



Ambassadors and the New Testament

More than just representatives

by Dan Hardock

All that we say and do should not be derived from the values and morals of this world, but rather from the One we represent.

When the Bible declares that “*you are ambassadors,*” what does this actually mean for the individual Christian? How has this passage been historically understood by the church?

The role of ambassador, once played by the prophets and Christ Himself, has now become ours.

Despite the fact that it is a popular theme among contemporary Christians, the New Testament only uses the word translated as “*ambassador*” twice—in 2 Cor. 5:20 “*We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*” and in Eph. 6:20 “*Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.*”

In both cases it is from the apostle Paul's hand. As a result, it is very hard (if not impossible) to do a purely internal comparison of NT literature to get a precise meaning of the term. Paul's statement of “*As God's fellow workers*” (2 Cor. 6:1) gives a clue as to the ambassadorial role that he is implying, but it is not much to go on. Essentially, like Paul, we have a message to deliver, although being God's “*fellows*” shows a remarkable degree of collegiality.

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“Ambassador” in Greek

Although the word translated as “*ambassador*” in English is not a common NT word, the Greek word does have some fascinating connections from which we can learn.

The word “*ambassador*” appears twice in the New Testament: *πρσβενομεν*—“*we are ambassadors*” (first person plural) that is used to address the Corinthians to whom Paul is writing, and *πρεσβευω*—“*I am an ambassador*” (first person singular) which Paul uses to refer to himself. This word, in some forms (and contexts), can be used to refer to an ambassador, but it also has the same root as the words that are often translated as “*elder,*” “*presbyter*” and is related to the word for “*priest.*” In this sense, the Greek “*πρεσβευω*” can refer to an ambassador but also someone who is older, or a person who is of high rank such as a city administrator.

Historical/Cultural Context

In order to get an idea as to what Paul meant by “*we are ambassadors*” we must turn to contemporary literature for comparison. A good source can be found in a passage in Josephus' work *The Jewish Wars* written around 75 AD. A major earthquake has devastated Israel, and its enemies have moved to take advantage. Herod (later “*Herod the Great*”) as Israel's protector, addresses the people in order to rally them against this new enemy's threat:

“...they have barbarously murdered our ambassadors, contrary to the common law of mankind; and they have destroyed so many, as if they esteemed them sacrifices for God....”

Of interest here, is that Herod associates harm to ambassadors as not only “*contrary to the common law of mankind*” but also as an affront to God Himself. The blood

of the ambassadors “cry out,” so to speak, for justice, as they have been treated inappropriately. Representing the nation which places itself under Yahweh, the killing of its ambassadors represents an attack not only on its leadership but its God as well. In this sense, an ambassador is more than just a representative. They are also viewed as being the person or authority in proxy of that leadership. To kill the ambassador is to symbolically kill the leader of the country represented.

Paul's “Ambassador” Theme in the Early Church

Given that what appears above was the general cultural assumption concerning ambassadors, what did the early church think when it viewed Christians being called ambassadors?

Because the theme only appears twice, it is not surprising that the Church Fathers (the theologians of the early church period) did not make much use of the term. Nevertheless, there are mentions of Paul's use of it especially among those like Augustine whose commentaries on the full text of various Biblical books have survived. Two theologians in particular who picked up Paul's ambassador theme are Origen of Alexandria (185–254 AD) and John Chrysostom (347–407 AD).

Origen of Alexandria

Origen of Alexandria is probably best remembered as being condemned as a heretic posthumously, as a result of what some of his followers did with his writings. Despite that, most theologians would point to him as being instrumental in early doctrinal formation of the Trinity. His use of the term “ambassador” appears in his massive apologetical work called “*Against Celsus*” named for a Platonic philosopher who had argued and written against the Christian faith during Origen's lifetime.

“We acknowledge...that we do desire to instruct all men in the word of God, so as to give to young men the exhortations which are appropriate to them, and to show to slaves how they may recover freedom of thought, and be ennobled by the word. And those amongst us who are the ambassadors of Christianity sufficiently declare that they are debtors to Greeks and Barbarians, to wise men and fools...”



In this sense, the role of the Christian ambassador is to declare the Gospel to all persons, regardless of social status, and to dispel ignorance. Later, in “*Against Celsus*,” Origen argues that “*the words of those who at the first assumed the office of (Christian) ambassadors, and who gave their labours to rear up the Churches of God...were accompanied with a persuasive power, though not like that found among those who profess the philosophy of Plato, or of any other merely human philosopher, which possesses no other qualities than those of human nature.*” For Origen, the power and authority to be Christian ambassadors comes directly from Christ.

