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CHAPTER III

TEACHERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

John E. Toews

The lists of ministries or gifts in the New Testament reveal the existence of two kinds of teachers in the early church, prophets, and teachers. The prophets stand in second place in the lists in I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 and in the first place in Romans 12. The teacher is in third place in I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, in second place in Romans 12, and first in the Pastorals (I Timothy 5:17).¹

The purpose of this article is to examine the nature of these teaching ministries in the early church and to inquire about their significance for the contemporary church. More attention will be devoted to the prophet as teacher because this form of teaching ministry has received less consideration in the church.

I. THE PROPHET AS TEACHER

Antecedents to the Christian Prophet

The prophetic ministry in the early church is rooted in a long tradition of prophecy in Ancient Israel. Beginning with Moses God revealed his will to his people through divinely chosen individuals. To begin with these individuals seem to have functioned as members and/or leaders of prophetic schools, e.g., Samuel and Elijah. From the time of Amos on we hear nothing about such prophetic fellowships. Instead we read of single prophetic figures and their disciple following, e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah.²

For many centuries it was assumed that the prophetic movement died out in Judaism around 400 B.C. The manu-

script finds of the last 50 years, however, have shown that the prophetic movement continued in Judaism during this period and experienced a rather dramatic renewal at Qumran.³

The prophetic movement of the inter-testamental period modified the more classical forms of prophecy at several points that are significant for understanding the role of prophecy in the early church. First of all, prophecy is redefined to include the exposition of earlier scriptures, e.g., Habakkuk or Isaiah. Secondly, prophecy is increasingly linked with wisdom. For example, wisdom is said to reside in the "prophet" Moses (Wis. Sol. 7:28; 11:1), and at Qumran Daniel the wise man is called a prophet (4QFlor. 2:3). These developments are especially evident in the apocalyptic literature. The apocalyptic seer marries prophetic vision with the wise discernment of its meaning.

The convergence of prophecy and wisdom occurs in part, at least, because both are increasingly identified with Israel's scriptures. Therefore, prophecy comes to mean not only inspired vision and word, but also inspired exposition and application of earlier prophetic words. Thus the wise teachers of Qumran expound the Scriptures, and the "prophet" becomes the model expositor of scripture in Rabbinic Judaism.

This "prophetic-wise man" figure of inter-testamental Judaism is probably the most direct antecedent of the Christian prophets, and of Jesus as well.

Jesus is identified as a prophet in the gospels. His prophetic activity includes synagogue teaching and scripture exposition (Lk. 4:24). The latter is characterized by "wisdom" and "authority" (Mk. 1:21f.; 6:2).

The Prophets in Acts

In Acts prophecy is one of the Holy Spirit's eschatological gifts of power that is available for all Christians. Thus, the Pentecost experience of speaking in tongues is identified as prophecy, and as a fulfillment of Joel's promise regarding the renewal of the prophetic gift (2:4, 11, 17ff.). But, more frequently prophecy is associated with certain leading men who exercise the gift as a ministry in the church. Within this more limited circle of prophets is a Jerusalem group in-

cluding Agabus which visits Antioch (11:27f.; 21:10), an Antioch group including Barnabas and Paul (13:1), and Judas Barsabbas and Silas who accompany the Jerusalem Decree to Antioch (15:22, 32). While Peter is not called a prophet he does all the things a prophet does in Acts, and so probably ought to be numbered as one of them.

The specific activities associated with the prophets in Acts are the following: 1) the prediction of future events (11:28; 20:23, 25; 27:22); 2) the declaration of divine judgment (13:11; 28:25-28); 3) the use of symbolic actions (21:11); 4) the experience of visions and dreams and the proclamation of the contents revealed (10:10; cf. also 9:10; 16:9; 18:9; 22:17ff.; 27:23); 6) the exposition of the Scriptures (13:5ff.; 14:22; 15:32).

The main purpose of these varied prophetic activities is exhortation or encouragement, *parakeleo/paraklesis*. The ministry of Judas Barsabbas and Silas in 15:32 is defined by the phrase, "exhort the brethren with many words and strengthen them." This verbal exhortation is set in parallel with the written "exhortation" of the Jerusalem Decree (15:27). The activity of Paul and Barnabas, is described in terms of exhortation in 14:22. The contents of the exhortation is outlined as "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God." The identification in Acts of exhortation as the focal ministry of the prophet corresponds with Paul's statements in I Corinthians 14. Exhortation seems to be the principle way in which the prophets exercised their ministry. This definition of the prophetic ministry points to teaching and counseling as the role of the prophets.

The interpretation of Scripture was a key element in this teaching ministry of the prophets. It is an important feature in the mission of the prophets Paul and Barnabas, as well as Paul and Silas, Peter and other Christian leaders (Acts 2:14-36; 4:8-12; 6:9-11; 8:30-35; 9:20-22; 13:5, 16-41, etc.). E. Ellis suggests we have an example of this prophetic interpretation of scripture in 13:16-41. Paul, the prophet "set aside" for mission in 13:1-2, interprets the Jewish Scripture in response to a request for a "word of exhorta-

tion."⁴ It is significant that Paul here is also a teacher and apostle.

