqueness. Two thousand years later, we are not still working on the foundation.

Beyond the unique twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, there were also apostles in a generic sense. Barnabas is referred to as an “apostle” in Acts 13:2 and 14:4. Andronicus and Junias are possibly identified as apostles in Romans 16:7. The same Greek word usually translated “apostle” is used to refer to Titus in 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25. So, there definitely seems to be room for the term *apostle* being used to refer to someone besides the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. Anyone who was “sent” could be called an apostle.

What exactly would be the role of an apostle outside that of the twelve apostles? That is not entirely clear. From the definition of the word, the closest thing today to an apostle, in the general sense, is a missionary. A missionary is a follower of Christ who is sent out with the specific mission of proclaiming the gospel. A missionary is an ambassador of Christ to people who have not heard the good news. However, to prevent confusion, it is likely best to not use the term *apostle* to refer to any position in the church today. The vast majority of occurrences of the word *apostle* or *apostles* in the New Testament refer to the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ.

There are some today who are seeking to restore the position of apostle. This is a dangerous movement. Frequently, those claiming the office of apostle seek authority equal to, or at least rivaling, the authority of the original twelve apostles. There is absolutely no biblical evidence to support such an understanding of the role of apostle today. This would fit with the New Testament’s warning against false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:13).

In a sense, all followers of Jesus Christ are called to be apostles. We are all to be His ambassadors (Matthew 28:18–20; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20). We are all to be “ones who are sent out” (Acts 1:8). We are all to be preachers of the good news (Romans 10:15).

Note—for a discussion on whether Matthias or Paul was the twelfth apostle, please read the following article: Was Matthias or Paul God’s choice to replace Judas as the 12th apostle? ⁴

APOSTLE (ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*). Someone, or something, sent. Derived from the verb “to send out” (ἀποστέλλειν, *apostellein*). In the New Testament, usually refers to someone sent as an authorized agent by Jesus or the Christian community (Matt 10:2; 2 Cor 8:23; Heb 3:1).

⁴ Got Questions Ministries. (2002–2013). [Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered](#). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.



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Development of the Term

The term “apostle” was originally used as an adjective, describing a dispatch that was usually made by sea. It could also designate the thing that was sent out. Thus, in classical and Hellenistic Greek, it is often applied in an impersonal way; for example, referring to a dispatched fleet or an invoice accompanying a shipment. It is used only once in the Septuagint (LXX), referring to the prophet Ahijah (1 Kgs 14:6), and once by Josephus when he is discussing envoys sent to Rome (*Antiquities* 17.300).

In the New Testament, “apostle” never refers to a dispatch or to an object being sent. Instead, it is sometimes employed to indicate a messenger (e.g., John 13:16). More often it refers to a person sent out as an authorized agent, either of Jesus or, in the early missionary work, of a distinguished congregation. This may be related to the rabbinic use of “emissary” or “sent one” (שליח, *shaliach*), which refers to someone who is authorized to act on behalf of another and represents the authority of that person.

The Origin of Christian Apostles

The origin of the notion of apostles in the Jesus movement is disputed.

According to Mark and Luke, Jesus chose 12 disciples and named them apostles (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13). The textual evidence for Jesus naming His disciples apostles is slim. The part of the Gospel of Mark that mentions the event (3:14, “whom he also named apostles”) is not found in the earlier manuscripts, leaving Luke’s Gospel as the only textual evidence of the 12 disciples being called apostles (Agnew, “The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept: A Review of Research,” 85–90).

Karl Heinrich Rengstorf argues that the apostles can be traced back to Jesus Himself. It is possible that He used the existing Jewish concept of “emissary” in choosing disciples and naming them apostles. Emissaries represented the full authority of their masters as they carried out functions on their master’s behalf (Rengstorf, “ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*,” 421–22, 425–27). However, the Jewish concept of emissary is not found in any sources earlier than the second century AD.

Other attempts at understanding the origin of the notion of apostles focus less on the concept of emissary and more on the terminology of sending in both the Old and New Testaments. While the noun “emissary” appears rarely in sources earlier than the New Testament, the Old Testament and the Septuagint abound with verbs meaning “to send” (שלח, *shalach*; ἀποστέλλειν, *apostellein*). The same is true of the Gospels, which include many instances of the verb “to send” but only a few instances of the noun “apostle.” Additionally, the Gospels’ descriptions of commissioning align with the Old Testament (Hahn, “Der Apostolat im Urchristentum,” 69–75).

Arnold Ehrhardt, Günter Klein, and Walter Schmithals argue that the origin of the notion of apostles cannot be traced back to Jesus. According to them, the notion of apostle developed in the early Jesus movement and its post-Easter mission. The majority of passages that use the word apostle are found in Acts and in the Pauline Letters, writings that are closely related to the missionary experience of the early Jesus movement. Thus, these scholars claim that the idea of apostles originated in the early missionary work, as new leadership figures emerged, and provided the background to the abundant use of apostle in the Pauline Letters and Acts. The Gospel writers then included the idea in their descriptions of how Jesus called His disciples (Ehrhardt, *The Apostolic Ministry*, 4–5; Klein, *Die zwölf Apostel*, 22–52; Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 98–110).

Apostle in the New Testament



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The term “apostle” is seldom used in the Gospels. Nevertheless, the commission of Jesus’ disciples shares many features with how Jesus described His own commission from God. In Acts, “apostle” refers either to the Twelve or to leading emissaries from distinguished congregations.

Regardless of how the historical question of the origin of apostles is answered, there are identifiable differences in how the term is used in the New Testament writings. Apostle is never applied to Jesus in the Gospels and it’s only used once in the rest of the New Testament to describe Him (in Heb 3:1). It is clear from the sayings of Jesus, however, that He saw Himself as sent by God to carry out the commission of His Father (e.g., Mark 9:37; Matt 15:24; Luke 10:16; John 5:36).

Of the 79 passages that use “apostle” in the New Testament, 66 are found in Acts and the Epistles (and three in Revelation). Although the term is uncommon in the Gospels, the description of the disciples’ commission (e.g., Mark 6:7–13) shares many features with how Jesus portrays His own commission. **Like Jesus, they are primarily sent to the house of Israel (after the resurrection of Jesus there is another commission that is broader in its scope; see Matt 28:18–20) and not to the whole world (compare Matt 10:5–6 and 15:24). They should also proclaim the same message as Jesus—that the kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven) has come—with words and deeds (compare Matt 4:17 and 10:7–8).** Additionally, how the disciples are received shows whether people receive Jesus and God (Matt 10:40: “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”). Thus, the ministry of the disciples is linked to that of Jesus Himself. **It includes a calling to continue His ministry with His authority.**

Acts presents two different understandings of apostle. From its first appearance in Acts 1:2, the most common usage of the term is to refer to the Twelve as a group. The other usage is found in several places—among them chapter 14—in which **Paul and Barnabas are called apostles (Acts 14:4, 14). They are first mentioned among the prophets and teachers of the church of Antioch, where the Holy Spirit singles them out and calls them for special work (Acts 13:1–2). The term apostle is thus also used for leading emissaries of a distinguished congregation, regardless of whether they belong to the Twelve.**

Earlier in Acts, Peter gives a form of definition of an apostle as a replacement for Judas is about to be chosen: “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 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” (Acts 1:21–22; NIV). However, there is debate about whether “apostle” is an office that continued after the deaths of the Twelve. This debate arises in part from Paul’s mention of apostles in Eph 4:11, in which he lists apostles alongside other offices in the Church.

Paul as an Apostle

Paul’s view on the role of the apostles, and on his own role as an apostle, develops in different letters. Early on, he calls himself—as well as some coworkers—“apostle.” Later, he restricts the term for himself and the twelve disciples. According to Paul, he belongs to the group of apostles because of his meeting with, and commission by, the risen Lord.

There is no uniform Pauline idea on apostles, or on his individual role as one. His letters reveal developments in his views. In 1 Thessalonians—probably the earliest letter—Paul does not refer to himself as an apostle in his greetings. The same is true of 2 Thess. Paul places himself together with Silvanus and Timothy and he predominantly uses the first person plural, portraying all three as authors and cosenders. At one time he refers to them as “apostles of Christ” (1 Thess 2:6). However, he may have been criticized for this—in later letters, he speaks of his cosenders simply as “brothers.”



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In Galatians, which was probably written after 1 Thess, Paul again presents himself together with a group. This time the others are anonymous, referred to as “the brothers here,” while he calls himself an apostle already in the prescript (Gal 1:1–2). In the Letters to the Corinthians, he names the cosenders, but refers to them as brothers while calling himself apostle (2 Cor 1:1)—or “called” to be an apostle (1 Cor 1:1), similar to Jesus’ disciples. In Romans, Paul presents himself as the only sender (in contrast to all other undisputed Pauline Letters). Furthermore, he says that he is called to be an apostle (Rom 1:1), expands on his apostleship (Rom 1:5), and refers to himself as an “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13). During his ministry, Paul thus reinterprets the role of the apostles, as well as his own role as an apostle. Paul also uses the term apostle when listing church offices and gifts (e.g., 1 Cor 12:27–31; Eph 4:11).

Paul is clear about his own status as apostle, however, even when this is disputed (e.g., 1 Cor 9:1–18). In the Letters to the Corinthians, **Paul rejects the notion that an apostle is simply one who had known Jesus during His earthly ministry.** He asserts that he had met the risen Lord and worked harder than the original apostles in his missionary work. He ironically calls his adversaries “super-apostles,” or more directly, “false apostles” (e.g., 2 Cor 11:5, 13). On the other hand, Paul deferentially calls himself “the least of the apostles” when he compares himself with Jesus’ disciples (1 Cor 15:9–10). At the same time, he seems to set limits to the extent of the apostles: **“He appeared to me last of all” (1 Cor 15:8). Thus, while he refers to himself as the least one, he still belongs to a very exclusive group; he met the risen Lord and was commissioned by Him to go to the Gentiles (e.g., 1 Cor 9:1; Gal 1:11–17).**

The Difference between Apostle and Disciple

The terms “apostle” and “disciple” do not have the same meaning in the New Testament. The term “disciple” is only used in the Gospels and in Acts (usually to refer to the Twelve), whereas “apostle” is mainly used in Acts and the Letters. **While disciples in the Gospels are all those who are called into discipleship by Jesus, only a few of them are sent out by Him as apostles.** In the epistles, the term “disciple” is never used and Jesus’ original 12 disciples are referred to as apostles (or the Twelve): “Then He appointed twelve, whom He also named apostles, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14–15; see also Luke 6:13). Later on, in Acts, Matthias is chosen as Judas’ replacement and becomes numbered among the “eleven apostles” (Acts 1:15–26; especially see Acts 1:26).

Selected Resources for Further Study

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DAN NÄSSELQVIST

APOSTLE, CRITICAL ISSUES Uses and application of the term “apostle(s)” in the New Testament.

Terminology

The noun “apostle” (ἀπόστολος, apostolos) in the New Testament is applied widely: to the Twelve (including Matthias) (Matt 10:2; 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:47–49; John 20:19–23); to Paul (Rom 16:7; 1 Thess 2:1–7); to Jesus (Heb 3:1–6); and to missionaries who bear the message of the gospel (1 Cor 9:5; 2 Cor 8:23; Eph 2:20; Phil 2:25; Acts 1:21–26; 13:1–3). Uses of the term in the New Testament do not follow a clear pattern. The range of possible meanings can be seen by considering four of the many occurrences of the term:

- *Jesus and Moses (Heb 3:1–6);*



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- *the 70 (or 72) sent out by Jesus (Luke 10:1–20);*
- *James (1 Cor 15:5–9);*
- *Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7).*

Jesus and Moses (Heb 3:1–6)

The authors of the Synoptic Gospels may allude to Jesus' role as an apostle, describing Him as sent (*ἀποστείλαντά, aposteilanta*) by God the Father (Matt 10:40; Mark 9:37; Luke 10:16). However, Hebrews 3:1 is more explicit, identifying Jesus as "the apostle (*ἀπόστολος, apostolos*) and high priest of our confession" (ESV). Based on Hebrews 3:1–6, several scholars connect Jesus' identification as an apostle to his role as the greater Moses (Bruce, "Hebrews," 7; Enns, "Creation and Re-Creation," 271; Scott, "Jesus' Superiority over Moses," 201; Swetnam, "ὁ ἀπόστολος, *o apostolos*; in Hebrews," 253).

