

Spiritual Gifts, Part 3

The Evangelist

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The third office listed by Paul is the evangelist. This office is often misunderstood today, for many denominations still have an office called an evangelist. The modern “evangelist” is someone who preaches the gospel where it previously had not been known. Thus, church planters, missionaries and street preachers are often referred to as evangelists. Indeed, the modern evangelist does spend most of his time doing the work of evangelism. Although it is understandable why the title “evangelist” is still in use today, one must make a distinction between the New Testament office of evangelist and the modern counterpart. There are a number of reasons why the evangelistic office during the first generation of the church was unique.

(1) All the evangelists named in the New Testament (except perhaps Stephen and Philip) have ministries that are intimately connected with the work of the apostles (e.g., Barnabas, Timothy, John Mark, Titus, Silas, Luke). They often functioned as special assistants to the apostles. “If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 8:23).

(2) The New Testament evangelists had Spirit-given supernatural powers to work signs and miracles (e.g., Stephen—Ac. 6:8; Philip—Ac. 8:13; Barnabas—Ac. 14:3). The miraculous gifts were needed to authenticate the gospel message at a time of new revelatory activity (cf. Ex. 4:5; 1 Kgs. 17:4; Jn. 10:25; 2 Cor. 12:12; etc.); during the foundation laying period of the church. Because of their miracle working abilities and their intimate connection with the apostolate, the office of evangelist was regarded as temporary and foundational by early Reformed theologians and commentators. “The Form of Presbyterial Church Government” in the *Westminster Standards* reads, “The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of his church, and the perfecting of the saints, are, some *extraordinary*, as apostles, evangelists, and prophets, *which are ceased*. Others ordinary and perpetual, as pastors, teachers, and other church governors, and deacons.”¹

(3) New Testament evangelists often engaged in special work. When the apostles had a special job to do they would choose an evangelist for the task. They were in some sense apostolic vicars; that is, men clothed with special powers for a specific purpose. They did ministerial tasks that only one specially commissioned by an apostle could do. The apostles even sent them out as superintendents of the churches. “But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state” (Phil. 2:19). Paul ordered Titus to “appoint elders in every city” (Tit. 1:5; cf. Ac. 15:22; 2 Tim. 4:9; Tit. 3:12).

¹ See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), 398.

(3) Whenever Paul lists church officers he always places the evangelist *before* the pastor-teacher. This position is logical given the evangelist's ability to work signs and miracles and their function as apostolic representatives to check on churches, appoint elders and so on.

Given the testimony of Scripture regarding the office of evangelist, one must either regard this office as temporary (as does John Calvin and the Westminster divines), or, one must argue that the supernatural gifts associated with this office and the close connection with the apostles have ceased while the office itself continues. The latter opinion, while popular, should be rejected for the simple reason that we do not have the biblical right to remove major aspects of an office carefully defined in Scripture without divine warrant. The men who today are involved in missionary work and church planting are teaching elders who are focusing a great deal of their attention on evangelism. They are evangelistic pastors, not evangelists in the strict biblical definition of the term. When Timothy had settled into a pastorate, Paul commanded him to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5). Obviously, the elements of the office of evangelist that are not unique to the first century, such as preaching the gospel in new areas and establishing new churches continues. But they continue through the non-extraordinary, perpetual office of pastor-teacher.

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