

The Teacher

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I remember the first time I ever heard a God-called, anointed teacher speak. He came as a guest speaker to the church I attended as a young man. I sat spellbound listening to his every word! My spirit soared with joy as he opened the word of God to me in a way I had never before experienced. He was not a pastor, he was a teacher.

The apostle Paul clearly listed the teacher among the five-fold ministry offices of the church in Ephesians, 4:11. He wrote, "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teacher." (NIV) Verses 12 and 13 go on to tell us why we have the five-fold ministries. ". . . To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (NIV) Thus, the teacher is part of God's plan to strengthen and build up His church.

Yet, for the most part, today's church still fails to recognize the existence or importance of this vital, church building office. As a result the teaching in many churches either goes mostly undone, or it is done by those who (bless their hearts) are very willing, but are not called to teach.

I will share my own experience as an example. God called me as a teacher when I was a very young man. So I went to a Sunday school class to observe a teacher and how he taught. Though it was many years ago, I vividly remember the experience. A member of the church was standing in front of the class reading from a small book. He couldn't read very well. The people were bored, some were looking out the window while others slept.

I am not being critical of the dear brother who was attempting to teach but he just didn't know how. Unfortunately, I'm sure episodes similar to my earlier experience are repeated in churches throughout the world every week! This church-wide lack of teachers leaves the church weak, untaught and ill prepared to engage in the spiritual conflicts of life.

To help us understand the office of the teacher, let's look to Scripture and see how the term *teacher* evolved as one of the five-fold offices of the church.

The Word "Rabbi"

Among the Jews of the post exile era, the word for a teacher was **rabbi**. The word *rabbi* had been used in Judaism for centuries. Originally, it was a respectful term used for those who were teachers in general. It applied to any field of learning, such as a wood craftsman, a philosopher, school teacher, and so forth. The term meant "great," "my great one," or "lord." Although it was the custom for a pupil to address his teacher as *rabbi*, the word became commonly used by anyone greeting a teacher, not just his students¹. But to the Jews by the time of Jesus, it was a term of very high respect reserved for those who were regarded as scholars of God's word. It was, therefore, a very coveted term by many in Judaism who wanted the public recognition and honor given to the *rabbi*.

This leads us to Jesus' restriction of the use of the term

"rabbi" among His disciples.

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Mat 23:8-12 NIV)

Jesus came as a servant, and He taught His followers to also be servants. There is no place in God's kingdom for pride, arrogance or self-exaltation. In Jesus' day the term *rabbi* epitomized pride, self-exaltation and arrogance. Thus, we can understand why Jesus forbade the use of the three terms, "rabbi," "father," and "teacher" for His disciples since these terms were the opposite of what He was trying to teach.

The Term "Teacher"

In Jesus' day, the word *teacher* was an honorable term, but it carried less honor than the term *rabbi*. I believe Jesus' restriction to His disciples of the use of these words extended only to their use as personal titles of honor. We must note there was, and is, no restriction in the use of the words to describe what one does. Therefore I see no problem for one to say, "I am a teacher." But for one to require or receive the title "teacher" as a position of esteem would indicate pride and be a violation of Jesus' instruction and example.

This restriction of the use of the words *rabbi* and *teacher* can be seen in the gospels. With the exception of John, Matthew, Mark and Luke favored the use of "teacher" for Jesus over "rabbi." In fact, Luke never used the word "Rabbi"!

So, as the first century church began to grow, the term "teacher" lost its former glory and became a functional, descriptive term describing one called to the office of teacher. Note that we see no one in the New Testament church, outside of Jesus, ever addressed as "teacher," but some are referred to as "teachers." (Acts 13:1, Jas 3:1) The term "rabbi" was never used, as far as I can see, in the Christian church.

Teacher, or Pastor-Teacher?

Some believe that the term *teacher* is simply an extension or function of the office of the pastor. The precise wording in the Greek text found in Ephesians 4:11 leans toward this interpretation. While it is true that the function of teaching is certainly a part of other ministry offices, that does not negate the office of teacher. To add support for teacher as a separate office, Paul seems to list the offices in order of importance for the building up of the church, "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers..." (1 Cor 12:28 NIV)

To further support the claim of a separate office of teacher, Paul goes on to ask a series of rhetorical questions, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? . . ." (1 Cor 12: 29 NIV) And, since the Lord called me specifically as a teacher, I obviously favor the idea of the teacher being separate from pastor.