Leaders Sent by God

In Enns' view, Heb 3:1–6 presents Christ as the second Moses, and the passage sets up the quotation of Psa 95 in Heb 3:7–11. According to Enns, Moses and Christ are to be regarded as apostles because they are "sent from God to the people" (Enns, "Creation and Re-Creation," 271). Moses acted as an apostle when God sent him with the divine message to the people (in Num 12 and at Sinai). Jesus is an apostle because He was sent to "be made like His brothers" and "make atonement for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17; Enns, "Creation and Re-Creation," 272). Enns explains that just as Moses led Israel through the wilderness, so Jesus leads the Church—"the new wilderness community" (Enns, "Creation and Re-Creation," 271)—to the promised land of resurrection. For both Moses and Jesus, the role of apostle is closely connected with the role of high priest.

Authorized Representatives

Scott defines "apostle" as an ambassador, or "one sent with delegated authority" (Scott, "Jesus' Superiority over Moses," 205). Scott states that Moses might have served as an apostle, while Aaron served as a high priest; in Christ, both positions are combined into one person. As an apostle, Jesus is sent from the Father to humanity; as a high priest, Jesus grants humanity access to the Father. The author of Hebrews distinguishes between the different positions of Jesus and Moses: Moses was faithful as a servant, while Jesus is faithful as the Son. Jesus "stands in close proximity to God, actually bearing the reflected radiance of God's glory" (Heb 1:3; Scott, "Jesus' Superiority over Moses," 209).

Announcing God's Name

For Swetnam, Jesus and Moses are apostles because they were sent out to proclaim the name of God. Swetnam identifies Heb 2:5–18 as christological commentary on Pss 8:5–7 and 22:22 (Swetnam, "ὁ ἀπόστολος, *o apostolos*; in Hebrews," 253) and proposes that this background explains the use of "apostle" in Heb 3:1. Swetnam notes that Moses was never directly called an apostle, even though "the word ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) is found a number of times with regard to the specific mission of Moses." God sent Moses to free Israel from Egypt and to "announce the name of God to the people." Jesus mirrors Moses as an apostle, as He is sent by God and announces His name among the "brothers" (Exod 3:14; Heb 2:12; Psa 22:22; Swetnam, "ὁ ἀπόστολος, *o apostolos*; in Hebrews," 253–54).

The 70 (or 72) Sent Out by Jesus (Luke 10:1–20)

Only Luke's Gospel preserves the account of Jesus sending out (*ἀπέστειλεν, apesteilen*) 72 of His followers two-by-two (Luke 10:1). They are described as field workers sent to bring in the harvest (Luke 10:2) and as "lambs in the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3). Jesus' instructions in Luke 10:4–11 match what He tells His 12 disciples Luke 9:1–6. Critical studies of this passage often focus on three questions:



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1. 70 or 72?
2. Are they true apostles?
3. Who were they?

70 Or 72?

Some manuscripts of Luke state that Jesus sent out 70 people; others put the number at 72. Nolland therefore refers to this group as “the Seventy(-two)” (Nolland, *Luke*, 548). It is possible that a scribe might have accidentally changed the number. Bock suggests that a scribe who was looking for “significance” in the text might have seen more meaning in 70 than 72 and changed the number intentionally. There is no consensus among commentators.

The discrepancy appears to be connected to competing traditions of the Old Testament regarding the number of nations that are descended from Noah or the number of elders appointed by Moses. Tiede explains that the Septuagint indicates 72 nations after Noah, while the Masoretic Text points to 70 (Tiede, *Luke*, 200). The number in Luke also could correspond with the number of elders that Moses appoints over Israel in the wilderness (Num 11:16–30). Although Moses follows God’s instruction to gather 70 elders around the meeting tent (Num 11:16, 24), Tiede notes that counting Eldad and Medad (who remained in the camp instead of gathering at the tent) would bring the number to 72 (Num 11:26–29). There were also 70 Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin.

Several scholars favor the tradition that Jesus sent out 70 followers (Tiede, *Luke*, 200; Scaer, “Luke and the Foundations of the Church,” 70; Plummer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 269; Lenski, *St. Luke’s Gospel*, 565):

- Plummer suggests the number is meant to establish a parallel between Jesus and the apostles with Moses and the elders (Plummer, *Gospel According to Luke*, 269). Also, Plummer states that both the 12 disciples and the 70 apostles were tasked with preparing people to hear the gospel, but he sees the mission of the 70 as temporary, whereas the charge to the 12 disciples is permanent (Plummer, *Luke*, 270).
- Scaer connects the number with the gospel’s proclamation among the Gentiles, noting that seven is a symbol of “completion and fullness” (Scaer, “Luke and the Foundations of the Church,” 68). The 70 apostles point back to the nations after Noah and the elders appointed by Moses, as well as pointing forward to the seven deacons chosen in Acts 6:1–6 (Scaer, “Luke and the Foundations of the Church,” 70).
- Lenski treats the 70 merely as a historic fact, without ascribing meaning to the number. He states that Jesus sends 35 pairs to expedite His mission (Lenski, *St. Luke’s Gospel*, 565).
- Bock favors 72 for the number sent and, like Lenski, rejects any symbolic meaning (Bock, *Luke*, 994). He states that 72 might have been used to match “the local counsels of seventy-two (Mishnah, *m. Yadayim* 3:5; 4:2), the seventy-two translators of the LXX, the LXX tradition of the seventy-two nations in Gen 10–11, and the seventy-two princes and kings in the world (3 Enoch 17:8; 18:2–3; 30:2)” (Bock, *Luke*, 1015). Bock acknowledges that, if Luke was deliberately alluding to the Old Testament, then 70 might be the “stronger candidate” (Bock, *Luke*, 1015). However, Bock rejects the two possible Old Testament meanings—the nations after Noah and the elders appointed by Moses—stating, “It is hard to establish a clear rationale for an intended Old Testament allusion, and thus it is unlikely that the number is symbolic” (Bock, *Luke*, 1016). Instead, the occasion for sending out the 72 was an opportunity for growth (Bock, *Luke*, 994). The significance of this passage, Bock



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says, is in God’s sovereign use of disciples other than the Twelve to minister to the towns Jesus passed on His trek to Jerusalem.

Are They True Apostles?

The followers sent out by Jesus in Luke 10 have not been universally accepted as apostles; often, they are simply called “disciples.”

- Scaer argues that the 70 should be regarded as apostles (Scaer, “Luke and the Foundations of the Church,” 69). He emphasizes that Jesus gives this larger group the same “command and prayer” that He had given the Twelve in Luke 9:1–6. Furthermore, he notes, Luke’s use of ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) in Luke 10 is consistent with his use of the ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) in Luke 9 (Scaer, “Luke and the Foundations of the Church,” 69).
- Bock states that Luke’s description of the 72 as “others” (ἑτέροις, *eterous*) designates them as “a group outside the apostolic band” (Bock, *Luke*, 994). They act as messengers in a manner similar to the messengers that Christ sends ahead of Himself in Luke 9:52 and the role of John the Baptist in Luke 1:17, 76; 3:4 (Bock, *Luke*, 994). In Bock’s view, being sent out as messengers does not necessitate the title of “apostle.”
- Many scholars take a middle position, recognizing an apostolic function but declining to use the term “apostle.”
- Tiede refers to the 70 (or 72) as “a larger cadre of officially authorized delegates who herald the approaching king and kingdom” (Tiede, *Luke*, 57–58). Without specifically stating whether the title of “apostle” applies, he focuses on the mission’s ambassadorial nature, which he says corresponds with the wider use of the term “apostle.”
- Nolland does not directly apply the title “apostle” to “the Seventy(-two),” but rather focuses on the Twelve and the “the Seventy(-two)” as groups with similar missions (Nolland, *Luke*, 548).
- Stein also notes the similarities between Christ’s charges to both the Twelve and the 70 (or 72). He is reluctant to call the latter “apostles,” but drawing on the verb ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*), he maintains that they are on an apostolic mission to “proclaim the Gospel message” (Stein, *Luke*, 305).

Who Were They? The 70

Luke does not record the names of those sent out by Jesus in Luke 10. Hippolytus of Rome, however, preserved an ancient tradition which named the 70 (Hippolytus, *On the Seventy Apostles*). Hippolytus also lists where each person served as bishop. The following names are included in his record and are mentioned in the New Testament:

Rufus	Rom 16:13
Cleopas	Luke 24:18
Matthias, who replaced Judas among the 12 disciples	Acts 1:23, 26
Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicholas	Acts 6:5; the seven deacons chosen by the early church
Ananias, who baptized Paul	Acts 9:10–17, 22:12–13
Agabus	Acts 11:28, 21:10



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John Mark, the evangelist	Acts 12:12
Barnabas	Acts 4:36
Silas	Acts 15:22–40
Apollos	Acts 18:24; 1 Cor 1:12
Epaenetus	Rom 16:5
Andronicus	Rom 16:7
Urbanus, Stachys	Rom 16:9
Apelles, Aristobulus	Rom 16:10
Herodion, Narcissus	Rom 16:11
Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas	Rom 16:14
Philologus	Rom 16:15
Lucius, Jason, Sosipater	Rom 16:21
Tertius	Rom 16:22
Erastus and Quartus	Rom 16:23
Sosthenes	1 Cor 1:1
Cephas, who apparently is distinct from Simon Peter	1 Cor 1:12; Gal 2:11
James, the brother of Jesus	1 Cor 15:7 (see next section)
Silvanus	2 Cor 1:19; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Pet 5:12
Epaphroditus	Phil 2:25
Clement	Phil 4:3
Aristarchus	Col 4:10
Justus	Col 4:11
Demas	Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:10
Luke, the evangelist	Col 4:14; Phlm 1:24
Phygelus and Hermogenes	2 Tim 1:15; Paul claims they left the faith; Hippolytus says they followed Simon Magus
Onesiphorus	2 Tim 4:19
Linus	2 Tim 4:21
Artemas and Tychicus	Titus 3:12
Philemon	Phlm 1:1



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In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius of Caesarea attributes to Clement of Alexandria the notion that the Cephas listed by Hippolytus is distinct from Simon Peter. According to Eusebius' note, this Cephas was the one whom Paul says that he rebuked in Gal 2. Eusebius does not appear convinced of this account but simply preserves it in his history.

Outside the 12 disciples, Scripture identifies other individuals as apostles, including Barnabas and Paul (Acts 14:4), James the brother of Jesus (1 Cor 15:7), and possibly Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7). For further discussion of James as well as Andronicus and Junia, see below.

Hippolytus also lists Thaddeus, but this is likely the same Thaddeus who was among the 12 disciples.

James (1 Cor 15:5-9)

James is listed among a large number of apostles in 1 Cor 15:5-9, where Paul states that the risen Christ had appeared to Cephas and the Twelve, then to "more than 500 brothers," then to James and "all the apostles," and finally to Paul himself. Paul's self-identification as "the last of the apostles" (1 Cor 15:9) suggests that he regarded all of the aforementioned people as apostles. The New Testament does not record an appearance of the risen Christ to James, but a fragment of the noncanonical Gospel of the Hebrews reports Christ allegedly coming to James—who had vowed to not eat or drink until Jesus' resurrection—sharing a eucharistic meal with him and announcing His resurrection (Dodd, *The Gospel According to the Hebrews*, 22).

Bruce and Barrett discuss James as an apostle in relation to Peter, whom they recognize as the clear leader of the Twelve. They propose that Paul is addressing two groups of apostles: Peter and the Twelve, and James and the other apostles. Bruce speculates that this additional group was larger than the Twelve (Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 141), yet he rejects the possibility of two distinct traditions (Galilean and Jerusalem) with competing leaders. Bruce does not define "apostle" or identify differences between Peter and James, but rather notes that Paul received both men as part of the same Jerusalem tradition. Barrett points out that Paul does not explicitly identify James as an apostle. In Barrett's view, a broader sense of the term "apostle" is in play where Paul mentions James and "all the apostles," who were more like missionaries (Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 343).

Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7)

In his greetings at the end of Romans, Paul describes Andronicus and Junia (Ἰουνίαν, *Iounian*) as "my compatriots and my fellow prisoners, who are well known to the apostles, who were also in Christ before me" (Rom 16:7). Critical discussions about Andronicus and Junia typically focus on two questions:

1. Was Ἰουνίαν (*Iounian*) a woman's name?
2. Were Andronicus and Junia apostles?

Was Ἰουνίαν (Iounian) a Woman's Name?

Church fathers such as Chrysostom (Chrysostom, *Romans*, 31), as well as modern scholars including Mounce (Mounce, *Romans*, 275-76) and Epp (Epp, *Junia*, 23-27) support reading "Junia" as a woman's name.

- Abernathy states that Ἰουνίαν (*Iounian*) (or Ἰουνιάς, *Iounias*) was consistently translated as the feminine "Junia" until the 13th century, when the Greek accent shifted to produce Ἰουνιάων (*Iounian*) and the masculine "Junias" (Abernathy, *Romans 9-16*, 369).



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- Some commentators (e.g., Murray, *Romans*, 229–30; Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 423–24) believe Paul most likely intended “Junias,” proposing that this is an abbreviated form of the common male name Junianus (Abernathy, *Romans 9–16*, 369).
- Dunn, however, notes that while “Junia” appears in over 250 instances in ancient literature, there is not one instance of “Junias.” Dunn concludes that “the assumption that it must be male is a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity” (Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 894).

Were Andronicus and Junia Apostles?

Early Church Fathers. Hippolytus lists Andronicus (but not Junia) as one of the 70 apostles whom Jesus sent out in Luke 10 (Hippolytus, *On the Seventy Apostles*). Chrysostom identifies both Andronicus and Junia as apostles, but he does not elaborate on whether they might have been among the 70 or James’ group (Chrysostom, *Romans* 31).

Modern Interpreters. Dunn says the phrase “well known to the apostles” in Rom 16:7 is best interpreted as “prominent among the apostles” (Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 894). Dunn understands Andronicus and Junia to be a married couple (Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 895). He counts them among the earliest Palestinian Christians and suggests that they were personally appointed by the risen Christ prior to His ascension, which might include them among the 500 who saw the risen Lord or among the apostles with James (1 Cor 15:7). Dunn remains uncertain about Andronicus and Junia’s connection with Rome; they might have been considered apostles of Rome, or they could have played a role in planting house churches there (Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 895).

Sanday and Headlam state that Andronicus and Junias were included among a larger body of apostles than the Twelve, suggesting that they were among the Palestinian Jews who dispersed after Stephen’s execution. They present three primary reasons for accepting Andronicus and Junias as apostles (Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 423–424):

1. the church fathers understood them to be apostles
2. the use of the Greek form of *episamos* (ἐπίσημοι, *episēmoi*) literally means “stamped or marked” in a way that made them distinct among the apostles, rather than meaning “well known by the apostles”
3. the wider use of “apostle,” substantiated by the Didache, allows the title to apply to people outside the Twelve (Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 423).

Several scholars emphasize that the term “apostle” could be used in several broader senses.

- According to Palmer, the New Testament describes two categories of apostles: the Twelve, or anyone with apostolic gifts, which Palmer connects with teaching and preaching (Palmer, *Romans*, 215).
- Mounce proposes that the term “apostle” includes missionaries and evangelists. He also suggests that Andronicus and Junia were Jewish believers and likely among the first Palestinian Christians (Mounce, *Romans*, 275–76).
- Abernathy suggests that Andronicus and Junia were among the 500 people mentioned in 1 Cor 15:6, and that all 500 were appointed as apostles by the risen Christ. This would explain Paul’s comment that Andronicus and Junia were ahead of him in the faith (Rom 16:7; Abernathy, *Romans 9–16*, 370).
- Schüssler Fiorenza explores in depth the possibility of a female apostle, concluding that the early Christian movement allowed men as well as women (and married couples) to serve as missionaries.



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She suggests that Paul uses four titles to describe missionaries: co-worker, brother/sister, deacon, and apostle (Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 169). The last title, she says, corresponds to Junia in Rom 16:7 and indicates her authority to evangelize, teach, and admonish (Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 169; see also 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 4:13).

- Although Murray acknowledges that “apostle” could refer simply to a messenger, he considers it far more likely that Paul uses this term to denote the Twelve. In Murray’s view, neither Andronicus nor Junias were apostles; instead, Paul’s comment in Rom 16:7 indicates that they were well known by the twelve apostles in Judea and Jerusalem (Murray, *Romans*, 230).

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JOHN M. LEWIS⁵

DISCIPLE *A student, pupil, or learner. In the New Testament it is used for Jesus’ followers. Often references “the Twelve” but also indicates a wider group of followers.*

Development

Master-disciple relationships were common in the land of Israel, although the terms for disciples are almost completely absent from the Old Testament and early Jewish literature. In the New Testament, however, the Greek word for disciple is often used. Found in the Gospels and Acts, it functions as a technical term for adherents of Jesus.

In the Greek world, philosophers, religious leaders, and mystery cults attracted disciples. A person became a disciple as he sought out a teacher and followed him and his principles. Similarly, in the rabbinical tradition, a “learner” or “student” (תלמיד, *talmid*) attached himself to a rabbi (literally “my great one,” with the additional meaning of “teacher” or “master”) or to a movement. Followers of Old Testament prophets could also be described as disciples. Although master-disciple relationship was a common phenomenon in the land

⁵ Lewis, J. M. (2016). [Apostle, Critical Issues](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



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of Israel, *talmîd* is used only once in the Old Testament (of a student in musical instruction; 1 Chr 25:8) and the Greek equivalent does not occur at all in the Septuagint. None of the terms appear in any Jewish literature until the time of Philo (i.e. at approximately the same time as Jesus). Later in rabbinical literature, *talmîd* switches meaning to become a specialized term for the student of Torah.

In the New Testament, the term “disciple” is used in the Gospels and Acts. In nearly all instances it is a technical term in reference to a follower of Jesus, although John the Baptist, the Pharisees, and Paul are also said to have disciples (Matt 9:14; 11:2; 22:16; Mark 2:18; John 1:35–37; Acts 9:25). In John, a group of Jews call themselves the disciples of Moses (John 9:28).

In the Gospels, Jesus creates His own group of disciples by calling individuals to follow Him. He also calls disciples that do not seem to qualify for the task (e.g., Matthew who is a tax collector—an occupation that was shunned and considered sinful in the land of Israel).

In the development of the Jesus movement, the term disciple becomes synonymous with those who believe and confess that Jesus is the Messiah. This is reflected in Acts, where the term regularly refers to a believer in Christ, regardless of whether one had known Jesus during His earthly ministry.

Disciple in the New Testament

In the New Testament, disciples do not seek out Jesus; rather, they answer when He calls them. Twelve disciples with different backgrounds are called into a special relationship with Jesus. According to Matthew and Mark, these twelve are the only disciples of Jesus.

The Gospels describe how Jesus called disciples to follow Him. Many of them came from villages in Galilee, especially Capernaum and Bethsaida. They had diverse backgrounds, including fishermen (Peter, Andrew, James, and John), a tax collector (Matthew), and a revolutionary (Simon the Zealot). Their role is especially clear in Matthew’s Gospel, where the expression “the twelve disciples” is used more often than “the Twelve” (e.g., Matt 11:1). Jesus’ disciples were not to choose another master, or become masters themselves. Instead, Jesus’ disciples were told to go and make disciples of the nations—to teach them what Jesus had taught them.

In Matthew’s Gospel, discipleship is a radical way of life and Jesus emphasizes that the disciples should be perfect (Matt 5:48). The disciples are positive characters, but the Gospel also shows their strengths and weaknesses. They are often referred to as a nameless group—Peter stands out as the only one receiving focused attention. He functions as an example to readers, with positive and negative characteristics, in the same way as the larger group of disciples. To some extent, the whole Gospel is a manual on discipleship, where most major discourses are directed towards the disciples (and to the readers as presumed followers).

Mark’s portrayal of the disciples is more ambiguous than Matthew’s. While they are shown with both positive and negative features, Mark emphasizes the failure of the disciples and uses it to show the meaning of true discipleship. Readers can identify with the disciples’ difficulties and are shown that failure does not mean the end of discipleship. The disciples’ misunderstanding, fear, and lack of faith play an important role in the plot. Their dedication and failures instruct the reader on the essence of discipleship: the disciple is a servant who must reject worldly expectations and concentrate on God’s way, which travels through suffering and servanthood.

In Luke’s Gospel, the term disciple is used from its first appearance in chapter 5 until the events at Gethsemane in 22:45. After the betrayal, it is never used in the Gospel again. Similarly, after Peter denies Jesus in 22:62, he is not called Peter—the name he received from Jesus as a disciple—ever again in the Gospel, but only Simon. Their behavior constitutes a breach of relationship with Jesus—they can no longer be true disciples.

The disciples are more frequently described as a large group. Jesus does not only send out the Twelve, but also 70 (or 72) others (Luke 10:1–12). To be a disciple is to be a follower of the Way, which is the way of



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salvation through self-denial. In Acts, this broader understanding is shown in the way that all believers in Christ, whether they have met Jesus or not, can be called disciples. It functions as a synonym for other terms, such as “saints” (e.g., 9:32), “Christians” (e.g., 11:26), and “Nazarenes” (24:5).

In John’s Gospel, the first followers of Jesus were disciples of John the Baptist (John 1:35–37). They start to follow Jesus when John the Baptist identifies Him as the Lamb of God, and only after this does Jesus turn and tell them to follow Him. In John’s Gospel, the usual circumstance of Jesus calling His disciples is only partially true. There is a strong contrast between disciples and non-disciples in John. A disciple is one who believes and accepts Jesus’ claims about His identity (John 6:69). Such a belief will then radically change the life of the disciple, resulting in externally recognizable marks of one’s belief: that the disciples love each other (John 13:34–35), that they stick to Jesus’ words (John 6:66–68), and that their lives bear fruit (John 15:8).

The Group of Disciples

The Gospels agree that the Twelve formed an inner circle. Many more may have been considered as disciples at the time of Jesus, as Luke’s Gospel presents the disciples as a larger group. They are also the ones who are called apostles (Luke 6:13).

Although the Gospels often identify the disciples of Jesus with the Twelve, this does not mean that they were His only disciples. Luke’s Gospel speaks of 70 (or 72) disciples (Luke 10:1–24), or even of a large crowd (Luke 6:17). There are also occurrences of women among Jesus’ close followers. At one point, Jesus is said to travel with the Twelve and three women “who were helping to support them out of their own means” (Luke 8:1–3). In Acts, a woman is referred to as a disciple: “In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha” (Acts 9:36; NIV). The feminine form of disciple (μαθήτρια, *mathētria*; the masculine form is μαθητής, *mathētēs*) is used, possibly indicating that women believers were commonly called disciples.

The Difference between Disciple and Apostle

While the disciples can be described as all those who are called into discipleship by Jesus, only a few of them are sent out by Him as apostles.

The terms disciple and apostle do not have the same meaning in the New Testament. One of the most important aspects of Jesus’ disciples is that He calls them, while a defining feature of apostles (from the verb “to send out”) are that they are sent out, representing Jesus.

In the Gospels, the apostles began as disciples, but not all disciples became apostles. The Twelve are defined as both disciples and apostles: “Then He appointed twelve, whom He also named apostles, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14–15; see also Luke 6:13).

Etymology

At the time of Jesus, the Greek term for disciple usually referred to an adherent of a great teacher or master.

“Disciple” (μαθητής, *mathētēs*) derives from the verb “to learn” (μανθάνειν, *manthanein*). In the early classical period it was used of a “learner” in a general sense, such as an “adherent” of a great teacher or teaching, or more technically as an “institutional pupil” of the Sophists. In the late Hellenistic period, the term was still in use.

The related verb, “to make disciples,” is never used in the active voice to describe what Jesus does. It is applied a few times in the passive voice to relate that persons have become disciples (e.g., Matt 27:57).

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DAN NÄSSELQVIST⁶

INTRODUCTION

More than twenty years ago, while preaching through the Gospel of Matthew, I gave a series of character studies on the twelve apostles. The messages were extremely well received, and we produced a tape album and study guide from that series, titled *The Master's Men*. Over the years we have broadcast the entire series several times on the *Grace to You* radio broadcast. Each time it airs, it generates a greater outpouring of affirmative response from listeners. After twenty years, that album continues to be one of the most popular series we have ever produced.

