

Encouraging Women to Do Biblical Studies at the Graduate Level

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When I was in seminary, a godly woman recounted to a few of us how she had been asked multiple times by male students why she, as a woman, had come to seminary. The questioning was aggressive in nature, not for general understanding. Another woman recounted how a passive-aggressive but zealous seminary student wrote a long message one early morning on the white board where the female students were getting together for prayer, encouraging them to not continue with the MDiv (Masters of Divinity). I think I may have encouraged him to do the same.

What is a complementarian to do? When I say complementarian, I am referring to people who believe that men and women are created equal in God's sight, but in His sovereign choice he has designed different roles for them. This is most clearly seen in the affirmation that only men should be elders/pastors (Baptist/Presbyterian) or bishops (Anglican) in a church. Many see complementarians as people who only say "no" to women. Here, I want to give a few reasons why complementarians of many stripes should encourage as many women as possible to get a Masters degree (or its equivalent) in biblical studies.

1. Being Honest Up Front

The struggle for many complementarian men and women begins with the belief that women are restricted from the role of elder/pastor. This would then prohibit them from many of the teaching roles in the church. That being the case, the focus of many schools that lean complementarian is the training of men for future positions in churches. The MDiv for example is primarily meant for people who are headed to the pastorate. It makes sense that the majority of students who pursue this degree would be men.

Moving ahead I must note that complementarians are split on whether women can teach men outside the role of elder. There are basically two camps:

- Piper¹/Schreiner²—women should not teach theology and biblical studies to men in a formal position in the church or in schools due to the pastoral/elder like authority that comes with teaching.

¹ J. Piper. "Can a Woman Preach if Elders Affirm It?" *Desiring God*. February 16, 2015. Accessed February 1, 2016. <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-a-woman-preach-if-elders-affirm-it.html>.

² T. Schreiner. "Why Not Have a Woman Preach?" *Desiring God*. May 7, 2015. Accessed February 1, 2016. <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-not-to-have-a-woman-preach.html>.

- Carson³/Keller⁴/Frame⁵—women are only restricted from the role of elder. Women are free to teach men in Sunday school, at conferences, in bible studies and more.

I, of course, am not doing justice to the nuance of each position, but it is helpful to alert the reader of the streams within complementarian thinking. The details of exegesis will be left for another time. All of these men deserve careful consideration and honor. Both of these streams should be able to agree to much of what follows.

2. God Makes No Distinction About Who Must Be Trained

Maybe this is obvious, but I don't hear too many people complaining about women in a Sunday school class or pursuing an undergraduate Bible degree. Why is there anguish when we get to the Masters level? It could be because some Masters degrees in theological studies are shaped for pastors. Fair enough, but shouldn't we still commend complementarian women to pursue these degrees?

Complementarians are not Gnostics. We don't believe that only some people can/should have access to the deep truths of God that can be unlocked by formal education. Of course, learning the Bible is not tied to a graduate degree, but there is something to be said for thoughtful and structured study of God's Word. Practically, it would be immensely helpful in discussions with egalitarian scholarship to have more complementarian women able to interact with them at an equal level of scholarship. The majority of complementarian scholars who could submit an article to a journal or write a theological treatise are men.

3. Biblical Worldview Is Important

Maybe many complementarian men assume that women in seminary are there to be pastors and therefore can't get their mind around complementarian women being in graduate school. We make the very bad assumption that seminary graduation is coterminous with ordination. Of course there are many options in a seminary beyond the MDiv, but that degree in particular is the standard for training in vocational ministry. I have a cousin who took seminary classes with no intention of receiving a degree so she could be a more effective nurse. Cost is certainly a factor, but more options for women will only lead to more theologically grounded women in a variety of disciplines.

³ D. A. Carson, 'Silent in the Churches', in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by W. Grudem and J. Piper, (Crossway, 1991).

⁴ T. Keller. "Women in Ministry." *The Gospel Coalition*. August 14, 2008. Accessed February 1, 2016. <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/scottysmith/2008/08/14/titleitems/>.

⁵ J. Frame. "May Women Teach Adult Sunday School Classes." *Frame-Poythress*. May 21, 2012. Accessed February 1, 2016. www.frame-poythress.org/may-women-teach-adult-sunday-school-classes/.

Having a well-trained theological mind does not necessarily mean a woman will go into vocational ministry. What about the women she could disciple, the friendships where she could bring informed biblical counsel, and the children (spiritual or physical) she will raise? What if she becomes a doctor who takes care of families, a lawyer who seeks justice or works in a government role for the good of society? Should we not cheer her on as she works towards a degree that lays the foundation for a deep biblical worldview?

4. Women Are Involved in Teaching

We certainly see women involved in the early ministry of the church. Priscilla teams with her husband to teach Apollos (Acts 18:26). Paul refers to women as workers in the Lord (Rom 16:12). Phoebe in Romans is singled out for her work with Paul (Rom. 16:1–2). Paul mentioned two women who labored with him side by side in the gospel (Phil. 4:2–3). Paul clearly commands women to teach children and younger women (2 Tim. 1:15; Titus 2:3–5).

