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## The Ministry of Teachers in the Early Church in the Light of the New Testament

The present study deals with the characteristic features of the ministry of teachers in the early church, contrasting them with the rabbis in the synagogues. As charismatic characters in the early church, teachers have played a role comparable to that of the apostles and prophets. In a different order of ideas, we would like to investigate whether the competence of charismatic teachers should be considered universal, or whether they played a rather local administrative role in the way bishops, deacons and presbyters did. At the same time, we shall analyse the content of their teaching aiming to define the place of teachers within the early church. We shall conclude with remarks concerning the development of the teachers' status in the post-Pauline period.

### 1. The origin of the function of teacher

Many researchers are of the opinion that the function of the teacher is of Jewish origin.<sup>1</sup> In the synoptic tradition we find references to teachers of the law becoming learners in the Kingdom of Heaven (Mat 13,52). The English exegete G. Dix considered that in the early church the Christian teacher had the same status as the Jewish rabbis.<sup>2</sup> The author of the first gospel specifies that the role of the teachers in the early church differed from that of the Jewish community of Jesus' time (Mat 23,8–10), especially by considering Jesus as the example to be followed. Nonetheless, Jesus was not regarded by them merely as an example, but he was also accepted as their Lord to whom they bound themselves to serve through

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<sup>1</sup> Rengstorf, K. H.: διδάσκαλος. In: TWNT II. 154; Dix, G.: *Le Ministère dans l'Eglise ancienne (des années 90 à 410)* (Traduction française de A. Jaermann et R. Paquier; Bibliothèque théologique). Delachaux et Niestlé, Paris 1955; Rieser, Rainer: *Jesus als Lehrer* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II/7). Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Dix, G.: *op. cit.* 79.

their confession of faith, in the way Peter did. The first century Christians avoided to call their teachers masters, as teachers considered themselves to be the disciples of a unique Master. This is the explanation for the rare appearance of the title doctor or master within the New Testament. However, this fact does not prevent us from treating Christian teachers on the same level with the Jewish teachers. In his essay addressing the functions in the early church, entitled “Prophets, Teachers, Leaders”,<sup>3</sup> H. Greeven also argued for the existence of a “cooperate body of teachers” commissioned to preserve, transmit and interpret Christian tradition.

## 2. The charismatic character of the function of the teacher

The church historian Adolf von Harnack asserted the principle of double church organization based on the data from the Didache, discovered by him in 1883. According to his classic argument, the leadership of the early church was formed of charismatic leaders of universal competence: apostles, pilgrims, prophets and teachers, as well as of administrative leaders: bishops, deacons and presbyters, having attributions regarding the problems of the local community. The suggestion of Adolf von Harnack was analysed first by the jurist R. Sohm, who on his turn argued that the principle of double organization had not been introduced simultaneously but rather consecutively.<sup>4</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> century research concluded that the difference between charisma and administrative function cannot be considered in opposition to one another, as Paul considers both to be charismatic in nature.<sup>5</sup>

In accordance with the New Testament, the teachers as well as the apostles and prophets belonging to the early church were given the gift of the Holy Spirit that helped them in their ministry. The pneumatic character of the function of teachers is especially emphasised in 1Cor 12. In its introduction Paul declares a statement of principle: “Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit” (v. 4). This statement is followed by the enumeration of gifts among which we find “wise speech” (λόγος σοφίας) and the expression “put knowledge into words” (λόγος

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3. Greeven, H.: Propheten, Lehrer, Vorsteher bei Paulus. Zur Frage der Ämter im Urchristentum. In: *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 44 (1952/53), 1–41.

<sup>4</sup> Sohm, R.: *Kirchenrecht I. Die geschichtliche Grundlagen*. Verlag von Dunker & Humblot, Leipzig 1923.

<sup>5</sup> Greeven, H.: *op. cit.* 3–4.

γνώσεως). In accordance with Paul's teaching, all the charismata are expressions of the Holy Spirit. All the community members were granted the spiritual gifts by the risen Lord aiming at strengthening the unity of the church and edifying the body of Christ.

