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What Apostles and Prophets Taught Me About the Church

David Cannistraci

My topic today finds its focus under the critically important question posed in our conference theme: What kind of a church does God want to grow? I have been asked to share something of the ecclesiology of New Apostolic Churches, and am most grateful for this opportunity to do so. I'd like to share with you a little of my journey as a developing minister, and in particular, "What Apostles and Prophets Taught Me About the Church".

"Ecclesiology" was not a familiar term in our church. I do not say that to imply that the people that nurtured me in my early walk with Christ were uninformed, because they were not. We all studied and embraced what we saw as the proper pattern for the New Testament church with great tenacity and fervor. We had a high regard for proper church government, structure and due order. We just didn't call it ecclesiology.

Though I was raised in evangelical churches, I never had a true experience with Christ until I was exposed to what are now being called new apostolic churches. I received Christ (and a simultaneous call to the ministry) at a Charismatic youth camp in the midst of the Jesus Movement that swept the West Coast in the early 70's. The recent term "new apostolic" was not in use then, but the ideas associated with it are the very ideas which forged my concept of the church from day one.

I was trained to serve God and taught to understand His plan for the church by men and women who were known by us as apostles and prophets. To some, this statement may sound strange; to others even heretical, and yet to me it was perfectly normal. For better or worse, I am a product of what could now

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be called new apostolic ecclesiology. The ideas that have most forcefully impacted my view of the church did not come from my seminary training; they came from ministers who instilled a vision of the New Testament church that still burns in me to this day.

It is remarkable to me that that these same concepts are now attracting academic attention as being revolutionary in terms of church growth. In fact, for years many ministers in our kind of churches felt ignored and sometimes even belittled by some evangelicals when it came to our way of doing church. Now, experts like my friend Peter Wagner are identifying our churches as the fastest growing segment of Christianity on the planet. I have the honor every year of teaching some of these concepts for Peter at Fuller Seminary in a course where my book *The Gift of Apostle* (Regal, 1996) is required reading.

So what did apostles and prophets teach me about the church? To understand my answer that question, you must first look with me through the lens of what our churches call restoration. Our framework for understanding the church went something like this: The first century church, particularly as described in the Book of Acts, was a vibrant model of God's perfect plan for the church. Over the course of time, this pattern degenerated, and the power of the New Testament church was lost, eventually finding its lowest ebb in the dark ages. Gone were the ministries, the truths and the experiences that gave the early church its vibrancy and growth. Gradually, God (who promised to restore all which the enemy has destroyed) began a process of divine restoration, bringing back to the church the truths and accompanying experiences which had been lost. He used men like Luther to restore the truth of justification by faith, and people began to experience it. Other reformers followed like the Anabaptists with water baptism, Wesley with sanctification, others with healing, the gifts of the Spirit, the and so on. For us, the pattern of the Book of Acts is being gradually restored to the present day church, releasing the original life and growth back to it. This process will continue until we are a church without spot or wrinkle, ready for the return of Christ (Acts 3:21).

Once we understand the restoration context, we can begin to grasp what apostles and prophets taught me about the church, and what I have come to value as basic to new apostolic ecclesiology:

I Was Taught that the Church is Built on Apostolic Organization

New apostolic churches are governed and organized by strong leaders. Some would call them autocratic, but we would see them as dynamic initiators. We have the concept of strong team ministry among a plurality of elders, but there is little doubt in our churches that the senior pastor is clearly in charge, and is encouraged to be so. The role of elders is to assist, implement and support what the senior elder or pastor receives as the plan from God. Elders exercise oversight of the people, not the senior pastor. We rarely vote or use boards and committees in our churches, since we do not see much scriptural evidence of them.

We view leadership as a highly spiritual process. Our leaders are called by God and qualified by virtue of their gifting, anointing and maturity. What our people want to know from their leaders is simple: *What is God saying to you?* New apostolic leaders gain their authority by being prophetically sensitive. They lead based upon revelation that is received during seasons of prayer and fasting.

Our leaders have a certain kind of mindset. They are positive and optimistic. They are aggressive in outreach, mission and vision. They are totally committed to the life and growth of the church, and lead the way spiritually for the people. They almost always view their ministry as being beyond the boundaries of the local church. Many are involved in traveling ministry and missionary activity in addition to their local duties.

Leadership for us means influence, and the pattern of influence in our churches is highly relational. This breeds a high level of trust between the shepherd and his sheep. For this reason, the duration of a leader's position is usually long term, and often it spans his entire lifetime. At the end of his work with the local church, the senior pastor will usually designate a successor, someone who has been a "spiritual son" or disciple of the senior pastor. The senior pastor will often accept a more apostolic role, overseeing the church while traveling more to help other churches as well.

Though many would feel uncomfortable with the power which most new apostolic leaders possess, the benefits are real. New apostolic churches have strong direction, tangible mission and thus, incredible influence. We have our share of leaders who crash and burn, but not as many as some might suspect. In real-

ity, many of the most dynamic and successful leaders in the body of Christ hold to these same concepts.