Apparently there was no sharp distinction between apostle, prophet and teacher in the early church with respect to the interpretation of Scripture. Paul and Barnabas are called all three. The triad of I Corinthians 12 can be clustered around the same persons in Acts. If that is the case, what distinguished one ministry from another? That is difficult to determine in Acts because Luke's language is fluid.

Some have suggested the prophet spoke on the basis of revelation, while the teacher transmitted and expounded the tradition and inculcated the fundamentals of the faith.⁵ While this distinction is made by Paul, Acts gives no evidence for it. Furthermore, it does not take seriously enough the teaching role of the prophet in Acts. Acts made no clear differentiation between the teaching of the prophet and the teacher. Both expound the Scriptures and the sayings of Jesus.

Similarly, the role of prophet and apostle overlapped. Ellis suggests the two ministries represent two concentric circles, in which the prophet's activity is somewhat smaller than the apostle's.⁶

In Acts then the prophet is a minister of God who exhorts and expounds the Scriptures in a manner similar to the ministry of the apostle and teacher.

The Prophet in the Pauline Churches

The Importance of the Prophetic Ministry. Prophets were important ministers in the Pauline churches. They are mentioned in association with apostles as the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), and they also follow the apostles in the "gift lists" (I Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11).

Prophecy is mentioned in the "gift lists" because it is one of the spiritual gifts, (*chrismata*). That means, (1) prophecy is a gift of grace exercised in the name of Jesus (I Cor. 12:3); (2) prophecy is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's activity in continuity with the prophets of Israel and yet also in fulfillment of the prophetic promises to Israel (Eph. 4:7f.); (3) prophecy is an eschatological gift of the new age that is

found only in the church (Eph. 4:8f.); (4) prophecy occurs in the context of the gathered church (I Cor. 14).

The gift of prophecy is to be preferred above all other gifts (I Cor. 14:1). That does mean, however, the gift is to be sought by individual believers, as I Corinthians 14:1 and 39 are often translated and interpreted. W.C. van Unnik suggests the phrase "earnestly desire" ought more correctly to be rendered "practice zealously the spiritual gifts, especially in order that you may prophecy."⁷ The point is that the gifts of the Spirit are not to be sought, but rather to be exercised because they are present already in the church as the community of the Spirit.

The importance of the prophetic ministry is evident also by its duration beyond the Pauline period. This ministry did not die out with the Apostle Paul or with the apostolic age. The *Didache*, an early second century writing, describes prophetic ministers in the churches (ch. 13). The Gospel of Thomas (Logion 42) and the Shepherd of Hermas (Mandate 11), both mid-second century, refer to prophetic ministries in their churches. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue* 82:1), also mid-second century, says that "the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time." Irenaeus, late second century, talks about brothers in the church who have prophetic gifts (*Against Heresies*, II, 32, 2 and V, 6, 1). A vigorous opponent of Christianity, Celsus, knows of Christian prophets in the churches in the early third century (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VII, 9).

In spite of the importance of the prophetic ministry and its lengthy history in the early church, we have no literary records from this movement. Prophecy was a ministry of the spoken word, not the written word. I Corinthians 14 is the only description of the nature of this ministry in the New Testament. The 11th Mandate of the Shepherd of Hermas offers the only other picture of this ministry in the extant literature of early Christianity.⁸

The Context of the Prophetic Ministry. Prophecy occurs in the context of the gathered church. In I Corinthians 14 Paul describes the context twice with the word *sunerchesthai*, "to come together." When the church comes together, when the body of Christ is gathered, then the pro-

phet arises and ministers. The church is the presupposition and the context for the exercise of the spiritual gifts. The gifts are given to the church to be exercised by its members for the welfare and growth of the whole body.

Prophecy occurs in the Pauline churches both as the occasional utterance of various members and as the continuing ministry of a relatively few leaders within it. All believers, men and women, may exercise the gift, but only a few are prophets. (I Cor. 11 and 14). The latter apparently are those who are recognized "to have prophecy" (I Cor. 13:2). To begin with such leaders conducted their ministry primarily in one local church (I Cor. 13:2; 14:37; cf. with Acts 13:1; 15:22, 32; 21:9). Later, some of the prophets began to travel through the churches of a region (Acts 11:27; 15:22, 32; Didache 11:3ff.). But even then the prophetic ministry remained a congregational phenomenon. It functions only when the church is assembled.⁹

The Purpose of Prophecy. The purpose of the prophetic ministry in I Corinthians 14 is edification, *oikodome* (vv. 3, 4, 26, 31). Edification means to build up another person, not only as an individual, but as a member of the church. Negatively, it involves the rejection of self-sufficient religious individualism which focuses attention on private spiritual phenomenon, e.g., speaking in tongues here.¹⁰ The meaning of edification is further defined by the words "exhort" (*paraklesis*) and "comfort" (*paramuthia*). These words are subordinate terms which define the nature and mode of edification. Together these words provide a functional definition of prophecy. The prophet edifies the church, he builds up the church by means of exhortation and comfort.

