

Teachers, Deacons and Prophets in the New Testaments

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TEACHERS – Examples through Relationships

The rabbis say that "Torah which does not have the father's home is no Torah."

In the New Testament, teachers had exemplary lives and good relational skills, such that many of them might have been teachers-elders. My arguments for this are the following:

First of all, the New Testament calls us to give as much attention to our lives as to our doctrine¹ because no one should hear us teaching what we do not live². This attitude was so essential that if someone was not blameless he could not become an elder, and therefore he could not teach³. It stands to no reason that teaching would be refused to unqualified elders, but it would be granted to teachers.

Secondly, many teachers were elders as well as Eph. 4:11 clearly demonstrates it. The Greek binds them together in one title as “elders-teachers”⁴, such that we could wonder if the early church was more a “four-fold ministry” rather than a “five-fold ministry”. This duality of ministries existed as well for “prophets-teachers” and even “apostles-teachers”⁵, such that we can easily conclude that teaching in the New Testament was quite “relational” or at least not as academic as it can be today.

Finally, it is impossible that the Jewish model of teachers has not influenced the model of New Testament teachers. Consider the following three facts.

¹ 1 Tim.4:16

² Matt. 23:3

³ One of the conditions to become an elder is being able to teach (1 Tim.3:2, Titus 1:9)

⁴ “The common article makes it plain that the didaskaloi are identical with the poimen, this lies in the nature of the case” Kittel Theological Dictionary of the New Testament –1978 edition, p.158

⁵ Didache 15: 1 and Acts 13:1, 1 Tim.2:7, 2 Tim.1:11

First of all, unlike the isolated academic environment of many Christian teachers today, the Jewish rabbis always had to have another trade on the side⁶, which explains why Paul, the apostle-teacher, repaired tents.

Secondly, rabbis, or their Greek equivalent “didaskalos”⁷, had a solid tradition of having disciples around them, a fact that demonstrates their relational and practical dimension. Those Rabbis led itinerant lives, attracting followers called talmidim (disciples) who lived with them most of the time and were eventually sent out independently. These Rabbis had a “yoke”, their method of interpreting Scripture, which prioritized the commandments of the Torah from greatest to least. Talmidim were expected to adhere to this yoke and memorize their rabbi’s key teachings. Living with their rabbi, talmidim learned to emulate their rabbi’s lifestyle, aspiring to follow God as their rabbi did. They were completely submissive to their rabbi’s authority. Even a casual reader of the Gospels will notice the parallels between Jesus and the s’mikah Rabbis. Jesus also had a yoke (Matthew 11:28-30; 22:36-40), sent his disciples out after they learned from him (Matthew 10:5-25), and they memorized and followed his teachings (Matthew 7:24-29, Luke 6:46-49). They lived with him to emulate his example (Matthew 10:1, 16:24-28).

In order to be blameless, teachers had to be involved in real life and deep relationships

Finally, rabbis enjoyed considerable authority and honor as such⁸, and this clearly explains why Paul wrote that elders were worthy of a double honor if they taught⁹.

Those relational characteristics give us the following two guidelines today:

- 1) Churches should never invite independent teachers who are not submitted to any church, such that they cannot prove their good reputation.

Nothing hurts more than good teachers who have bad lives. If the teachers are traveling so much that they cannot demonstrate their credibility, they should be able to show how relational and credible they are through their own disciples. It is interesting that Peter describes dangerous teachers as men who “follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority”¹⁰. In other words, bad teachers despise the necessary mutual submission that accompanies every good relationship. Be on your guard against those independent teachers who cannot prove through their relationships how holy and submitted they are!

⁶ In fact it is only by the 12th century that the job of rabbi had become a full-time occupation.

⁷ the “didaskalos” of Eph.4:11 is the same term used for instance for Socrates and his disciples

⁸ See Kittel for the tremendous honour Jewish didaskalos received in the Gospels, 1978 edition, p.154

⁹ 1 Tim. 5:17

¹⁰ 2 Pet.2:10

- 2) If they are not at the same time elders, teachers should imitate the practical and relational model of first century rabbis.

