

Educating & Equipping Women

Why Is Bible Education for Women Important?

In 2014, Pew Research Center's statistics reveal that in Protestant Evangelical churches, 55% of the congregation is made up of women. If you look on the typical church calendar, women's bible studies will outnumber the men's studies. Walk into any Sunday School program, or nursery on Sunday mornings, and you will find most of the teachers are women. Stop by your local summer vacation bible school, and you will count women as the majority of the teachers and volunteers.

Women make up the larger portion of our congregations, and more significantly the greatest portion of that is in the role of teacher. Yet, in theological education women make up just 37% of enrollment.

Taking a broader look at those statistics, let's break it down into real people.

A very conservative poll, the Olson Poll (based on physical head count averages, which didn't account for unique people over a course of time) estimates that on any given Sunday, we have 52 million people sitting in our churches. Based on the Pew Research Center's statistic of 55%, this equates out to 28.6 million women in attendance each week.

According to the Association of Theological Schools, in 2014, there were 62,789 students enrolled in theological education programs (from general theological studies to masters in divinity degree programs). Based on the statistic that 37% of those students are women, that equates to 23,231 female theology students.

This boils down to 1 woman with formal biblical education per 12,311 women in the church.

Considering that 99% of the churches in the United States don't even reach 10,000 members (let alone female members) this creates a very stark reality; which is in most churches we will not find ONE woman with formal biblical education.

It is the women who are entrusted with teaching children in our church programs and activities. The women are leading more bible studies, and make up the largest percentage of our volunteer base. Women are taking a more prominent role in the spiritual development of their children, our future generations, as single parents or while the father is away from the home at work. Yet, we have failed to encourage these women to pursue formal biblical education, or even provided biblical training at the church level.

John Calvin referred to the church as "*the Mother of all the godly... into whose bosom God is pleased to gather His sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.*"

We have been called as women to share the gospel, to train our children in the ways of the Lord, and to teach the younger generations of women. The goal has always been generational, that we would learn, so that we could teach. We teach so that others will learn, and they will teach. This is spread down the generations, at the same time it is spreading outward into our communities.

So, why should we educate and equip women with formal education and discipleship programs? We do so in order to equip them for the good work God has called them to do. We do so, because we

recognize that women have a special understanding of each other, and the needs of women. We provide comfort and safety to damaged women. We provide nurturing and compassion to the hurting. We provide gentle counsel and guidance. We can love like daughters, lead like sisters, and correct like mothers. It is a unique distinction that God gifted us, and it is used for His glory every time we minister to another woman.

Ligon Duncan addresses it this way: *“We need to help Christian women appreciate the manifold areas of service that are open to them in the church and to equip them distinctively as women to fulfill their ministry. But this will never happen if our approach to discipleship in the church is androgynous – that is, if it refuses to take into account the gender distinctives of the disciple.”*

Many of the distinctions that make us women, are gifted to us upon birth. We are naturally inclined toward certain emotional responses, and nurturing characteristics. Those are wonderful gifts, but they must be anointed with the Word to be used to their fullest capacity.

Not every woman is going to be able to invest the money or time into formal schooling or seminary degrees. However, we can begin the process of equipping our women through basic bible literacy.

In her book, *“Women of the Word”*, Jen Wilkin focuses on understanding the need for bible literacy, and how put it into practice. She explains: *“Bible literacy occurs when a person has access to a Bible in a language she understands and is steadily moving toward knowledge and understanding of the text. If it is true that the character and will of God are proclaimed in Scripture, then any serious attempt to become equipped for the work of discipleship must include a desire to build bible literacy.”*

In order to begin the process of bible literacy, we need to understand how to read and interpret the scriptures. If you are “spending time in the word”, as Jen Wilkin puts it, but do not understand basic principles of study ... you may do more harm than good to your understanding of the scriptures.

Some of the mistakes we make, according to Jen, are that we look to the scriptures to feel better. We have a problem, and it makes us feel anxious or depressed. We go to our Bible, read a verse that gives us a promise, and so we feel comforted. The problem is that when we do this regularly, we are making the bible about US, not about God. If we only turn to the word for the “feel good” sections, we will miss the scriptures that challenge us.

Another mistake is that we read the scriptures blindly to answer our questions about life. You meditate on the decision you must make, close your eyes and pray for God to show you an answer, and then flip through the bible blindly, letting your finger land on the answer that God is revealing to you. The problem with this is that the purpose of the scriptures is not to answer our questions. Again, we end up making the bible about us, and our problems more than it is about God's redemptive message.

If we feel too intimidated to read the Bible itself, we can make the mistake of reading books *about* the Bible. Jen points out the obvious problem here, in that we are now reading someone else's interpretation, and if we take it as truth... we are not testing it against God's word for accuracy. In other words, they might be wrong. And, if they are right.... you will get more out of reading their commentaries when you already have an understanding of the scriptures for yourself.

In Hannah Anderson's book, *Made for More*, she warns about only reading the “pink” parts of the Bible, the ones that appeal to women, wives, and mothers. Jen Wilkin shares this same warning, it is easy to look for the scriptures that we can identify with, but if we are not looking to the rest of the

word, we are going to be unbalanced in our understanding of His Word. The scriptures say that ALL the word is God breathed and profitable. Not some. All.

When we take the time to invest in biblical literacy we are:

- Connecting directly with God through his Word
- Growing in biblical understanding and application.
- Protecting ourselves against false teachers and secular “reasoning”.

In order to test the Word, we need to know it.

“When women grow increasingly lax in their pursuit of bible literacy, everyone in their circle of influence is affected. Rather than acting as salt and light, we become bland contributions to the environments we inhabit and shape, indistinguishable from those who have never been changed by the gospel.” Jen Wilkin, Women of the Word.

Trevin Wax, in the book *Gospel Centered Teaching* warns: *“If we are not careful, the pursuit of knowledge is merely a sham to make ourselves feel intellectually superior to those around us. We start to view spiritual maturity in terms of knowledge rather than obedience.* He also points out that as we are learning and applying the Bible to every day life, we don't allow it to become a list of do's and don'ts for the week. This can warp a view that the scriptures are about us. We will start to look scan the scriptures for personal meaning and direction over the primary meaning of the text. As we are learning bible literacy, we need to remember the first question to ask is NOT: *“how does this apply to me?”*. The first question we need to ask IS: *“what does this reveal about God or His plan?”*

In the following two segments we are going to explore this topic more in depth, as well as other methods we can use to deepen our scriptural knowledge and prepare ourselves for sharing the gospel.