

Institute of Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

THE FIVE-FOLD ROLE OF A CHRISTIAN TEACHER

By

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1. Introduction

A job – description

She or he has the task to lead a group of hikers consisting of Olympic athletes and handicapt persons through heavy fog lingering over a big swamp in north-south direction keeping them in good mood and bringing them successfully of course to three different target places at the same time.

(Author is unknown)

This job- description reveals that being a teacher is a challenging task. It involves practicing different roles. Sociology understands roles as the sum of expectations a to a human being to behave in a certain manner.¹ So in the case of a teacher he is expected to teach and not to read his newspaper during lessons and that he is expected to give grades according to criteria and not just throwing a dice. Teachers are acting out at least four major roles in order to succeed in their work. These roles can be defined as Classroom manager, Person of Competence, Motivator, and Model.

The overall aim of teaching is Education. Hartmut von Hentig, a German philosopher of education tried to define it in one sentence: „*Die Sachen klären – die Menschen stärken!*“ – In English it would read as follows: *Clarify the subjects – strengthen human beings.*

How could one combine this given definition with biblical views in application of the Christian educator and their fulfilment of educational roles? In what way are the roles unique from a Christian perspective? Is there an additional role to these four? My purposes in writing the

¹ Brockhaus Enzyklopädie, No. 18, Mannheim: F. A. Brockhaus, 1992, p. 493.

following essay are to examine these very questions. Thereby this essay will focus on the secondary and tertiary level of education.

The first part of this essay pertains to the conceptual character of educational roles from a Christian perspective. The second part will be more experiential oriented as different classroom-situations are reported and examined in relation to the diverse roles of a teacher.

2. The five roles from a Christian viewpoint

2.1. The Teacher as a Classroom – Manager

Although this role sounds rather technical, it has some vital functions. To begin with, a classroom - manager provides for correct procedures. This includes handing out an outline of a planned course, giving information about the requirements such as testing and grading and dealing with assignments and absence.

Providing a good setting in which the students can learn, is a goal applying to all teachers regardless of their philosophical or religious background. From a Christian view the way the teacher deals with these technical matters he can make clear that he views students as beings who are unique in the Creator Gods eyes and that he loves them (John 3,16).²

A classroom-manager also deals with discipline. This includes setting rules, applying them in different situations, being consequent and transparent in disciplinary actions. But this responsibility concerning discipline is not a purpose of its own. Disciplinary actions are not for the purposes of displaying and enjoying authority on the side of the teacher. Discipline in a Christian sense has a serving character. It serves to support the learning process and the development of the students personalities.

² The Bible, King James Version, London: Collin's Clear Type Press, 1982. All Bible quotations are taken from this version.

From a Christian view discipline should not be acted out in a punitive but in a redemptive and noble way. It expresses the reality of God's love to each individual and his will to reconcile and to renew.

Disciplinary actions must make sense. They, with other influences, should lead to better insights towards revision of attitudes and behaviour so that the students may feel, as far as possible, that they are being treated in *just* way. In this context it is important to be predictable for students ³

From a Christian perspective there is good reason to view and to treat them as individuals who are loved by God who are of a unique value to Him (1. John 4,8.9) ⁴.

The challenge is to show a Christian attitude even if disturbances come up unexpected and at the wrong time. Here our role as a class-manager is put to the test.

To mention a third task in being a classroom- manager, it requires a knowledge of group dynamics. Here Group dynamics speaks of a knowledge about the characteristics of groups and how one leads a group in a way that it can work effectively and reach its goals. Groups have to be considered as organisms which grow in quality or can fall apart. The teacher should be aware that they undergo certain stages. His/her influence, way of acting and leading are decisive for the survival of the group.⁵ A Christian responsibility lies in a teacher's capability in group leadership as well as ability to avoid embarrassing individuals which make up this group.⁶

2.2. The Teacher as a Person of Competence

There are some good reasons to show excellence in the transmission and presentation of contents especially for a Christian teacher.

³ Rolf Dubs: *Lehrerverhalten*, Zürich: Verlag de Schweizerischen kaufmännischen Verbandes, 1995, p. 369.

⁴ The Bible, *Ibid*.

