

The Pastor's Wife Is a Pastor's Wife - Part I

"There you are," a woman whispered in my ear as she grabbed my elbow during a church gathering. "I've been looking *everywhere* for you!"

I braced myself. You never know what a statement like that could mean—especially at a church gathering.

Did I leave my car running in the parking lot? Did one of my kids have an accident involving bodily fluids? Or horror of all horrors—is my husband's zipper down while he's preaching?

The woman led me from the back of the meeting room where I was standing into the lobby area.

Was there someone critically in need of prayer? Is there a baby being born in the lobby? Did someone leave a pumpkin latte out here with my name on it?

The woman urgently pointed to the ceiling. "Look! The air conditioning isn't cold enough. You have to fix it."

I breathed a sigh of relief and gave her a quick hug. "The air conditioner? I don't know how to fix the air conditioner. I barely know how to read a Celsius thermostat."

She thought about this for a second and chuckled. "But you *are* the pastor's wife."

My Biggest Fear as a Pastor's Wife

Both my husband and I had wanted to minister overseas before we were married. My husband spent a summer in the Middle East and fell in love with the people, their culture, their language, and their food. Dave is constantly trying to come up with more ways to incorporate *shish tawook* into his diet.

For my part, a few months after I began walking with God in college I read *Let the Nations Be Glad* with some friends. If you've ever read this book by John Piper then you know why I applied for a passport after reading the first chapter.

I was excited to serve the Lord overseas. After we got married I was excited for my husband to be a church planter.

But there was one thing about being a pastor's wife that terrified me . . . I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would never be able to measure up to everyone's expectations.

I had heard all the rumors about pastor's wives. They're supposed to play the piano, lead prayer meetings, organize the Christmas play, supply a baby to be Baby Jesus for the Christmas play, and perhaps have several more kids to be shepherds and wisemen for the play, too.

They're supposed to be up on the latest fashions and epitomize modesty at the same time. They need to know how to cook enough food to feed every church member and know all the words to all the hymns in the hymnal.

Someone even told me that pastor's wives who live overseas have to grow their hair really long so they could tie it into a bun. I can't tie a bun to save my life. Just by coincidence (or perhaps not), I cut my long hair into a short bob a few weeks before we moved overseas. *Oops.*

I might have been too paralyzed to even pack my suitcase if I had taken all of these rumors seriously. Just thinking about that could make a wife want to throw in the dishtowel at the first potluck and hide under the stairs with the leftover grape juice from communion.

Of course, I would have cheered for my husband as he boarded the plane. "Have fun, Honey! Skype me! I'll be praying for you!"

I felt that my husband was very well suited to be a pastor for a congregation of people from more than 50 different nationalities. But me, be an international church pastor's wife? I wasn't so sure I fit the fabled job description.

So What *Is* a Pastor's Wife?

I can imagine that you might be thinking a variety of things as you read this, depending on your perspective of what a pastor's wife should be.

Perhaps something about the idea of having this role shaped by others' expectations unsettles you. But maybe you can't think of any realistic alternatives. After all, everyone has expectations placed upon them--everyone.

A good question we ought to ask is this: Where are these expectations coming from?

It is so helpful for me to continually process the implications of this question. My husband is very well aware that I am not a wonderwoman. A few weeks after the church launched, the saints at Redeemer Church of Dubai caught on to this fact as well!

So what is a pastor's wife? One answer is very simply stated:

The pastor's wife should be a pastor's wife.

That sounds obvious, right? But this idea is not always easy to unpack and apply.

The Pastor's Wife and Her First Love - Part II

"I just want to take a minute to soak this in." Our cheeky South African friend had a big grin on his face as he approached my husband and me after a church meeting.

"What do you mean?" my husband inquired.

"It's just so strange to see you two standing next to each other at *church* of all places! Shouldn't you both be working?" He chuckled. Our friend's remark about us rarely being in one another's presence during church gatherings is humorous.

But some remarks aren't very funny.

Someone once told me, "Excuse me, *you* are the pastor's wife? I expected you to be different."

I'm slowly getting used to the forthrightness of some of the friends we've made here in Dubai. After living in this region for nearly four years, most of my culture shock has become quite mild.