A few years ago, I started teaching a verse-by-verse exposition of Luke's Gospel in our church. When I reached Luke 6:13–16 (where Luke records Jesus' calling of the Twelve) I preached a new series of messages on the apostles. Once again, the response was overwhelming and enthusiastic. While preaching the series I realized that an entire generation had been born and reached adulthood in the years since we had last studied the lives of the disciples. They identified with these men in the same way their parents had done more than two decades before.

Even people who had practically memorized the tapes from the earlier series said they still found the lives of the disciples as fresh and relevant and practical as ever. The new series quickly became another favorite, and people began urging me to combine all the material on the apostles in a book. I didn't need much prodding for such a project. The book you are holding in your hands is the result.

I have always been fascinated with the lives of the twelve apostles. Who isn't? The personality types of these men are familiar to us. They are just like us, and they are like other people we know. They are approachable. They are real and living characters we can identify with. Their faults and foibles, as well as their triumphs and endearing features, are chronicled in some of the most fascinating accounts of the Bible. These are men we *want* to know.

That's because they were **perfectly ordinary men** in every way. Not one of them was renowned for scholarship or great erudition. They had no track record as orators or theologians. In fact, they were **outsiders** as far as the religious establishment of Jesus' day was concerned. They were **not outstanding because of any natural talents or intellectual abilities**. On the contrary, they were all too prone to mistakes, misstatements, wrong attitudes, lapses of faith, and bitter failure—no one more so than the leader of the group, Peter. Even Jesus remarked that they were slow learners and somewhat spiritually dense (Luke 24:25).

They spanned the political spectrum. One was a former Zealot—a radical, determined to overthrow Roman rule. But another had been a tax collector—virtually a traitor to the Jewish nation and in collusion with Rome. At least four, and possibly seven, were fishermen and close friends from Capernaum, probably having known one another from childhood. The others must have been tradesmen or craftsmen, but we are not told what they did before becoming followers of Christ. Most of them were from Galilee, an agricultural region at the intersection of trade routes. And Galilee remained their home base for most of Jesus' ministry—not (as some might think) Jerusalem in Judea, which was the political and religious capital of Israel.

Yet with all their faults and character flaws—as remarkably ordinary as they were—these men carried on a ministry after Jesus' ascension that left an indelible impact on the world. Their ministry continues to influence us even today. God graciously empowered and used these men to inaugurate the spread of the gospel message and to turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6). Ordinary men—people like you and me—became the instruments by which Christ's message was carried to the ends of the earth. No wonder they are such fascinating characters.

The Twelve were personally selected and called by Christ. He knew them as only their Creator could know them (cf. John 1:47). In other words, He knew all their faults long before He chose them. He even knew Judas would betray

⁶ Nässelqvist, D. (2016). [Disciple](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.



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Him (John 6:70; 13:21–27), and yet He chose the traitor anyway and gave him all the same privileges and blessings He gave to the others.

Think about the ramifications of this: From our human perspective, the propagation of the gospel and the founding of the church hinged entirely on twelve men whose most outstanding characteristic was their ordinariness. They were chosen by Christ and trained for a time that is best measured in months, not years. He taught them the Scriptures and theology. He disciplined them in the ways of godly living (teaching them and showing them how to pray, how to forgive, and how to serve one another with humility). He gave them moral instruction. He spoke to them of things to come. And He employed them as His instruments to heal the sick, cast out demons, and do other miraculous works. Three of them—Peter, James, and John—even got a brief glimpse of Him in His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–9).

It was a brief but intensive schedule of discipleship. And when it was over, on the night of Jesus' betrayal, "all the disciples forsook Him and fled" (Matthew 26:56). From an earthly point of view, the training program looked like a monumental failure. It seemed the disciples had forgotten or ignored everything Christ had ever taught them about taking up the cross and following Him. In fact, their own sense of failure was so profound that they went back to their old vocations for a time. And even at that, it appeared they would fail (John 21:3–4).

But encouraged by the risen Lord, they returned to their apostolic calling. Empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they valiantly undertook the task to which Jesus had called them. The work they subsequently began continues today, two thousand years later. They are living proof that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. In and of themselves they were clearly not sufficient for the task (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:16). But God led them in triumph in Christ, and through them He diffused "the fragrance of His knowledge in every place" (v. 14).

To get an appreciation for the brevity of their earthly time with Christ, consider the fact that Jesus' entire ministry from baptism to resurrection lasted only about three years. And the intensive training time with the disciples was only about half that long. In A. B. Bruce's classic work, *The Training of the Twelve*, he points out that by the time Jesus identified and called the Twelve from the larger group of His followers (Matthew 10:1–4; Luke 6:12–16), half of his earthly ministry was already over:

The selection by Jesus of the twelve ... is an important landmark in the Gospel history. It divides the ministry of our Lord into two portions, nearly equal, probably, as to duration, but unequal as to the extent and importance of the work done in each respectively. In the earlier period Jesus labored single-handed; His miraculous deeds were confined for the most part to a limited area, and His teaching was in the main of an elementary character. But by the time when the twelve were chosen, the work of the kingdom had assumed such dimensions as to require organization and division of labor; and the teaching of Jesus was beginning to be of a deeper and more elaborate nature, and His gracious activities were taking on ever-widening range.

It is probable that the selection of a limited number to be His close and constant companions had become a necessity to Christ, in consequence of His very success in gaining disciples. His followers, we imagine, had grown so numerous as to be an incumbrance and an impediment to his movements, especially in the long journeys which mark the later part of His ministry. It was impossible that all who believed could continue henceforth to follow Him, in the literal sense, whithersoever He might go: the greater number could now only be occasional followers. But it was His wish that certain selected men should be with Him at all times and in all places,—His traveling companions in all His wanderings, witnessing all His work, and ministering to His daily needs. And so, in the quaint words of Mark, "Jesus calleth unto Him whom He would, and they came unto Him, and He [ordained] twelve, that they should be with Him." (Mark 3:13–14)

That means these few men, whose backgrounds were in mundane trades and earthly occupations, had little more than eighteen months' training for the monumental task to which they were called. There was no second string, no backup players, no plan B if the Twelve should fail.

The strategy sounds risky in the extreme. In earthly terms, the founding of the church and the spread of the gospel message depended entirely on those twelve ordinary men with their many obvious weaknesses—and one of them so devilish as to betray the Lord of the universe. And the entirety of their training for the task took less than half as long as it typically takes to get a degree from a seminary today.



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But Christ knew what He was doing. From His divine perspective, the ultimate success of the strategy actually depended on the Holy Spirit working in those men to accomplish His sovereign will. It was a mission that could not be thwarted. That's why it was a work for which God alone deserves praise and glory. Those men were merely instruments in His hands—just as you and I can be God's instruments today. God delights to use such ordinary means—"the foolish things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27–29). The two-thousand-year triumph of the apostolic endeavor is a testimony to the wisdom and power of the divine strategy.

Sometimes in Scripture the Twelve are called "disciples"—*mathetes* in the Greek text (Matthew 10:1; 11:1; 20:17; Luke 9:1). The word means "learners, students." That is what they were during those months they spent under the direct and personal tutelage of the Lord. He had multitudes of disciples, but these twelve were specifically called and chosen to a unique apostolic office. Therefore they are also designated "apostles"—*apostoloi* in the Greek. The word simply means "messengers, sent ones." They were given a unique ambassadorial office of authority and spokespersonship for Christ. Luke especially uses this term in his gospel and throughout the Book of Acts, and he reserves the term almost exclusively for the Twelve. Matthew speaks of "apostles" only once (Matthew 10:2); elsewhere, he refers to "twelve disciples" (11:1; 20:17) or "the twelve" (26:14, 20, 47). Likewise, Mark uses the term "apostles" only once (Mark 6:30). Other than that, he always refers to the apostles as "the twelve" (3:14; 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 10:32; 11:11; 14:10, 17, 20, 43). John, too, uses the word *apostolos* just once, in a nontechnical sense (John 13:16—where most English versions render the expression, "he who is sent"). Like Mark, John always refers to the apostolic band as "the twelve" (John 6:67, 70–71; 20:24).

Luke 10 describes an incident where seventy of Jesus' followers were chosen and sent out two by two. They were obviously "sent ones" and some commentators therefore refer to them as "apostles," but Luke does not employ that term to describe them.

The Twelve were called to a specific office. And in the Gospels and Acts, the term *apostoloi* almost always refers to that office and the twelve men who were specifically called and ordained to the office. Acts 14:14 and the Pauline epistles make it clear that the apostle Paul was likewise called to fill a special apostolic office—that of "apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13; 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11). Paul's apostleship was a unique calling. He obviously had the same authority and privileges as that of the Twelve (2 Corinthians 11:5). But Paul's apostleship is not subject matter for this book, because our focus here is on the twelve men who shared Jesus' public ministry with Him as His closest friends and companions. Paul wasn't converted until after Christ's ascension (Acts 9). He was an apostle "born out of due time" (1 Corinthians 15:8). He spoke with the same authority and manifested the same miraculous ability as the Twelve—and the Twelve embraced him and recognized his authority (cf. 2 Peter 3:15–16)—but he was not one of them.

The number twelve was significant, because Luke describes how, after Jesus' ascension, the apostles chose Matthias to fill the office vacated by Judas (Acts 1:23–26).

The role of an apostle (including the special office to which the apostle Paul was called) involved a position of leadership and exclusive teaching authority in the early church. The New Testament Scriptures were all written by the apostles or their close associates. And before the New Testament was written, the apostles' teaching was the rule in the early church. Beginning with the very first converts at Pentecost, all true believers looked to the apostles' leadership (Acts 2:37). And as the church grew, its faithfulness to the truth was described in these terms: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42).

The apostles were given a supernatural power to work signs and wonders (Matthew 10:1; Mark 6:7, 13; Luke 9:1–2; Acts 2:3–4; 5:12). Those signs bore witness to the truth of the gospel, which the apostles had received from Christ, and which they introduced on His behalf to the world (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4).

In other words, their role was a pivotal, foundational role. They *are* in a true sense, the very foundation of the Christian church, "Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

These studies in the lives of the apostles have been a particular delight for me—and one of the most fruitful endeavors of my life. My greatest joy is preaching Christ. Eleven of these men shared that passion, devoted their lives to it, and triumphed in it against over-whelming opposition. They are fitting heroes and role models for us,



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despite their shortcomings. To study their lives is to get to know the men who were closest to Christ during His earthly life. To realize that they were ordinary people just like us is a great blessing. May the Spirit of Christ who taught them transform us the way He transformed them, into precious vessels fit for the Master's use. And may we learn from their example what it means to be disciples indeed.

1

COMMON MEN, UNCOMMON CALLING

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

—1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–29

From the time Jesus began His public ministry in His hometown of Nazareth, He was enormously controversial. The people from His own community literally tried to kill Him immediately after His first public message in the local synagogue. "All those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way" (Luke 4:28–30).

Ironically, Jesus became tremendously popular among the people of the larger Galilee region. As word of His miracles began to circulate throughout the district, massive hordes of people came out to see Him and hear Him speak. Luke 5:1 records how "the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God." One day, the crowds were so thick and so aggressive that He got into a boat, pushed it offshore far enough to get away from the press of people, and taught the multitudes from there. Not by mere happenstance, the boat Jesus chose belonged to Simon. Jesus would rename him Peter, and he would become the dominant person in Jesus' closest inner circle of disciples.

Some might imagine that if Christ had wanted His message to have maximum impact, He could have played off His popularity more effectively. Modern conventional wisdom would suggest that Jesus ought to have done everything possible to exploit His fame, tone down the controversies that arose out of His teaching, and employ whatever strategies He could use to maximize the crowds around Him. But He did not do that. In fact, He did precisely the opposite. Instead of taking the populist route and exploiting His fame, He began to emphasize the very things that made His message so controversial. At about the time the crowds reached their peak, He preached a message so boldly confrontive and so offensive in its content that the multitude melted away, leaving only the most devoted few (John 6:66–67).