The one way it seems that men and women diverge in the church is in the role of authority and weighing of teaching. The conclusion of 1 Timothy 2:11–12 is not that women must never teach men or submit to all men, but that men who are tested and approved are those who must ultimately preach, teach and weigh what is being taught. This makes sense of 1 Corinthians 14:26–35 where the women participate in prophesying, but not in the oral weighing of such prophecy. Paul is saying that women may not teach the gospel authoritatively to men in the public assembly of the church. Paul does not want women to be in positions of authority in the church; teaching is one way in which authority is exercised in the church. This is why the office of elder is closed to women – this is the authoritative office of the church.

I diverge from some of my complementarian brethren in that I see contexts where women taught men and I believe women should be teaching in various ways in the church for the edification of the body. This could also include teaching in schools, Sunday school courses, becoming scholars in various fields, serving in a campus ministry, leading a non-profit and more. Even if the most conservative of complementarians see problems with some of the conclusions here, we can all still strive to train more women for the positions we all agree on.

5. Many Gospel-Loving Women Led the Missionary Movement

What about the women who were deeply involved in the modern missionary movement? Elisabeth Elliot, Amy Carmichael, Corrie Ten Boom, Lilia Trotter, Helen Roseveare, Mary Slessor, and Lotie Moon come to mind immediately. Let's also not forget the wives of the men we revere. Just by example, do you think of Adoniram Judson or Adoniram and Ann?

Elisabeth Elliot once wrote:

What is the place of women in world mission? Jesus said, “You [and the word means all of you, male and female] are my witnesses. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” And there have been countless thousands who, without reference to where they came from or what they knew or who they were, have believed that Jesus meant exactly what he said and have set themselves to follow.

Today strident female voices are raised, shrilly and ad nauseam, to remind us that women are equal with men. But such a question has never even arisen in connection with the history of Christian missions. In fact, for many years, far from being excluded, women constituted the majority of foreign missionaries.⁶

Oh, for more and more women on the global mission field, well trained in theology, with minds honed to read and teach the Bible.

6. A Lesser Call?

It is either culture or human tendency that leads people to believe that the ultimate calling in vocational ministry is the ability to preach and teach to the whole church. Maybe it is because we vet those people in a more thorough way than we would say a youth worker. So teaching children—not ultimate. Discipling youth—not quite the top. College students—at least you are close. Outreach—if you study you probably don’t have the time. And women—we leave that to the pastor’s wives.

This is obviously a caricature, but I hope it makes the point. Women training women is not only a high calling; it is a crystal clear command in Scripture. The discipleship of women and children is so massive a burden that we will never reach the end of it. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if local churches had women they could go to, whom they could trust to train other women?

7. The Immense Value of Theologically Trained Moms

The impact of well-trained women would be enormous on the next generation. If moms are the primary nurturers of our children and often the ones who spend the majority of time with their children, then isn’t a God-centered theologically robust worldview of great value? Are we short-changing the primary teachers of our children by not encouraging them to receive more formal training?

8. On Books by Women

Walk into almost any Christian bookstore anywhere in the world and you will find that the majority of books are prosperity gospel lite and that the women’s section in particular needs help! You may wonder whether we should have so many books specific to men and women, but we can agree that a few more well-informed women who can write would be a great blessing to the church?

⁶ E. Stetzer. "Monday Is for Missiology: Women, Missions, and Missiologists." *Christianity Today*. January 10, 2011. Accessed February 1, 2016. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2011/january/monday-is-for-missiology-women-missions-and-missiologists.html>.

It is probably no surprise to you that women read more than men. Let's have some women with a formal and solid theological education that can serve as teachers to deepen the roots of faith and understanding for the women who walk into Christian bookstores.

9. Your Church Would Do Well to Have a Few Theologically Trained Women on Staff

I was recently listening to D.A. Carson, who recounted that the hiring practice in the churches in the thoroughly complementarian Sydney Diocese (Anglican), is to make the 3rd or 4th hire in a church plant a formally well-trained woman. Considering the number of women that are most likely in your church, do you have a few women who can rightly divide the word of truth? Might you consider hiring a woman on your staff as your church grows? I am well aware that many women step away from "working" while they are having children, which decreases the pool of women from which to hire, but there are certainly some women who could flourish in these roles.

I'm also not speaking just of a woman who could be a good counselor. I am so glad there are women being trained in solid counseling programs, many of which seminaries create and gear specifically to women. But how much more beneficial would it be to have women with a general Biblical Studies degree AND a counseling degree. Let's pray that they would be good counselors because they are biblical scholars!

We need well-trained women serving in our churches. Seminaries and the plethora of new training options available would do well to market to complementarian women. If we believe the gifts are not restricted to men only, then surely complementarians should lead the way in training women. Lord, make it so, for the sake of your bride.

10. Final Confession

I want to conclude by saying I have failed miserably at purposefully encouraging women to study at a deeper level. When I was a pastor I remember my focus being so intently on the men of the churches. I never once thought of starting an intensive training regimen for any women in the church. I left that to the community bible studies, a less intensive and more relational time people would gather together. I was wrong to do so. Maybe more complementarian pastors can learn from my mistake and push women to formalized study, whether in a school or in the many church-based training options now available.