

# Apostles and Saints

Scripture: Colossians 1:1-2

Sermon Series: *Colossians*

Topic: Apostles, Church



## Author

We often refer to this portion of Scripture as "the book of Colossians." However, it's not really a book at all, but rather it is a letter. The opening sentence identifies it's author.

*Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

## Paul: An Apostle of Christ Jesus

The author of this letter is, "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.*" The word **apostle** is not one we often use, but I saw it twice in the news over the past week or so. The first instance came from the title of a new Netflix horror movie that will be released around the time of Halloween,

which, from watching the trailer apparently demonizes anyone who believes the Bible and glorifies gore, blood, and the bizarre. I don't recommend watching it.

The second instance came from the news of a massive, Mexico based mega-church that recently purchased 270 acres in Atlanta and whose leaders claim to be modern-day apostles of Jesus.

Their current leader was appointed to his apostolic ministry with a "manifestation of apostolic election" so specific that they report that it happened on Sunday, December 14, 2014 at 2:43 a.m. and yet so mysterious that they do not describe what happened in any more detail than "a sublime act of identifying the Emissary of God."



## What Is An Apostle?

So what does the term apostle mean? Are there still apostles today?

Understanding this word is essential to rightly understanding the author of this letter and how that relates to the application and significance of this letter for us today.

## Apostle

The basic meaning of the word ***apostle*** (ἀπόστολος) in the wider Greek cultural context referred to "***one sent out on a mission***," particularly relating to sea-faring and military expeditions.<sup>1</sup> However, in the Biblical context and use of the word, there are two applications, one less frequent and very broad, while the other is more frequent and very narrow.

## Less Common Broad Use

There are only three<sup>2</sup> verses in the New Testament (NT) where the word apostle is used in the broad sense of 'being sent out.' For example, in 2 Corinthians 8:23, "Paul refers to the men who accompanied him in taking an offering to the suffering saints in Jerusalem as "*messengers* [ἀπόστολοι from ἀπόστολος] of the churches."<sup>3</sup> The word here is used in a very broad sense, referring to all the men who were sent out with Paul to deliver financial aid the Christians in Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, "[Ἀποστέλλω \(πέμπω\), Ἐξαποστέλλω, Ἀπόστολος, Ψευδαπόστολος, Ἀποστολή](#)," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 407.

<sup>2</sup> Phil. 2:25; 2 Cor. 8:23; Jn. 13:16.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 906.

Some people today use the term 'apostle' in this broad sense referring to those who are sent out for the sake of the name of Jesus, such as gifted church planters or especially effective missionaries. In this sense, we could say that there are still apostles today, although I do not recommend using the word in light of the second use of the word in Scripture.

### More Frequent Narrow Use

The second use of the word apostle in the NT is much more frequent, occurring 74 times, and being very narrow in scope. This second use of the word is a very technical and specifically refers to those men who were personally appointed by Jesus to preach the gospel to the world. They are "*special messengers of the gospel of Jesus*."<sup>4</sup> This very narrow understanding of the word comes from Jesus.

#### Luke 6:13

*<sup>13</sup> And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles:*

### A Witness to His Resurrection

Jesus had many disciples but he chose only 12 to receive the designation of apostle. As the early church grew, **two qualifications** came to define an *apostle* in this narrow sense of the word. First, an apostle had to have personally witnessed the resurrected Jesus.<sup>5</sup> When Peter led the Eleven to find a replacement for Judas, the requirement was that he was able to join them as a "witness to His resurrection" (Acts 1:22). In this very specific sense, in order to qualify as an apostle, you must have personally seen the resurrected Jesus with your own eyes.

### Commissioned by Jesus Himself

The second requirement was that one must have been commissioned by Jesus himself. In other words, an apostle must have been personally sent out by Jesus on a particular mission. Seeing him is one thing, but an apostle must also have heard the voice of Jesus telling him to go preach the gospel. Both requirements must be fulfilled in order to be an apostle: you must see the risen Jesus and then be sent out by him. In this more narrow sense, there are no more apostles today, since all the people who were alive after Jesus' resurrection are now dead.

### Paul, the Last Apostle

If you're wondering couldn't Jesus appear to someone in a vision and send him out on a mission as He did to Paul? Certainly He could. However Paul viewed himself as the last apostle. Jesus did appear to a couple of others besides Paul, but Paul, it seems, was the last person to whom Jesus appeared and sent out.