It is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the meanings of "exhort" and "comfort" in Paul. When used together they are characterized by admonition and comfort.¹¹

How does the prophet edify by means of exhortation and comfort? He teaches. The manner of the prophet's ministry resembles what we would call exhortatory or pastoral preaching/teaching. The prophet of the early church is related to the prophets of Israel and the inter-

testamental period. He upbuilds by warning, instructing and correcting the church. The prophet teaches what the Christian way requires of the church and those who belong to the church.

The educational or teaching nature of the prophet's ministry of edification is underlined further in I Corinthians 14:19 and 31. In v. 19 Paul contrasts the unintelligibility of speaking in tongues and the comprehensibility of "instruction." Since the point of the whole context concerns the superiority of prophecy over tongues, the "instruction" here must refer to prophetic speech. The aim of the prophetic speech is instruction. The rare verb Paul uses here for "instruct," *katecho*, is used normally to describe teaching in the content of the faith.¹² In v. 31 Paul says the outcome of prophecy is learning and edification. To be edified by the prophetic gift is to be taught something and to learn what is taught. The prophet edifies by teaching, and the church is edified by learning.

E. Ellis provides further evidence of the teaching dimension of the prophetic ministry. He has made the case that "the Lord says" formula quotations of the Old Testament represent prophetic teachings. (e.g., II Cor. 6:14-18), as do the "faithful sayings" of the Pastoral Letters (e.g., I Tim. 1:15). The former contain significant textual variations from all known Old Testament text forms, and commentary-elaboration-application of the cited passage. The authoritativeness of "the Lord says" as well as the exposition of Scripture fit the prophet-wise man understanding of prophecy that developed during the inter-testamental period. Old Testament expositions like that found in I Corinthians 2:6-16, which appears to be the work of pneumatics and which follow well-known patterns in Judaism, probably also represent the work of prophets.¹³

The educational nature of the prophet's role blurs the line between prophecy and teaching in Paul, just as in Acts. Both are church centered ministries. Prophets and teachers address primarily the church, not the world. The prophet's word of teaching, however, has a less fixed content than the teacher's. The teacher transmits and expounds the tradition of Scripture and the Gospel. He may do this at any time. The prophet may do some of the same, but he can only

speak when the Spirit inspires and commissions him. The inspiration of the Spirit is a critical, distinguishing mark of the prophet.

Thus the prophet may teach as the teacher does, or exhort as the brethren exhort (I Thess. 4:18; 5:11; II Cor. 13:11). He is not differentiated by a unique content or area of ministry, but by the manner of his ministry. He is concerned with the totality of the church's life, but he speaks only when moved by the Spirit to speak. That is why his teaching can be called a revelation, *apokolupsis*. In I Corinthians 14:26 "revelation" replaces "prophecy" alongside of "teaching," *didache*. Both before and after Paul has been speaking of prophets. The use of "revelation" instead of "prophecy" suggests Paul wants to stress the nature of prophecy as revelation in contrast to teaching. This, of course, does not exclude teaching as a ministry of the Spirit, but rather emphasizes that the content of prophecy comes through revelation rather than tradition as in teaching.¹⁴

The revelatory nature of the prophetic word, however, must not lead to any confusion with "tongues". The "revelation" of prophecy and the "knowledge" of teaching have a rational and understandable content. They belong to the domain of the mind (*nous*). "Tongues," by contrast, belong to the realm of the ecstatic and can enter the sphere of the mind only through interpretation, e.g., translation into rational categories.

The Prophetic Ministry to Unbelievers. While the prophet's ministry is church centered, it does impact unbelievers who come to church (I Cor. 14:24-25). The prophet may be an evangelist, but only if the unbeliever is present in the gathered church. The effects of the prophetic word on the non-Christian are powerful. He is convicted of sin or unfaith. Secondly, he is judged, he is called to eschatological account in anticipation of the final judgment. And, finally, the secrets of his inner self are exposed. In short, prophecy makes the unbeliever aware that he lives under the power of sin and calls him to repentance. The point is clear, the prophetic word is a powerful one. It not only upbuilds the church, but it also convicts the sinner.

The Regulation of the Prophet's Ministry. Precisely because the prophetic word is a powerful one that is based

on inspiration, the prophetic gift is subject to abuse. Therefore, it must be carefully regulated and tested. Three regulations are outlined in I Corinthians 13-14. First of all, the prophet must prophesy out of love and in love, or he is non-existent as a person and as a prophet, *outhen eimi* (13:2). Secondly, the prophetic ministry must edify the church (14:3-4). Thirdly, the prophetic ministry must be an orderly one (14:29-32). No more than two or three prophets shall speak in any given gathering of the church, and then one by one rather than simultaneously. If one prophet is speaking and a revelation is made to another, the speaker must stop and step aside for the other. This brief statement suggests a situation where a prophet adds comments of his own following the delivery of a prophetic word. Such teaching must yield to the prophetic word of a fellow-prophet. The underlying principle is stated in v. 32, "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." The present tense of the verb to be subject or subordinate, *hypotasso*, is important. The prophetic inspiration is continuously subject to the prophet's will and control. When a prophet decides to stop speaking, the prophetic Spirit complies. The rule that the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet became a normative criterion in differentiating true prophesy from false in the early Christian church. The lack of prophetic control became one of the significant bases for discerning Montanism, a second century movement of the Spirit and prophecy, as a false prophetic movement.¹⁵

