

Engage360 Episode 117 | Theology for Everyone; Ellen Wildman

Intro [00:00:04] Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

Don Payne [00:00:15] Hey, friends, welcome to Engage360 and Denver Seminary, where our mission is to prepare people to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the Gospel in the life changing truth of Scripture. I always love talking to our alumni, especially those who are engaging the needs of the world in really interesting or creative ways. That is not at all to diminish or disparage the many who have somewhat more conventional forms of ministry and are slugging it out faithfully because they are truly unsung heroes. It's simply to expand our vision of how the gospel can be creatively angled into the complexities and ambiguities and brokenness of our culture, and how their seminary education helped them do that. As long as I've been connected to Denver Seminary, which goes back almost 40 years, it has been a place of creative ministry. I've met people who are engaged in some of the most innovative and unusual forms of ministry I could even imagine. So, our guest in this episode is Ellen Wildman, who graduated from Denver Seminary last year, 2022, with an M.A. in Biblical and Theological Studies and is now a speaker and writer residing in Nashville, Tennessee. Welcome, Ellen.

Ellen Wildman [00:01:34] Thank you so much for having me. Happy to be here.

Don Payne [00:01:37] And glad you can. Ellen has quite a basket full of published devotional guides that you can find on her website, which is EllenWildman.com. And her most recent publication is a volume of devotionals called Single and Not Sorry. And want to talk to her a little bit about that. But Ellen, first, introduce yourself, if you would. Tell us a little bit about yourself, what drew you to seminary, and how you got started in the writing ministry that you have.

Ellen Wildman [00:02:03] Yeah, of course. So, like you said, my name is Ellen. I live here in Nashville, Tennessee, and I really got my start here in Bible publishing. And little did I know when I took a job as an administrative assistant in Bible publishing that I would really find my life's calling. And it was there in that first job, I was on a team of 17 men and me, that I learned that there was a need for more women in theology and more women in Bible publishing, and that really lit a fire under me to first study Bible publishing and get more involved with it, but also to go back to seminary so that I could sharpen my skills, I could learn more about God and learn more about what it meant to be a theologian. So that's what kind of guided me to Denver and got me started on that journey.

Don Payne [00:02:54] I love that, Ellen. And there's a couple of things I want to chase down with you while we have you. But on your website, you say theology isn't just for boys and you say, I want women to see God's word is accessible, understandable, and life changing. Everyone is a theologian. What do you mean by that? Unpack that for us.

Ellen Wildman [00:03:15] I see that as my catch phrase a little bit, mostly because I want women to feel welcome in these spaces, and I also want men to know that we have a valid space in theology. And what I really mean by that is in my experience and in talking with my friends and church community, I've seen that women have a lot harder time viewing themselves as theologians than men do, in my experience at least. And so, my goal with saying stuff like theology isn't just for boys, and I want women to know that they're theologians is to remind them that God has equipped them with his spirit to study, interpret, and apply his word and share with others. So, it's really a goal to empower others to know that they have the tools to study theology and to be theologians.

Don Payne [00:04:07] You said that very well. I want to go back just a little bit. Why do you think it is that many women seem not to think of themselves as theologians? Why is that do you think?

Ellen Wildman [00:04:18] That's a good question. I would say that at least among my friends, women rely more on other teachers to teach them about theology, whether it be through podcasts or sermons or

Christian books. And that's not a bad thing. You know, it's good to use those secondary resources. But I think women that I've encountered feel more intimidated by going straight to the word to understand and apply it. And I understand that it can be overwhelming, but I want women to know that they can go to that word, and they have the tools to understand what God is saying in the word.

Don Payne [00:04:57] Yeah, I wonder, this is probably a bit of a leading question, but I wonder whether there's something in a lot of evangelical Christian subculture that conveys the message to women that they have to be dependent upon the works of others. I don't know if that's been your experience.