Among those who stayed with Christ were the Twelve, whom He had personally selected and appointed to represent Him. They were twelve perfectly ordinary, unexceptional men. But Christ's strategy for advancing His kingdom hinged on those twelve men rather than on the clamoring multitudes. He chose to work through the instrumentality of those few fallible individuals rather than advance His agenda through mob force, military might, personal popularity, or a public-relations campaign. From a human perspective, the future of the church and the long-term success of the gospel depended entirely on the faithfulness of that handful of disciples. There was no plan B if they failed.

The strategy Jesus chose typified the character of the kingdom itself. "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20–21). The kingdom advances " 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). A dozen men under the power of the Holy Spirit are a more potent force than the teeming masses whose initial enthusiasm for Jesus was apparently provoked by little more than sheer curiosity.



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Christ personally chose the Twelve and invested most of His energies in them. He chose them before they chose Him (John 15:16). The process of choosing and calling them happened in distinct stages. Careless readers of Scripture sometimes imagine that John 1:35–51, Luke 5:3–11, and the formal calling of the Twelve in Luke 6:12–16 are contradictory accounts of how Christ called His apostles. But there is no contradiction. The passages are simply describing different stages of the apostles' calling.

In John 1:35–51, for example, Andrew, John, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel encounter Jesus for the first time. This event occurs near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in the wilderness near the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was ministering. Andrew, John, and the others were there because they were already disciples of John the Baptist. But when they heard their teacher single out Jesus and say, "Behold the Lamb of God!" they followed Jesus.

That was phase one of their calling. It was a calling to *conversion*. It illustrates how every disciple is called first to salvation. We must recognize Jesus as the true Lamb of God and Lord of all, and embrace Him by faith. That stage of the disciples' call did not involve full-time discipleship. The Gospel narratives suggest that although they followed Jesus in the sense that they gladly heard His teaching and submitted to Him as their Teacher, they remained at their full-time jobs, earning a living through regular employment. That is why from this point until Jesus called them to full-time ministry, we often see them fishing and mending their nets.

Phase two of their calling was a call to *ministry*. Luke 5 describes the event in detail. This was the occasion when Jesus pushed out from shore to escape the press of the multitudes and taught from Peter's boat. After He finished teaching, He instructed Peter to launch out to the deep water and put in his nets. Peter did so, even though the timing was wrong (fish were easier to catch at night when the water was cooler and the fish surfaced to feed), the place was wrong (fish normally fed in shallower waters and were easier to catch there), and Peter was exhausted (having fished all night without any success). He told Jesus, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net" (Luke 5:5). The resulting catch of fish overwhelmed their nets and nearly sank two of their fishing boats! (vv. 6–7).

It was on the heels of that miracle that Jesus said, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). Scripture says it was at this point that "they forsook all and followed Him" (Luke 5:11). According to Matthew, Andrew and Peter "immediately left their nets and followed Him" (Matthew 4:20). And James and John "immediately ... left the boat and their father, and followed Him" (v. 22). From that point on, they were inseparable from the Lord.

Matthew 10:1–4 and Luke 6:12–16 describe a third phase of their calling. This was their calling to *apostleship*. It was at this point that Christ selected and appointed twelve men in particular and made them His apostles. Here is Luke's account of the incident:

Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot who also became a traitor.

Their apostleship began with a kind of internship. Christ sends them out. Mark 6:7 says they were sent out two by two. At this stage they were not quite ready to go out alone, so Christ teamed them in pairs, so that they would offer one another mutual support.

Throughout this phase of their training, the Lord Himself stuck closely with them. He was like a mother eagle, watching the eaglets as they began to fly. They were always checking back with Him, reporting on how things were going (cf. Luke 9:10; 10:17). And after a couple of seasons of evangelistic labor, they returned to the Lord and remained with Him for an extended time of teaching, ministry, fellowship, and rest (Mark 6:30–34).

There was a fourth phase of their calling, which occurred after Jesus' resurrection. Judas was now missing from the group, having hanged himself after his betrayal of Christ. Jesus appeared to the remaining eleven in His resurrection body and sent them into all the world, commanding them to disciple the nations. This was, in effect, a call to *martyrdom*. Each of them ultimately gave his life for the sake of the gospel. History records that all but one of them were killed for their testimony. Only John is said to have lived to old age, and he was severely persecuted for Christ's sake, then exiled to the tiny island of Patmos.



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Despite the obstacles they faced, they triumphed. In the midst of great persecution and even martyrdom, they fulfilled their task. Against all odds, they entered victorious into glory. And the continuing witness of the gospel—spanning two thousand years’ time and reaching into virtually every corner of the world—is a testimony to the wisdom of the divine strategy. No wonder we are fascinated by these men.

Let’s begin our study of the Twelve by looking carefully at phase three of their calling—their selection and appointment to *apostleship*. Notice the details as Luke gives them to us.

THE TIMING

First, the timing of this event is significant. Luke notes this with his opening phrase in Luke 6:12: “Now it came to pass in those days.” The New American Standard Bible renders the phrase this way: “And it was at this time.” Luke is not talking about clock time, or the specific days of a specific month. “At this time” and “in those days” refers to a period of time, a season, a distinct phase in Jesus’ ministry. It was an interval in His ministry when the opposition to Him peaked.

“In those days” refers back to the immediately preceding account. This section of Luke’s Gospel records the vicious opposition Christ was beginning to receive from the scribes and Pharisees. Luke 5:17 is Luke’s first mention of the Pharisees, and verse 21 is his first use of the word “scribes.” (The scribes are mentioned alongside the Pharisees as “teachers of the law” in verse 17.)

So we are first introduced to Jesus’ chief adversaries in Luke 5:17, and Luke’s account of their opposition fills the text through the end of chapter 5 and well into chapter 6. Luke describes the escalating conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Judaism. They opposed Him when He healed a paralytic and forgave his sins (5:17–26). They opposed Him for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners (5:27–39). They opposed Him when He permitted His disciples to pluck heads of grain and eat them on the Sabbath (6:1–5). And they opposed him for healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (6:6–11). One after another, Luke recounts those incidents and highlights the growing opposition of the religious leaders.

The conflict reaches a high point in Luke 6:11. The scribes and Pharisees “were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.” Both Mark and Matthew are even more graphic. They report that the religious leaders wanted to destroy Jesus (Matthew 12:14; Mark 3:6). Mark says the religious leaders even got the Herodians involved in their plot. The Herodians were a political faction that supported the dynasty of the Herods. They were not normally allied with the Pharisees, but the two groups joined together in collusion against Jesus. They were already hatching plans to murder Him.

It is at this precise point that Luke interjects his account of how the Twelve were chosen and appointed to be apostles. “It came to pass in those days”—when the hostility against Christ had escalated to a murderous fever pitch. Hatred for Him among the religious elite had reached its apex. Jesus could already feel the heat of His coming death. The crucifixion was now less than two years away. He already knew that He would suffer death on the cross, that He would rise from the dead, and that after forty days He would ascend to His Father. He therefore also knew that His earthly work would have to be handed off to someone else.

It was now time to select and prepare His official representatives. Jesus—knowing the hatred of the religious leaders, fully aware of the hostility against Him, seeing the inevitability of His execution—therefore chose twelve key men to carry on the proclamation of His gospel for the salvation of Israel and the establishment of the church. Time was of the essence. There weren’t many days left (about eighteen months, by most estimates) before His earthly ministry would end. Now was the time to choose His apostles. Their most intensive training would begin immediately and be complete within a matter of months.

The focus of Christ’s ministry therefore turned at this point from the multitudes to the few. Clearly, it was the looming reality of His death at the hands of His adversaries that signaled the turning point.

There’s another striking reality in this. When Jesus chose the Twelve to be His official representatives—preachers of the gospel who would carry both His message and His authority—He didn’t choose a single rabbi. He didn’t choose a scribe. He didn’t choose a Pharisee. He didn’t choose a Sadducee. He didn’t choose a priest. Not one of the men He chose came from the religious establishment. The choosing of the twelve apostles was a judgment against institutionalized Judaism. It was a renunciation of those men and their organizations, which had become



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totally corrupt. That is why the Lord didn't choose one recognized religious leader. He chose instead men who were not theologically trained—fishermen, a tax collector, and other common men.

Jesus had long been at war with those who saw themselves as the religious nobility of Israel. They resented Him. They rejected Him and His message. They hated Him. The Gospel of John puts it this way: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). The religious leaders of Judaism constituted the core of those who rejected Him.

Nearly a year and a half before this, in one of the first official acts of Jesus' ministry, He had challenged Israel's religious establishment on their own turf in Jerusalem during the Passover—the one time of year when the city was most populated with pilgrims coming to offer sacrifices. Jesus went to the temple mount, made a whip of small cords, drove the thieving money-changers out of the temple, poured out their money, overturned their tables, and chased their animals away (John 2:13–16). In doing that, He struck a devastating blow at institutionalized Judaism. He unmasked the religious nobility as thieves and hypocrites. He condemned their spiritual bankruptcy. He exposed their apostasy. He publicly rebuked their sin. He indicted them for gross corruption. He denounced their deception. That is how He *begun* His ministry. It was an all-out assault on the religion of the Jewish establishment.

Now, many months later, at the height of His Galilean ministry, far removed from Jerusalem, the resentment that must have been inaugurated at that first event had reached a fever pitch. The religious leaders were now bloodthirsty. And they began to devise a scheme to execute Him.

Their rejection of Him was complete. They were hostile to the gospel He preached. They despised the doctrines of grace He stood for, spurned the repentance He demanded, looked with disdain upon the forgiveness He offered, and repudiated the faith He epitomized. In spite of the many miracles that proved His messianic credentials—despite actually seeing Him cast out demons, heal every conceivable sickness, and raise dead people to life—they would not accept the fact that He was God in human flesh. They hated Him. They hated His message. He was a threat to their power. And they desperately wanted to see Him dead.

So when it was time for Jesus to select twelve apostles, He naturally did not choose people from the establishment that was so determined to destroy Him. He turned instead to His own humble followers and selected twelve simple, ordinary, working-class men.

THE TWELVE

If you've ever visited the great cathedrals in Europe, you might assume that the apostles were larger-than-life stained-glass saints with shining halos who represented an exalted degree of spirituality. The fact of the matter is that they were very, very common men.

It's a shame they have so often been put on pedestals as magnificent marble figures or portrayed in paintings like some kind of Roman gods. That dehumanizes them. They were just twelve completely ordinary men—perfectly human in every way. We mustn't lose touch with who they really were.

I recently read a biography of William Tyndale, who pioneered the translation of Scripture into English. He thought it wrong that common people heard the Bible only in Latin and not in their own language. The church leaders of his day, incredibly, did not want the Bible in the language of the people because (like the Pharisees of Jesus' day) they feared losing their ecclesiastical power. But against their opposition, Tyndale translated the New Testament into English and had it published. For his efforts he was rewarded with exile, poverty, and persecution. Finally, in 1536, he was strangled and burned at the stake.

One of the main things that motivated Tyndale to translate Scripture into the common language was a survey of English clergy that revealed that most of them did not even know who the twelve apostles were. Only a few of them could name more than four or five of the apostles. Church leaders and Christians of today might fare just as poorly on the test. The way the institutional church has canonized these men has actually dehumanized them and made them seem remote and otherworldly. It is a strange irony, because when Jesus chose them, He selected them not for any extraordinary abilities or spiritual superiority. He seems to have deliberately chosen men who were notable only for their ordinariness.



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What qualified these men to be apostles? Obviously it was not any intrinsic ability or outstanding talent of their own. They were Galileans. They were not the elite. Galileans were deemed low-class, rural, uneducated people. They were commoners—nobodies. But again, they were not selected because they were any more distinguished or more talented than others in Israel at the time.

Certainly, there are some rather clear moral and spiritual qualifications that have to be met by men who would fill this or any other kind of leadership role in the church. In fact, the standard for spiritual leadership in the church is extremely high. Consider, for example, the qualifications for being an elder or a pastor, listed in 1 Timothy 3:2–7:

[He] must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Titus 1:6–9 gives a similar list. Hebrews 13:7 also suggests that church leaders must be exemplary moral and spiritual examples, because their faith must be the kind others can follow, and they will be required to give an account to God for how they conduct themselves. These are very, very high standards.