The Testing of the Prophetic Inspiration. The prophet does not judge the validity of his own message. Rather, he is subject to a testing process that involves various levels of church discernment. At one level the prophetic words must be congruent with the message and teachings of the apostles, in this case the Apostle Paul (I Cor. 14:37-38). At another level the prophetic word must be tested by the other prophets in the church (I Cor. 14:29). Finally, in I Thessalonians 5:20-21 Paul commands the whole church to test the prophetic word. Only after a prophet's word has been tested in this process is it to be received as the word of God. This discernment process distinguishes the prophetic inspiration from the prophet's own impulses, and differentiates true prophecy from false.

The ability to discern between true and false assumes some truth criteria. The New Testament describes two such criteria to be used in the testing process. First, the prophetic word must be in agreement with the central affirmations of the church. Paul states in I Corinthians 12:3 that the confession "Jesus is Lord" is central to any verbal ministry of the Spirit. Only that prophecy is legitimate which acknowledges that Jesus is risen and exalted. In Romans 12:6 Paul asserts that the prophetic gift must be exercised in right relationship to the faith. The genitive, "of the faith," here is probably an objective genitive defining the content of the faith.¹⁶ The writer of I John adds an additional theological benchmark, the confession that Jesus Christ came in the flesh and is of God (4:1-3). Secondly, the prophetic word must build up the church. The edification of the believing community is a frequent test of prophecy (I Cor. 14:4, 31; cf. also I Jn. 3:11-18; 4:7-21).

It is significant that these criteria are dynamic in nature. They are not rules or regulations that can be checked off by one or two leaders in the church. Rather, they are guidelines and principles which require a continuous discernment process in the life of the church. The effectiveness of the prophetic ministry is tied to such an ongoing testing process. The vitality of both, the prophetic ministry and the testing process, is a sign of the vitality of the church.

This concern for testing prophetic inspiration continued in the early church after the time of the apostles. In *Didache* (ca. 110 A.D.) the writer outlines three criteria for discerning the true from the false prophet. First, does the prophet teach what Jesus taught? Is there theological congruence with the Messianic word? Secondly, does the prophet live what he teaches? Is there ethical congruence in the prophet's own life? Third, does the prophet personally gain from his message? If his message benefits others, and not himself, he is a true prophet. If he is the primary beneficiary he is false. Thus, for example, a prophet who asks for money that benefits himself is a false prophet.

The testing process of the prophetic ministry in the early church was very important because one of the most formidable challenges facing it was the problem of false or

counterfeit prophets. Pseudo-prophets are a problem in virtually all strata of the New Testament and in other early Christian literature. The church is warned repeatedly to be on guard of opponents, defectors or imitators of the true apostles and prophets. Such false prophets have a different spirit and proclaim a different Jesus and a different gospel (Gal. 1:6; II Cor. 11:4, 13ff.) They teach a theology of demons (I Tim. 4:1; cf. Jas. 3.15) that is characterized by greed, and asceticism or sexual licentiousness (Phil. 3:19; Rom 16:18; II Tim. 3:6; Jude 7-8; Rev. 2:20). Finally, they delimit and/or disparage the nature and salvific role of Jesus (I Cor. 12:3; II Peter 2:1-3; I John 4:1-3).

The problem of false prophecy in the early church was so great and uncertainties of discerning it so difficult that the prophetic gift itself gradually fell into disrepute and finally disuse.

The central issue involved in the testing process of the prophetic ministry is a delicate one. The prophetic spirit must be given freedom, but it also must be subject to safeguards and controls. If God has a word to speak to the church through a prophet the church must be ready to listen, but on the other hand, the church must not receive every word of prophecy as a word of God. Paul addresses this problem by relating the prophetic office to the church as a whole rather than to the cult or its leadership as in Judaism.¹⁷ Prophecy is not restricted to a few nor controlled by officials of the cult. All may prophecy because prophecy is a function of inspiration and not office. Prophets are people who have the gift, not people elected to an office. It is the church as a whole which recognizes the gift. Therefore, the church as a whole must control it by discernment of the prophetic word and by those whom it recognizes as prophets. Where this balance breaks down, false prophecy flourishes and the gift of prophecy dies.

The Prophet in Revelation

The nature of the prophetic ministry in the Apocalypse involves two questions, the prophetic role of the writer and the role of the prophets of the church.

