

## Professional or Pastor Teacher

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### Introduction

There is a lot of misunderstanding among teachers about their role are they professionals or are they really pastoral carers. It is my opinion that Christian teachers and leaders need to go beyond professionalism without any reduction in their standards. That is they should have the highest professional standards but not adopt some of the attitudes and expectations of professionalism.

#### ***What are professional standards?***

Firstly there is a recognition that the calling or work in which they are involved demands that teachers are equipped to engage in and negotiate a process of ongoing professional learning.

Secondly there are standards of professional competence. Professionally competent teachers must demonstrate successful teaching and meet the standards for professional competence including punctuality, confidentiality, work ethic, standards of care for students fair and just relationships with others, effective participation in the staff team and willingness to carry out allocated responsibilities.

Thirdly teachers need to have and maintain professional accomplishment. Teachers need to be accomplished and successful practitioners, recognised as having in-depth knowledge and pedagogy. Finally they need to be committed teachers who can articulate a vision of education to their students, peers, the profession and the wider community.

#### ***What is Professionalism***

*Professionalism* involves not only maintaining professional standards but also maintaining certain attitudes in regard to their work. In commenting on these attitudes I am not intending to be critical of them. Indeed they have served professions well and have been worked out over a period of many years. However for teachers in a Christian school some of these attitudes need to be challenged and replaced by more pastoral attitudes.

Professional attitudes commonly held include assumptions of exclusivity of expertise, a client relationship, of remunerated service and a limitation of involvement within the working week and the work environment.

The assumption that the professional is an expert if accepted tends to disempower others in the community including parents and even to some extent students. A client relationship can also deny a proper role in learning for students and lead to a failure to recognise what Fowler calls the “office” of students. It can also commercialise the relationship which can lead parents to believe that there is no need for them to be involved. While it is important that teachers be properly paid Christian teachers should work not because they are paid but because they are called by the Lord. The Christian community should remunerate them at a level that recognises their needs and the worth of their service Christian teachers should not regard themselves as hired people (John 10:12) rather they should see themselves as under-shepherds in the service of the Chief Shepherd.

*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:2 – 4 NIV)*

The professional attitude sets clearly defined limits that are assumed in a client relationship. The Christian teacher will, of course need boundaries to their service but their relationship is not primarily one of empathetic caring but one of love for students and a willingness to serve them selflessly. Boundaries and limits are needed so that teachers do not over commit themselves and thus make themselves ineffective through stress and burn-out.

1 Peter 5 makes it clear that people who are under-shepherds should:

- Work because they have a sense of call not just to earn a living
- They should be motivated not by good salaries but by a desire to serve the lord and others.
- They should not serve because they like telling people what to do but because they want to be examples to their students,

## **TEACHING CHRISTIANLY**

*“Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” Matthew 13:52*

This little parable that Jesus gave us, I call the parable of the Christian teacher. In it teachers are shown as hosts to their students. They bring out from their storerooms new treasure as well as old treasure. To have treasure the householders must store it up. This involves study and planning. To have new treasure they must keep on seeking for treasure. This involves learning, researching reading and praying and depending on the Holy Spirit.

Henri Nouwen (1991) talks of the need for those in ministry to go beyond professionalism to become pastoral. In doing so he proposes two models of teaching; one which is based on a professional approach which he sees as a violent form of teaching and the other based on a more pastoral approach which he calls redemptive. This paper only seeks to summarise his views.

## Two models of teaching

### *Teaching as a violent process*

- **Competitive**
- **Unilateral**
- **Alienating**

### *Teaching as a redemptive process*

- **Evocative**
- **Bilateral**
- **Actualising**

### ***Teaching as a violent process when ...***

Nouwen believes that education is violent when it is a *competitive* process. This is seen in the way that students look at their fellow students and their teachers in the way they expect to be graded so that everyone can see how each is doing compared to others. It is also seen in the importance that is given to the preparation for and the taking exams and the importance given to requirements set to gain university entrance. And because exam results can determine their future they are driven by fear. The competitive attitude can even invade students' free time making them feel guilty when they are not working

He also sees it as a violent process because it is *a unilateral or one way process*. He believes teaching is unilateral because at the heart of most teaching is the assumption that the teacher is competent and the student is not; that education is all about trying to make one who is not competent more competent and one who is ignorant more informed. The teacher is strong because he "knows" and the student is weak and does not "know" This unilateral process disempowers the student and tends to destroy community because it destroys true cooperative and collaborative learning and action.