⁵ Irene Klein: *Gruppenleiten ohne Angst*, München: J. Pfeiffer, 1984, p.

⁶ There are obviously some overlappings with leadership qualities. I regard being a leader as a general role of being a teacher.

Firstly because “everything you teach is related to God and His creation. Therefore, every subject is a great subject that can be viewed with awe, wonder and reverence. Using a powerful metaphor, the poet Robert Frost expands on this perspective and also provides an implied response. “We dance around in a ring and suppose. But the secret sits in the middle and knows.”⁷ So a Christian teacher is far more than just a mediator of a certain knowledge. It is not enough to teach the students who Einstein, Napoleon and Mona Lisa was, but to open their eyes for contexts and encouraging them to ask for meaning from a Christian viewpoint.

(And by the way it’s really difficult to teach who Mona Lisa really was!)

As an important precondition, the teacher must learn to know how his subject, relates to the living God and his creation. Only then he can be described as competent. But competent should not be understood as something static. On the contrary, it is an ongoing process. The teacher is never in the position to declare to have absolute competence in this or that subject, due to the progression and the interrelatedness of all knowledge.

Secondly because they are made in the image of God they are challenged to use their intellectual, social and emotional powers He has given to us to develop them. The students should not only memorize content but work with it and they should exercise their mental power of judgement. - Didactics and Methodology get in touch with the Holy.

Thirdly one basic reason striving for competence is that the trust the students put in the teacher shall not be destroyed. At least it is a concrete expression of Christian love to present to them topics and concepts in a profound and diligent manner. The Apostle Luke is a good biblical example for a teacher who is concerned with diligence. In the foreword of his Gospel he explains the reason for giving his report about Jesus (Luke 1, 1-4).

⁷ R. M. Coupland: A Challenge for a new Teacher, Journal of Adventist education, Oct./Nov. 2002, p. 41.

Fourthly and finally the Christian teacher shows a responsible attitude by providing the students with knowledge of different kind and even more importantly with tools and methods they can work with in the jobs they get after their study-time.

2.3. The Teacher as a Motivator

Motivation is a crucial factor in the learning process. As a motivator the Christian teacher needs to be trained in the strategies and techniques of motivation just as any other non-Christian teacher. In the last decades there have been developed various motivation theories.

Before applying them the Christian teacher should be familiar with the preconditions for implementing motivation strategies. These include a *supportive atmosphere, contents which make sense for the learner and goals of learning*. There are at least four major motivation strategies:

1. Promote success expectations to show the students that there is a link between personal effort and success in learning. In doing this the teacher plays a vital role by acting as a modelling person who helps with the search for a better solution, who reinforces and encourages first stages of successes and focuses on the efforts and the success of the individual rather than comparing the success with those of others.
2. Extrinsic strategies deal with the practical use of learning efforts. Teachers are well advised to communicate to their students repeatedly for what they can use what they have learned and how it can be applied.
3. Intrinsic strategies aim at deepening the inner motivation. Here the teacher for instance needs to show the wider context of that what has to be learned. This includes introducing students with thinking strategies appropriate to the assignments. It is important that at the end of a certain learning process there stands a product which the student can identify with.

There is a fourth strategy which promotes the motivation to learn in general.

A behaviour of the teacher which fosters the motivation to learn is a key-factor in this. Intensity of teaching, enthusiasm and the presentation of a topic in a new and unexpected way can stimulate motivation. This could be reached by arousing cognitive conflicts. Moreover an interest should be aroused for a meta-cognitive consciousness of learning strategies.⁸

Christian teachers draw as much attention as possible to these strategies. They recognize them in their diversity as a clear hint for the holistic character of the motivation issue. From a Christian viewpoint it makes no sense to use these strategies simply as tools to reach short-term success.

Instead they link them to the belief that man is created in the image of God. (1. Moses 3,1)

Although this image is distorted it can be restored. This basic belief guides all motivating efforts. It opens up a wide horizon for the motivation task.

Secondly we should not forget the work of the *Spirit* and his impact on perceiving things, situations and persons. The reflection on each individual student under the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit would help to get away from prejudices and early-fixed judgements about students and their learning capabilities.