Why was it necessary to emphasise this main principle? The reason for this was that in the Corinthian community there existed a group of Christians the members of which claimed a privileged position, having the gift of glossolalia. They are supposed to have been the adepts of Peter.<sup>6</sup> By his teaching on the body of Christ, Paul wanted to stress that the church of Christ validates another scale of values. In the community all are submitted to the priority of Christ. All community members have to strive for using their spiritual gifts not for their own glorification but for serving the good functioning of the community.

Who were those who benefited from these spiritual gifts? We find the answer for this question in the last part of this chapter: "And God has placed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, gifts of healing, helps, gifts of leadership, different kinds of tongues" (v. 28). Insofar our subject is concerned, this is the most important statement, as it is only here that the noun διδάσκαλος "teacher" appears together with the "apostles" (ἀπόστολος) and "prophets" (προφήτης). These three functions reappear in Acts 13,1–3 where they are enumerated in the same order. From the point of view of the history of tradition, one may presume that this formula has its origin in the period preceding Paul's ministry, more exactly in the Antiochian community.<sup>7</sup> So we can conclude, that in his First Epistle to the Corinthians Apostle Paul resorts to the tradition of the early church in expressing his teaching on spiritual gifts. It is characteristic for this verse that the gift of glossolalia is the last in the order of charismata. On the other hand, the apostles, prophets and teachers are the first three in this order.

This fact does not mean that Paul considers only these three functions as having a universal or charismatic character, while the other ones being of a merely local or administrative nature. On the contrary, he attributes charismatic

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<sup>6</sup> Vielhauer, Ph.: Paulus und die Kephas Partei in Korinth. In: *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975), 341–352.

<sup>7</sup> Zimmermann, Alfred F.: *Die urchristlichen Lehrer. Studien zum Tradentenkreis der Didaskaloi im frühen Urchristentum* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.12). Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 1984, 111.

character to the other function as well, having been ordered by God and aiming at the development of the church. The apostles, prophets and teachers are on top of the list, as their function is connected to their person. In Jürgen Roloff's definition, we can speak about functions performed in the community when some people constantly execute important services for the building up of the community.<sup>8</sup> All these functions have one feature in common, namely, that they are all in the service of the Word.

The opinions of researchers differ in the way they answer the question whether these were leaders of the universal church, or of the local communities. Most of them refute the theory according to which the prophets and teachers were charismatic pilgrims comparable to the apostles.<sup>9</sup> After having analysed the life of the early church community from a sociological point of view, Gerd Theissen arrives to a conclusion contrary to the former theory.<sup>10</sup> In our opinion, one can hardly assert that some of these leaders led a sedentary life, while others led a wandering life. Paul, for example, spent 18 months in Corinth, while he spent two and a half years in Ephesus. This assertion is also valid concerning the activities of Aquila and Priscilla, who moved from one community to the other (Acts 18,2; 18,26; 1Cor 16,19; Rom 16,3–5).

We may conclude therefore that beside the apostles and prophets the teachers with spiritual gifts played an important role in the early church. This is what the author of the Epistle also questions after having enumerated the other charismata: "Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? Not all are teachers, are they?" (v. 29). These rhetorical questions express Paul's respect towards each one of them.

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<sup>8</sup> Roloff, Jürgen: *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament* (Neues Testament Deutsch – Ergänzungsreihe 10). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1993, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Schrage, Wolfgang: *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar VII/3). Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999, 231.

<sup>10</sup> Theissen, Gerd: *Sociologie der Jesusbewegung. Eine Beitrag zur Entstehung des Urchristentums*. Kaiser Verlag, München 1977, 14–21.

### 3. The content of their teaching

We have very few New Testament texts that could help us in clarifying the contents and form of the διδασχή. In his study, the theologian K. H. Rengstorf shows that the teachers of the New Testament were mainly preoccupied with interpreting the Old Testament in a Christian spirit.<sup>11</sup> As the Epistles to the Galatians and Corinthians show, this task was performed not only in the Jewish-Christian communities but also in the Hellenistic churches (cf. Gal 3; 1Cor 10; 2Cor 3). It is worth mentioning that the Old Testament helped them clarify not only theoretical problems, but the practical ones as well (1Cor 3,15; 9,9; 10,6–13). Von Harnack's classical statement has been refuted by O. Michel by convincing arguments proving that the Hellenistic communities did not accept the authority of the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup>

