

Women as Students and Trainers in Theological Education

Theological Education

We will briefly comment on the differences between Bible institutes, Bible colleges and theological seminaries. This is important as we consider the possibilities for women in these institutions.

Women as Students

1. Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:41-42) – Considering the example of a woman learning directly from Jesus and being encouraged by him for choosing to learn at his feet rather than the traditional duties of a woman.
2. Ready to give reasons for their faith (1 Peter 3:15) – Taking into account the importance of the acquisition of knowledge for apologetic purposes.
3. Ready to handle the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:3-4) – This is a call that is not for men only or women only but for everyone: handling the Word of God is a key element in our Christian life because:
 - a. It will keep us from error (1 Timothy 4:16, Titus 2:1)
 - b. It will keep us from sin (Psalm 119:9,11)
 - c. It will help us against temptation (Matthew 4:1-17)
 - d. It is alive and will change even the deepest part of our hearts (Hebrews 4:11-13)
 - e. It can guide us (Psalm 119:105)
4. Ready to train younger women (Titus 2:3-4) – In our society today, we are in desperate need of role models, not just men or women, but men and women who will be able to teach and to show in their own lives the power of God and the transformation through the Spirit.
5. Ready for spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:12-20) – This is something that we tend to forget. We are in a spiritual battle, like it or not. Not just men, but all God's children, are called to take up the armour of God to face the enemy. Being a soldier requires training. Some need more than others, so we should try to encourage one another as we train together against the forces of the evil one.
6. Ready to be a suitable helper in ministry (Romans 16: 1-15; Philippians 4:2-3, etc)
 - a. Romans 16:1-15 – Paul mentions women who have helped him in his ministry
 - i. Phoebe – deaconess of Cenchrea and a patron for many, including Paul (v. 1-2)
 - ii. Prisca (Priscilla) – fellow worker (v. 3)
 - iii. Mary – hard worker (v.6)
 - iv. Junia – Jew like Paul, fellow prisoner and well known among the apostles (v.7)
 - v. Tryphaena and Tryphosa – workers in the Lord (v.12)
 - vi. Persis – worked hard in the Lord (v.13)
 - vii. Rufus' mother – who was a mother to Paul (v. 13)
 - viii. Julia and the sister of Nereus – v. 15

- b. Philippians 4:2-3
 - i. Euodia and Syntyche – co-workers with Paul in the Gospel and with Clement.
- c. All these women have shown commitment to the Lord and Paul remembers their hard work and their partnership in the Gospel. It is important to note that they were not considered second class workers, but workers who helped Paul, side by side.

What do women do with their studies?

Taking the results from my brief survey and some information from websites we can see that:

- Missionaries – Women represent $\frac{2}{3}$ of all the missionaries on the mission field.¹
 - The first single female missionary went to the mission field in the 1820s; she was an African American and a former slave. Betsy Stockton went as a domestic servant to a missionary couple in Hawaii. She was the first unmarried missionary from America.²
 - By 1910 there were 4710 unmarried women on the mission field and 1948 were from the United States.³
 - In 2005, according to Lausanne World Pulse:⁴
 - 4.4 million women were engaged in fulltime Christian work
 - $\frac{2}{3}$ of women in full-time ministry were unmarried
 - Over $\frac{1}{2}$ of women in full-time mission were unmarried
 - Under $\frac{1}{2}$ (49.7%) of women in home⁵ mission were unmarried
- Personal discipleship – (74%)
- Own family (61%)
- Children’s ministry (63%)
- Youth ministry (44%)
- Women’s ministries (52%)
- Small Bible study groups (70%)
- Counselling (40%)
- University or college teacher (17%)

Taking these results and numbers into account, it is important to recognise the contribution women are making to the kingdom of God. These women need to have the necessary training in order to fulfil the mission that God had given them in a way that honours him and produce fruit for his glory.

¹ John Piper, "Why Are Women More Eager Missionaries?", *Desiring God*, 2018 <<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-are-women-more-eager-missionaries>> [Accessed 14 May 2018].

² Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem To Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004). P.288

³ Tucker, p. 289

⁴ Sandra S. K. Lee, "Women In World Evangelization: More Study Needed | Lausanne World Pulse Archives", *Lausanneworldpulse.Com*, 2018 <<http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/lausannereports/740/06-2007>> [Accessed 14 May 2018].

⁵ In the context of the article, home refers to the nation of origin, mainly USA and European nations and Australia.

Women as Trainers

Last January, John Piper, a well-known church leader from America, was asked in his daily podcast the following question "*Is there a place for female professors at a Seminary?*" Piper gave his opinion on the matter to the listener, from a very personal and narrow perspective that we will consider in the next paragraphs.⁶

Piper based his answer on a complementarian view, which he describes as historically and Scripturally based. He only mentioned 1 Timothy 2:12, and gave a very loose hermeneutical explanation. The main points of his arguments are:

1. Church leadership is reserved only for spiritual, biblically qualified and humble men.
2. The role of the seminary is to prepare men for pastoral leadership in congregations.
3. The role of professors is not only to impart knowledge but to be role models, mentors and guides.
4. "The more we succeed in distinguishing the seminary teacher from the pastor teacher, the more we fail in providing modelling of experienced pastor teachers."
5. "It is inconsistent and ultimately unbiblical to allow women to function in formal teaching and mentoring capacities."

The backlash from fellow complementarians with a more open attitude came soon after. Mark Thompson, Principal of Moore College, Sydney, replied with an article in the Gospel Coalition Website⁷ which offers a balanced attitude towards women and the contribution they make to theological education.

Taking some of Thompson's arguments, personal arguments and biblical passages we will try to answer Piper.

Argument #1 – Response

He explains that church leadership is reserved only for men. While he bases his argument on 1 Timothy 2:12, he fails to recognise that the main issue is not about church leadership. Since a seminary, college or institutes are not the church, the restrictions and limitations would not be applicable in the same way. At this point, Piper fails to distinguish between the two spheres of ministry, the church and the academic world. Another aspect he fails to understand is that as pastors, men will have to speak and to deal with women, who are intrinsically different from men. Alice Matthews explains that 60% of most congregations would be women.⁸ She explains how men and women have different perceptions in life and different ways of communication. Matthews adds that some of the mistakes preachers make is to think that concerning gender, "one size fits all", but in her book she shows how important it is for the

⁶ John Piper, "Is There A Place For Female Professors At Seminary?", *Desiring God*, 2018 <<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-there-a-place-for-female-professors-at-seminary>> [Accessed 14 May 2018].

⁷ Mark Thompson, "Is There A Place For Women On A Theological College Faculty? - The Gospel Coalition | Australia", *The Gospel Coalition | Australia*, 2018 <<https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/place-women-theological-faculties/>> [Accessed 14 May 2018].

⁸ Alice P Matthews, *Preaching That Speaks To Women* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003). P.7

preacher or pastor to understand the differences that exist in the congregation due to gender.⁹ So it would be beneficial for a man in training for Christian ministry to be exposed to the different style of teaching and communication that most of his congregation would be able to relate to.

Argument #2 – Response

Piper offers a very narrow view of the role of a theological institution. He particularly refers to seminaries but, even then, he sees the seminary as training pastors only. But what about missionaries? Other academics? Or church workers and church planters? In most of these cases, it would be important to have female input and perspective.

We live in a society where the ideas of gender and gender differences are being ignored, nevertheless it doesn't mean that they don't exist or that they have suddenly disappeared. So it is key for future church workers, missionaries, pastors etc to be familiar with a wide variety of issues and views that can only be explained through female faculty members. Piper himself says that is not about women attending seminary and getting the best possible grounding. But is this not contradictory, since, according to him, a seminary is for training pastors.