Another impact of the Spirit is the awareness of the great number of talents and gifts the Holy Spirit has given to people (1. Cor. 12,4). In this context the Christian teacher is fascinated by the idea of discovering and promoting abilities and personality as such.

As Christian teachers we are aware of the spiritual powers and their enormous motivating impact. If a teacher is driven by them, he will be able to keep up *his* motivating attitude. Sadly enough too often teachers loose their original idealistic motivations and end up frustrated. A Christian motivation is a *lasting one* because it is not based on self-centered motivations or ideological ideas but on an unique understanding of the human being as created by God enhanced with enormous potential to learn and to grow.

⁸ R. Dubs: *Lehrerverhalten*, p. 382.

2.4. The Teacher as a Model

From a humanistic view there are six dimensions of a teacher-personality: *authenticity* which means not to hide behind facades, to show feelings in a controlled way and to practice honesty to yourself by admitting that you prefer some students to others. The second dimension is *care* in the sense of a caring relation. The third dimension is *respect*, that includes trust in the students and a true effort for weaker students. The fourth dimension is *openness for learning*. The fifth dimension is *predictability*, which means that the teaching person is transparent for instance when it comes to the shape of tests and exams. The sixth dimension is *empathy*, which means that the teacher is trying to see things from the students view.⁹ These dimensions emphasize the personality of the teacher. This corresponds to the Christian perspective of teaching in which the example of the teacher is underlined. According to Colossians 3,10.11 he (also the Christian teacher) has “put on the new man, who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, when there is neither Greek nor Jew...”

We teachers are representatives of the Master Teacher Christ (2. Cor. 5,20). In harmony with this the Apostle Paul points out that “whatever you do in word and deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Col. 3,17) That includes a wide range of activities attached to our roles as a teacher and the above dimensions which are meaningful in all the roles of the teacher. It is the way we enter a classroom, we comment on students contributions, we approach a topic, we deal with questions may they be provocative or strange, or we grade, or admit to having made a mistake.

However the reality of being a new creature doesn't absolve teachers from developing a self-critical attitude – in respect to the hidden problematic roles they play. Psychological research tells us that teachers mould four different types of teachers, at least in connection with their type of personality. It is the *Good-fellow - teacher*, the *Freedom – teacher* with a *laissez faire*-attitude,

⁹ Ibid., p. 369

the teacher who is *obsessed with order* and the *high quality demanding teacher*. The ideal should be a mixture of all these types. The aim is to arrive at an authentic personality without wearing a mask.¹⁰

A teacher who relates to God and really lives from grace and lets his personality mould by it can be strong enough to undergo this self-analysis. It would show him particular needs he has and point him to God's grace. So the way would be cleared to become a model in the Christian sense.

Christian teachers can only become role models if they are *truly converted persons* who are rooted in scripture, have developed a Christian mind and pursue a distinct lifestyle.

As an effect of this they become a *model* to their students, a *model* for living in a relationship with Christ with all the values like trust, honesty, self-sacrifice, endurance, friendliness, forgiveness. As the teacher exemplifies Christian values, he makes them come to life. So the students are not only confronted with concepts and theories but they encounter a representative of this faith. This will make a life-long impact on the students. Up to 80 percent of the lesson or seminar contents they might forget but they will not forget the personality of their teachers and their approach to different topics.

Ellen G. White made some strong statements concerning this role of a model and the goals linked to it.

“The teachers in our schools have a heavy responsibility to bear. They must be in words and character what they wish their students to become – men and women that fear God and work righteousness. If they are acquainted with the way themselves, they can train the youth to walk in it. They will not only educate them in the sciences, but will train them to have moral independence to work for Jesus, and to take up burdens in His cause.”¹¹

Basically she points out that modelling happens by integrating knowledge, morality and the willingness to serve.

¹⁰ Marc Böhmann: Lebenslügen, in Pädagogik 9/1999, p. 11.

¹¹ Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students, Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1923, p. 48.

Moreover Ellen G. White underlines that Christian teachers should never underestimate their influence.