Ellen Wildman [00:05:17] Definitely. I think that's 100% true. And my story when I was growing up, I was taught that kind of inadvertently. I was really involved in the church, but I was taught that I should go to those secondary resources before I should go to the word. Almost like I didn't have the tools myself.

Don Payne [00:05:35] Yeah. Or you've got to have somebody else do the work for you. Is that a fair way to put it?

Ellen Wildman [00:05:39] Yeah, exactly. I think so.

Don Payne [00:05:43] Okay. Well, what have you seen so far that is beginning to turn that tide around?

Ellen Wildman [00:05:52] Really the core message that I've wanted to communicate through both this new devotional and just in speaking and writing is that idea that everyone is a theologian. And I have seen that when women believe that it's very empowering and it's almost surprising and sometimes uncomfortable for people to hear that they have the spirit not of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind. They can understand scripture. And for some, that's intimidating to go straight to the word and dig in and wrestle with what's there. But I've seen it as kind of a relief and an empowerment and an excitement around the study of theology, which for me is really exciting.

Don Payne [00:06:38] Oh, yeah. I don't want to get into too much gender stereotyping here, but do you see, have you seen any patterns of difference in the way women and men come at the task of theology, the work of theology?

Ellen Wildman [00:06:57] That's a good question. I think, like I mentioned, women in my experience have been a little bit more intimidated and almost feel like we have to find our place, feel like we need to find where we fit in theology. For me, that looked like, when I was going to college, I knew that I wanted to speak, and I knew that I liked writing. But I felt like my only path was to go into women's ministry because I didn't know that there was an opportunity to go into Bible publishing or to write for men and women. I thought that was the only option as a woman. So, I don't know if that necessarily answers your question, but it does definitely involve breaking some gender stereotypes and being willing for men and women to see that we all have a seat at the table and we're all theologians.

Don Payne [00:07:49] I like the way you phrased women finding their place in theology. And another way I've heard that put is finding their voice. Not just women in general, but each of us has to find our voice in the work of theology, the work of thinking rightly about God and God's ways. Do you feel like you are finding your own voice?

Ellen Wildman [00:08:13] 100%. And honestly, I think that going to Denver really helped me to find that voice in a way that I hadn't before.

Don Payne [00:08:22] How so? Tell us about that.

Ellen Wildman [00:08:24] Before I came to Denver, I went to Bible school, but I had only really seen primarily male Bible teachers and theologians. And so, I had the idea that I knew where I fit, and that

wasn't in speaking or writing. When I went to Denver, I was encouraged by my professors in a way that I hadn't been before. And I also started digging in more to the Bible and realized that I really enjoyed it.

Don Payne [00:08:55] That's always a good thing.

Ellen Wildman [00:08:59] Yes, always a good realization. But I was so intimidated when I first started my studies in undergrad that I would hit a challenging passage or a challenging theology and almost just give up because I was overwhelmed and didn't think I could handle it. And once I was equipped to understand and felt like I trusted God and I trusted myself, I was able to find my voice in a way that I hadn't before.

Don Payne [00:09:32] Can you describe your voice? What is your voice, do you think, in theology?

Ellen Wildman [00:09:38] I think a big part of it is just demystifying what a theologian looks like. In my experience, a lot of my friends have an image of an old guy with a long beard that sits in his library all hours of the day, which sounds great, honestly, but I think part of my voice is just demystifying that idea that you have to look a certain way or have certain political beliefs or be at a certain stage in your life. You know, have kids, be married, to be a deep and serious thinker, or to enjoy studying the word of God. So that voice that demystifies and makes theology more accessible and more exciting. I don't think theology is boring.

Don Payne [00:10:28] Thank you for saying that.

Ellen Wildman [00:10:31] I think theology can be fun. Exciting. I had the most fun when I was writing papers, believe it or not. So, I want people to know that, and I want people to experience that excitement over the word of God that I feel.