By the way, the standard is no lower for people in the congregation. Leaders are examples for everyone else. There's no acceptable "lower" standard for rank-and-file church members. In fact, in Matthew 5:48, Jesus said to *all* believers, "Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Frankly, no one meets such a standard. Humanly speaking, no one "qualifies" when the standard is utter perfection. No one is fit to be in God's kingdom, and no one is inherently worthy to be in God's service. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). There is none righteous, no not one (Romans 3:10). Remember, it was the mature apostle Paul who confessed, "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Romans 7:18). In 1 Timothy 1:15 he called himself the chief of sinners.

So there are no intrinsically qualified people. God Himself must save sinners, sanctify them, and then transform them from unqualified into instruments He can use.

The Twelve were like the rest of us; they were selected from the unworthy and the unqualified. They were, like Elijah, men "with a nature like ours" (James 5:17). They did not rise to the highest usefulness because they were somehow *different* from us. Their transformation into vessels of honor was solely the work of the Potter.

Many Christians become discouraged and disheartened when their spiritual life and witness suffer because of sin or failure. We tend to think we're worthless nobodies—and left to ourselves, that would be true! But worthless nobodies are just the kind of people God uses, because that is all He has to work with.

Satan may even attempt to convince us that our shortcomings render us useless to God and to His church. But Christ's choice of the apostles testifies to the fact that God can use the unworthy and the unqualified. He can use nobodies. They turned the world upside down, these twelve (Acts 17:6). It was not because they had extraordinary talents, unusual intellectual abilities, powerful political influence, or some special social status. They turned the world upside down because God worked in them to do it.

God chooses the humble, the lowly, the meek, and the weak so that there's never any question about the source of power when their lives change the world. It's not the man; it's the truth of God and the power of God *in* the man. (We need to remind some preachers today of this. It's not their cleverness or their personality. The power is in the Word—the truth that we preach—not in us.) And apart from one Person—one extraordinary human being who was God incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ—the history of God's work on earth is the story of His using the unworthy and molding them for His use the same careful way a potter fashions clay. The Twelve were no exception to that.

The apostles properly hold an exalted place in redemptive history, of course. They are certainly worthy of being regarded as heroes of the faith. The book of Revelation describes how their names will adorn the twelve gates of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. So heaven itself features an eternal tribute to them. But that doesn't diminish the truth that they were as ordinary as you and I. We need to remember them not from their stained-glass images,



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but from the down-to-earth way the Bible presents them to us. We need to lift them out of their otherworldly obscurity and get to know them as real people. We need to think of them as actual men, and not as some kind of exalted figures from the pantheon of religious ritualism.

Let's not, however, underestimate the importance of their office. Upon their selection, the twelve apostles in effect became the true spiritual leaders of Israel. The religious elite of *apostate* Israel were symbolically set aside when Jesus chose them. The apostles became the first preachers of the new covenant. They were the ones to whom the Christian gospel was first entrusted. They represented the true Israel of God—a genuinely repentant and believing Israel. They also became the foundation stones of the church, with Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Those truths are heightened, not diminished, by the fact that these men were so ordinary.

Again, that is perfectly consistent with the way the Lord always works. In 1 Corinthians 1:20–21 we read, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” That is the very reason there were no philosophers, no brilliant writers, no famous debaters, no eminent teachers, and no men who had ever distinguished themselves as great orators among the twelve men Christ chose. They *became* great spiritual leaders and great preachers under the power of the Holy Spirit, but it was not because of any innate oratorical skill, leadership abilities, or academic qualifications these men had. Their influence is owing to one thing and one thing only: the power of the message they preached.

On a human level, the gospel was thought a foolish message and the apostles were deemed unsophisticated preachers. Their teaching was beneath the elite. They were mere fishermen and working-class nobodies. Peons. Rabble. That was the assessment of their contemporaries. (The same thing has been true of the genuine church of Christ throughout history. It is true in the evangelical world today. Where are the impressive intellects, the great writers, and the great orators esteemed by the world? They're not found, for the most part, in the church.) “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (v. 26).

“But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence” (vv. 27–29). God's favorite instruments are nobodies, so that no man can boast before God. In other words, God chooses whom He chooses in order that *He* might receive the glory. He chooses weak instruments so that no one will attribute the power to human instruments rather than to God, who wields those instruments. Such a strategy is unacceptable to those whose whole pursuit in life is aimed toward the goal of human glory.

With the notable exception of Judas Iscariot, these men were not like that. They certainly struggled with pride and arrogance like every fallen human being. But the driving passion of their lives became the glory of Christ. And it was that passion, subjected to the influence of the Holy Spirit—not any innate skill or human talent—that explains why they left such an indelible impact on the world.

THE TEACHER

Bear in mind, then, that the selection of the Twelve took place at a time when Jesus was faced with the reality of His impending death. He had experienced the rising hostility of the religious leaders. He knew His earthly mission would soon culminate in His death, resurrection, and ascension. And so from this point on, the whole character of His ministry changed. It became his top priority to train the men who would be the chief spokesmen for the gospel after He was gone.

How did He choose them? He first went off to commune with His Father. “He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12).

Throughout the first five chapters of his Gospel, Luke has already made clear that prayer was a pattern in the life of Jesus. Luke 5:16 says, “He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.” It was His habit to slip



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away in solitude to talk to His Father. He was always under pressure from the massive multitudes when He was in the towns and villages of Galilee. The wilderness and the mountain regions afforded solitude where He could pray.

We don't know *which* mountain this was. If it mattered, Scripture would tell us. There are lots of hills and mountains around the northern Galilee area. This one was probably in close walking distance to Capernaum, which was a sort of home base for Jesus' ministry. He went there and spent the entire night in prayer.

We often see Him praying in anticipation of crucial events in His ministry. (Remember, that is what He was doing on the night of His betrayal—praying in a garden where he found some solitude from the hectic atmosphere in Jerusalem. Judas knew he would find Jesus there because according to Luke 22:39 it was His habit to go there and pray.)

Here is Jesus in His true humanity. He was standing in a very volatile situation. The brewing hostility against Him was already threatening to bring about His death. He had a very brief amount of time remaining to train the men who would carry the gospel to the world after His departure. And the chilling reality of those matters drove Him to the top of a mountain so He could pray to God in total solitude. He had made Himself of no reputation and had taken the form of a bondservant, coming to earth as a man. The time was now approaching when He would further humble Himself unto death—even the death of the cross. And thus He goes to God as a man would go, to seek God's face in prayer and to commune with the Father about the men whom He would choose for this vital office.

Notice that He spent the entire night in prayer. If He went to the mountain before dark, that was probably around seven or eight o'clock in the evening. If He came back down after dawn, that would have been around six in the morning. In other words, He prayed for at least ten hours straight.

To say He spent the whole night requires several words in English. It's only one word in the Greek: *dianuktereuo*. The word is significant. It speaks of enduring at a task through the night. The word could not be used of sleeping all night. It's not an expression you would use if you wanted to say it was dark all night. It has the sense of toiling through the night, staying at a task all night. It suggests that He remained awake through the darkness until morning and that He was persevering all that time in prayer with an immense weight of duty upon Him.

Another interesting note comes through in the Greek language although we don't see it in the English. Our English version says that He "continued all night in prayer to God." Actually, the Greek expression means that He spent the whole night in the prayer of God. Whenever He prayed, it was quite literally the prayer of God. He was engaged in inter-Trinitarian communion. The prayer being offered was the very prayer of God. The Members of the Trinity were communing with one another. His prayers were all perfectly consistent with the mind and the will of God—for He Himself is God. And therein do we see the incredible mystery of His humanity and His deity brought together. Jesus in His humanity needed to pray all night, and Jesus in His deity was praying the very prayer of God.

Don't miss the point: The choice Christ would soon make was of such monumental importance that it required ten to twelve hours of prayer in preparation. What was He praying for? Clarity in the matter of whom to choose? I don't think so. As omniscient God incarnate, the divine will was no mystery to Him. He was no doubt praying for the men He would soon appoint, communing with the Father about the absolute wisdom of His choice, and acting in His capacity as Mediator on their behalf.

When the night of prayer was over, He returned to where His disciples were and summoned them. ("And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself"—Luke 6:13.) It was not only the Twelve whom He summoned. The word *disciple* in this context speaks of His followers in a broad sense. The word itself means "student, learner." There must have been numerous disciples, and from them, He would choose twelve to fill the office of an apostle.

It was common, both in the Greek culture and the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, for a prominent rabbi or philosopher to attract students. Their teaching venue was not necessarily a classroom or an auditorium. Most were peripatetic instructors whose disciples simply followed them through the normal course of everyday life. That is the kind of ministry Jesus maintained with His followers. He was an itinerant teacher. He simply went from place to place, and as He taught, He attracted people who followed His movements and listened to His teaching. We get a picture of this back in verse 1: "Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that He went through the grainfields. And His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands." They were walking with Him, following Him from place to place as He taught, gleaning grain for food as they walked.



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We don't know how many disciples Jesus had. At one point, he sent seventy out in pairs to evangelize in communities where He was preparing to visit (Luke 10:1). But the total number of His followers was undoubtedly far more than seventy. Scripture indicates that multitudes followed Him. And why not? His teaching was absolutely unlike anything anyone had ever heard in its clarity and obvious, inherent authority; He had the ability to heal diseases, cast out demons, and raise the dead; He was full of grace and truth. It's not amazing that He drew so many disciples. What is amazing is that anyone rejected Him. But reject Him they did, because His message was more than they could bear.

We see something of the dynamics of this in John 6. At the beginning of the chapter, He feeds more than five thousand people who had come out to see Him. (John 6:10 says the men alone numbered five thousand. Counting women and children, the crowd might have easily been double that number or more.) It was an amazing day. Many of those people were already following Him as disciples; many others were no doubt prepared to do so. John writes, "Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world'" (v. 14). Who was this man who could produce food out of nothing? *They* spent most of their lives farming, harvesting, raising animals, and preparing meals. *Jesus* could just create food! That would change their lives. They must have had visions of leisure and free food, already prepared. This was the kind of Messiah they had hoped for! According to John, "They were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king" (v. 15). He escaped by a series of supernatural events that culminated in His walking on the water.

The next day the people found Him in Capernaum, on the other side of the lake. Crowds of them had come looking for Him, obviously hoping He would give them more food. He chided them for following Him out of wrong motives: "You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled" (v. 26). When they continued to ask for more food, He told them, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world" (v. 51). The saying was so hard for them to understand that they pressed Him to explain. He continued:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven; not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever." These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. (vv. 53–59)

This was so offensive that even many of His disciples began to have second thoughts about following Him. John writes, "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more" (v. 66).

So disciples were coming and going. People were attracted, then disillusioned. And on that particular occasion described in John 6, Jesus even said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" (v. 67). Peter spoke for the group when he answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (vv. 68–69).

Those who stayed were people whom God had sovereignly drawn to His own Son (v. 44). Jesus had also drawn them to Himself in particular. He told them, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16). He sovereignly selected them and (with the exception of Judas Iscariot, whom Christ knew would betray Him) He sovereignly worked in them and through them to guarantee that they would persevere with Him, that they would bear fruit, and that their fruit would remain. Here we see the principle of God's electing grace at work.

The sovereignty of His choice is seen in an extraordinary way by the selection of the Twelve. Out of the larger group of disciples, perhaps hundreds of them, He chose twelve men in particular and appointed them to the apostolic office. It was not a job for which applicants or volunteers were sought. Christ *chose* them sovereignly and appointed them, in the presence of the larger group.

This was a remarkable moment for those twelve. Up to this point, Peter, James, John, Andrew, Nathanael, Matthew, and the others were just part of the crowd. They were learners like everyone else in the group. They had been following and listening and observing and absorbing His teaching. But they didn't yet have any official role of



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leadership. They had not yet been appointed to any role that set them apart from the others. They were faces in the crowd until Christ selected them and made twelve of them apostles.

Why twelve? Why not eight? Why not twenty-four? The number twelve was filled with symbolic importance. There were twelve tribes in Israel. But Israel was apostate. The Judaism of Jesus' time represented a corruption of the faith of the Old Testament. Israel had abandoned divine grace in favor of works-religion. Their religion was legalistic. It was shot through with hypocrisy, self-righteous works, man-made regulations, and meaningless ceremonies. It was heretical. It was based on physical descent from Abraham rather than the *faith* of Abraham. In choosing twelve apostles, Christ was in effect appointing new leadership for the new covenant. And the apostles represented the new leaders of the true Israel of God—consisting of people who believed the gospel and were following the faith of Abraham (cf. Romans 4:16). In other words, the twelve apostles symbolized judgment against the twelve tribes of Old Testament Israel.