Arguments #3 & #4 – Response

Thompson argues that a richer understanding of complementarianism is needed.¹⁰ He believes that an appropriate recognition of our differences and gifts in the context of gender equality might help to show the image of God, as men and women work together. It is interesting to consider that as men and women work together as part of the faculty team, their portrayal of role models and mentors does not rely on an individual but on the team. Thompson explains that each individual, from both genders, brings strengths and weaknesses to the team as a whole.¹¹

Two things I want to emphasise from what Thompson says:

- *Godly male leadership enables and enhances the appropriate ministry of women, it does not stifle it.*¹² (I think this is fundamental, we are not talking here about a struggle for power, I think it is about the Kingdom of God and the roles that God has called us to fulfil.)
- *The absence of women may unwittingly model something else that is much less than God's design for men and women*¹³. (If an all-male faculty is modelling only the character traits of a pastor teacher, then the students will miss other character traits that could be learned from female role models.)

Piper also explains that it is important for pastors to have male role models and mentors. And while we can all agree that it is important to have a same-sex mentor, we can see in the Bible how Eunice and Lois were role models of faith to Timothy, who at that time was a pastor in Ephesus. We cannot say that female role models have nothing to contribute to future pastors or leaders. There are examples of faith,

⁹ Matthews, p. 17

¹⁰ Thompson, "Is There A Place For Women On A Theological College Faculty? - The Gospel Coalition | Australia"

¹¹ Thompson, "Is There A Place For Women On A Theological College Faculty? - The Gospel Coalition | Australia"

¹² Thompson, "Is There A Place For Women On A Theological College Faculty? - The Gospel Coalition | Australia"

¹³ Thompson, "Is There A Place For Women On A Theological College Faculty? - The Gospel Coalition | Australia"

submission, spiritual life, team work, patience etc which would enrich the experience of future leaders from a different perspective. On the other hand, an all-male faculty could be at risk of becoming misogynistic and sending a message that they are unimportant to the women in their congregations.

Argument #5 – Response

According to Piper, it is inconsistent and unbiblical to allow women to function in formal teaching and mentoring capacities. But, if we take the passage he used to justify that point (1 Timothy 2:12), we can clearly say that Paul is speaking in the context of a church, not a Bible college. Also, Piper is ignoring the biblical examples of women teaching men in a setting other than the church.

The first example we have is Hulda the prophetess. (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chronicles 34:22-28)

At the time when Josiah was king, and the Law was found, Josiah sent five men to Hulda the prophetess to inquire of God. The five men were none other than the high priest Hilkiah, Shaphan the scribe, Asaiah a servant of the king, and two other men. We can see here that God's message to the highest spiritual authority of the Israelites was delivered through a woman. It is not the case of a lack of prophets at the time that they went to see her; David Legge in his sermon about Hulda explains that Jeremiah and Zephaniah were exercising their public ministry at that time.¹⁴

We have here a woman who is clearly speaking God's word and is a recognised prophetess. Maybe what God wants to show his people is that he hasn't forbidden women from having a teaching or prophetic role, but it is simply used in a different way to a different audience.

Legge explains that the Jews recognised several prophetesses throughout the Old Testament: Miriam (Moses' sister), Deborah, Isaiah's wife, Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and Hulda. Women prophesying is mentioned in Joel 2:28-29, which is mirrored in the book of Acts 2:17-21 in Peter's discourse on the day of Pentecost.

The New Testament also speaks about women as prophetesses. But there is another example I would like to consider: Priscilla.

Priscilla, Aquila's wife

Priscilla's name appears in the New Testament six times:

- Acts 18:2-3 Aquila, a Jew from Pontus, and Priscilla his wife (the first appearance and introduction of who they are)
- Acts 18:18 Priscilla and Aquila joined Paul on his trip to Syria
- Acts 18:26 Priscilla and Aquila heard Apollos speaking at the synagogue and
 - Took him aside
 - Explained to him the way of God.
- Romans 16:3 Prisca and Aquila (Paul called them fellow-workers)
- 1 Corinthians 16:19 Aquila and Prisca (the church in their house)

¹⁴ David Legge, "Little Women Part 5: Huldah The Prophetess - David Legge - Preach The Word", *Preach The Word*, 2007 <<https://www.preachtheword.com/sermon/women05.shtml>> [Accessed 14 May 2018].