Of course many, indeed I think most, called pastors have a

secondary call to teach. The primary call is that of a pastor, but God most commonly accompanies that call with the secondary teaching call. Why? Because every church needs to be well taught and the pastor is the most obvious person to do at least some of that teaching.

The primary speaking function of the pastor is to preach. Good preaching motivates people. Good teaching brings understanding. The two are not quite the same thing.

Developing the Call

Once someone determines he or she is a called teacher, then the process of developing that call must begin. There are many ways we can develop the call. First and foremost, we should study everything we can get our hands on, the most important being the Bible. We should be reading and studying the Bible, other books, study guides, and so on. Listening to tapes is, or course, also a form of study.

The called teacher should also take advantage of any more formal opportunities to learn such as special seminars and conferences. And certainly Bible school and/or seminary is very beneficial if it is available.

As the called teacher is faithful in his or her learning process, God will open up opportunities to teach. These usually start out being small groups such as a home Bible study group, Sunday school, etc. The teacher should be willing to teach at every opportunity. That includes teaching children if that's where the Lord puts you to develop your teaching skills!

We may also be given the opportunity to teach in the secular world. My teaching skills were very much enhanced when I was made an instructor in the United States Marine Corps. I taught principles of management for four years. During that time other instructors critiqued me and my techniques. I look back on that experience as the Lord giving me a wonderful opportunity to refine my call and skills as a teacher.

Every called teacher must be willing to have someone around who will criticize him and make suggestions as to how to improve. The Lord may provide a co-worker in the ministry, a spouse, or whomever. It is vitally important that we be willing to learn from others, not only for our pride's sake, but to further mature the call.

Every teacher also must learn to make good outlines of whatever material he or she is teaching. These outlines should be saved and revised from time to time. A mature teacher is always willing to allow the Holy Spirit to change and enrich the teaching.

The Characteristics of a Teacher

Although the other offices can lay claim to some of the characteristics listed below, the teacher will possess more of these qualities.

1. He/She Seeks Understanding

We can define this trait as a divine curiosity. When the teacher sees something in Scripture or in the church that he doesn't understand, he will diligently search the Scripture and read any and everything he can get his hands on seeking to understand *the what* or *why* of that subject. He will spend hours, days, weeks, or as long as it takes, seeking to understand. Once

he grasps the understanding he quickly encompasses it into a teaching and shares it with the church.

2. He/She Teaches By Principles or by Books of the Bible

There are two basic ways of teaching God's word, one is by analyzing and teaching principles, and the other is by selecting a book of the Bible and teaching through the book, verse by verse. My style of teaching is the principle method.

For example, Scripture teaches us that "A tithe . . . Belongs to the Lord." (Lev 27:30) That's plain enough, but a lot of vital information is left unsaid. The teacher gathers all relevant information and presents it more fully as a set of principles. These principles include such truths as everything we have is from the Lord, and that He *requires* a tenth of it back. When it's returned to the Lord, He releases a blessing on the giver. If it is withheld, the withholder comes under a curse. (Mal 3 and Lev 26). The remaining nine tenths are blessed by the Lord and multiplied so that it goes further than the original one hundred percent. Thus the teacher chooses a topic and then uses the whole Bible and whatever other material he or she needs to teach the topic.

When a teacher teaches by the book method, he or she selects a book of the Bible and methodically goes through it with his students. A good teacher will also bring in scriptures from other books of the Bible to elaborate what the selected book says. This method may end up being partly teaching by principle and partly by a specific book.

3. He/She Has Natural Speaking Ability

An experienced teacher find it easy to speak publicly and he or she actually enjoys it. He has the God-given ability to explain things in such a manner that people easily understand. His mind can spontaneously come up with simple, graphic illustrations and good word pictures that help the hearers grasp a point better.

Notice that when I say a called teacher has a natural speaking ability, I am not saying that he or she doesn't need to be trained in speaking techniques. Once the teacher undergoes this training, his or her effectiveness as a speaker greatly increases.

