

## Can a Woman Teach in the Church? A Reformed Perspective

A Colombian believer starting a Reformed church wrote asking,

*I would like your counsel on the role of women in the church. We believe they may not preach, have authority over men, nor govern in the church. But we have doubts about some of the applications of this.*

*One of our members is a graduate in psychology. She has offered to give talks in the church on psychology from a biblical perspective. We are asking ourselves if she ought to give conferences only to women or if it would be appropriate to include the church as a whole.*

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### **My reply:**

Dear Sergio,

Evidently God is granting you the opportunity to define the working parameters of your church. This indicates he considers your efforts worthy of attention and that your work has a future.

### **The difference between laws and principles**

Understanding the difference between a *law* and a *principle* is at the core of this question. Laws are absolute. Violating a law is a transgression. A principle, however, is a general guide to ordinary practice. Violating a principle is not necessarily a transgression and may have exceptions.

A key question: Will this woman be performing a function that is the domain of an ordained minister? The question of women teaching in the church is a serious concern.

### **The functions of ordained ministry**

Throughout the Bible, certain functions are presented as the proper domain of the ordained minister only:

- The proclamation of the Word of God to the congregation in worship.
- The administration of the sacraments.

These areas denote spiritual authority for leadership over God's people through preaching and teaching.

## **Avoiding confusion in church leadership**

Both Old Testament priests and New Testament ministers possess these roles as a result of their calling. In theology, these roles are referred to as "the priestly functions." These normally take place in formal public worship.

When considering the proposed lectures on psychology by this lady, ask yourself: Is the meeting called at a time and place where the congregation is normally gathered for public worship? Is the intent of the meeting to expound the Word of God to the congregation?

Based on the information you gave me, the purpose of the meeting is not public worship. The topic is psychology, not the Bible. It is a lecture, not a sermon. None of her conferences have to do with the *priestly functions*, so I see no violation of biblical principles here.

As a church leader, it is your responsibility to see that all members have ample opportunity to express their gifts. You acknowledge the truth, or you would not be asking the question. Women may exercise any spiritual gift, including that of teaching. She may not, however, duplicate or replace an ordained minister's functions in administering the Word of God and the sacraments to the congregation.

## **Women and exercise of spiritual gifts**

Some Reformed churches have sinned against women by not allowing them ample expression of their gifts. This is an error at least as serious as ordaining them. If I had to make a choice, I would rather a woman inadvertently trespass biblical limitations than deprive her of her gifts. Practicing a privilege we do not merit seems more consistent with grace than taking away a blessing that is ours.

### **Liberty rather than legalism**

Therefore, if you must risk a mistake, choose liberty over law. The chances of pleasing God are better. That being said, it is surprisingly easy to avoid such risks.

Reformed churches do this by having a woman use a lectern in another location than the pulpit. This practice is not because the pulpit is sacred. No piece of furniture, in this dispensation, is sacred. However, for some, the pulpit represents spiritual authority and leadership through preaching the Word.

Another way to avoid confusion is to have an elder preside over the meetings. You can announce the meetings as "A lecture on Christian Psychology by Dr. Sanchez, with Elder Rodriguez presiding." This makes it clear you have no intention of confusing the difference between the role of a minister and the role of a lady in the church expressing her gifts and knowledge.

Beware of creating unnecessary rules and restrictions. It would be ludicrous to start a church dedicated to God's grace and then bind it by unnecessary rules. The thing that laws produce most is more laws. Paul says it best...

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Gal 5:1*

In his bonds of freedom,

Roger Smalling