“No limit can be set to our influence. One thoughtless act may prove the ruin of many souls. The course of every worker in our college is making impressions upon the minds of the young, and these are borne away to be reproduced in others. It should be the teacher’s aim to prepare every youth under his care to be a blessing to the world. This object should never be lost sight of.”¹²

This role - model is intertwined with all the other roles. They build a unity. For instance if a teacher has no great interest in establishing and keeping discipline or to be a classroom - manager he might have difficulties to be a role model in the Christian way to the extend he could be. If he is not concerned with diligent preparation of his lessons and shows a persistent lack of competence he will loose both authorities as a professional and intertwined with it as a spiritual person.

2.5. The Teacher as a Priest

In addition to the fourth there is a fifth teacher-role which is genuine Christian by character and most intriguing when taking a deeper look at it. It is a role which is less public in nature, a “very private and probably the most telling for eternity for it releases the explosive, providential, purging power of the supernatural into the lives and affairs of the Christian teacher’s young charges.”¹³

The role which is meant here is the *priestly role*. Foremost it includes the willingness for intercession for the students. This happens by praying alone for the students in the quiet chamber and by praying with students bringing their troubles and sorrows to God.

In several cases the teacher feels free to offer students a prayer of intercession.

¹² Ibid., p. 96.

¹³ George Akers: The Ministry of Teaching, in *Adventist Review*, No. 20/ 1989, p. 13. George Akers, the former Director of the Education Department of the General Conference underlines the spiritual significance of this role.

Inasmuch as the students recognizes him as a trustworthy and spiritual minded person this will happen.

Practicing intercession helps the teacher to become more sensitive to the problems of his students. The bible assures us of the fact that there is *someone* who cares for the students and their troubles as well as for the teacher. This is very *good news* to teachers who have to cope with so many expectations coming from different sides: from himself, from parents, students, the institution and society.

Ellen White strongly encourages us in persistent intercession-prayers by writing:

“If the curtain could be drawn aside, we would see what heavenly assistance enables, what dramatic results accrue from this kind of persistent priestly praying. Only the hereafter can adequately chronicle the full impact of godly teachers interceding for their students.”¹⁴

The priestly role makes an impact on teachers. It’s deeply spiritual because

- it helps the teacher to develop a Christ-like perspective on each of his students
- it puts his faith to the test. The question here is: Are we determined to practise continuous intercession as an integral part of our professional work?
- it molds him into a new character as he focuses on Christ and his character when practicing intercession.
- it makes him humble in the sense that he knows, that God is the one and only who really knows best about the inner situation of individuals. We have to acknowledge that we are very limited in understanding an other person fully and being able to help her. Sometimes we are even part of the persons problems or even worse - the cause of the problem.
- it reminds him of his own need for the High Priest Jesus Christ his presence and his

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

service.¹⁵

The last two roles *model* and *priest* are far more than just roles in a sociological sense. They are an integral part of our personality allowed to be formed by the spirit. These “roles” are not like hats you put on and off. They require a sense of commitment and they are worth it.

3. Application of the Roles – Three Cases

As indicated in the introduction the second part has a more experiential emphasis. It contains short reports about three cases in which these roles had been challenged. A Christian approach to the five roles is not a somewhat airy theory. So I am going to report about classroom situations in which the five roles are put into practice.

3.1. Case one - the ashamed student

I remember the case of one student who was enrolled in the German as a foreign language programme. In addition to the financial worries, he was unable to pass the exam. After one year of studying and hard working he had failed. He along with the other few who didn't succeed felt very miserable. But the worst fall for him, that he felt ashamed, not having reached an important goal.

In respect of my role of a person of competence, I tried to make sure, that we graded him in a fair way. I tried to realize my role as a Model by taking time to sit down and talk with him about my own experiences of test-anxieties. As a motivator, I emphasized his points of progress in the last year, like his big word-knowledge and oral –language skills. Moreover I encouraged him to repeat the exam three months later and gave him material for exercises. Concerning the priestly

¹⁵ Christ the High Priest is the great example for the teacher who intercedes for his students.

role I first hesitated to offer to pray for him, but then finally asked and together we brought his nervousness and disappointment before God.

3.2. Case two – a problem with envy

The second case concerns two students who started to talk across the tables in their language. I didn't feel very good about it because of the tone and their mimics. Very soon it became clear that they were talking about another student from their continent. They were envying him and his success.