4. He/She Has a Burden for the Church

All of the five-fold ministry officers have a burden for the church. But the teacher's burden is that every Christian *have understanding*. His teaching is continually moving from subject to subject seeking to impart the necessary scriptural understanding that leads to Christian maturity and victory over sin and circumstances. Of course, like any Christian, the teacher has concern for individuals who are burdened or who have problems. But his primary focus is on the church as a whole.

5. He/She Often Travels

Because the teacher is a church body builder, he is often found traveling. Perhaps a teacher will come to a church and spend a few months or a year or two teaching then move on.

Obviously, not all teachers travel in this manner. Some teachers stay in the same congregation, teaching a single class for years. But careful observation of such classes will show that the older students are rotating out of the class and younger ones are coming in. (Of course, Bible schools and seminaries are the best example of this.) Thus in effect, the students travel through, the

teacher is stationary.

The Teacher's Goal

The truly called teacher wants to see others receive, understand and put into practice the principles he is imparting. He loves to see his students excelling in their Christian walk. He wants them to understand everything he understands. He has then reached his objective; he has taught himself out of a job! The teacher's ultimate objective and goal is to teach Christians to hear and obey the Lord's voice.

Apollos, a Biblical Example

Although he is never labeled as a teacher in Scripture, I believe that Apollos is a New Testament example of a teacher. I will list some of the Scriptures concerning Apollos that I think support this conclusion.

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. (Acts 18:24 NIV) When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. (Acts 18:27 NIV) I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. (1 Cor 3:6 NIV)

We have already stated that teachers are diligent students of the word. Acts 18:24 tells us that Apollos was from Alexandria. During the first century, the world's foremost library was in Alexandria, Egypt. Apollos presumably had access to that great library. In the same verse Paul states that he "was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures." Again, the traits of a teacher.

I have made mention that teachers travel. In Acts 18:27 and Titus 3:13 we see Apollos traveling to Achaia and Crete. And we also know that he taught in Corinth. (1 Cor 3:4-6)

Apostles and prophets lay a church foundation and teachers build on it. Paul confirms this about Apollos. He said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it . . ." (1 Cor 3:6)

We also see in Apollos the fact that a teacher's ministry is to the existing church rather than the unsaved. Paul said that Apollos ". . . was a great help to those who by grace had believed." (Acts 18:27 NIV)

Beware of False Teachers

To sit under one of God's called, anointed, and trained teachers is indeed a joy. But just because a teacher is trained and seems to have an anointing doesn't certify him or her. All of a teacher's teaching and doctrine must continually be examined and compared with Scripture. Why? Because Satan sometimes disguises himself as an angel of light. (2 Cor 11:14) He can also counterfeit an anointing. Is it not then reasonable to assume that Satan will send false teachers into the church? Absolutely yes! Peter warns us about this. He wrote,

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as *there will be false teachers among you*. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2 Pet 2:1 NIV, emphasis added.)

Then how can we tell the true teacher from the false? First, by constantly measuring his or her teaching with Scripture. And second, to ask the Holy Spirit to bear witness.

I remember hearing a teacher several years ago. He had a powerful speaking ability. He often had his listeners spellbound with his powerful use of words. I could find nothing in what he said that didn't measure up to Scripture. But something was wrong. I couldn't see it with my mind but the Holy Spirit let me know that something was wrong.

Then one day a brother came bearing some unsettling news. In several European countries, this teacher had gathered young women around himself for his sexual pleasures. He justified his actions by saying, "Jesus had women around him for His sexual pleasure." In fact, I learned that he had even been convicted of sexual misconduct in Europe! God is faithful. If we are willing to seek the Holy Spirit and then listen, He will tell us the truth about the teaching we are hearing. I am not suggesting we be skeptical of every teacher. It's just that we must always be on guard against false teachers.

Should Women Teach?

There is some question in the church as to whether women should be permitted to teach. This issue is based on a statement Paul wrote to Timothy: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." (1 Ti 2:12 NIV)

I personally do not believe this gender distinction should apply in today's church and here's why. Rules of biblical interpretation are our guidelines. One of those rules states that we must not form Bible doctrine based on a single verse of Scripture. Another rule of interpretation states that the Bible does not contradict itself. For example, in the same verse in 1 Timothy Paul said that a woman was not "to have authority over a man." But God is sovereign. In the Book of Judges God specifically set up Deborah as ruler over all Israel.

Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites came to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. (Jdg 4:4-6 NIV)

Since this seems to contradict Paul's statement, another rule of biblical interpretation states that in such cases of apparent contradiction there must be another explanation. So we ask the question, "Why would Paul restrict women from teaching?" I believe it was because of the low level of education the women of the first century were allowed to have. In the Jewish society of Paul's time men were educated as far as their desires and financial means permitted. Women were given only the very basics required to perform household and marketing functions such as elementary reading and math. Of course all Jewish children were given the basic teachings of the Old Testament. But only male children were allowed to go on to truly study the sacred books of the Jewish faith.

So, in my opinion, Paul's restriction was cultural rather than

gender based. If Paul were writing that same verse today, perhaps he would say, "I do not permit *anyone who is uneducated* to teach or to have authority; he or she must be silent." With this I fully agree.

One last point, if you hold that only men can teach, you are essentially restricting God to only giving the call of teaching to men, never to a woman. This is extremely presumptuous. If we are totally honest, all of us know of women today who are excellent Bible teachers. Let's let God choose whom He will to teach and to preach. And let us be open to receive God's word from whatever vessel He chooses.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Teacher

As with all ministries, the personality of the individual will have its strengths and weaknesses. The teacher is no exception. Let's look at some of them.

1. The Strengths

a. He/She Easily Sees Biblical Truths -Because of the analytical mind of the teacher, she can quickly grasp Bible truths. She often sees things in Scripture that others don't. Because of this she can outline and teach subjects easily and understandably.

b. He/She Gets Agitated at Error -The teacher loves the truth. Even if the truth is painful, the teacher still loves it. When he sees a minister abusing biblical truth he quickly gets agitated, even angry! (The teacher isn't alone on this point, other ministers, especially apostles and prophets have the same response.)

2. The Weaknesses

Now let us look at the weaknesses of the teacher.

a. He/She Has a Casual Interest in Evangelism - Because the teacher's ministry is to the church, he eagerly grasps opportunities to teach, but he tends to neglect opportunities for evangelism. This is wrong. The Lord has given all of us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18) and everyone, including the teacher, should seize every opportunity to evangelize.

b. He/She is Impatient with Others Who Differ - When someone differs with the teacher's presentation or point of view on a scriptural matter, he has a tendency to ignore the person. "What does he know?" the teacher asks himself. "I'm the one who has spent hours studying this subject. I'm right." The mature teacher listens carefully, and is ready to learn from anyone, even his students.

c. He/She is Reluctant to Accept Correction - All of us at one time or another need correction. God always has those in the body of Christ who bring messages of correction to his ministers. Since the teacher's role is so critical, it is important that his doctrine remain pure. If error begins to enter his teaching, God will send someone to point to the truth. Every mature teacher is willing to hear the Holy Spirit's voice of correction regardless of whom He chooses to speak through, even if it's your wife (or husband)!

Teachers are Strictly Judged

Good teachers in the church are respected and admired. And rightly so, for Scripture says that those who labor in the word are worthy of double honor. (1 Tim 5:17) For this reason, some people want to be teachers. But we must always remember, first one must have the call from God, and second, teachers are judged by strict standards. James gave us a stern warning:

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. (Jas 3:1 NIV)

God will judge us according to our stewardship of the truth we hold. Teachers hold much truth and they multiply that truth by imparting it to others. What we teach affects dozens, hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of other believers. If we teach error, how many are contaminated by it? Therefore, God's judgment is more severe for the teachers than for others.

Conclusion

The church always prospers when it is well taught. Every pastor should occasionally make room in the pulpit for teachers who have a message for the church. The whole Body of Christ is blessed by a mature, anointed teacher.

Lord, we thank you for the called, anointed, and disciplined teachers you have put in our midst to teach us Your ways. Bless them, make financial provision for them, and encourage them. Help us to recognize the teachers among us and to give them the honor they are due, so that you may be glorified. Amen.

1 Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Volume VI, Page 961.

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