

In what sense does Paul claim to be an apostle?

1. Paul claims to be an apostle in the sense that he is one among a select group of persons called out and appointed to establish the gospel. As an apostle he was--to use his own metaphor--a planter. He sowed the seed of the gospel, which others could help tend, though only God could give the growth. Or, again, Paul thinks of this apostolic role as a parental role--whence his references to his readers as his "children" and to himself as their "father" or even as their mother (Gal 4:19).

2. But establishing the gospel involves not only the missionary preaching through which the seed is planted and the child is born, but also the pastoral teaching whereby the plant is nurtured and cultivated and the child exhorted and trained. Thus Paul's teaching ministry, his concern for Christian nurture, is inseparable from his preaching, evangelizing ministry whereby his role as apostle was most fundamentally performed.

3. But this understanding of what it means to be an apostle is entirely compatible with acknowledging that an apostle is not the originator of tradition, but a bearer of it--that the gospel one preaches and teaches as an apostle has been handed down to and received by one through a process exactly like that involved in one's own preaching and teaching of it to others (1 Cor 15:3 ff.).