So I asked the two kindly to speak in German. However the next day the same two carried on in their own language. Again I repeated my request for them to stop. After the lesson the student they were talking about, came to me and asked me to do something about it. He was very upset by the situation, the envy of his fellow students I gave him the opportunity to express his feelings about the situation which made him very upset. I promised to speak with the two on the following day. Before I had the chance the student phoned me and told me that he had already spoken with the others and that everything had been settled. So we prayed together and thanked God for his guidance in the situation.

As a side note, this same student who had felt so offended, soon accelerated to the advanced group and passed his final exam.

In this particular situation I was again challenged in different roles. First as a classroom-manager. I had to be sensitive to what was going on and make sure that the group could proceed with the lesson. The group was affected by the situation and so it had to be settled before proceeding with contents.

I had to realize the imbalance which existed between a *self* (in this case the individuals me and the offended student), the *group* and the *topic* being discussed. These terms are used in the

“Theme Centered - Interaction – Method” (TZI) which is concerned with the balance between theme, group and self. These build a triangle.¹⁶ As one can see I was not only challenged in my role as a classroom manager but also as a role-model and in my priestly role.

3.3. Case three - an agnostic student

In this case a brilliant student who spoke already several languages showed his disinterest in religion and his severe doubts about Christian faith by either skipping the devotional or displaying disinterest or opposition to it by entertaining himself with other things like glancing through a grammar-book.

The other students noticed it but didn't change anything in the way they conducted their devotionals. I spoke to the student privately and told him my impression. He described himself as an agnostic. The fact that some of the other students seemed to be so convicted provoked opposition in him. He had thought about leaving but then decided to stay and do the examinations. In the course of the talk it turned out that he had not made up his mind where to take up further studies or what kind of studies. Because of a lot of work and a feeling of anger about him I felt unable to act out my priestly role and I didn't offer him to pray for his future and the choices he had to make. Concerning modelling I even more tried to keep my devotionals as short as possible, conferring my use of religious language.

3.4. Some observations

These cases show that uncomfortable situations can arise very quickly and quite unexpectedly. As a teacher it is not always easy to fulfil desired roles. There is always some human factor, such as anger or stress or simply ignorance of a student's true situation that limits one's ability to react in the correct manner. This is especially true for beginner teachers

¹⁶ Irene Klein: Gruppenleiten ohne Angst, p. 32.

Who are preoccupied with content of study and their role of a person of competence.

Often we hesitate to act out our priestly role because we feel it entangles one self too much into the private lives of the students. On the other hand, there is much to be said about the openness experienced between individuals gathered together in prayer.

4. Conclusion

The five major roles of a Christian teacher are very closely inter-related. They receive a distinct meaning from a Christian perspective a meaning that reaches beyond the human sphere of understanding. A Christian teacher is aware of the greater context of Gods redemptive work. To be a Christian teacher is a high calling. Some may even feel overwhelmed by such a calling. They ask themselves how it is ever possible to live up to the formentioned roles within the Christian context and maintain a level of consistency.

In response to these feelings I would like to point out that the calling of a Christian teacher has to be perceived as an *ongoing process*. It never ends during the years of teaching.

God does not call “perfect teachers” he does however enable those, who are willing to learn and grow in understanding of their tasks and roles of their profession. A prolific writer on Christian education reminds us that it is God who endows us with the power we need.

“Without Christ we can do nothing. The pure principle of uprightness, virtue, and goodness are all from God. A conscientious discharge of duty, Christ-like sympathy, love for souls and love for your own soul, because you belong to God, and have been bought with the precious blood of Christ, will make you a labourer together with God, and endow you with persuasive, drawing power. You must respect your own example as well as precept, you must show that you reverence your faith....”¹⁷

¹⁷ Fundamentals of Christian Education, Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1923, p. 194.

If these sociological roles of a teacher, which have been presented here, are filled with the Christian spirit, they have the ability to become an integral part of the teachers personality which is moulded by the Spirit! This understanding and practice will contribute to a powerful witness and spiritual growth on “both sides of the desk”. Teachers, who adopt this attitude are become aware of their limitedness but at the same time can feel challenged to turn more and more to Christ and rely on the work of the Spirit helping them to be true Christian teachers.

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