

Dear Rev. James,

Thank you for writing us at Christian Questions Radio. You asked what “apostolic” meant.

Apostolic is an adjective derived from the noun “apostle.” Apostolic is often used as a modifier for the word “authority.” Apostolic authority rests upon the belief that the apostles were given specific authority through the holy spirit to perpetuate the godly inspired writings of the New Testament. Shortly before Jesus’ death, he told his disciples that his Father would send them a helper, the holy spirit, and that through this power of God they would be guided into all truth, remembering what Jesus had said to them as well as empowering them with various gifts including prophecy. (See John 14:25-26; 16:13; and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.) It is clear from these scriptures that the apostles were commissioned to finish the work of revealing God’s plan not only to the newly formed Christian churches, but to all those who would follow in the path of Jesus in future years. The apostles accomplished this work through their writings in the Book of Acts, the New Testament letters and in Revelation.

The Catholic Church uses the term “apostolic succession.” It means that bishops represent a direct, uninterrupted line of continuity from the apostles of Jesus Christ. According to this teaching, bishops possess certain special powers handed down to them from the apostles; these consist primarily of the right to confirm church members, to ordain priests, and to consecrate other bishops. The outward sign by which this connection is both symbolized and effected is the laying on of hands by the bishop at ordination. Some Christian denominations have a different viewpoint of the “laying on of hands” and use it as a means of “healing” to eradicate illness. We disagree with both of these views. Although the laying on of the hands of the apostles conferred the special gifts of the spirit, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, that ability belonged to the apostles alone. Even Philip, a disciple, known as the evangelist, who was able to perform signs and great miracles, could not confer the gifts of the spirit, but needed to send for the apostles to do this. (See Acts 8:14-17.)

We, therefore, believe that once the apostles died, the special powers they possessed ceased and were not transferred to others. In summary, we do not believe in the power of apostolic succession or in the laying on of hands for the purpose of healing or for transferring the power of the holy spirit to others in this day and age. That power passed away once the apostles were off the scene. In regard to the miraculous gifts of the spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul states, “But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. . . . And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:8, 13) We hope we have answered your question.

Sincerely,
Christian Questions Radio