

What Shall I call you?

In some church denominations and religious groups the leaders are typically identified and called by special titles, such as 'Pastor', 'Prophet', 'Apostle', 'Bishop' etc. They introduce themselves to their new members by using such titles, and refer to each other – at least in front of their 'ordinary' members - by such titles rather than just by their names, and on occasion even insist on outsiders addressing them by such titles. Some can become quite offended if this practice is not followed.

But is there any scriptural instruction or precedent for this practice, and is it in conformity with the teachings and spirit of the Bible, particularly with regards to the New Covenant times, or in any way beneficial to the Church, as the body of Christ?

Biblical Precedent

Old Testament

In the Old Testament there were various officials and leaders, such as priests, high priests, prophets and seers. What were they all called? From my research the terms 'priests', 'high priests' and 'prophets' were on every single occasion mentioned in the Bible used to identify the person's function, and not once as a title for the person - i.e. such people were always referred to by their function, as e.g. 'Aaron the priest', and never once as 'Priest Aaron', or 'High Priest Caiphas' etc.

Priests and High Priests

I found 13 occasions on which the priests were referred to as 'Someone the Priest', and once to 'a priest in the order of Melchidek', and 7 times to 'Someone the High Priest'.

Prophets

I found 20 references in the Old Testament to different prophets - on each occasion they were referred to as 'the Prophet Someone', and not once was a prophet ever referred to with 'prophet' as a title, as in e.g. 'Prophet Elijah.'

New Testament

In the New Testament I found that on each occasion the Old Testament prophets were again always referred to as 'the prophet Someone', and as before never to e.g. 'Prophet Elijah'. Elijah, for example, is always referred to simply as 'Elijah', and never as 'Prophet Elijah'.

Acts 13:1 is an interesting passage in which it refers to 'prophets' and 'teachers' of the church at Antioch, and then names several people, but never once uses a title for any of them, such as 'Prophet Barnabas, or Teacher Simeon'. *Acts 13:1 Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called "the black man"), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul.*

Biblical Example

Jesus set an example

Jesus set a very clear example of servant leadership, both by only identifying himself as 'the Son of Man' and by demonstrating the humble attitude he expected us all to display when he washed the feet of each of His twelve disciples at the last supper, and then told them to go and do the same. John 13:14 *And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet.* Could any of them ever have felt superior to any other believer after such a clear demonstration of humility and the instruction to do the same, which we can take by extension to refer to the way we regard and treat all others?

The Apostles set an example

Surely if any leader in the New Testament had the right to claim and to use a title, it would be the apostles? Yet none of them ever did. Not once that I could find did any of the twelve apostles ever refer to themselves as 'Apostle Paul' or 'Apostle Peter' etc., and neither did any one of them ever use a title, whether in respect to themselves or of the other person when referring to any of their fellow apostles.

In Acts the apostles were all referred to by their first names, on every single occasion. Here is an example: Acts 1:13 *When they arrived, they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying. Here are the names of those who were present: Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (the zealot), and Judas (son of James).* This same practice is applied through all the books in the New Testament.

In his letters Paul referred to Peter as just 'Peter', and not 'Apostle Peter' (Galatians 2:7, 13 and 14) and the same in referring to Timothy as just 'Timothy' (1 Thessalonians 3:2, 5 and 6; and Philemon 1:1), and likewise Peter referred to Paul as just 'Paul' in his letter (2 Peter 3:15.).

In their letters each of the apostles introduced themselves by their names and the capacity in which they wrote – i.e. as 'apostles', which was never used as a title. The most common phrase used is '*chosen by God to be an apostle*' as in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy, and simply as '*an apostle of Jesus Christ*' in 1 and 2 Peter, or even more simply as just '*an apostle*' as in Galatians.

Slave of Jesus

Paul, Peter, James and Jude all referred to themselves as a 'slave' of Jesus Christ. The Greek word 'doulos' is translated as a 'slave' or 'bondservant'. A bondservant is a slave who becomes a freeman yet still chooses to give up his/her personal rights of freedom to stay and serve a master, a decision that he/she is willing to take for the rest of his/her life." ('Doulos for Life World Harvest'). This is what it really means to accept Jesus as our Lord, as well as our Saviour.