The writer, John, is obviously writing prophecy,

(see 1.3). The book contains a mixture both in form and content of judgment on the church and salvation-word. It is a prophetic message that edifies the church through exhortation (*paraklesis*) and consolation (*paramuthia*).¹⁸

The author, however, nowhere is called a prophet. By the authority he claims and commands he stands closer to Jewish prophetic tradition than what we know of early Christian prophecy. The writer of Revelation stands above his community and is not subject to its testing and judgment. The correctness of his words are unquestionable for they are declared true by God himself (21:5; 22:6). John is unique in the early Christian prophetic movement, but he is, nevertheless, a prophet in the church. So great is his stature and authority as a prophet that his relation to the church seems more akin to the prophets of Israel or the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran.¹⁹

The writer may be an atypical prophet in the church, but what about the Christian prophets mentioned nine times in the visionary material of the book? D. Hill has made a special study of these passages, and proposes the following: 1) the prophets exist as an identifiable group in the church. 2) The prophets do not represent a separate class from the other members of the church who are all, in principle, prophets. 3) Prophecy concerns a function and not an office. 4) The prophetic ministry is continuous and congruent with the Pauline understanding of the prophetic gift.²⁰

II. THE MINISTRY OF THE TEACHER

The "gift lists" indicate the existence of a definable circle of teachers in the church. They always follow the prophets in the list of ministries. The teachers are spirit-endowed, just as the prophets, and their teaching must be intelligible if it is to be profitable to the church (I Cor. 14:6).

Antecedents to the Christian Teachers

The ancient world knew of two kinds of teachers, one who imparted knowledge and skill and one who taught how to live. Most teachers in the Greek world belonged to the first type, but not all. Socrates, for example, refused to be

called a "teacher" because he did not want to be associated with the profession. Teachers in Judaism were to give direction to life, especially in the way of God and His law. The method of education was imitation. The student learned by living in close association with the teacher and by carefully imitating his study of the law, his words, his actions and his life. Thus, the context for teaching and learning was "a community of scholars," a teacher and his students living and learning together and from each other.²¹

Teaching in the early church must be understood within the Jewish context. Jesus was the most immediate model for the early Christian teacher. He conducted a peripatetic school. He called a group of people, known as disciples or learners, to follow him and to learn from him by walking and working with him. Jesus looked and taught like a Jewish rabbi, but he did so with an authority and power that distinguished him from his contemporaries.²²

The Role of the Teacher

The ministry of teaching is specifically identified seldom in the New Testament. Acts reports teachers and prophets active in 13:1. Paul mentions teachers in all of his "ministry lists" (I Cor. 12:28-29; Rom. 12:7; Eph. 4:11). Paul identifies himself as a teacher (I Tim. 2:7; II Tim. 1:11). Church members are cautioned not to seek the ministry of teacher (James 3:1). If the ministry itself is seldom identified by name, the function or role is described often. Teachers in the early church did four things: 1) they taught young converts; 2) they transmitted the traditions of Jesus and the church; 3) they interpreted the traditions of Jesus and the apostles; 4) they taught and modelled morals in and for the church. The ministry of teaching is so important and central to the life of the church that it is the one ministry which deserves "full-time" status and economic remuneration (Gal. 6:6). The teacher deserved such support because his role necessitated education and time to read, study and interpret.

Since much has been written about the role of the teacher and since the role of the teacher is better understood than that of the prophet, each of the roles will be defined on-

ly briefly (bibliographic suggestions in the endnotes suggest the most accessible literature for further reading).

The Teacher of Young Converts. The call to repentance and faith in Christian preaching was followed by teaching about the Christian way. The evidence for such teaching is abundant. 1) It is evident in the baptismal texts. When Paul opposes cheap grace in Romans 6, he says, “do you not know” that in baptism believers were baptized into Christ’s death” (6:3). They had been taught this in connection with baptism. A few verses later Paul says the young converts were taught “the standard of teaching” (*typon didaches*) and committed themselves to it (v. 17). This “standard of teaching” was concerned with a new way of life contrasted to the old life of sin (vv. 17, 18). Other baptismal texts indicate a similar emphasis. They outline a teaching about “putting off” the elements of the old life and “putting on Christ” as a new mode of life (Col. 3:8-12; Eph. 4:22-24; I Pet. 2:1; James 1:21). Ephesians describes this baptismal instruction as “learning Christ” (4:21). The shape of what they learned is detailed in 5:3-6:18.²³

2) A second body of evidence for such teaching is a series of references in Paul’s letters to instructions he gave in all his churches at the very outset of their existence. For example, in I Corinthians 4:17 Paul says he taught the earliest converts of “my ways in Christ.” The phrase “my ways in . . .” is a rabbinic one that means “rules for living” according to a certain way, in this case the Jesus way. Paul gives some glimpses of the shape of this way in I Corinthians 7:17 when he says that “my rule in all the churches” is that “everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him.” Or, in 11:16 he indicates a teaching that a woman’s hair is given her for a covering, and in 14:33 that Christian worship must be characterized by order.

3) A third body of evidence for teaching young converts can be found in a host of specific texts in Paul’s letters where he reflects on his early teaching ministry to a church. For example, in I Thessalonians 2:11 Paul writes, “like a father with his children we exhorted you and encouraged you and charged you.” The three verbs suggest the profile of Paul’s teaching to the young church. A careful study of

the Thessalonian letters indicates many of the things Paul taught this new body of believers.

The Transmission of Tradition. One of the primary tasks of the teacher was to transmit the traditions of the faith. The teacher in the ancient world functioned as the transmitter of the tradition of a people to the next generation. The teacher in Judaism did this with great care to insure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the tradition.²⁴

The teacher in early Christianity was responsible to transmit three kinds of traditions in the church. 1) He passed on the Jewish scriptures as the Bible of the church. He did this both by copying the scriptures and by teaching them to members of the church.