Deep academic studies certainly have their legitimacy, if they eventually end up in a practical theology that improve the way we view God, our lives and the world. This is why teachers should always be careful to not cut themselves from people and from the real world. Instead, they should carefully select a few disciples, preferably potential future teachers, whom they can train and pour their lives in.

Ideally, if we were to restore this model, every Bible school and seminary in the world should have teachers who personally take time to mentor and disciple some of their students! Unfortunately Christianity has evolved away from this relational paradigm. The real pillars of the first century Church were not teachers, but apostles, evangelists, prophets and elders, as independent teachers started to only take a growing importance much later¹¹ when the church grew in intellectualization and doctrinal polemics.

DEACONS - Leaders of every possible ministry – Gateway to Eldership

Whenever people think of restoring all the ministries of the early church, they immediately think of the so-called fivefold ministries. I suggest we should come up with a 6 fold ministries. Deacons should be added to that list. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, that ministry must have had quite an importance in the early church since we are left with a list of their qualifications. Secondly, if the 5 fold ministry may only include 10% of all Christians, the 6th ministry can cover 90 % of the Church. Every Christian who has a willingness to serve can potentially become a deacon. The reason for this is that deacons do not have to have specific spiritual gifts or callings, but to just good families and good characters.

Deacons did not hold a position of decision making authority like elders, a fact indicated by the fact that women could possibly become deaconesses¹². Some want to exclude women from this office, as 1 Tim.3:8-12 seems to only define deacons for men, but since deacons were not commissioned to lead or to teach, there is no reason to be concerned when women are in that position. Their main role was service¹³, whether it was at the tables¹⁴, having house-to-house

¹¹ Read the explanations that Gerhard Kittel gives in his dictionary regarding the free didaskalos of the Egyptian Church and how Jesus first appeared as a “euangelistes” and then as a “didaskalos”, a progression which the Church imitated (p.158-159)

¹² Phoebe in Rom.16:1 is a “diakono” which can be translated either as deacon, deaconess, or servant.

¹³ Diakoneo, of which we have the word deacon, means literally servant.

¹⁴ Acts 6:1-6

visitations¹⁵ or be in all sorts of useful services. They are the equivalents of every possible ministries the church might have today, whether it is youth ministers, worship ministers, or prison ministers. This function was certainly a way for any potential elder to be “tested”¹⁶ in all sorts of settings, which is why deacons are viewed as “potential elders” in churches that believe in the interdependence of those two ministries. This may have been true as well for other ministries, since we even see Philip the evangelist serving at the tables¹⁷.

Deacons were not required to have the same level of maturity and reputation as elders, but they still had to have good marriages¹⁸, which is indicative of their leadership and characters. Acts 6 does not mention the men serving at the tables as being “deacons”, but it is interesting that even such a “low” task of service required them to be full of spirit and wisdom!

If anyone wants to “work for God”, I suggest he first become a “servant”, that is a deacon, in one area that will test how much he wants to serve rather than being served¹⁹. If he excels in it and if at the same time works on developing an exemplary character and marriage, he will have a good starting point for any other ministry.

PROPHETS - The agents of Supernatural Revelations

NT prophets were not the equivalent of OT prophets

It is only when we clearly understand the nature and purpose of the New Testament prophecy that we can clearly determine what prophets are supposed to be today. Prophecies in the New Testament were not doctrinal and infallible revelations of God which determined how churches and individuals were supposed to act.

Such an absolute authority in doctrinal statements was only reserved to apostles. I am indebted to Wayne Grudem for his convincing argument that the equivalents of Old Testament prophets were *not* New Testament prophets, but apostles²⁰. Whenever the prophets of the old alliance made their statements, it was always with the divine authority of absolute certainty, just like apostles. What they decreed happened.