The second important mission to be fulfilled by teachers was to hand down the Jesus tradition. As a generic term, tradition referred first to Jesus' life and teaching and second to the ethical standards given by the apostles. M. Dibelius, an adept of form criticism, asserts that "In the development of the tradition of the gospels the narrators and teachers played a significant role. Based on the New Testament scripts we can form a notion of the activity of teachers, but we do not have sources concerning the role of the narrators."<sup>13</sup> Many of the contemporary theologians consider this assertion to be unfounded, as in their opinion one and the same person can play the role of both a narrator and a teacher at the same time.<sup>14</sup> This statement is supported by Paul's comment in 1Cor 14,6 expressing that the apostles' as well as the prophets' activity is worth doing only if it includes instructions given to the community.

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<sup>11</sup> Rengstorf, K.: διδάσκω διδάσκαλος. In: *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 2.138–168.

<sup>12</sup> Michel, Otto: *Paulus und seine Bibel*. Bertelsmann, Gütersloh 1929, 112; Harnack, Adolf von: *Das Alte Testament in den paulinischen Gemeinden*. De Gruyter, Berlin 1928, 124.

<sup>13</sup> Dibelius, M.: *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*. J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1933, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, F. V.: The Christian Teacher in the First Century. In: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 60 (1941), 317–328.

In transmitting the tradition, teachers act as authorised representatives of the tradition.<sup>15</sup> Athanasius Polag argued in this respect that Christian teachers played an important role in the formation of the so-called Logion.<sup>16</sup> We have to consider the theory sustained by the followers of form criticism regarding the significant role that teachers played in the community-services. They were assumed to have given regulations concerning the liturgical order, as well as the contents of catechism (1Cor 9,14; 11,23; 15,3).<sup>17</sup> This theory had been further developed by the English researcher C. H. Dodd insisting on the necessity of differentiating between apostolic kerugma and Didache. He argued that “the authors of the New Testament delimited clearly preaching from teaching. Teaching in most cases meant an ethical indemn, but in some cases it could take apologetic form.”<sup>18</sup> Although this definition is a general one, Dodd is correct in sustaining that the most important part of the teaching was the parainesis. In the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, Apostle Paul bids the readers to preserve the tradition handed down to them by means of oral and written communication (2Thess 2,5). In his epistles the apostle emphasizes the fact that his teaching is a faithful transmission of what had been imparted to him (παραδίδωμι; 1Cor 11,23; παραλαμβάνω 1Cor 15,3).

Based on what had been said before, we can conclude that the main task of each teacher of the New Testament was to communicate the *tradition* to the community in a reliable way. This ethical message can be illustrated by many examples taken from Paul’s epistles. In 1Cor 4,17 he uses the verb διδάσκω in this sense, asking Timothy to remind the Corinthians of “which I teach them everywhere in all our congregations.”

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<sup>15</sup> Roloff, Jürgen: *Das Kerygma und die irdische Jesus. Historische Motive in den Jesus-Erzählungen der Evangelien*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1970, 271.

<sup>16</sup> Polag, Athanasius: *Die Christologie der Logienquelle (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament)*. Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1977, 17–31.

<sup>17</sup> Dibelius, M: *op. cit.* 20.

<sup>18</sup> Dodd, C. H.: *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*. Hodder & Stoughton, London 1936, 7.

## 4. The person and place of the teacher in the congregation of Paul's era

It is hard to define the place of the teacher within the community as the word διδάσκαλος occurs only in a single place in Paul's epistles, namely in 1Cor 12,28. This can be supplemented by a short paragraph from Rom 12,6–7, where the apostle enumerates some of the important functions: "And we have different gifts according to the grace given to us. If the gift is prophecy, that individual must use it in proportion to his faith". It is noteworthy that in this paragraph we do not find the noun διδάσκαλος but the predicative διδάσκω. This shows that it is not so much the person performing the task of teaching but rather the task to be performed which is emphasised here. This is the reason why the person of the teacher must be defined functionally just as in the case of the prophets.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, in the congregations of Paul's era, beside the commissioned teachers, any other member of the community was offered a possibility to teach and prophesy, had the spiritual gift aiming at building up the church been given to him or her (cf. 1Cor 14,26). We may emphasise here that the function of the teacher is well-defined, but one may also notice a certain freedom in turning it into practice. The function of teachers consisted mostly in transmitting and reinforcing the ethical rules and confessional forms to be observed by their fellowmen (1Cor 4,7; Rom 2,21; 16,17).