Don Payne [00:10:50] That is exciting. Yeah. And what could be more thrilling than probing into the bottomless mystery of understanding who God is and what God's ways are? What in the world could outdo that, right?

Ellen Wildman [00:11:07] Exactly. And I learned that when I trust God, and then when I trust God in me to do that work, it's so fun and so exciting.

Don Payne [00:11:18] Oh, good. What was your experience here at Denver Seminary as a woman? Depending upon the program people are in, you may have had many classes where women were the minority in a class. What was your experience like in a seminary environment where men in some instances outnumber you?

Ellen Wildman [00:11:40] Yeah, that's a great question. I did have a lot of classes that were much more male heavy, and I had had that in undergrad as well, so I was a little bit prepared in a way. But overall, it was honestly such an encouraging experience. I came in with some preconceived notions, I think, that I was going to have to kind of shove some elbows and wrestle my way through to get my voice heard. And that really wasn't the case.

Don Payne [00:12:11] Oh, I'm glad to hear that.

Ellen Wildman [00:12:13] Yeah, I was really strengthened by my professors in particular, but also by other students to pursue writing and to pursue theology. And honestly, it was just really refreshing because I have definitely been in circles where men would prefer that women take a backseat, as I'm sure many women in seminary have. And I really did not experience that. So, it was great.

Don Payne [00:12:38] Well, I'm really glad to hear that. Can you isolate maybe one or two key things you learned or experienced here at Denver Seminary that shaped you today, personally, or professionally?

Ellen Wildman [00:12:51] What a big question. I think isolating one or two is hard, but really, I kind of mentioned it before, what sticks out to me is learning that I had a seat at the table. That's really what I learned in a way that I hadn't before. And I think how I learned that through my studies was through the encouragement of my professors and also through my own personal growth as I delve deeper into studying the Bible and studying God in a way I hadn't before. I realized the richness of what is there, and I realized that I could understand it. And part of my journey is just when I went to undergrad, I grew up in a Christian home, but I wasn't really taught theology. So, when I went to Bible school and people were talking about Calvinism and Armenianism and different views of baptism, I had no idea what they were talking about. And in that experience, I did not feel empowered at all because people almost were too set in their ways to explain it to me, you know, to kind of in a way, quote unquote, dumb it down to someone who didn't understand. And so that experience taught me, okay, maybe I don't have the experience and maybe I don't have the calling that I thought I did. Coming to Denver Seminary was the complete opposite experience. I was able to take apart these complex topics with other students and with professors in a way that was understandable and in a way that I felt that I could teach to others when the time came. So, it was just really empowering and helped me realize that what I felt and feel God is calling me too is not wrong.

Don Payne [00:14:42] Oh, that's really great to hear.

Ellen Wildman [00:14:44] Which is always a good reminder.

Don Payne [00:14:45] Yeah, No kidding. Hey, your book. I want to talk a little bit about this book. Single and not sorry. It's ninety devotions of real encouragement for right now. Give us an overview of why you wrote this and what kind of impact you're hoping it'll have on people.

Ellen Wildman [00:15:02] Yeah. So really, the impetus for writing single and not sorry was to emphasize for single Christians and single women that their life is beautiful and good as it is right now. And the reason I wanted to emphasize this is that I have felt too many times in the church or in Christian community, I've heard, and I've internalized messages that your life really begins when you're married. And in fact, you might actually reach a new level of holiness or spirituality when you are married. What I wanted to do is really combat these myths, and let readers know that their life is beautiful as it is, and they don't need a relationship to affirm what God is stirring up in their hearts and what He's calling them to. And really, the core of it is, even if you are single, even if you desire a relationship or marriage in the future where you are right now, you're not missing out and you're not behind.

Don Payne [00:16:09] That's a great phrase. That's worth the price of the book there. That phrase you're not behind. I don't know how many people I've talked to and how often I myself have felt in various ways that somehow, I'm late to the game.

