



A COMMISSIONING OF TEACHERS¹

At Seventh Reformed Church we endeavor to strike a balanced approach to the teaching ministry of the church, avoiding a censorious limitation of those who can teach on the one hand and a chaotic free-for-all on the other. To unpack this a little, we support what we believe to be the Bible's specific stipulations of pastoral ministry (re ordination) and its prohibitions too (re sisters and unqualified brothers in Christ), yet we reject the fear that would drive us go beyond Scripture in limiting who may teach informally in the life of the church. We thus uphold both the distinctiveness of the pastoral office *and* the ministry of Christ's body, preventing our talk of "The Domini" from becoming a form of clericalism contradicting both Scripture and our history.

It is in the light of this view of the teaching ministry of the church that we commission today those recommended by the Education Committee and agreed on by the Consistory for the upcoming year of teaching. They affirm as faithful summaries of Scripture the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession [1561], Heidelberg Catechism [1563], and the Canons of the Synod of Dort [1618/19]) and are to teach in line with what they affirm.

THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR NON-ORDAINED TEACHERS

Scripture clearly envisions believers other than ministers teaching.

First, we discern that ministers of the new covenant differ from prophets and priests of the old covenant. While ministers preach formally, they proclaim an already-accomplished gospel. Their goal is not to keep the teaching to themselves, but to equip the saints for ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). It is in no small measure out of the equipping of the labors of ordained ministry that our teachers are readied for their teaching.

Note, second, that Elders are to be "apt [or given] to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9). The teaching need not be formal, but elders are to teach all the same, and are to set an example in the church by both their readiness to teach and their commitment in teaching.

Understand, third, the difference which the Lord's new covenant has made (Jer. 31:31-34). The people of God no longer need to wait for word from a prophet or hang upon the ministrations of a human priest (Heb. 8), nor must all teaching be left to the minister or elders, for the law of God is written on the hearts of all God's people and is embraced by all those who trust the Messiah. In short, believers "know the Lord" for themselves.

Fourth, the New Testament speaks of older men teaching younger men (Tit. 2:1-2, 7-8), likewise older women "teach[ing] what is good" to younger women (Tit. 2:3-5). The bent of the teaching may be more practical, but the practical is not to be divorced from the theological. While age may be a factor in who can teach, it is not *the* factor. What is essential is knowledge and experience of God issuing in lives of godly wisdom. Where such traits are present, men and women may teach in their designated sphere.

In general, let it be remembered that elders, non-ordained brothers, and mature sisters in Christ are not to compete with, or to undermine the formal or ordained teaching ministry of the church, at least not without solid biblical and verifiable grounds (1 Tim. 5:19, and even then only in an orderly way). Nevertheless, our teachers are valuable servants who perform a most admirable role in supplementing the formal ministry of the Word. They grant, as it were, the minister's sermons some legs causing them to run much further and wider.

THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF NON-ORDAINED TEACHING

Any group in the church may ask for a minister to teach on any given occasion, but it is mistaken, impractical, and a hindrance to the

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development of gifts in the church to insist that he must either teach or be present to answer questions.

First, to play safer than Scripture typically backfires. We not only stifle the use of the gifts God has given his church we give opportunity for the criticism of those who oppose our views on the question of who may be ordained.

Second, the denial of the teaching gifts of others constitutes a throwback to pre-Reformation times in which priests chained the Bibles to the lecturn so that the people could not interpret it for themselves (i.e., without a priest). In protest, the Protestant reformers translated the Bible and put it in the hands of the people. While it is true to say that the right to private interpretation of the Scripture has been greatly abused by those theologically or spiritually unqualified to teach, we are not to jettison the right on that account.

Third, the minister's preaching and teaching involves training up others to teach. He expounds Scripture not only to teach a given passage, but to train congregants in how they are to study and to teach Scripture. A consistent diet of expository preaching is the most suitable method of preaching in this regard.

Fourth, if lay teachers don't know all the answers, as we may imagine some to counter, they must do what ministers do: Go away, study the answer, and come back with it the next time! The pastoral staff of the church do not have all the answers either, but we are available to help our teachers where we can.

CONCLUSION

Since we do not expect all our teaching materials to come from ordained ministers, we should not expect all our teachers to come from their ranks either. Instead, we use Consistory-agreed teachers, praying for God's blessing on their labors, supporting their classes by our faithful attendance, and encouraging them by our interaction.

We should expect, however, that those beginning to sense a call to the ministry find in the teaching opportunities of the church a place where they can test their gift under the supervision of the elders. There is a double responsibility here, first on the elders to be on the lookout for those whom the Lord may be calling, and on the individual to make known his desire to teach. There is no sin in putting oneself forward for assessment by the eldership, but much soul-searching is required where there is no concern for the church of God or openness to his call.

May God bless, then, this upcoming season of ministry, both to our teachers and to those taught by them. It is a privilege to work together as the body of Christ, "until we all," says Paul, "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

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