Jesus Himself made the connection plainly. In Luke 22:29–30, He told the apostles, “I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The significance of the number twelve would have been immediately obvious to almost every Israelite. Jesus' messianic claims were clear to all who listened to His teaching. He constantly spoke of His coming kingdom. Meanwhile, throughout Israel, expectation was running high that the Messiah would very soon appear and establish His kingdom. Some had thought John the Baptist would be that Messiah, but John pointed them to Christ (cf. John 1:19–27). They knew very well that Christ had all the messianic credentials (John 10:41–42). He wasn't the kind of political leader they expected, so they were slow to believe (John 10:24–25). But they surely understood the claims He was making, and they were filled with anticipation.

So when He publicly appointed twelve men to be His apostles, the significance of that number was loud and clear. The apostles represented a whole new Israel, under the new covenant. And their appointment—bypassing the religious establishment of official Judaism—signified a message of judgment against national Israel. Clearly, these twelve ordinary men were not destined for an ordinary role. They stood in the place of the heads of twelve tribes. They were living proof that the kingdom Jesus was about to establish was altogether different from the kingdom most Israelites anticipated.

Luke 6:13 says, “He chose twelve whom He also named apostles.” The title alone was significant. The Greek verb *apostello* means “to send out.” The noun form, *apostolos*, means “one who is sent.” The English word *apostle* is a transliteration, rather than a translation, of the Greek word. The apostles were “sent ones.” But they were not mere messengers. The Greek word for “messenger” was *angelos*, from which we get our word “angel.” An *apostolos* was something more significant than a courier or a herald; *apostolos* conveyed the idea of an ambassador, a delegate, an official representative.

The word has an exact parallel in Aramaic—*shaliah*. (Remember that the common language in Israel in Jesus' time—the language Jesus Himself spoke—was not Hebrew, but Aramaic.) In that first-century Jewish culture, the *shaliah* was an official representative of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of Israel. A *shaliah* exercised the full rights of the Sanhedrin. He spoke for them, and when he spoke, he spoke with their authority. He was owed the same respect and deference as the council itself. But he never delivered his own message; his task was to deliver the message of the group whom he represented. The office of a *shaliah* was well known. *Shaliah* were sent out to settle legal or religious disputes, and they acted with the full authority of the whole council. Some prominent rabbis also had their *shaliah*, “sent ones” who taught their message and represented them with their full authority. Even the Jewish Mishnah (a collection of oral traditions originally conceived as a commentary on the Law) recognized the role of the *shaliah*. It says, “The one sent by the man is as the man himself.” So the nature of the office was well known to the Jewish people.

Thus when Jesus appointed apostles, He was saying something very familiar to people in that culture. These were His delegates. They were His trusted *shaliah*. They spoke with His authority, delivered His message, and exercised His authority.

THE TASK



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The familiar role of the *shaliyah* in that culture virtually defined the task of the apostles. Obviously, Christ would delegate His authority to these twelve and send them out with His message. They would represent Him as official delegates. Virtually everyone in that culture would have instantly understood the nature of the office. These twelve men, commissioned as Jesus' apostles, would speak and act with the same authority as the One who sent them. "Apostle" was therefore a title of great respect and privilege.

Mark 3:14 records this same event: "Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach." Notice the two-step process. Before they could be sent out to preach, they had to be pulled in. It was absolutely critical that they be with Jesus before they be sent out. In fact, it isn't until Luke 9:1 that Jesus calls the Twelve together and gives them authority over the demons and power to heal diseases. At that point, He literally delegates to them His miracle power. So in Luke 6, He identifies and appoints them and brings them under His direct and personal tutelage ("that they might be with Him"). In Luke 9, several months later, He gives them power to work miracles and cast out demons. Not until then did He "send them out to preach."

Up to this point, Jesus was speaking to huge crowds most of the time. With the calling of the Twelve in Luke 6, His teaching ministry becomes more intimate, focused primarily on them. He would still draw large crowds and teach them, but His focus was on the disciples and their training.

Notice the natural progression in their training program. At first, they simply followed Jesus, gleaning from His sermons to the multitudes and listening to His instructions along with a larger group of disciples. They apparently did not do this full-time, but as opportunity allowed in the course of their regular lives. Next (as recorded in Matthew 4), He called them to leave everything and follow Him exclusively. Now (in the incident recorded in Luke 6 and Matthew 10), He selects twelve men out of that group of full-time disciples, identifies them as apostles, and begins to focus most of His energies on their personal instruction. Later, He will gift them with authority and miracle power. Finally, He will send them out. At first, they go on short-term mission assignments, but they keep coming back. But when He leaves to return to the Father, they will go out for good on their own. There's a clear progression in their training and entry into full-time ministry.

No longer just disciples, they are now apostles—*shaliyah*. They occupy an important office. Luke uses the word "apostles" six times in his Gospel and about thirty times in the book of Acts. Their role in the Gospels pertains primarily to taking the kingdom message to Israel. In Acts, they are engaged in the founding of the church.

Although they were common men, theirs was an uncommon calling. In other words, the task they were called to, and not anything about the men per se, is what makes them so important. Consider how unique their role was to be.

Not only would they found the church and play a pivotal leadership role as the early church grew and branched out, but they also became the channels through which most of the New Testament would be given. They received truth from God by divine revelation. Ephesians 3:5 is very explicit. Paul says that the mystery of Christ, which in earlier ages was not made known, "has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets." They did not preach a human message. The truth was given to them by direct revelation.

They were therefore the source of all true church doctrine. Acts 2:42 describes the activities of the early church in these terms: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Before the New Testament was complete, the apostles' teaching was the *only* source of truth about Christ and church doctrine. And their teaching was received with the same authority as the written Word. In fact, the written New Testament is nothing other than the Spirit-inspired, inscripturated record of the apostles' teaching.

In short, the apostles were given to edify the church. Ephesians 4:11–12 says Christ gave the apostles "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." They were the original Christian teachers and preachers. Their teaching, as recorded in the New Testament, is the only rule by which sound doctrine can be tested, even today.

They were also examples of virtue. Ephesians 3:5 calls them "holy apostles." They set a standard for godliness and true spirituality. They were the first examples for believers to emulate. They were men of character and integrity, and they set the standard for all who would subsequently become leaders in the church.



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They had unique power to perform miracles that confirmed their message. Hebrews 2:3–4 says that the gospel “first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.” In other words, God confirmed His Word through the apostles by the miracles that they were able to do. The New Testament indicates that *only* the apostles and those who were closely associated with them had the power to do miracles. That is why 2 Corinthians 12:12 speaks of such miracles as “the signs of an apostle.”

As a result of all this, the disciples were greatly blessed and held in high esteem by the people of God. Jesus’ expectations for them were met through their faithful perseverance. And His promise to them was fulfilled in the growth and expansion of the church. You may recall that in Luke 18:28, Peter said to Jesus, “See, we have left all and followed You.” The disciples were apparently concerned about the way things were going and what might happen to them. Peter’s words were actually a plea. It is as if he was saying, on behalf of the others, “What’s going to happen to us?”

Jesus replied, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life.” They had not left anything that He would not more than make up to them. And God did bless them in this life (even though, as we shall see when we examine each life, most of them were martyred). God blessed them in this life through the founding and growth of the church. They not only gained influence, respect, and honor among the people of God; but as for their homes and families, they gained multitudes of spiritual children and brethren as the church grew and believers multiplied. And they will be greatly honored in the age to come as well.

THE TRAINING

All of that might have seemed remote and uncertain on the morning Jesus summoned His disciples and appointed the Twelve. They still needed to be taught. All their shortcomings and human failings seemed to overshadow their potential. Time was short. They had already left whatever vocations they were expert in. They had abandoned their nets, forsaken their fields, and left the tax tables behind. They had relinquished everything they knew, in order to be trained for something for which they had no natural aptitude.

But when they forsook their jobs, they by no means became idle. They became full-time students, learners—*disciples*. Now the next eighteen months of their lives would be filled with even more intensive training—the best seminary education ever. They had the example of Christ perpetually before them. They could listen to His teaching, ask Him questions, watch how He dealt with people, and enjoy intimate fellowship with Him in every kind of setting. He gave them ministry opportunities, instructing them and sending them out on special assignments. He graciously encouraged them, lovingly corrected them, and patiently instructed them. That is how the best learning always occurs. It isn’t just information passed on; it’s one life invested in another.

But it was not an *easy* process. The Twelve could be amazingly thick headed. There was a reason they weren’t the academic elite. Jesus Himself often said things like, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand?” (Matthew 15:16–17; cf. 16:9). “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe” (Luke 24:25). It is significant that Scripture doesn’t cover their defects. The point is not to portray them as superholy luminaries or to elevate them above mere mortals. If that were the aim, there would be no reason to record their character flaws. But instead of whitewashing the blemishes, Scripture seems to make a great deal of their human weaknesses. It’s a brilliant reminder that “[our] faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:5).

Why was the learning process so difficult for the apostles? First of all, they lacked spiritual understanding. They were slow to hear and slow to understand. They were at various times thick, dull, stupid, and blind. All those terms or their equivalents are used to describe them in the New Testament. So how did Jesus remedy their lack of spiritual understanding? He just kept teaching. Even after His resurrection, He stayed forty days on earth. Acts 1:3 says that during that time He was “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” He was still persistently teaching them until the moment He ascended into heaven.

A second problem that made the learning process difficult for the disciples is that they lacked humility. They were self-absorbed, self-centered, self-promoting, and proud. They spent an enormous amount of time arguing about who would be the greatest among them (Matthew 20:20–28; Mark 9:33–37; Luke 9:46). How did Jesus



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overcome their lack of humility? By being an example of humility to them. He washed their feet. He modeled servanthood. He humbled Himself, even unto the death of the cross.

Third, not only did they lack understanding and humility, but they also lacked faith. Four times in the Gospel of Matthew alone Jesus says to them, “O you of little faith” (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). In Mark 4:40, He asked them, “How is it that you have no faith?” At the end of Mark’s Gospel, after they had spent months in intensive training with Jesus—even after He had risen from the dead—Mark writes, “He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart” (Mark 16:14). What remedy did Jesus have for their lack of faith? He kept doing miracles and wonderful works. The miracles were not primarily for the benefit of unbelievers; most of His miracles were deliberately done “in the presence of His disciples” so that *their* faith could be strengthened (John 20:30).

Fourth, they lacked commitment. While the crowds were cheering and the miracles were being multiplied, they were thrilled. But as soon as the soldiers came into the garden to arrest Jesus, they all forsook Him and fled (Mark 14:50). Their leader ended up denying Jesus and swearing he didn’t even know the man. How did Jesus remedy their proneness to defection? By interceding for them in prayer. John 17 records how Jesus prayed that they would remain ultimately faithful and that the Father would bring them to heaven (vv. 11–26).

Fifth, they lacked power. On their own, they were weak and helpless, especially when confronted with the enemy. There were times when they tried but could not cast out demons. Their faithlessness left them unable to harness the power that was available to them. What did Jesus do to remedy their weakness? On the day of Pentecost He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower them. This was His promise to them: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). That promise was mightily fulfilled.

We’re inclined to look at this group with all their weaknesses and wonder why Jesus did not simply pick a different group of men. Why would He single out men with no understanding, no humility, no faith, no commitment, and no power? Simply this: His strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Again we see how He chooses the weak things of this world to confound the mighty. No one could ever examine this group of men and conclude that they did what they did because of their own innate abilities. There is no human explanation for the influence of the apostles. The glory goes to God alone.

Acts 4:13 says this about how the people of Jerusalem perceived the apostles: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.” The Greek text says people perceived that they were “*aggramatoi ... idiotai*”—literally, “illiterate ignoramuses.” And that was true from a worldly viewpoint. But it was obvious that they had been with Jesus. The same thing should be said of every true disciple. Luke 6:40 says, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher.”

The apostles’ relatively brief time of training with Jesus bore eternal fruit. At first, it might have seemed that everything would be for naught. The night Jesus was betrayed, they were scattered like sheep whose shepherd had been smitten (Matthew 26:31). Even after the resurrection, they seemed timid, full of remorse over their failure, and too aware of their own weaknesses to minister with confidence.

