

# The Special Role of Apostles in the New Testament Church

This excerpted from Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume*, p. 2724–26.

That the apostles played a foundational, authoritative, and temporal role in the church can be seen from their relationship to others.

## *The Relationship of Apostles and Elders*

All apostles were elders, but not all elders were apostles; elder is an **office** in the church, while apostleship was a **gift** to select individuals in the church. For instance, the apostles John and Peter were elders (2 John 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1; cf. 3 John); when Judas defected, Peter, citing Psalm 109, said, “May another take his place of **leadership**” (lit.: “bishop’s office” or “eldership”; Acts 1:20 NIV). All apostles were elders (bishops) by **office**; they were apostles by **gift**, given by God to the church (Eph. 4:8, 11). An apostle was an elder with the apostolic gift.

## *The Apostolic Role Was Temporary*

Not only was apostleship a gift, it was also a **temporary** gift; apostles lived only in the first century, for they had to be eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ, a qualification laid down when Judas was replaced by Mathias in Acts 1:22. Paul also defended his apostleship by saying, “Am I not an apostle? ... have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1; cf. 15:7–9). Further, apostles were part of the church’s **foundation**, laid only in the first century (Eph. 2:19–20). What is more, apostles, along with prophets, received the revelation inscripturated in the New Testament, which was given once to edify the church of all times (2 Tim. 3:16–18). These men were the living authority who recorded a permanent written authority for our faith. (See appendix 8.)

Never did they appoint new apostles **to replace them** (Acts 12:2), **but only new elders to serve with them and after them** (cf. 14:23; Titus 1:5). In fact, even those who were apostles called themselves “elders” in their later epistles (cf. 2 John 1; 3 John 1; 1 Peter 5:1). Also, after the death of the apostles, when second- and third-century authors wanted to claim divine revelation and authority for their writings, they claimed to be apostles, implying **they knew such revelation and authority had died with the apostles**.

## *Apostles Were the Early Church’s Final Authority*

Not only were the apostles the New Testament church’s foundation (Eph. 2:20), they were also its ruling authority. They appointed the elders (Acts 1:23; Titus 1:5), their teaching (being God’s

revelation) was the church's basis (Acts 2:42), and they settled doctrinal disputes (Acts 15; cf. Gal. 2).

*Apostles Were the Early Church's Source of New Revelation*

Paul said, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11–12). Peter recognized Paul's epistles as revelation from God (2 Peter 3:13–16) and placed them alongside Old Testament Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15–16).

In point of fact, (1) since Jesus had promised to lead the apostles into "all truth"<sup>1</sup> and bring to their mind "everything I have said to you"; (2) since apostles lived only in the first century; and (3) since the New Testament is the only authentic record from the first century of apostolic teaching, it follows that the apostles were the vessels of God's final revelation for the church. This is why **only** they were given and could give "signs of an apostle" (2 Cor. 12:12 NKJV), miracles to confirm their revelation from God (Heb. 2:3–4). Indeed, when the last apostle wrote the New Testament's last book, he appended to it this warning:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18–19 NIV)

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<sup>1</sup> John 16:13

<sup>2</sup> John 14:26