



**A Review of Jen Wilkin.
Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds.
Wheaton, IL: Crossway. 2014. 180pp. \$12.99.**

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Studying the Bible is hard work. But Jen Wilkin is adamant that women are up for the task. In fact, in her excellent new book *Women of the Word: How to Study the Bible with Both Our Hearts and Our Minds*, she challenges women living in an age of swipes and clicks, to study God's word with *purpose, perspective, patience, process, prayer*. With these five P's, she guides women to take the radical step of taking time and effort to study the Bible.

READING IN A PIXELATED AGE

We live in an era of the screen, and screens impact the way we interact with text. In April of last year, a *Washington Post* article summarized the recent body of research on our changing reading habits: "Before the Internet, the brain read in mostly linear ways—one page led to the next page, and so on. . . The Internet is different. With so much information, hyperlinked text, videos alongside words and interactivity everywhere, our brains form shortcuts to deal with it all—scanning, searching for key words, scrolling up and down quickly."¹

The research suggests that scanning and skimming digital content makes us less able to read deeply off-screen. Cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf was quoted in the *Post* article: "I worry that the superficial way we read during the day is affecting us when we have to read with more in-depth processing."

¹ Michael S. Rosenwald, "Serious reading takes a hit from online scanning and skimming, researchers say," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2014, accessed March 19, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/serious-reading-takes-a-hit-from-online-scanning-and-skimming-researchers-say/2014/04/06/088028d2-b5d2-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html.

And this surely has implications for our Bible reading. A national survey reported that of adult Americans who increased their Bible reading last year, 26% attributed their additional time in the Word to downloading the Bible onto their phone or tablet.² And *The New York Times* reported that on Sunday mornings Bible app YouVersion receives more than 600,000 search requests every minute.³ And the Word became pixels.

LEARNING TO FEED ON THE WORD

Of course, from the first speaking of God, to the printing press of Gutenberg, to the common-language translation of Tyndale, the Bible has always been on the cutting edge of communication technology. The capability of digital Bibles to encourage cross-referencing, word- and phrase-searching, and translations in parallel has been a great boon for modern Bible students. But quick and easy are not always best.

“When you begin a study of a text,” Wilkin writes, “print out a double-spaced copy in 12-point font on nice, thick printer paper . . . Print a copy that will allow you to annotate the text as a true student would. Go ahead and treat yourself to a nice set of colored pencils and new highlighter while you are at it.” (90)

Women of the Word, in a spirit similar to the counter-cultural movements of slow-food and slow-reading, is a helpful encouragement for slow-study, slow-theology, and slow-learning. “If we want to feel deeply about God,” she writes, “we must learn to think deeply about God.” (33) And this takes work.

To an audience accustomed to grabbing bytes of information, Wilkin’s process may be a hard sell. And so throughout the book she makes well-reasoned arguments for *why* serious Bible study ought to be fundamentally different than other kinds of reading:

Arriving at understanding is much harder than simply taking in new facts. When we read a newspaper, we do not feel frustrated by our ability to understand it. This is because a newspaper does not intend to stretch our understanding—it is a delivery system for information. Learning the Bible is a quest for knowledge, but it is ultimately a quest for understanding. Unlike a newspaper, the Bible is far more than a delivery system for information—it aims to shape the way we think. This means that, more often than not, we should expect to experience frustration when we sit down to read it. (77)

Early in the book, Wilkin paints the big picture: “Sound Bible study transforms the heart by training the mind, and it places God at the center of the story” (36). Then, she helpfully critiques some of the poor approaches aspiring Bible students often adopt. “The Xanax Approach,” for example, where a reader looks for quick-fix verses to make herself feel better. “In reality,” she writes, “the Bible doesn’t always make us feel better. In fact, quite often it does just the opposite” (39).

² “The State of the Bible: 6 Trends in 2014,” *Barna Group*, April 8, 2014, accessed March 19, 2015, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/664-the-state-of-the-bible-6-trends-for-2014>.

³ Amy O’Leary, “In the Beginning Was the Word; Now the Word Is on an App,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2013, accessed March 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/technology/the-faithful-embrace-youversion-a-bible-app.html>.

Finally, she lays out a methodical prescription for prayerfully studying Scripture in the context of the entire biblical metanarrative: moving from initial comprehension of a text, toward thoughtful interpretation of its meaning, ending with application of its message to the student's life.

In the end, seasoned Bible students are unlikely to find anything novel in Wilkin's approach, but her directives are helpfully organized and clearly explained. Therefore, *Women of the Word* is a well-crafted resource for women of all ages who are interested in growing deeper in God's Word.

ONE SHORTCOMING AND A GREAT STRENGTH

If *Women of the Word* has a weakness, it is in the book's failure to begin with a comprehensive doctrine of Scripture. The way we approach the Bible—the necessity of using a careful and demanding course of study like Wilkin endorses—depends largely on our understanding of Scripture as inspired, infallible, inerrant, sufficient, unified, and clear. In our current culture the idea of spending hours wrestling with a text to discover objective truth is quite foreign. We cannot assume that Christians naturally understand the doctrine of the Word, and therefore, I wished Wilkin had given a brief explanation of what motivates and undergirds her high view of Scripture.

One of the greatest treasures in this book is Wilkin's insistence that the mind transforms the heart. This is a message women need to hear. Interestingly, Wilkin applies cognitive science to Bible study, encouraging women that knowledge increases affection. The book's directives for Bible study, while very academic in character are not cold and lifeless. Instead, Wilkin desires women to kindle hearts afresh through a deeper knowledge of God. It is my hope that Wilkin's book will offer a way to substantive delight in God for a generation of skimmers and scanners.

STUDYING THE BIBLE WITH PEN IN HAND

The true test of any method is to put it into practice. So, a few days ago, I printed a hard copy of the five chapters of 1 John and sat down with my pen. At this writing, I have read the book in its entirety four times. I've highlighted repeated words and phrases. I've resisted the temptation to Google. I've written questions in the margins that I don't really want to answer. In short, I've worked hard, I've done what Wilkin said, and I'm nowhere near finished. But Wilkin's instructions have been easy to follow, and I find myself encouraged to continue.

Though such a method takes time, I can almost hear Wilkin saying to me, "The fruit of Word-labor is sweet." But then again maybe it is the Holy Spirit: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Ps 119:103)!