But after Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit came, infused them with power, and enabled them to do what Christ had trained them to do. The book of Acts records how the church was launched, and the rest is history. Those men, through the legacy of New Testament Scripture and the testimony they left, are still changing the world even today.⁷

DECAPOLIS (Δεκάπολις, *Dekapolis*). A term meaning “ten cities” that designates a group of Hellenistic cities predominately located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River.

Introduction

⁷ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2002). *Twelve ordinary men: how the Master shaped his disciples for greatness, and what He wants to do with you* (pp. xi–27). Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group.



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The region of the Decapolis corresponds roughly with the Old Testament region of Gilead, and includes what is today northwest Jordan and southern Syria. Although the term “Decapolis” implies 10 cities, the number fluctuates in lists from ancient authors. The cities were not a unified confederation, but they shared close geographical ties, Greek cultural orientation, and economic and trade interests. While frequently under the control of various empires or kingdoms, the cities attempted to maintain a degree of civic autonomy.

Biblical Relevance

The New Testament contains three references to the region of the Decapolis. These citations are the earliest references to this region in ancient literature. Two of these references are in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 5:20; 7:31). In Mark 5:1–20, Jesus travels eastward across the Sea of Galilee into the land of the Gerasenes, where He encounters a man living among the tombs who is possessed with an unclean spirit (Mark 5:2). While the exact referent of “land of the Gerasenes” is contested, it probably refers to Gerasa, a city associated with the Decapolis. However, various Greek manuscripts identify the city as Gerasa, Gadara, or Gergesa. After exorcising the man of his unclean spirit, Jesus commissions him. Mark 5:20 records that the man goes into the Decapolis proclaiming what Jesus has done for him. The second reference is in Mark 7:31–37, where the author mentions the region in connection with other Gentile locales in which Jesus had been traveling: Tyre and Sidon. While in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31), Jesus encounters and heals a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment.

The third New Testament reference to the Decapolis is in Matt 4:25. Here Matthew illustrates how Jesus’ increased fame, due to His healings and exorcisms, was drawing people from Galilee, Jerusalem, Judaea, from beyond the Jordan, and the Decapolis. The regions “beyond the Jordan” and “the Decapolis” are almost synonymous and could overlap geographically. Matthew’s reference to the Decapolis contributes to his emphasis on Gentiles being drawn to Jesus from the great distances. Matthew foreshadows this theme earlier in the Gospel by describing the Magi’s arriving from the East to worship the baby Jesus (Matt 2:1–12).

In addition to these references to the Decapolis specifically, the Gospel writers mention specific Decapolis cities. They treat the Decapolis as a general region mainly characterized by a Gentile population and therefore a place of questionable purity. The individuals Jesus encounters in this region are typically ill or demon possessed. While Jesus’ ministry only rarely focuses on the Decapolis, His travels to and compassionate acts within this region demonstrate the inclusion of Gentiles.

Cities of the Decapolis

Two additional first-century references to the Decapolis are in the writings of Pliny the Elder and Flavius Josephus. In his *Natural History* (5.16.74), Pliny provides the first list of names for Decapolis cities:

1. Damascus
2. Philadelphia
3. Raphana
4. Scythopolis
5. Gadara
6. Hippos
7. Dium
8. Pella
9. Gerasa
10. Canatha

With the exception of Scythopolis (modern-day Beisan/Beth-Shean), all of these cities are located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River. Although Pliny lists Damascus, this city is rarely considered a Decapolis city because of its distance from the other cities. The city of Raphana is sometimes identified with Abila. The second-century Roman geographer Ptolemy adds an additional nine cities to Pliny’s list and omits others (*Geography*, 5.14.18), bringing the number of Decapolis cities to 18.

An older view understood these Decapolis cities as representing a united confederation or league. No evidence exists, however, that these cities banded together for military, political, or economic purposes. Rather, the cities of the Decapolis were connected by their geographical proximity and shared Greek culture.

The cities of the Decapolis were established in locations that created a catalyst for thriving urban growth. Most cities were located along frequently traveled roads, and some were established at strategic road junctions. Both Pella and Scythopolis were located at the intersections of trade and military roads that ran north-south and east-west. The Decapolis cities were also founded near plateaus or acropolises that would allow for fortifications. Other natural geographical features are also typical of these cities. The city of Gadara, for example, was located near a warm spring known for its healing qualities. Since agriculture played a significant role for feeding the population and in trade, these cities were located near fertile valleys, rivers, and conducive micro-climates. As new cities were sometimes reestablished on the foundations of older sites, the Greek populations often mixed with the indigenous population. All the cities became influential centers of Hellenistic culture and thought.

History of the Decapolis Region



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Hellenistic Period

The history of the Decapolis spans approximately 1000 years from the Hellenistic period to the Byzantine period (third century BC—seventh century AD). The origin of the Decapolis is frequently traced to the Hellenistic period under Alexander the Great and his successors, the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. The Hellenistic influence is evident in the names of Pella and Dium, which duplicate the names of significant Macedonian cities. The city of Philadelphia (modern-day Amman, capital of Jordan) bore the name of the Hellenistic ruler Ptolemy II Philadelphia (283–246 BC). According to a later Roman inscription, the city of Gerasa erected a statue to one of Alexander the Great's generals, Perdiccas. The statue may have been in honor of one of the Hellenistic founders of the city.

After the death of Alexander the Great and the division of his kingdom among his generals, the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt expanded its rule into Palestine and the territory of the Decapolis. The Ptolemies controlled this region until the battle of Panion (200 BC), when they were defeated by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III and his troops. Antiochus annexed the territory of the Decapolis, and for the next 100 years the Seleucids controlled these cities. During this period, the cities flourished as well-established urban centers.

The eventual declining influence of the Seleucid kingdom, however, allowed for the growing power and influence of the Judean Hasmonean kingdom in the Decapolis. The Judean king Alexander Jannaeus (100–76 BC) spread his kingdom eastward and conquered Scythopolis, Gadara, Abila, Dium, and Pella. Unlike the Seleucids, who allowed the cities a large degree of autonomy, Jannaeus coerced assimilation of the Decapolis cities into the Hasmonean Kingdom. The cultural and religious tensions between the Judeans and the local population of the Decapolis cities created animosity until the entry of the Romans into the region.

Roman Period

The establishment of the Decapolis as a recognized geographical grouping of cities is often associated with the Roman general Pompey (64–63 BC). He was credited with "liberating" the Decapolis cities from the control of Hasmonean rule and establishing Roman power and influence in the region. Pompey created a system for ensuring loyalty to Rome. By liberating the cities of the Decapolis and allowing a level of self-governance, he weakened the Hasmonean Kingdom and also ensured the positive support of the local populace toward Roman policies. The coinage of the Decapolis cities began to be dated by the new Pompeian calendar instead of the old Seleucid calendar in celebration of this freedom from Judean control. Scythopolis was especially grateful to Pompey's general, Gabinius, who helped rebuild the city. Gabinius' portrait was placed on coinage, an extremely rare honor at the time, with the inscription "of the people of Gabinian Nysa."

During the next hundred years, the Decapolis cities thrived and maintained a degree of civic autonomy even as they were nominally under the governorship of the province of Syria. Occasionally the cities could be assigned as a token of loyalty to a client-king. For example, Caesar Augustus presented Herod the Great with the cities of Hippos and Gadara (30 to 4 BC). At Herod's death, the cities reverted back to Syrian governance. One of the few inscriptions mentioning the Decapolis by name suggests that it had an administrative officer, perhaps a person who functioned like Pilate, the sub-governor of Judaea. If so, Decapolis, while being a geographical designation for the cities, may also have indicated a specific Roman administrative region.

The cities of the Decapolis, like many cities in the region, were caught up in the Judean War of AD 66–70. According to Josephus (*Life*, 65. 341–42, 410), a group of leaders complained to the Roman general Vespasian about Judean attacks against their cities. During this period, sporadic massacres were carried out against local Judean populations. Josephus records Judeans being slaughtered in Scythopolis, Pella, Gadara, and Hippos. In the city of Gerasa, however, Judeans were exiled rather than killed. During the Judean War, Scythopolis—the one city west of the Jordan River—served as a base for the Roman army under Vespasian.

Later tradition suggests that one of the cities of the Decapolis served as a safe haven for Christians fleeing from the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. According to Eusebius, the Christians fled Jerusalem and made their way to Pella (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.5.3–4). While archaeological evidence is unable to confirm this relocation, Pella's location near Galilee and the possibility that many Jerusalem believers were Judean Christians from Galilee lends some creditability to the tradition. Pella became an important Christian center in the Byzantine period.

For Decapolis cities, the second century AD was marked by stability and increased trade. The cities thrived in this period, as illustrated by the quality of material used in buildings. Imposing new monuments were built out of imported marble from the island of Marmara and granite from Egypt rather than local basalt stones. Emperor Hadrian's visit to Jerash in AD 129 illustrated the growing significance of some Decapolis cities.

Byzantine Period

Although the cities of the Decapolis were marked by pagan religious and civic influence during the New Testament era, Christianity had a growing influence on the cities from the fourth—seventh centuries AD. The previously pagan religious and civic functions were replaced by the growing influence of the Christian population. Excavations have revealed the remains of several Byzantine churches within the Decapolis. For example, 17 churches have been unearthed in the city of Gerasa. Abila had five Byzantine churches, including an unusual basilica boasting five aisles. Some of the cities became important bishoprics with their bishops participating in significant ecumenical councils during the fifth and sixth centuries.



Who Are The Apostles? Week #1: When God Equips The Called

Culture and Influence of the Cities

Extensive archaeological excavations have been conducted in many of the Decapolis cities. The results of this work reveal the influence, affluence, and independence of the Decapolis. All the cities had at least one theater. Other typical Graeco-Roman features include forums, temples, and baths. Scythopolis, the largest of the cities, also had a hippodrome (a horse-race and athletic stadium) along with an amphitheater. Greek temples and the worship centers of the gods and goddesses flourished during the Roman period in Decapolis cities. The archaeological remains of the large colonnaded oval Roman forum at Gerasa (modern day Jerash) today illustrate the status and prominence of a Decapolis city. Archaeological artifacts and architectural structures demonstrate that these eastern cities emulated the style and function of western Graeco-Roman influences.

In addition to civic architecture, philosophy, literature, and sciences associated with the cities reflect the culture of the Decapolis. Sources preserve the names and often the works of important individuals from these cities. For example, the mathematician Nichomachus came from Gerasa, and the poet Meleager and the rhetorician Theodorus both came from Gadara, as did Philodemus the Epicurian.

The minting of coins demonstrated the greatest level of autonomy and self-identification for the Decapolis cities. Perhaps for this reason, the inscription on some coins of the Decapolis highlighted the quality of freedom and independence. A coin of Hippos illustrates this freedom with the inscription: “of the Antiochean at Hippos, holy and city of asylum.” Coinage provides a small but fascinating window upon civic life within these cities. Frequently the city coins portrayed gods and goddesses significant for that city, such as Heracles, Zeus, or Athena. The city of Gadara minted coins portraying “The Three Graces”—the goddesses associated with charm, beauty, and creativity. One of the most frequent images on Decapolis coinage was Tyche. Often portrayed wearing a turreted crown (perhaps representing the walls of the city), she is the goddess associated with the fortune and prosperity of the city.

While the cities of the Decapolis often prospered during their long histories, some succumbed to earthquakes. Seismic activity can be frequent and intense near the Jordan Rift Valley. One of the most significant earthquakes occurred in AD 749. It devastated the cities of Hippos, Pella, Jerash, and Scythopolis. Even today, persons walking among the ruins and excavated remains of these cities can recognize the aftermath of the earthquake in columns laid over like fallen dominos.

Selected Resources for Further Study

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DAVID M. MAY⁸

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Apostle; fisherman; Peter’s brother (Mt 4:18; 10:2; Mk 1:16, 29; 3:18; 13:3; Lk 6:14; Jn 1:35–44; 6:8–9; 12:12; Ac 1:13).⁹

⁸ May, D. M. (2016). [Decapolis](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

⁹ [Christian Standard Bible](#). (2020). (p. 1129). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.