- 2 Timothy 4:19 Prisca ad Aquila

Four times Priscilla's name comes before her husband's. Theologians have offered different explanations for this. Wallace refers to Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, who took it as a sign not only of equality but even prominence over her husband. He argues that there is no sufficient information in the Scriptures to justify taking this as not only equality but a role reversal.¹⁵ Some, like Derek and Dianne Tidball, explain that it is uncertain or unclear why her name is mentioned first, and they refer to Mary Evans who claims that the couple were an equal partnership.¹⁶ Although it is impossible to explain with absolute certainty the purpose of the order of their names, we can be sure that Priscilla's role in teaching Apollos was shared with her husband. Acts 18:26 clearly states that both took Apollos and explained to him the "way of God more accurately." Apollos was a learned man from Alexandria, and he had heard the message of Jesus. Gæbelein explains that he was an eloquent man with knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and the message of Jesus.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he was corrected by Priscilla and Aquila. Again, it wasn't in a church setting, but here is a woman involved in correcting a man's knowledge along with her husband.

The examples of Hulda and Priscilla are very similar, in the fact that women are involved in teaching or giving God's message to prominent and educated men. What is clear here is that we should be careful when using some of the biblical restrictions on women with universal application. One of the dangers of extreme complementarians is that they extend the limitations to every aspect of life. Sharon James explains how ultra-conservatives have read the so-called restrictive texts (1 Corinthians 14:33-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-14) and used them as weapons against any possibility of women teaching or being involved in ministry, while ignoring examples like those we have just mentioned.¹⁸

Women as Trainers: What is it all about?

It's about calling

Throughout the Scriptures we can see that God has called people for different purposes. He called:

- Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) to go out from Ur to the place where he would lead him.
- Gideon (Jud. 6:11-27) to defend the Israelites against the Midianites.
- Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-14). First God gave him a vision and then he became a judge of Israel and a prophet.
- David as king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:1-13).
- Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-10) to proclaim destruction to his people.
- Esther (Esther 4:12-14). Although this passage is not as straightforward as the others, it is clear that Mordecai saw a higher purpose in Esther's role as queen.

¹⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, "Aquila And Priscilla In 1 Corinthians 16:19", *Bible.Org*, 2004 <<https://bible.org/article/aquila-and-priscilla-1-corinthians-1619>> [Accessed 15 May 2018].

¹⁶ Derek Tidball and Dianne Tidball, *The Message Of Women* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012). Pp. 202-203

¹⁷ Frank E Gæbelein and others, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary : John - Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1981). Pp. 490-491

¹⁸ Sharon James, *God's Design For Women* (Darlington (England): Evangelical Press, 2007). P. 82-83

- Mary (Luke 1:26-45) to become the mother of Jesus.
- The twelve disciples (Mark 1:16-20; 2:1-17; John 1:35-51) to follow him and to become fishers of men.
- Paul (Rom. 1:1) to be an apostle.
- The church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2) to be saints together with those in every place that call upon the name of Jesus.

The list goes on and on. Not only in the Scriptures, but throughout the generations, Christians have been called for different purposes. The most common is the call to the mission field., We all endorse, accept and support those who have felt the call to go to the ends of the earth with the message of Jesus. But have we even considered that God might be calling us not only to go to China, Africa, India etc, but also much closer to home as well. Martin Luther preached that the role of a wife and a mother was a calling. We rarely talk about that calling. What has God called me to? What if God calls a woman to lead Sunday School? Or another woman to go to China to do evangelism? And what about other women called by God to do counselling? And what if the call is to academic teaching? Why would this last call be less important or more conflictive than the others?

The *Theological Education* journal comments that in their study of women in theological education, the women were more concerned about their call or vocation than about job security.¹⁹ They wanted more encouragement while they were pursuing what they felt was their calling. The researchers added that due to the churches' view on women's ministry in they struggled throughout their experience in college. The authors added that some of the discrepancies that women experienced were, lack of female mentors, questions about women in leadership roles, preaching, among others.²⁰ They also talked about the negative comments they received from some male colleagues

It's about gifts

Spiritual gifts are not a result of our human desires, they are distributed by the Holy Spirit, according to 1 Cor. 12:4-11. Paul explains that to each (that includes men and women) is given a manifestation of the Spirit, for the common good, not for personal good, or for the benefit of a small group, but for the benefit of the whole body. This idea is also repeated in Ephesians 4:1-16, where what is emphasised is the unity of the body and that the gifts have been given to equip the saints for ministry. In the passage in Corinthians, Paul specified that the gifts are empowered by the Spirit who gives them to each individual as he wills.