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<sup>4</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 541.

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Cor. 9:1 for Paul's testimony to have seen the risen Lord.

## 1 Corinthians 15:7-8 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

The Bible does refer to a couple of Paul's contemporaries as apostles, such as Barnabas<sup>6</sup> and James<sup>7</sup> as we see here. However, no one living after Paul is ever referred to as an apostle. Not even Timothy is referred to as an apostle here in verse one even though he is with Paul as he writing this letter and perhaps even helping him. Notice how Paul makes a distinction between himself and Timothy.

*Paul, an **apostle** of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

Paul does not write, "Paul and Timothy, apostles of Christ Jesus." He separates himself from Timothy. Paul refers to himself as an apostle while he refers to Timothy as a brother. It is also interesting that no early church father (that I am aware) ever used the term 'apostle' in reference to themselves, not even the most influential among them, such as Aquinas, Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, or Jonathan Edwards.

## Summary

Therefore, Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus. Timothy is not. Paul is a 'special messenger' for Jesus. He has seen with his own eyes the resurrected Jesus in the flesh and he has been sent out by Him on a particular mission (which we will more fully explain in a moment).

## Why Does Paul Note That He is an Apostle?

So why does Paul make a point of noting this fact? Is he arrogant and likes to throw around his spiritual weight? Is he puffed up with pride? Or is there some other reason? It is not pride that drives Paul to share this fact about himself. It is unfamiliarity.

Paul has never met the Christians who live in Colossae. He has never been to their city. Paul is introducing himself to them for the first time. He wants them to know who it is who is writing to them. Paul did not plant the church at Colossae. This was apparently done by Epaphras (1:7). Most likely Epaphras, who is a resident of Colossae (4:12), had journeyed to Ephesus, which was approximately 120 miles west of Colossae, and become a believer (i.e. disciple) during the three years that Paul was ministering there (Acts 19). Evidently he then returned home and shared the gospel with his fellow countrymen and many of them believed the gospel and were born again.

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 14:14.

<sup>7</sup> Gal. 1:19; 2:9; Acts 15:13-21 (James acts like an apostle).

## Summary

So Paul is stating that he is an apostle because the Christians in Colossae have never met him and because he wants them to know that he has been commissioned by Jesus himself. Thus, as the particularly chosen messenger of Jesus, Paul has the anointing and authority to rightly teach them the word of God and instruct them in how God expects them to live.

## Paul, An Apostle... by the Will of God

Paul is not content to merely communicate that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus, but he goes on to inform them that he became an apostle *by the will of God*.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,*

Why does note this? Paul wants his readers to understand that he is not the one ultimately responsible for his being an apostle. He did not chose this office for himself, but rather he was chosen by God. Paul is an apostle not by his own will, but by the will of God. He did not volunteer to be an apostle. He was handpicked by Jesus for a particular gospel purpose at a time in his life when he was actively opposing the gospel.

Paul grew up under rigorous, orthodox Jewish education. He was educated by the best tutor, Gamaliel.<sup>8</sup> When he heard men like Stephen publicly preaching that Jesus is the messiah, he did not believe it. He understood this message to be a lie and a dangerous deception that needed to be opposed. He actively opposed it. He was in favor of Stephen's stoning. After Stephen's death, he made it his mission to seek and find other Jewish disciples of Jesus and forcibly stop them from following him.

He employed violence to this end. He bound believers, men and women, and had them thrown into prison to be punished. He even received letters of authority from the chief priests to extend his search for Christians beyond Jerusalem to Damascus. However, on his way to Damascus something happened that forever changed his life and the whole course of human history. I daresay you and I are sitting here this morning due in some measure to what happened to Paul as he journeyed to Damascus.

At noon, as he drew near to the City, a light that was brighter than the sun shone around him and he fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice saying,

### **Acts 26:14-18 (ESV)**

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>15</sup> And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup> But rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 22:3-5.

things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,<sup>17</sup> delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you<sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

In this encounter Paul both saw the resurrected Jesus and was commissioned by Him to preach the gospel. Paul is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Saul. The will of Paul was to persecute Christians. The will of Jesus was through Paul to propagate Christianity. The will of Paul was to stop the spread of the name of Jesus among the Jews. The will of Jesus was through Paul to spread His name not only among the Jews but among the Gentiles also. It was not Paul’s plan or purpose to become an apostle of Christ Jesus. However, it was God’s plan and purpose for Paul’s life. The will of God is sovereign over the will of man. Paul became an apostle, not by his own will but by the will of God.