¹⁵ Their wives were to cultivate confidentiality (not being “slanderers”) which implies in that culture visiting homes

¹⁶ 1 Tim.3:10

¹⁷ Acts 6:5

¹⁸ 1 Tim.3:12

¹⁹ Matt.20:28

²⁰ Wayne Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy: In the New Testament and Today*. Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books, 2000

The same certainly cannot be said of prophecies in the New Testament; people could, and in fact had the obligation to test them²¹, showing by this that they could not always be correct. Worthy of note here is the Greek word used for “testing”, the same word used in 1 Pet. 1:7 that talks about our faith being tested by fire, like gold that go through a whole purifying process. Prophecies are to be all tested in the same way, until we bring them out to the surface and finally “keep the good” as mentioned in 1 Thess. 5:21.

Not all prophecies are “pure” and so we should not be afraid to test them. It is probably the reason why some Christians even treated them with contempt²². The same principle of testing is seen in Corinth as other prophets had to “weigh carefully what is said” (I Corinthians 14:29).

If NT prophets are not to be put on the same pedestal of authority and leadership as the OT prophets, we can draw the following 4 conclusions:

1) NT prophets did not build the foundation of the early Church, except “apostle-prophets”

Since prophets in the early church could err in their predictions²³, they were not the leaders who built the foundation of the church. The prophets mentioned in Eph. 2:20 and 3:5 were apostles as well. In those two verses apostles and prophets were the one and same persons, that is, they were the apostles who *at the same time* were prophets²⁴.

This is not at all in contradiction with what we have seen before where all sorts of ministries had a duality of roles. They were elders-teachers²⁵, elders-apostles²⁶, apostles-teachers²⁷, prophets-teachers²⁸, elders-prophets²⁹, apostles-teachers, or as in the case of Eph.2:20 apostles-prophets³⁰. Acts 13:1 mentions Paul and Barnabas as prophets and/or teachers while we know as well that they were apostles. John himself must certainly have been an “apostle-prophet” when we consider how prophetic the book of Revelation is³¹.

²¹ 1 Thess.5: 20-21

²² 1 Thess. 5:20-21

²³ If one studies the prophecies of Agabus to Paul, he will see some incorrect details.

²⁴ See the linguistic and theological argument in the appendices of Wayne Grudem. *The Gift of Prophecy: In the New Testament and Today*. Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books, 2000

²⁵ Eph.4:11

²⁶ 1 Pet. 5:1

²⁷ 1 Tim.2:7, 2 Tim.1:11

²⁸ Acts 13:1, 2 Pet.2:1 and Acts 11:22. Since Barnabas is listed first in Acts 13:1 where there are prophets and teachers in the church, he most likely was a prophet as well as a teacher.

²⁹ 1 Tim.4:14 some elders prophesied such that maybe some were prophets

³⁰ Eph. 2:20 and 3:5

³¹ The reason why the book of Revelation has an apostolic authority is not because John was a prophet, but because he was an apostle as well.

2) NT prophets did not lead churches

In the NT, prophets are never mentioned in leadership roles (unless they are elders or apostles, as seen in Eph.2). This is confirmed by the fact that women could be prophetesses³² as well (if we believe that women are not to lead churches)

3) Only apostle-prophets brought divine revelations or doctrinal statements that have contributed to form the canon of the New Testament

We never see NT prophets claiming infallible authority. Only apostles-prophets established their divine apostolic authority, which clearly establishes the NT as the final authority (“when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God³³”). Prophets who bring doctrinal revelations that are in clear contradiction with the New Testament should be viewed as false prophets.

4) NT prophets did not bring judgment against society but encouragement to the Church

Unlike the OT prophets, we do not see NT prophets with a socio-political agenda accompanied with warnings and judgments against unbeliever. Their primary mandate was to strengthen the Church. It is true that prophetic words can at times appear as “judgments” to unbelievers when the hearts are openly exposed³⁴ by supernatural revelations, but it should always be done in the spirit of the New Testament, which is with gentleness and patience, and not harshness.