None of the saints is left out, because the emphasis is on the unity of the body, the need for all the gifts to be exercised and it does not mention any restriction in their use.

¹⁹ Mary L. Jensen, Mary Sanders and Steven J. Sandage, *Theological Education - Volume 45 - Number 2* (The Association of Theological Schools - The Commission on Accrediting, 2010), pp. 99-116
<<https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/theological-education/2010-theological-education-v45-n2.pdf>> [Accessed 14 May 2018]. P.104

²⁰ Jensen, Sanders, Sandage, *Theological Education*, p. 104

We should encourage one another to use the gifts that we have received from the Spirit, in a way that would be of benefit and encouragement and growth for the whole body of Christ.

It's about abilities

In his article, Piper didn't deny the abilities that some women have theologically, he just asked them not to use them in an academic context or in the church. But throughout the Bible God gave abilities and talents to people and asked them to use those abilities for his glory.

This was the case with Bezalel and Oholiab, in Exodus 35:30-36:2. The writer explains that the Lord has called them and filled them with the Spirit of God, with skill, intelligence, knowledge and all craftsmanship, to build the tabernacle.

Take the case of Abigail and David, 1 Samuel 25. As soon as Abigail heard what happened, she went out to make peace and to humble herself before David. Due to her actions, her life and the people with her were spared.

The example of the little child with the five loaves and two fishes comes to mind, in John 6:1-15. The boy offered all that he had; little did he know that it would be enough to feed more than 5000 people.

The *Theological Education* journal explains that many women use their abilities in teaching areas such as spiritual formation, counselling, pastoral care, religious education and others; rather than other academic fields such as theology, church history and biblical studies.²¹ There might be a range of reasons for that. But it is important that we consider the skills that God might have placed in women and encourage them to use them.

It's about passion

Probably I use this word as I am speaking from a woman's perspective, and historically the female gender has been identified with emotions, while the male gender has been identified with rational thinking.²² But although passion does refer to a deep emotion, for me it is more connected with fire, a fire that burns inside us and compels us to act. In the Bible we see examples of this, such as Jeremiah 20:9. Here the prophet wanted to walk away from serving God, from being ridiculed for the message he was giving, a message of destruction for which he was being persecuted. But he felt as if there was a fire in his heart that he couldn't contain. Paul - told the Philippians that God is the one who worked in them (and in us) both to will and to work, sometimes even against our own desires. Moses didn't want to go to deliver Israel, but later he offered to be killed instead of them.

Passion is usually born out of love. We have been called to love God with all our hearts, our minds, souls, strength; basically, with everything. That kind of love, which demands such a great commitment will

²¹ Barbara G. Wheeler and Sharon L. Miller, *Theological Education - Volume 45 - Number 2* (The Association of Theological Schools - The Commission on Accrediting, 2010), pp. 87-97
<<https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/theological-education/2010-theological-education-v45-n2.pdf>> [Accessed 14 May 2018]. p.90

²² Matthews, p. 66

produce something in our hearts. It will move us to do what our Lord has called us to do, not out of compulsion but out of love.

Throughout the centuries, women have passionately surrendered their lives to serve God in many different ways. But for most of that time the chance to study the Bible and to teach was limited, very limited. The Reformation opened the door slightly and encouraged women to study the Bible, first to teach their children, and later to teach other women. Now God has opened another avenue for women to develop their abilities, to answer his calling and to use their gifts with passion for the Lord.

Is that too much to ask that we encourage them?

Questions for discussion:

1. How can we encourage women to pursue theological education? Why?
2. How can we create or facilitate church-based ministries for women who have received theological education?
3. How can we help/encourage/guide women who feel the call to pursue higher degrees in education and even a call to be a theological trainer?
4. Why should the biblical restrictions on women in church leadership be applicable to every aspect of life outside the church?
5. What is the purpose of a Bible college/institute/seminary? What roles are available in academia for women teachers?