### This Was Not the Last Time Paul Saw Jesus

On his way to Damascus Paul saw with his own eyes the risen, resurrected, and glorious Jesus. Jesus appeared to Paul in the flesh. We must also note that this was not the only time Jesus appeared to Paul. Jesus stated to him (v.16) at that first encounter that He had plans to appear to him at other times in the future particularly to deliver him from the Jews and the Gentiles.

We ought not to think that Jesus appeared to Paul only once, set him on his course to preach the gospel, and then left him to his task never to direct or instruct him again. Paul was Jesus’ personally chosen messenger and Jesus remained with him guiding, protecting, and instructing him throughout his life. One example of this is when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and more than forty Jews made a pact not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.<sup>9</sup> Jesus appeared to Paul to comfort and encourage him.

#### **Acts 23:11 (ESV)**

*<sup>11</sup> ...the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

Jesus appeared to Paul this time to deliver him from his own people, just as He promised (Acts 26:17). Jesus comforted Paul by telling him that even though there were many who opposed his preaching the gospel, Jesus would not allow them to prevent Paul from going Rome, which was where Jesus ultimately wanted him to go in order to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Once again, the will of Christ is sovereign over the will of man.

Furthermore, Jesus not only appeared to Paul to deliver him from danger. He also appeared to him to help preach the gospel. A second example occurs near the end of Paul’s life. Jesus

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<sup>9</sup> Acts 23:12.



appeared to Paul in Rome as he was on trial before Caesar. This time Jesus helped Paul to preach. Paul relates this in his second letter to Timothy.

### **2 Timothy 4:16-17 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! <sup>17</sup> But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

These are just two examples of Jesus appearing to Paul. I found four more examples.<sup>10</sup> The point here is that, not only did Jesus appear to Paul to keep him free to preach the gospel, but He also appeared to him to ensure that what he preached was everything Jesus willed that he preach. Jesus stood by Paul so that "*the message might be fully proclaimed.*" Paul left nothing out of his preaching that Jesus willed to be included and he included everything in his preaching (and letter writing) that Jesus willed to be known.

Paul was Jesus' special chosen messenger. Paul saw Jesus with his own eyes and Jesus sent him out for the expressed purpose of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ. Jesus was with him from the moment he called him to be His apostle on the road to Damascus to the moment he was beheaded in Rome, and at every point in between. Jesus stood by him to keep him alive and free to preach the gospel. He also stood by him as he wrote the letters that would shape the doctrine of the church and come down to us, including this Letter to the Colossians.

And Jesus sent young men like Timothy to come along side Paul, to travel with him, to be a friend and support to him, to learn from him, to watch his conduct, to listen to his preaching, and to faithfully pass on that teaching after Paul died. Timothy was with Paul in as he was writing this letter.

## Provenance & Date

Paul wrote this letter while he was imprisoned, most likely in Rome. This would be during his first Roman imprisonment, thus dating the letter to around A.D. 61 or 62.<sup>11</sup> At this point in history Nero was emperor of Rome.

Colossians is one of the three letters know as the Prison Epistles. The other two are Ephesians and Philemon. All three were delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See also Acts 16:6-10; 18:9; 22:17-21; 27:23.

<sup>11</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), liv.

<sup>12</sup> Col. 4:7-9. See also Eph. 6:21.

## Destination

Paul wrote this letter to the believers in the city of Colossae.

<sup>2</sup> *To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:*

The city of Colossae is no longer inhabited but its ruins are close to Honaz, Turkey, which is a little south and west of the city of Turkey. It was built on a mound near the Lycus river which flows into the Meander river which was known for its many twists and turns, thus our English word meander, meaning “to wander or wind about.”