2) The teacher transmitted the Jesus tradition, the stories about Jesus and the words of Jesus. Luke's prologue reports how many "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" "delivered to us" narratives about Jesus. The phrase "delivered to us" is a translation of a technical term (*paradidomi*) which means the careful transmission of a tradition. Luke's Gospel represents "an orderly account" of some of the narratives about and words of Jesus. Paul used the same technical term to report that he handed on the Jesus tradition, e.g. the tradition of the Last Supper (I Cor. 11:23ff.). Often the moral instructions Paul gave to new converts are drawn from the Jesus tradition (e.g. Rom. 7:10 = Mt. 5:32; I Cor. 9:14 = Lk. 10:7), and thus represent the transmission of the Jesus word. We know from Papias, a mid-second century church father, that this process of oral transmission of Jesus' words continued into the second century.²⁵

3) The teacher transmitted the confession, faith and ethical norms of the early church to new churches and new generations of Christians. Paul, for example, states in I Corinthians 15:3 that he is passing on the tradition of Jesus' resurrection appearances as they were transmitted to him. In I Corinthians 11:2 he commends the Corinthian Christians for maintaining the traditions he transmitted to them. He exhorts the Thessalonians to "hold fast the tradition which you have been taught" (II Thess 2:15). The Pastoral Letters are full of exhortations from Paul, the teacher, to Timothy and Titus to hold fast the traditions he delivered to

them and to transmit these traditions to others so they in turn may teach still others. We see here four generations of teachers concerned with the transmission of Christian tradition, those who taught Paul, Paul himself, Timothy and Titus, and the young teachers being instructed by them. The continued and correct transmission of the faith is a special concern in the Pastorals because false teachings and traditions are being set forth and transmitted. The viability and integrity of the Christian church depends on the transmission of the correct tradition about Jesus and the apostolic faith.²⁶

The Interpreters of Tradition. The teachers did not merely transmit the traditions of the church. They were also pre-eminently the interpreters of the tradition. Thus they interpreted the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures in light of the Christ event. The teachers were exegetes; they expounded the meaning of the scriptures and applied them to the life of the church. Paul summarizes this task well in Romans 15:4, "for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction . . ." His persistent and creative use of the Jewish scriptures is testimony to this teaching ministry.²⁷

The teachers of the church also interpreted the Jesus tradition. They applied the Jesus word to the life of the church (see I Cor 11 and 15). They wrote the gospels, each of which represent a distinct and unique interpretation of the meaning of Jesus for the church and the world.

The Modeling of Morality. The teacher in Judaism, we saw earlier, was concerned not only with verbal instruction and cognitive learning. He was equally concerned with teaching by example and learning by imitation. Teachers in the early church followed this Jewish and Jesus mode of teaching as well. Thus, Paul calls his converts five times to imitate him. In I Thessalonians, one of the earliest letters written by Paul, he observes that the young church "learned from us how to live" (4:1). He calls them to further growth by reminding them of the lifestyle of the apostolic team, "you know what kind of men we proved to be for your sake, for you became imitators of us and the Lord" (1:5-6). Throughout the Letter he specifies how he and his associates modelled Christian ethics—they worked hard with their

hands day and night (2:9), they encouraged and cared for fellow Christians as a father treats his children (4:18; 5:11).

The theme of imitation continues in Paul's later letters. The Galatian, Corinthian and Philippian Christians are called to "imitate me" (Gal 4:12; I Cor. 4:14-17; Phil. 3:15-17). In I Corinthians 10:31-11:1 Paul adds "imitate me as I imitate Christ." The imitation of Christ does not mean some abstract example or memory of the past, but imitation as modelled in the life of Paul.

A study of these "imitation texts" suggests several important observations. 1) Paul urges "imitation" of himself only to those churches which he has founded. Imitation presupposes a relationship in history. A leader can model only for Christians whom he knows and who know him. 2) Imitation of Paul is a function of having accepted his gospel. People can imitate Paul because he has converted them and taught them some theology about God and his people. While Paul insists that his theology is essentially the same as that of the other apostles, he is aware that his preaching and way of life have their own distinctive modalities. Good theology is incarnated theology. Imitation is possible when theology is both taught and modelled for a specific group of people. 3) Paul's call to imitation is a call to mediated imitation. It springs from Paul's authentic representation of the Christian faith, and from the perceived need to model the faith for his converts so they can "test" (*dokimazein*) the leading of the Spirit in their lives and conduct. 4) The calls to imitation have an ethical-imperative objective. They are linked with concerns for specific kinds of ethical behavior.