In Romans Paul introduces himself with, '*This letter is from Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, chosen by God to be an apostle...*' Other apostles introduced themselves in the same way. James 1:1 *This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Peter 1:1 *This letter is from Simon Peter, a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ.* Jude 1:1 *This letter is from Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.* This clearly illustrates the humility of the early apostles.

Biblical Instruction

Jesus warns us

It appears that Jesus was well aware of the very human tendency of leaders to regard themselves as superior to others, and in one way or another to flaunt their positions. So He warned His disciples: Matthew 20:25-28 *But Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Jesus teaches us

Jesus taught his disciples, using the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees as an example, about the attitude he expected them to display, and about the use of titles, such as 'Rabbi'. Jesus was very critical of the attitudes of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, who it is recorded were the official interpreters of the law of Moses. He said that everything they did was for show, and that they loved to receive respectful greetings and to be called 'Rabi'. (See Matthew 23:1-36). Matthew 23:5-7 *"Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra-long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honour in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi.'*

Note that they loved to be called by a title, 'Rabbi'. Rabbi means 'Master'. A rabbi was a religious leader of the Jewish people. Some Rabbis acted as spiritual leaders of their congregations (Synagogues), while others acted as teachers of the Hebrew scriptures and religious traditions. According to John 1:38 'Rabbi' and 'Teacher' are synonymous titles. Clearly this was a title of dignity, and hence the reason that they loved to be called 'Rabbi'. Jesus taught His disciples very clearly and deliberately on this point – that they should not act like the typical leaders of their day: Matthew 20:25-27 *But Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers in this world*

lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave.

Jesus went even further by demonstrating the kind of leadership attitude he wanted his disciples, and hence all of us, to have by washing the feet of each of his disciples at the last supper, and then telling them to follow his example and to do the same. (See John 13:1-15). This appears to be something that the apostles understood very well, at least after Pentecost, as evidenced by their letters to the churches, where none of the apostle ever used a title in referring to themselves or to anyone else.

Note that, as explained above 'Rabbi' also means 'Master', and Jesus (as we will see below) instructed them not to exalt anyone by calling them by this title, and that no-one should consider themselves to be superior to anyone else, as we are all equal, and no one is superior to anyone else. Matthew 23:8-11 *"Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your Father. And don't let anyone call you 'Teacher,' for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant.*

The spiritual leaders in the time that Jesus ministered were the Rabbis and Teachers, and Jesus told His disciples not to use these titles. Today we have Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Teachers and Evangelists. Surely this principle still applies today – none of these functions is to ever be used as a title.

Function of Leaders under the New Covenant

In the New Testament in Ephesians 4:11 we are told that Christ gave certain gifts to the church: the 5-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Note it was not the other way around - that the church, as a body of believers, was given to the 5-fold leaders! Each of these gifts are functions, and not titles: that is five different ways in which the persons with such gifts are together to serve the body, and not to 'lord it over them' – which purpose is very clearly stated in the following verse: Ephesians 4:12 *Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.*

Peter gave clear instructions to 'the elders in the churches':

We have seen what the responsibility and function of the five-fold leaders in the church should be, so now let's look at what their attitude in carrying out their functions should be: 1 Peter 5:2 *Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly - not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God.* And especially relevant in this context is 1 Peter 5:3 *Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example.* Clearly, Paul did not want this new type of leadership to imitate the attitude of the old order of the Rabbis, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, in any way.

Relevance of using titles - what is the problem?

Spiritual 'superiority' of leaders

In addition to the fact that, as we have seen, the use of titles is just not biblical, there is the danger of both the leaders of any ministry, and of their members, inferring and coming to believe that anyone in the ministry with a title is somehow superior to everyone else without a title. Such an assumed hierarchy is unbiblical. As stated above in Matthew 23:8 (*..all of you are equal as brothers and sisters..*) we are all equal, so this would be totally false. We are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28), and our salvation and the ministry gifts we receive are all by grace, and neither earned nor deserved (Romans 12:6, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 4:10 etc.)

The five-fold gifts mentioned above are leadership gifts, and there are many more gifts given to each person in the church, so there should be no place for superiority or even comparison amongst the member of the church. 1 Peter 4:10 *God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.* Everyone in the Kingdom of God has a function, and each gift given to each person is to enable them to fulfil their calling and function in

the church. The use of titles, such as pastor, prophet, apostle, bishop etc. is not scriptural – I can find no support for anyone in the church to claim or to use a title.