Nouwen believes that education is *an alienating process* when it alienates the students by directing their eyes away from themselves, their relationships and the world in which they live towards the future where the real things are supposed to happen in "the real world". This view of teaching sees education as a "preparation for life." However many find it irrelevant because learning is directed towards scoring grades in final examinations and those who know they cannot "make the grade" feel totally alienated from their education. It also alienates the students by directing their eyes away from themselves, their relationships and the world in which they live towards the future where the real things are supposed to happen in "the real world".

### ***Teaching as a redemptive process when ...***

Nouwen proposes a way of teaching that is redemptive. To be *a redemptive process* he believes that teaching must be evocative, bilateral and actualising.

Teaching is *an evocative process* when it calls out from the students the God-given potential within the students (Ephesians 4:7) and when teachers allow and encourage all students to use their distinctive giftedness in a trusting and open classroom. To teach evocatively the teacher must be able to see the gifts and abilities, and the different learning styles of students and be willing to welcome the ideas and to encourage the passions that God has created in students and to call these out from them. They do this as they believe in them, encourage them; exhort them to stretch themselves and to use talents and skills they may previously have been unaware of. Teachers can do this when they are truly hospitable and are thus open to

the students along with their parents, when they know their students and love them and pray for them.

Nouwen maintains that for teaching to be is a redemptive process it must be *bilateral* in the sense that both the teacher and students are both involved in learning. Where teachers encourage discussion and sharing of ideas and experiences students will grow to true maturity (Ephesians 4: 12-13). This can happen in a Christian learning community where the “office” of both teacher and students is recognised and where the emphasis is on nurturing the communal life of the members of the learning community and providing a flexible, open organisational structure that makes room for spontaneous interactions and does not seek to control all that happens.

Where teaching is bilateral it is neither teacher-centred or student centred but Christ centred. In bilateral learning the subject itself speaks to the community (Palmer, 2007 Chapter V) as it is understood as part of God’s creative and redemptive purpose. The subject is thus addressed rather than simply taught or researched.

Nouwen also believes that teaching is redemptive when it involves *a process of actualising*. He call this *actualising* because it is a way of teaching that makes the learning real for the students and the students are involved in it and see it as being relevant to themselves and thus of actual value to themselves in the here-and-now. Teachers make the learning real for students when they are involved in it and see it as being relevant; when students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject and when the future becomes a part of the present. This can occur when all the students work together using their gifts to build up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Nouwen (1991 Page 14) summarises the importance of redemptive teaching saying

*To build a better world, the beginnings of that world must be visible in daily life. There is no reason to expect much to happen in the future if the signs of hope are not made visible in the present. We cannot speak about ways to bring about peace and freedom if we cannot draw from our own experiences of peace and freedom here and now. We cannot commit ourselves to work for justice and love in tomorrow's society if we cannot discover the seeds of it in the relationships we engage ourselves in today. A non-violent world cannot be born out of a violent teaching process any more than justice can be born out of jealousy, mildness out of cruelty, or love out of hate. But when schools are places where community can be experienced, where people can live together without fear of each other, and learning can be based on a creative exchange of experiences and ideas, then there is a chance that those who come from them will have an increasing desire to bring about in the world what they experienced during their years of formation. In this sense, schools are not training camps to prepare people to enter into a violent society but places where redemptive forms of society can be experimented with and offered to the modern world as alternative styles of life. Teaching then can become a way of creating a new life-style in which people are able to relate to each other in a basically non-violent way. And the teacher himself, in trying to live this way, will discover that learning itself is a way of life that goes far beyond the classroom situation, that it creates new relationships that do not finish when students leave, that it is a process that asks for continuation and is not limited by grades and degrees, and that it is a challenge to an ongoing renewal of one's style of life.*

It can be seen that what Nouwen calls *redemptive teaching* covers the three cornerstones of temple building studied earlier, or the three measures of growth referred to in Ephesians 4:1-16. Redemptive teaching will be powerful in the life of

students as the teacher “creates a space where the community of truth is practiced” (Palmer 1993).