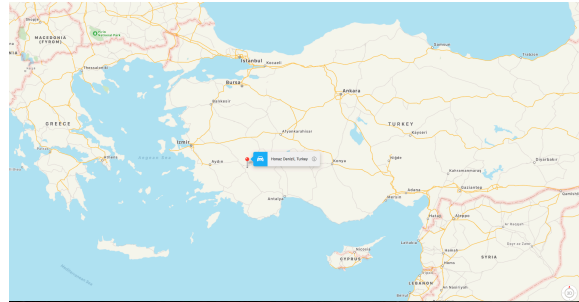
In its day it was a populous and wealthy city laying on the main road between Ephesus and Sardis. It was primarily known for its wool industry. Sheep grazed on the fertile hills of its valley and the harvested wool was dyed a dark red color which became known as ‘Colossian red.’<sup>13</sup>

The city is also about 10 miles from Laodicea and 12 miles from Hierapolis. All three cities suffered great destruction from several earthquakes and this may have contributed to the demise of Colossae. Although its location is still marked, there is essentially nothing left to see except a few scattered stones.

“In the early part of the second century b.c., according to Josephus (Ant. 12.147–53), Antiochus III brought two thousand Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia and settled them in Lydia and Phrygia (Lightfoot, 19). So the Colossae of Paul’s day seems to have been a cosmopolitan city in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled.”<sup>14</sup>

## To the Saints and Faithful Brothers in Christ

Paul addresses the believers as “*saints and faithful brothers in Christ.*”



<sup>13</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, xxvi.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, xxvii.



<sup>2</sup> *To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:*

Paul is not writing to two different groups of people. He is describing one group of people by in two ways, as saints and then as faithful brothers and sisters.

First he refers to them as 'saints.' The Greek word is *hagiois* (ἁγίοις) and it means "persons who belong to God; the ones called to be God's people."<sup>15</sup> They are the ones whom God has set apart from unrighteousness unto righteousness. They are the ones called to be holy.

Paul is not here describing the quality or degree of their sanctification. Remember he has never met these people (although Epaphras has certainly informed Paul of their spiritual condition<sup>16</sup>). He is here speaking of the special relationship they now have with God the Father by virtue of their faith in Jesus.

Paul is referring to them according to their new and true identity in Christ. Paul does not call them saints because of some great spiritual deeds they have done but rather because of who they have now become by being united with Jesus through faith. Paul refers to all the churches of God as saints.

#### **Romans 1:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be **saints**:

#### **1 Corinthians 1:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints**...

#### **Ephesians 1:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,  
To the **saints** who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

#### **Philippians 1:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,  
To all the **saints** in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi...

To become a child of God is to become a saint. Being a saint does not mean that you are sinless, but rather that you are loved and chosen by God who then calls you out of darkness to join Him in the light. God chooses to aim his electing love on you and bring you out of death and into life. Saints are described later in the letter.

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<sup>15</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 124.

<sup>16</sup> Col. 1:7-8.

## Colossians 3:12

"... as God's chosen one, holy and beloved...

If you're thinking, "I don't qualify to be a saint," then you are exactly right. No one is qualified to be a child of God. *"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*<sup>17</sup> *There is none righteous, no, not even one."*<sup>18</sup> God does not call those who are qualified. He qualifies those whom he calls into a relationship.

Yes, He calls us to be holy just as He is holy,<sup>19</sup> but He does not wait until we are holy to call us. If He did, then He would be waiting forever, for being holy is something that, apart from Him and His work of grace, none of us will ever be. No, he calls the unholy to be holy and then gives those whom He calls His own Holy Spirit to begin to work holiness within us. He knows that we cannot be holy by ourselves and so He puts Himself in us so that we will become like Him.

Paul also refers to them as *'faithful brothers* [and sisters].<sup>20</sup> Saints are people of faith. Being brought into a special relationship with Jesus is effected through faith. The people who belong to God are a people who believe in God. They trust Him. That's what faith does, it trusts.

## Conclusion

The final words of Paul's greeting are these.

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

Paul's desire is that God's grace and peace would be upon you. Jesus supernaturally broke into Paul's life in order to send him out to preach to the Gentiles, which is you and me. Jesus chose and anointed and sustained Paul because He intended for His gospel to be spread throughout the world. What Paul writes in this letter to the Colossians is what Jesus wanted you and I to hear. God showed grace to Paul in order that grace and peace might come to you and me. Grace and peace only comes through the good news of the gospel, which is that Jesus saves sinners. Let your faith abide in this grace.

Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus. Timothy is not. But you will be a saint if you abide in the gospel of Jesus which Paul preached.

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<sup>17</sup> Rom. 3:23.

<sup>18</sup> Rom. 3:10.

<sup>19</sup> Lev. 11:44; Mt. 5:48; 1 Peter 1:16.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek word here, *adelphoi* can be translated as 'brothers and sisters' according to the context.