Titles or Functions

In Ephesians Paul explains very clearly that Jesus has given 5 specific gifts to certain people in the church, with a very clear objective – to train and equip the members in the church to perform their individual functions, and in doing this to build up the whole church. Leaders with these gifts were given to serve the church – the members of the church were not given to them.

Ephesians 4:11-12 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

What about honouring our leaders?

Some have said, 'but are we not supposed to honour our leaders?' Indeed we are, but the question is *how* we are told to do this. Certainly not the way the religious leaders of Old Testament times were honoured, by the use of 'respectful greetings' and the use of titles such as 'Rabbi' or 'Teacher', as in Matthew 23:7 *They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi.'* We should always keep in mind what Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples; Matthew 23:11-12 *The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Paul's Instructions

Paul's instructions to Timothy are often quoted as justification for the use of a title to honour leaders in the church, but let's look at what this passage really says, and the context, to understand the true meaning of this passage: 1 Timothy 5:17-18 *Elders who do their work well should be respected and paid well, especially those who work hard at both preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You must not muzzle an ox to keep it from eating as it treads out the grain." And in another place, "Those who work deserve their pay!"* The context is that all the elders who devote themselves to the ministry should be respected and properly supported financially. There is nothing here to suggest that a special title, such as 'pastor' be used to honour a leader. The same applies to the following scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 *Dear brothers and sisters, honour those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and give you spiritual guidance. Show them great respect and wholehearted love because of their work. And live peacefully with each other.*

Conclusion

The use of titles is not supported in scripture, either by the teachings of Jesus or of the apostles, or in the example set by each of the leaders in the Bible. Furthermore God never made a distinction between sacred and secular. In fact, the Hebrew word 'avodah' is the root word having the same meaning of "work" and "worship." God sees our work as worship. We are all equal in God's eyes – we just serve Him different ways, so don't let us fall into pride through succumbing to the flattery of a title.

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Old Testament

Priests and High Priests

Numbers 16:37 Aaron the priest
Numbers 16:39 Eleazar the priest
Joshua 22:30 Phinehas the priest
1 Samuel 2:11 Eli the priest.
1 Samuel 14:3 Ahijah the priest
1 Kings 1:8 Zadok the priest,
2 Kings 11:4 Jehoiada the priest
2 Kings 16:16 Uriah the priest
2 Kings 22:8 Hilkiah the high priest
1 Chronicles 24:6 Zadok the priest
1 Chronicles 27:5 Jehoiada the priest
2 Chronicles 19:11 Amariah the high priest
2 Chronicles 31:10 Azariah the high priest
Ezra 7:12 Ezra the priest,
Nehemiah 3:1 Eliashib the high priest
Nehemiah 12:10 Jeshua the high priest
Isaiah 8:2 Uriah the priest
Jeremiah 29:25 Maaseiah, the priest
Jeremiah 29:29 Zephaniah the priest
Haggai 1:12 Jehozadak, the high priest
Matthew 26:3 Caiaphas, the high priest
Hebrews 5:6 a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

Prophets

Old Testament

Exodus 15:20 Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister
1 Samuel 22:5 the prophet Gad
2 Samuel 7:2 Nathan the prophet
1 Kings 11:29 the prophet Ahijah
1 Kings 16:1 the prophet Jehu
1 Kings 18:36 Elijah the prophet
2 Kings 6:12 Elisha, the prophet in Israel
2 Kings 14:25 Amittai, the prophet
2 Kings 19:2 the prophet Isaiah
2 Kings 22:14 the prophet Huldah
1 Chronicles 17:1 Nathan the prophet
2 Chronicles 10:15 the prophet Ahijah
2 Chronicles 12:5 The prophet Shemaiah
Nehemiah 6:14 Noadiah the prophet
Jeremiah 20:2 Jeremiah the prophet
Jeremiah 28:10 Hananiah the prophet
Habakkuk 1:1 the prophet Habakkuk
Haggai 1:1 the prophet Haggai
Zechariah 1:1 the prophet Zechariah
Malachi 4:5 the prophet Elijah

New Testament

Matthew 2:17 the prophet Jeremiah
Matthew 8:17 the prophet Isaiah
Matthew 12:39 the prophet Jonah
Matthew 21:11 Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee
Luke 2:36 Anna, a prophet
Luke 4:17 Isaiah the prophet
Acts 2:16 the prophet Joel
Acts 13:20 Samuel the prophet