Paul's concern for teaching by example extends beyond new converts. He also asks his former associates and current teachers in the church to continue following his example. Timothy is warned to "continue in what you have believed and learned, knowing well by whom you were taught" (II Tim. 3:14). Timothy was taught a clear pattern of life and conduct; "You have followed my teaching, my conduct, my goal of life, my fidelity, patience, love and endurance through persecutions and sufferings in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra" (II Tim. 3:10-11). But Paul demands even more. He instructs Timothy to hand on to others what

he has learned from Paul, including the modeling (*typos*) for the believers of love, faith and purity (I Tim.4:11). Titus, likewise, is to be a model for the young men in his work (2:7). Paul models for Timothy and Titus who in turn model for their students. What we have in the early church is not only Pauline theology, but Pauline modeling of the Christian faith. Both are equally important and both are to be transmitted to the third generation of Christian teachers by the second generation.²⁸

CONCLUSIONS

There were two teaching types and styles in the early church. The prophet taught by the inspiration of God. The teacher taught by transmitting and interpreting the traditions of God's people and God's special messengers for his people, e.g., Moses, Jesus and Paul.

There are two teaching types and styles in the church today. The experientialist teaches by sharing his/her experience, his/her autobiography. The teacher teaches by exegesis and applying the Scriptures.

What the church today needs is a renewal of both forms of early Christian teaching. Teachers we have, but prophets we lack. Hans Küng reflects on the consequences of a spiritless church. Such a church "declines and becomes a spiritless organization; outwardly everything may seem all right, things run smoothly, according to the plan and along ordered paths . . . but inwardly it will be a place where the Spirit can no longer blow when and where He wills."²⁹

The church can survive without prophets, as it has for many generations, but it will not thrive. The church always needs people who genuinely speak from God; it always needs a living word. The personal testimony may warm the heart. Only a true word from God upbuilds the church.

The church needs prophets. But before the church can have prophets the pattern of church life must be reshaped. The reshaping necessary to encourage and permit the renewal of the prophetic ministry must include the following: (1) the renewal of the communal theology and experience of the church. The church has erred to view prophecy as an individualistic gift. Prophecy is only and always a

ministry within the context of genuine Christian community. Whenever we understand church as a religious social contract of individuals who have "gotten right" with God and who want Christian fellowship there will be no prophetic ministry. Whenever we understand church as the people of God in the world outside of which there are no gifts of the Spirit, there will take place a renewal of the prophetic gift.

(2) The renewal of an eschatological consciousness in the church. The gift of prophecy is an eschatological reality; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit for the people of God living between the times. Whenever the church lives out of the present, when it beds down in history, there can be no prophetic word. Whenever the church lives out of the age to come and thus fundamentally challenges the basic assumptions and ethos of an age, it exercises the gifts of the eschatological reality given her by her Lord.

(3) The readiness to consider seriously new insights of the Holy Spirit. The Protestant preoccupation with "the letter" has "quenched the Spirit." God has spoken a clear and authoritative Word in Scripture, and above all in Jesus. But Jesus gave his people his Spirit to continue speaking and witnessing to him, and to continually guide them in the world. The church's affirmation of biblical authority must be balanced by an openness to the continuing word and work of the Spirit among God's people.

(4) The re-institution of the testing process of the prophetic word. Not every prophetic word is a word from God; in fact, many prophetic words are merely and only words from men and women, even men and women who speak out of demonic powers. The prophetic word must be examined, it must be tested by other prophets, the teachers and the whole church. Genuine and normative biblical authority will be revitalized by such a testing process in the church. The testing of the new and living word from God by the written Word would produce new commitment to live in and out of the Word of God.

The renewal of the testing process in the church will make it clear that there are no self-confessed prophets in the church. In the New Testament no one calls himself/herself a

prophet. Prophecy is a gift discerned by the church and exercised in the church for the edification of the church. All self-styled prophets are by definition false prophets.

If the church needs a renewal of prophecy it also needs a renewal of teaching. The one without the other is disastrous. Prophecy without teaching leads to fanaticism just as teaching without prophecy breeds dogmatism. Prophecy gives vitality, but teaching preserves continuity. Teaching is an indispensable complement to prophecy. The normative role of tradition—the Word of God to his people via Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Paul—sets the boundaries and establishes the criteria for regulating and testing the living prophetic word.³⁰

The renewal of the teaching gift likewise calls for reshaping in the life of the church. I suggest only several things. 1) Genuine biblical study, preaching and teaching must replace the current preoccupation with inwardness. 2) And, concomitantly, the myopic vision of the “now generation” must once again give way to a sense of tradition and history. How I feel right now is not unimportant, but it is less significant than how God has moved among his people in history. The existential needs of my neighbor and/or my own existential needs are not unimportant, but they cannot replace reflection on the long history of God’s dealing with and words to His people. My history happens to go back to Abraham, not just yesterday or the last bad rap. The history that begins with Abraham tells me that God is for his people; He is faithful to his people and saves them even though they experience trials and tribulations. The renewal of teaching calls the church back to this long history of God’s relationship with his people. The flip side of that history is to put the present into perspective, to reduce the significance of the moment.

3) The linkage of teaching and “imitation” or “modeling” is critical for the renewal of teaching. The transmission and interpretation of tradition must be fleshed out in lives that model the truths passed on and expounded. No one wants a return to the double standard of the yesteryear in which “laity” and “clergy” lived by different ethical norms. All Christians live by the same norm. But unless the leader-

ship in the church is called upon and can embody the theology it proclaims, few will understand what it looks like in real life. Teaching that is worthy of imitation calls for teaching that models.