NT prophets brought supernatural revelations to build up the Church

The main mission and characteristic of prophets today is to give *supernatural* revelations regarding the past, the present or the future of individuals or churches, in such a way that people know that only God could reveal this hidden information to them. Some, like for instance Alan Hirsh, want to reduce NT prophets as those who “bring correction and challenge the dominant assumptions we inherit from the culture...they question the status quo³⁵”, but nowhere do we see NT prophets doing this. Instead, the only reason prophets had the kind of influence and ministry described in 1 Corinthians is that they brought supernatural revelations that transformed individuals and churches. This is what brought authority to their revelations, particularly when it

³² Anna or the four prophesying daughters of Philip the evangelist - Luke 2:36 and Acts 21:9

³³ 1 Thess.2:13

³⁴ 1 Cor. 14:24 convicted(ἐλέγχεται) implies as well the notion of being rebuked, reprovved or being guilty

³⁵ Alan Hirsch, The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church, Baker Publishing Group, 2007

was precise and done in a loving and gentle way. “Genuine prophecy is the public disclosure of the mind and will of the Lord by the Spirit. There is no question about the authority of the prophetic word after it has been duly tested.”³⁶

If prophets did not have the mandate to transform society or the authority to lead churches, they nevertheless had a tremendous influence on them. For instance Agabus forecasted a worldwide famine which in turn led churches to organize reliefs in Judea³⁷. Prophets could deliver words in such a way that the secrets of the heart were exposed³⁸; they gave spiritual guidance³⁹ or bestowed spiritual gifts.⁴⁰ They could, like the prophets of old, even give interpretations to dreams, since the latter have a “prophetic” dimension. The main result of the prophetic activity was the building up and strengthening of the Church⁴¹.

Prophets were to encourage or challenge people through supernatural revelations that exposed the hearts, that gave confirmations of what was already in the hearts and by giving possible directions for their lives

Prophets should have exemplary and submitted lives

As with the teachers, the prophets had to be living examples of what they preached. The Didache, which was considered "The Teaching of the Apostles" by the early Church Fathers, says that “not everyone who speaks in a spirit is a prophet, unless he has the behavior of the Lord. *From his behavior*, then, the false prophet and the true prophet shall be known”⁴²

It is not unusual for prophets to feel different than others and even struggle because of this difference. They do not see in a “natural” way, as they see most people through their prophetic eyes and other supernatural senses. Because of this, some can be tempted to feel untouchable and above the perception of others. This is why it is extremely important that they should be submitted and in strong relationships with spiritual leaders whom they listen. Be on your guards against prophets who are not fully accountable to a local church, particularly if they show signs of being relationally dysfunctional.

The more sensorial prophets: The Seers

It should be noted here that within the category of prophets comes a group that is classified in the OT as “seers”.⁴³ They differ from the prophets in the sense that they are far more “sensorial” in their perception of what God wants to reveal. Prophets have visions and images

³⁶ A position paper regarding God’s authority and its expression in the church, from Bill Gibson, Vancouver 2010, posted on <http://www.paoc.org/resources/forms/position-papers>

³⁷ Acts 11:28

³⁸ I Corinthians 14: 25

³⁹ I Timothy 1:18

⁴⁰ I Timothy 4:14

⁴¹ 1Cor. 14:31

⁴² Didache 11:8

⁴³ 1 Samuel 9:9

that they express more verbally, whereas seers “feel” divine revelations in a more physical way, which in turn they express in a more visionary way (thus the name “seer”).

This gift is often manifested through their senses of smell, touch or even taste. They can come in places and physically sense spiritual realities that no one else around senses. This different kind of spiritual sensitivity is such that in their initial stage they can often feel alienated from others until they have learnt to express their gift with clarity to outsiders. They can often have as well very rich and “colored” dreams, for which they must seek interpretations that will edify others.