The teachers' personality did not differ much from that of the prophets. They all served the word as shown in 1Cor 14,6 (διδαχή and λαλέω) during community gatherings. The difference between the two consisted in the fact that while prophets applied the apostles' instructions to the local community, the teachers tried to preserve and interpret the tradition. The difference between the two charismatic activities almost diminished in the ecstatic moment of prophesying. "The risen Lord spoke in prophesying, who gives us revelation through the Holy Ghost, while in teaching the resurrected Christ speaks to us through the Scripture and through the interpretation of kerugma handed on by tradition."<sup>20</sup> It is therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Chevalier, Max-Alan: *Esprit de Dieu, paroles des d'hommes* (Bibliothèque Théologique). Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel 1966, 168.

<sup>20</sup> Roloff, Jürgen: *Die Kirche*, 142.

correct to interpret the relationship between the mission of the prophet and the teacher as complementary, thus avoiding unnecessary antagonism between the two.<sup>21</sup>

In H. Greeven's opinion, the vertical perspectives are as important as the horizontal dimensions, because without prophecy teaching could become a rigid law, while prophecy without teaching could turn into a zealous activity.<sup>22</sup> Prophecy is occasional, it concerns a given situation within the community, while teaching leads to systematised and institutionalised knowledge. A prophet can be compared to a geographic explorer, while a teacher is more like a geographer whose task is to gather and systematise the different results deriving from the exploration.<sup>23</sup> Fulfilling the teacher's mission depends on individual skills. Teachers need not only spiritual gifts but also professional training. The reading and writing skills are most important but being familiar with the Scripture and with the Jesus-tradition and being able to apply the rules of interpretation to those is likewise demanded from them. In his Epistle to the Romans, Apostle Paul maintains that teachers can only build on the fundament laid by the apostles (Rom 6,17; 12,6–7). The teacher's activity is not a personal matter: he fulfils his role for the benefit and by the commission of the community, similar to the learned leaders of the synagogue.<sup>24</sup> Gal 6,6 enhances this definition, although it uses the term *κατηχέω*: "Now the one who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with the one who teaches it." This statement highlights the role of a teacher in the congregation.

## 5. The function of a teacher in the period after Paul's era

Regarding the person and tasks of the teacher, Eph 4,11 states as follows: "It was he who gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers." As the enumerated functions are preceded by the same article, we can deduce some information regarding their personal identity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Schrage, Wolfgang: *op. cit.* 236.

<sup>22</sup> Greeven, H.: *op. cit.* 129.

<sup>23</sup> Wilkens, Ulrich: *Der Brief an die Römer* (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament VI/3). Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Rengstorf, K. H.: *op. cit.* 161.

<sup>25</sup> Zimmermann, Adolf F.: *op. cit.* 117.



In the period following Paul's time there existed leaders who fulfilled simultaneously the responsible function of a pastor and a teacher. This suggests that in the time of the elaboration of the Epistle, the function of the teacher was not considered to be an independent one.<sup>26</sup> In the post-Pauline generations the prophets and teachers did not form separate groups anymore. The role of the teachers was taken over by the leaders of the community. Thus, the principle of leading through teaching came to be consolidated.<sup>27</sup> The Pastoral Epistles follow this orientation. The leaders of the community appear to be teachers and preachers at the same time (1Tim 1,3; 4,11; 6,2).

The unity of the church can be maintained only through accurate and clear teaching. Authentic teaching has also the role of assuring the continuity with the apostolic tradition, that is Paul's teaching. The identity of the church can only be guaranteed by being faithful towards this teaching during changing times. The responsibility of teachers is strongly endorsed by Apostle James: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly" (Jam 3,1). It is the duty of the teachers before assuming this title to bind themselves to the truth. A teacher who is unfaithful to the Word ruins the church that he or she was supposed to build up.

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<sup>26</sup> Roloff, Jürgen: *Die Kirche*, 248.

<sup>27</sup> Roloff, Jürgen: *Die Kirche*, 264.