Sadly in most schools the paradigm of teaching is what Nouwen describes as a *violent process* and while some students learn well, damage is done to many, often the majority of students. This is especially the case in developing countries where the process fails to prepare the majority of students for a productive life of service.

The ideal of teaching redemptively in a covenant or Christian learning community may never be fully realised and, in fact the very idea will according to Nouwen attract resistance (1991 page 15).

### ***Dealing with resistance to learning redemptively***

Nouwen believes that many people do not want the insight of learning and teaching redemptively. They do not want to come to the light but prefer the comfort of old (and often darker) ways of teaching. They thus have a blind spot to what the Spirit might want to teach them. For example students may have long and sometimes fierce discussions about justice and equality while hating their teacher or pastor and ignoring the needs of fellow students. Over-weight and over-fed people talk about the atrocities of hunger and world poverty while maintaining their safe way of life and only making token gestures to help.

Why is there this resistance? Nouwen suggest there are three blind spots that are at the root of the blindness towards redemptive teaching and learning; a wrong supposition, a false pressure and a horror of self-encounter.

#### **A wrong supposition**

Nouwen claims that many teachers and students still operate under wrong idea that it is better to give than receive. He says “It is difficult to recognise the meaning of Christ’s saying ‘there is more happiness in giving than receiving’ (Acts 20:35) because it is difficult to confess that perhaps the greatest service we can offer to our fellow man is to receive and allow *him* the happiness of giving.”

We enjoy giving to others because we are blessed in the act we are often reluctant to receive because we are too proud to accept that we need the help of others. A gift only becomes a gift when it is received. If teachers truly want to help their students and to bless them they need to discover the potential of their students and allow them to give those gifts. Ephesians 4:7 reminds us that grace is given to each person according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Students grow when they discover that they have offered something new and of value to their teacher or their fellow students. Teachers would be much better teachers if students were willing to draw the best out of them. As long as we hang on to our blind spot that giving is our first task our blindness will not be healed.

#### **A false pressure**

A second cause of blindness is the modern educational process that forces people to work for grades and for higher degrees and more academic rewards. As undue emphasis is placed on academic rewards and intellectual accomplishments people have less time for personal development gaining insights from each other’s experience. The academic emphasis means that many very gifted people in non-academic areas fail to achieve their potential and society is worse off for the fact and

so are the people. A society that ill prepares a majority of their population for an effective and productive life has misunderstood the purpose of schools and schooling.

### **A horror of self-encounter**

Nouwen believes that most people find it difficult to look at their own situation and realise as humans we and our students are “both naked, powerless, destined to die, and in the final analysis, totally alone and unable to save each other or anyone else” because we do not understand our weakness we hide ourselves from reality and allow ourselves to be driven by the most trivial desires and by unworthy ambitions, often not admitted but still very powerful. Nouwen (1991 page 19) sums up this situation saying:

*Only if students and teachers are willing to face this painful reality can they free themselves for real learning. For only in the depths of his loneliness, when he has nothing to lose any more and does not cling any longer to life as to an inalienable property, can a man become sensitive to what really is happening in his world and be able to approach it without fear. This conversion, which is not a sudden event but an ongoing process, is the most important prerequisite for arriving at redemptive insights and removing our many blind spots.*

If we are to learn to teach redemptively we must learn from Jesus who did not cling to his rights but became like us, one of the many who had to humble himself to live and to learn as a human even as a helpless child.

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8 NIV)*

Nouwen (1991 page 20) concludes saying:

*“Only he who is not afraid to show his weakness and who allows himself to be touched by the tender hand of the Teacher will be able to be a real student. For if education is meant to challenge the world, it is Christ Himself who challenges teachers as well as students to give up their defenses and to become available for real growth.*

## **Bibliography**

Nouwen H. J. M. (1991) *Creative Ministry*, New York, Image Books Doubleday