NOTES

- 1 See my "New Testament Patterns of Church Leadership," *Seminary Lecture Series*, 1 (September, 1979), 4, for a comparative listing of the ministries.
- 2 See J.H. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Abingdon, 1979), 250-283; *Interpretation*, 32 (January, 1978) 3-68, for an introduction to the prophetic movement and additional bibliography.
- 3 See Millar Burrows, "Prophecy and the Prophets at Qumran," *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, ed. B.W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (Harper and Row, 1962), 223-232; E.E. Ellis, "Prophecy in the Early Church," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume* (Abingdon, 1976), pp. 700-701; and F.F. Bruce, *The Teacher of Righteousness* (Tyndale, 1975).
- 4 See E.E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 133. See also D. Hill, "Christian Prophets as Teachers or Instructors in the Church," *Prophetic Vocation in the New Testament and Today*, ed. J. Panagopoulos, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum*, 45 (Brill, 1977), 125; and D. Foord, "Prophecy in the New Testament," *Reformed Theological Review*, 31 (1972), 13, 14.
- 5 See, for example, G. Friedrich, "Prophetes," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6 (Eerdmans, 1968), 854.
- 6 Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, p. 142.
- 7 See J. Reiling, *Hermas and Christian Prophecy. Supplements to Novum Testamentum*, 37, (Brill, 1973), 146ff.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 27ff.
- 9 See J. Reiling, "Prophecy, the Spirit and the Church," *Prophetic Vocation in the New Testament and Today*, ed. J. Panagopoulos, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum*, 45 (Brill, 1977), 66, 67. See also E. Schweitzer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, SBT, 32, (SCM, 1961), 89ff., 139ff.; and H. von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of*

- the First Three Centuries* (Adam and Black, 1969), pp. 30ff.
- 10 G. Braumann, "Exhort," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, I (Zondervan, 1975), 569ff.
 - 11 G. Braumann, "Comfort," *Ibid.*, pp. 328ff.
 - 12 See H.W. Beyer, "catecheo," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 (Eerdmans, 1965), 638ff.
 - 13 See Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, pp. 45ff.; 80ff.; 147ff.; 182ff.
 - 14 See Reiling, "Prophecy," p. 70; and Foord, "Prophecy," pp. 18-20.
 - 15 See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 16.7;17.2
 - 16 See W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago, 1957), p. 56.
 - 17 See J.D.G. Dunn, "New Wine in Old Wine Skins: VI. Prophet," *Expository Times*, 85 (1973), 7, 8.
 - 18 See Hill, "Christian Prophets," pp. 118ff.
 - 19 See D. Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John," *New Testament Studies*, 18 (1972), 410ff.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 406ff.
 - 21 See H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*(Mentor Books, 1964); W. Barclay, *Train Up A Child; Educational Ideals in the Ancient World* (Westminster, 1959); B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Gleerup, 1964); K.H. Rengstorf, "didaskalos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2 (Eerdmans, 1964), 148ff.; J.A. Grasse, *The Teacher in the Primitive Church and the Teacher Today* (University of Santa Clara Press, 1973), pp. 3ff.
 - 22 See R.P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Eerdmans, 1968); R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1975); S. Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Gleerup, 1978); D. Daube, "Responsibilities of Master and Disciples in the Gospels," *New Testament Studies*, 19 (1972), 1-15; K. Wegenast, "Teach," *Dictionary of New Testament*

- Theology*, 3 (Zondervan, 1978), 767f.; Rengstorf, "didaskalos," *TDNT*, 2, 153ff.
- 23 See, for example, C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (Harper, 1964); R.H. Mounce, *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching* (Eerdmans, 1960); R.C. Worley, *Preaching and Teaching in the Earliest Church* (Westminster, 1967); G. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth and New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge University Press, 1974); I.A. Muirhead, *Education in the New Testament* (Association Press, 1965); C. Brown, "The Structure and Content of the Early Kerygma," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 (Zondervan, 1978), 57ff.
- 24 See Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*.
- 25 See B. Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Gleerup, 1964); B. Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Fortress, 1979); F.F. Bruce, *Tradition Old and New* (Zondervan, 1970), pp. 29ff.; Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth and New Testament Preaching*; Wegenast, "Teach," *DNTT*, 3, 772ff.
- 26 See, for example, A.M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (Westminster, 1961); V.H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Eerdmans, 1963); J.W. Fraser, *Jesus and Paul: Paul as Interpreter of Jesus* (Marçhan Manor Press, 1974).
- 27 See, for example, E.E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1957); R.N. Longnecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Eerdmans, 1975); Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*; Bruce, *Tradition*; Fraser, *Jesus and Paul*.
- 28 See D.M. Stanley, *The Apostolic Church in the New Testament* (Newman, 1967), 371ff.; Grassi, *The Teacher*, pp. 57ff.; 85ff.; Muirhead, *Education*, pp. 49ff.; W. Bauder, "Imitate," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1 (Zondervan, 1975), 490f.
- 29 H. Küng, *The Church* (Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 433.
- 30 S.H. Greeven, "Propheten, Lehrer, Vorsteher bei Paulus," *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 44 (1952), 29.