Origen thought that Christians should not recognize any authority outside of their own nation—that being the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, we are to resist participating in all activities or customs that would compromise our positions as ambassadors. We should not bow down to authorities who would have us act contrary to the Kingdom we represent.

John Chrysostom

If Origen was known for his allegorizing tendencies when it came to Scripture, John Chrysostom, living nearly 200 years later, was known for his relatively literal interpretation of the Holy Writ and his excellence as an exegetical preacher. Many of his sermons have survived (referred to as “*Homilies*”) and cover the majority of Paul's writings. Interestingly, Paul's theme of “ambassador” appears many times in Chrysostom's writings. Applying the ambassador theme to the motif of Jesus' parable of the Tenants, Chrysostom makes this observation concerning God's love in one of his sermons on Romans:

“After all this, we killed the Prophets, we stoned them, we did them other cruel wrongs without number. What

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then? In their place, He sent no longer Prophets, no longer Angels, no longer Patriarchs, but the Son Himself. He too was killed when He had come, and yet not even then did He quench His love, but kindled it even more, and keeps on beseeching us, even after His own Son was killed, and entreating us, and doing all things to turn us unto Himself. And Paul cries aloud, saying, ‘Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: be ye reconciled to God.’”

In this sense, the role of the ambassador, once played by the prophets and Christ Himself, has now become ours.

Later Developments: Church and State

As time moved on and the ancient world disintegrated into innumerable factions, the church became the one unifying factor in the midst of the political chaos. As we move into the medieval period, the theme of ambassador appears a few times, but where it does, it almost always refers to the church and its clergy. This is partly due to the fact that all persons in a Christian society were considered Christians and not in need of an “ambassador.” The church was involved in innumerable embassies to other countries, which were thought of as not only political in nature, but spiritual as well.

Later, as the Protestant Reformation (circa 1500) started to emphasise the importance of the individual believer, the idea that Paul's words applied to all who follow Christ became an accepted understanding. In many ways, this is a natural outflow of Martin Luther's concept of the “priesthood of all believers.” John Calvin (died 1564 AD), showing a shift in the medieval attitude, wrote concerning 2 Cor. 5:20: “Any other person, it is true, might also be a witness to us of the grace of God, but Paul teaches that this office is specially entrusted to ministers.” Later, preachers such as John Wesley and George Whitfield (1700s AD) assume that being an ambassador applies to all followers of Christ.

Summing Up: What are we called to?

So what are we to make of all this? Firstly, it needs to be understood that Paul's words were not to specific individuals or classes of people, but are inclusive of all

who follow Christ. Designated as such, we should not recognize any authority as being higher than the Kingdom from which we have been sent.

It also means, by implication, that we are in a foreign land and that we are not the citizens of the place where we find ourselves. Our citizenship is of the place we represent—the Kingdom of God.

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But most importantly, we are Christ's representatives to the world. We are literally Christ's presence to those around us. When we speak of spiritual matters, it is not our own point of view that we represent, but rather the point of view of Christ. When we are opposed, it is not as ambassadors that we are being opposed, but rather the country and leader that we represent is being opposed. We are literally only the messenger for someone else.

In light of all these things, how then should we live?

I think the answer to the above is obvious: We should live worthy of the calling of ambassadors. *In this sense, all that we say and do should not be derived from the values and morals of this world, but rather from the One we represent.* There is no division between professional and personal life in this respect. Furthermore, we need to be aware that we do represent Christ to others in His absence. As His ambassadors, we are His hands, His means of comforting, His love personified and His way of communicating that the state of war that existed between *humanity* and God, can come to an end. We are the ambassadors of God's peace and love for all humanity.

There will be a day when the King will come to represent Himself to the world. On that day, every knee shall bow, and every tongue will confess, that Jesus is Lord. Some will do so with glad rejoicing while others with grim realization. In the meantime, as ambassadors of the King, we have some diplomatic work to do. *f*

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1. It is, in this sense, the now archaic English term “Elders of the City” to refer to city councillors or “The Fathers of Confederation” do not so much denote age but rather authority or position.
 2. Josephus, Jewish Wars 1:19:4
 3. Origen, Against Celsus, Book II, Chapter 54
 4. Ibid, Chapter 68
 5. Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:9-19
 6. John Chrysostom, On Romans, Homily 5
 7. John Calvin, Commentary On 2 Cor. 5:18-21