I Was Taught that the Church is Made Vital Through Passionate Devotion

New apostolic churches are filled with spiritual intensity. I had a very "high impact" conversion and maturation process which was characterized by many wonderful spiritual experiences. Our churches believe you should "taste and see that the Lord is good." As a result, our devotion is passionate.

New apostolic worship is very spirited. Hand clapping, shouting, joy and enthusiasm are the norm. Often people will weep, bow to the ground, put their arms around each other as they sing, and whole-heartedly pour out their love to God. In worship, we sense the tangible presence of God. Our songs are often written spontaneously, and vary widely from church to church. Although the great hymns of the church are not completely abandoned, our people prefer the Scripture choruses and simple songs that give voice to their convictions.

New apostolic people love to pray, and believe that the house of God is a house of prayer. We pray together in times of corporate prayer where many lift their voices up in aggressive intercession for an hour, and sometimes more. In the church which disciplined me, we attended a one hour pre-service prayer meeting every Sunday morning and evening. For the first five years after I was saved, my peers and I practiced a weekly Wednesday fast, which we rarely missed. I met my wife in an all-night prayer meeting (we had them every Sunday night for many years). We understood and practiced spiritual warfare, prophecy, praying in tongues and casting out demons, all with an assurance that this was the kind of Christianity which Jesus and the apostles advocated in the New Testament.

Few would argue against the positive benefits of this type of activity. New apostolic churches generally experience high levels of awakening and revival due to their spiritual passion, which in turn translates into more people finding and experiencing the power of Jesus Christ.

I Was Taught that the Church is Built Up Through Widespread Activation

New apostolic churches seek to involve everyone in ministry. We understand Ephesians 4:11-17 to mean that Christ has

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given the apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher (the “five-fold ministry” or “ascension gift ministries”) to equip and mature every believer for ministry so that the entire body of Christ can be built up. We see these five ministries operating until the Body is complete and in perfect unity. Therefore, everyone is called. Everyone is a leader of sorts. Everyone is a witness, and volunteer and a soldier. Many of our churches have high standards of conduct and holiness related to keeping ourselves fit for God to use us. The apex of our year was what we called *prophetic presbytery*, where traveling prophets and apostles would visit our local church and spiritually identify, through prayer and personal prophecy, what kind of ministry our various members had. Everything was geared to active ministry.

This mindset gives new apostolic churches incredible vitality. People discover and use their spiritual gifting. They grow and develop in ministry. They find fulfillment and purpose in the church, and it keeps new life flowing constantly.

I Was Taught that the Church is Extended by Constant Incubation

New apostolic churches reproduce leaders in prolific numbers. The local church is seen as a place where missionaries, elders, pastors and ministers are groomed and sent out from. Take our own local church, for example. In the past twenty-five years, we have raised up and sent out over twenty-five couples into full time ministry. Most of these couples were products of our senior pastor’s ministry. For years, we would spend three hours of our Saturday each week being trained in an informal class called M.I.T.’s (Ministers in Training). The young men and women who graduated from this “mini-Bible School” have gone on to minister as pastors and missionaries in various parts of the world. In our paradigm, this was totally normal. It is the result of the kind of concepts of the church that we held to.

Apostolic churches are unconventional in the way they approach leadership development. Seminary training means little in our kind of churches. Instead we value hands on experience. We motivate people and get them preaching on the streets, planting cells groups, praying for the sick and caring for one another very early in their Christian experience. Many feel that seminaries overemphasize intellectualism in ministers, and view them as counterproductive. Ordination is accomplished locally based on local church values and proven ministerial ability rather than academic accomplishment.

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New apostolic churches often hesitate to send their potential leaders away to Bible College or seminary because they see the local church as the best place for a young leader to develop a ministry. For this reason, many churches like ours have developed first-rate in-house ministry schools where the values and skills relevant to that church's vision can be imparted without losing touch with the next generation of leadership. Mentoring and discipleship are constant priorities in these environments.

New apostolic churches also tend to use "home-grown" leaders to build their staffs. I often heard the scripture on Abraham going to war "with servants trained in his own house" quoted as an explanation for not importing our ministers from other places. In fact, there is a tangible difference in loyalty and like-mindedness where this principle is practiced. There is a continual emphasis upon three qualities above every other in developing a ministry: servanthood, faithfulness and submission. The fruitfulness, stability and unity found in these churches are ample evidence of the value of this approach.

What kind of a church does God want to grow? For me, and many like me, in churches like mine all over the world, the answer is plain. God wants to grow a church like the early church. He wants a church that is organized and led by dynamic and prophetic leaders who actively equip the saints. He wants to grow churches that are spiritually aggressive and vibrant in devotion. He looks for churches that are fully activated for every-member ministry, and churches that affect the world around them through the development of generation after generation of leaders and world changers. In short, God wants to grow *apostolic churches*.

Writer

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