Ellen Wildman [00:16:26] I think that's a really common thing that I know people struggle with is God's timing. And it's hard to wrestle with, and it's okay to wrestle with it, but it also is just, you feel like you can breathe when you realize that you're not behind.

Don Payne [00:16:45] Great image. How did this writing change you? I ask that as an author, because I think writing projects of any significance always change the one who writes them in some ways. How did this change you?

Ellen Wildman [00:17:00] So this was my first book. I've written articles and different online publications, but I hadn't written a book before, so it changed me a lot. I think the biggest thing, which I don't know what could be bigger than this is, I realized that I wanted to become a writer. So that was a big change. And I realized as I was writing this book, I am really never happier than when I'm writing. And I always knew that I enjoyed writing. Like I mentioned, I've always liked writing papers. I've always liked writing for my full-time job, but I never really dreamed that I could write a whole book or that I could use my writing in a way that would really bring others in the long form to understand Christ deeper. And so that realization was really

freeing and also a little scary because it unlocked, you know, kind of a new love for me. And really, when writing this, I feel like I had the moment of this is what I think God created me for.

Don Payne [00:18:08] That's rich. And I envy that because I find writing to be very hard work. I took a writing course in my senior year of undergrad about 100 years ago, and I remember one of the textbooks we read was written by a writer who said that he did not enjoy writing. He simply enjoyed having written and I can relate to that.

Ellen Wildman [00:18:33] I will say it's 90 devotions and about maybe 40 or 50 of those came super easy. But the rest by, you know, 80, 81, I was really struggling to think of topics.

Don Payne [00:18:46] Okay, so you are mortal after all.

Ellen Wildman [00:18:49] I am, don't worry.

Don Payne [00:18:51] Okay. I've known lots of people who want to be writers, and I'm not just thinking about those who say that, you know, they want to write the great American novel, but they envision being writers. What was that like for you, crossing that threshold into becoming a writer and realizing that you are a writer?

Ellen Wildman [00:19:13] I think a lot of it hinges on believing the gifts that God gave me. In the past, I've had a lot of trouble accepting that I have talents. In my mind, everybody could write a book, and everybody could go to seminary. You know, it's not that hard. And so, a lot of it for me was just conquering my own self-doubt with the Word of God and also others' encouragement. That was really the first step. I think the second step in kind of taking on that title of writer was really just, again, getting rid of the image of what I think a writer has to be. I had this image that you have to be older and wiser. You probably have to be an Instagram influencer. You probably have to have good captions coming left and right, and I realized that I can be a writer, a faithful writer, and I can also faithfully have a full-time job and faithfully have a small following that I post pictures of my cat sometimes, and sometimes I post about theology. I could do both. So, a lot of it was just working through, I would say, my own self-doubt and trusting and remembering how I felt when I wrote and how I felt that God was leading.

Don Payne [00:20:45] What have been some of the early response patterns to it? What kind of feedback have you gotten so far?

Ellen Wildman [00:20:52] It's been really exciting. Honestly, when I wrote the book, I thought, okay, my friends and family will read this, but I don't know if anyone else will. So what's been the most exciting is hearing from people that I don't know that they've been encouraged and that it's an honest reflection of what it's like to be single, because there's a lot of single resources out there, but a lot of them focus on what I consider kind of less than helpful advice, like use this time to prepare for marriage, or you need to put yourself out there more, or you'll find the right man when you stop looking, stuff like that. They focus more on that and focus more on being content in this season. And while I personally am content in this season, I wanted to acknowledge that not everybody will be. You'll experience hard times and that's okay. You'll experience unmet expectations or unmet plans. That's okay. And just being honest with the different ups and downs of singleness, just as you would be honest with the ups and downs of marriage.

Don Payne [00:22:03] Let me ask you this, Ellen, I'm going to go back to your seminary experience, how do you think this book might have looked differently if you had written it before attending seminary?

