

Why Does Paul Call Himself an Apostle?

In the New Testament, the bases of Paul's claims to apostleship can be arranged according to five criteria: *God's calling*, the *revelation of Jesus*, *fruitful ministry*, *spiritual power and authority*, and *holy character*—especially as demonstrated in *sacrificial giving* and *perseverance in suffering*. Many of his declarations and defenses of his apostleship span more than one of these categories.

The opening verses of the majority of Paul's letters declare his apostleship explicitly, the most notable exceptions being the two epistles to the Thessalonians, in which he claims no title in the salutation. He does refer to himself as an apostle in *1 Thessalonians* 2:6, however. In the epistle to the Philippians, written while imprisoned, he is simply a "servant of Christ Jesus" (*Phil.* 1:1), perhaps because of the emphasis on the fellowship of suffering and self-emptying. Paul's self-identification to Philemon as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus" and "an old man" (*Philemon* 1,9) probably reflects his desire to appeal to Philemon in love (9) as a brother (20) and a partner (17), rather than in the authority of the apostle with which he opens the letter to Philemon's church in Colosse (if *Colossians* is to be judged authentic). Paul's apostleship is declared at the beginning of every other letter.

God's call, God's will, God's commandment

In the introductory first verses of *Romans* and *1 Corinthians*, Paul stresses his *calling* to be an apostle; in *Romans*, Paul is also the servant (as in *Philippians*), and is *set apart* for the gospel. In *1 & 2 Corinthians*, *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, and *2 Timothy*, Paul is an apostle by the *will of God*. In *Galatians* 1:1 & 11-12, Paul makes it clear that this *God-calling* and *God-willing* did not occur through

any human mediator, but was mediated directly through Christ. In *1 Timothy*, God's will becomes the *commandment of God*, perhaps suggesting its explicit and compulsory nature. In *Galatians 2:7-9*, Paul explains that the apostles and elders at Jerusalem endorsed him as an apostle to the Gentiles because they recognized the grace given to him and the similarity to God's working in Peter's apostleship.

The Revelation of Jesus

Perhaps the most distinctive qualification Paul gives for his apostleship, which likely sets him apart from later "apostles," is his personal encounter with the living Christ after his resurrection. Luke portrays this devastating vision in *Acts 9:3-8*. Paul cites this encounter with the risen Jesus many years later in making his defenses in *Acts 22:6-11* & *26:12-18*. Interestingly, *Acts 26:16* implies that Paul had other visions of the Lord after the initial Damascus Road experience. This may concur with *Galatians 1:11-12*, where Paul makes it explicit that he received the gospel he preached solely through revelation. If Paul had received the whole understanding of the gospel and his mission in the revelation on the Damascus Road, it would make little sense that he waited so long to begin his active missionization. In *1 Corinthians 9:1-2* and *15:8-10*, Paul clearly validates his apostleship by the fact that he has personally seen the risen Lord.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. (*1 Cor.* 9:1-2)

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (*1 Cor.* 15:8-10)

The Fruitfulness of Paul's Ministry

In both of the *1 Corinthians* passages above, Paul goes on to further validate his apostleship by the abundant fruit and intensive labor of his ministry. In replying to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them that they themselves are the ultimate proof of his apostolic ministry. Though Paul feels unworthy of apostolic calling, he cannot deny the grace given to him by God nor whom he has become. By God's grace He worked harder than any of the other apostles.

Spiritual Power and Authority

Paul's apostolic ministry was further evidenced by God's power to perform signs and wonders. In *Acts 14:3*, the miracles are understood as God's validation of the apostolic message. The Jerusalem council recognized the numerous signs and wonders done by Paul as evidence of his apostolic calling (*Acts 15:2, Gal. 2:7-9*), and perhaps this is a substantial part of what they found similar in the callings of Paul and Peter. Paul does not think his apostleship in any way inferior to any of the "super-apostles" the Corinthians have encountered; the powerful and miraculous signs performed among them prove that Paul is a "true apostle," not a pretender (*2 Cor. 12:11-12*). Paul also reminds the Corinthians that he is vested with authority from God because Christ is speaking through him (*13:2-3,10*). In *Romans 15:18-21*, Paul explains that he has not built on the foundations of other apostles, but has travelled from Jerusalem all the way to the lands of Illyricum demonstrating the power of the Spirit of God in signs and wonders, thus "fully proclaiming" the gospel of Christ. The two unmistakable implications here are (1) that true apostles proclaim the *full* gospel of Christ, which includes the display of miraculous power, and (2) that true apostles bring forth *new* fruit in *new* territories and do not exploit the work of others.

Apostolic Character

The apostle is marked by holy character, temperance, and perseverance in every kind of situation, and a genuine willingness to suffer and sacrifice for the good of the body of Christ. In *2 Corinthians* 11:22-28, Paul engages in an exercise of "folly" in comparing himself to certain super-apostles. Paul's evidence of being a better minister is seen in the many sufferings he has willingly endured. In *1 Corinthians* 4:9-15, Paul suggests this abasement is the normal lot of the apostle—to be "a spectacle to the world," a "fool for Christ's sake"—which lot he does not despise. He affirms the possibility of a multitude of instructors in Christ, but only the apostle is a *father*. In *2 Corinthians* 12:11-15, Paul's sacrificial attitude toward his "children" is well articulated: "I will most gladly spend and be spent for you..."

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