Ellen Wildman [00:22:14] I think that it would have lacked a depth that it now has because I attended seminary, because not only was I more acquainted with the Bible, but also, I trusted, and I trust God in me more than I did before I attended seminary. So, I'm able to confidently dig a little deeper into emotions and feelings and seasons and also dig a little deeper into the word.

Don Payne [00:22:44] I'm going to read a little bit into your comments. You can correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like some of what you took from seminary was more than simply the classes you took or the books you read. The way you described that sounds more like the overall experience of seminary and how God used, you know, maybe challenges and stretches and things that were not printed in a curriculum per se. That's the language I often use with students, is the overall experience of seminary. The thing as a whole, not merely the aggregate of the classes that you took. Was that part of your experience?

Ellen Wildman [00:23:27] 100%. I mean, I think I came to seminary, let's see, one year after I graduated undergrad. But I'm still young, still figuring out what life looks like. So, I think that seminary came at that pivotal moment where I felt like I had a lot of options in front of me. I was trying to determine where I felt God was leading me. And then seminary came. Not only did I learn a lot and study a lot, but it also really shaped me into who I am.

Don Payne [00:23:59] Okay. Yeah, it can tax us in ways that we don't expect. Nobody prints that in the catalog, right?

Ellen Wildman [00:24:06] Well, I also did write this book at the same time that I was writing my final paper for a seminary. The manuscript for this book was due a week before my final paper, so it was a busy time.

Don Payne [00:24:20] Oh, yeah. If you were doing both at the same time. Switching back and forth between different modes of thought and different writing styles, probably.

Ellen Wildman [00:24:28] Exactly.

Don Payne [00:24:29] Now, where can people get this? Can they get it at all the normal places they get books? Or where?

Ellen Wildman [00:24:34] Yep. It was published by Dayspring. You can get it on Dayspring.com or Amazon, any of those places.

Don Payne [00:24:41] Great. So, what are you working on now? What's next for you? Do you know?

Ellen Wildman [00:24:45] Yeah, that's a great question. So, I will actually be working on another devotional at Dayspring coming out in the summer of 24. So, working on that and then just thinking through a couple other books, what it would look like to write on different topics and really just continue to delve into Christian culture versus what I think the word has to say about different topics. That's kind of vague, but we'll see what happens.

Don Payne [00:25:17] That's encouraging. Keep at it. Let me encourage listeners to check out Ellen's website. I mentioned this earlier. It's EllenWildman.com. And in addition to her book, *Single and Not Sorry*, 90 devotionals of Real encouragement for Right Now, in addition to that, your website has a number of other short pieces you've written, correct?

Ellen Wildman [00:25:40] Yep. On my website are all the different articles I've written, so you can check those out on a variety of topics.

Don Payne [00:25:47] Okay. Well, Ellen, this has been really fun to talk to you. We're proud to have you as one of our grads and really encouraged to see what you've done with your seminary education and how the Lord has opened up some doors for you to be of some really significant influence through your writing gifts.

Ellen Wildman [00:26:05] Thank you.

Don Payne [00:26:06] I hope you'll keep honing that craft because you'll be able to hone it all your life long, and it's a craft worth honing.

Ellen Wildman [00:26:15] That's the plan. You know, I'm just along for the ride. God's going to tell me what to do, and I'm going to write right alongside him.

Don Payne [00:26:23] Good. Good. Do that. Well, thanks for spending time with us, Ellen. I want to give a word of thanks as well to Matt Evans, who records these interviews, and Christa Ebert, who edits them on behalf of Andrea Weyand, who is our senior director of communications. Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts. And please send any questions or comments to us at our email address, which is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. Our website, DenverSeminary.edu has plenty of other resources you can explore, such as advanced degree programs and also more episodes of Engage 360, including full episode transcripts. We're really grateful for your interest, for your support, and for your prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you. Take care, friends.