But there are still moments when I'm shocked. Like the time a group of ladies offered to point out some places where I could stand to lose more of my baby weight. One woman stepped forward and gently patted a few body parts to emphasize her point. Another woman advised me, "Stop wearing loose pants or you will stay this way."

At that moment I wasn't trying to treasure the gospel; I just wanted to go to a "happy place." Thankfully, I can laugh about this now. I've come to realize that the openness these women enjoy comes from security in their friendships sealed by loyalty. These women loved me so much to include me in their community where friends speak freely about all sorts of things from expanding waistlines to struggles with sin.

I am continually learning more about different cultures. I am also continually learning to treasure the gospel and its implications for me as the wife of a pastor.

Ministry can be overwhelming with its complex web of relationships and bouts of intense busyness. Factor in cultural complications and various seasons of life and you've got a recipe for potential anxiety, discouragement, and fatigue.

As pastors' wives, our extreme circumstances make it easy for us to forget that our relationship with God is the predominant, defining relationship in our lives.

I forget the gospel because of my sin.

Certainly my own sin is the most persuasive factor in my forgetting the gospel. I know in my heart I feel I am *the* VIP. I assume this should be the case for the people in my life because in my own mind I am larger-than-life. A friend gently reminds me that people don't think about me nearly as often as I like to think they do!

Because I'm self-centered, I tend to have an unhealthy fixation on things like church drama or our jam-packed pastoral schedule. I can stew over comments about my husband or the church and assume the worst motives in others. This is all the more reason I must continually remind myself of the all-encompassing, life-defining reality of the gospel.

I forget the gospel because of secondary things.

Many a pastor's wife has struggled with expectations for them on the part of the congregation (and perhaps her husband). With input from dozens of fellow church members, "Our Old Pastor's Wife" can become a idealized caricature who wears dozens of hats. Someone told me that one of the up-sides of being married to a church planter is that new believers don't know "Our Old Pastor's Wife." So when these new believers move on from our church to another church then *I* turn into her.

We should affirm and celebrate how God designed us with a myriad of different gifts for building up the church and loving our neighbors. But the roles we play should be second fiddle to one great reality--- God designed *all* of us to see and cherish him as our highest good.

Every pastor's wife has this in common: we are all desperate to see God's grace at work in our life, our husband's life, and in the life of our church. Dependency on God's grace is a defining reality for every pastor's wife across the globe.

We are Jesus' sheep, too.

When we get caught up in the work of the ministry and forget our dependence on God, we carry burdens we were never meant to bear. We need to remember that Jesus bears our burdens, just like he bears the burdens of every fellow saint in our church. The greatest burden he has carried for us is our sin.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Jesus absorbed God's wrath against our sin so we don't have to absorb church drama and let it define us and rule our marriage.

Jesus governs all things for our good and his glory so we don't have to be control freaks in order to feel safe.

Jesus died to forgive our sins so we could live to righteousness and avoid a world of snares like pride, gossip, and selfishness.

Jesus is sovereignly building his church so we don't have to burn out in frenetic ministry busyness.

Jesus is going to present the church to himself in splendor so we don't have to despair over every negative comment we hear.

Jesus is our tender Shepherd who loves us with undying faithfulness so we don't have to live for people pleasing.

Jesus is the Overseer of our souls; he cares for us! Through his work on the cross, our Good Shepherd gives us his own body as sustenance for us. We ought to take pains to feast on his word every day for the good of our own souls---not just to regurgitate for ministry output.

Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp said in *How People Change*, "If who I am in Christ does not shape the way I think about myself and the things I face, then I will live out some other identity." The most defining relationship of the pastor's wife is her relationship to the Chief Shepherd who guides, cherishes, and guards her soul.

By grace through faith the pastor's wife is a partner in the glorious gospel. He who began the good work of conforming us to the image of his Son will complete it at the day of Jesus Christ.

And to the praise of his glorious grace we'll become *exactly* whom he expected.

The Pastor's Wife and Her Primary Ministry - Part III

An article in our local newspaper announced an airline's new policy---"your fourth wife flies free"---in honor of a ruler who had just taken his fourth wife.

When my husband traveled to India for ministry he brought back an interesting anecdote. He said, "Every pastor I met introduced himself to me like this: 'My name is So-and-so; I have one wife and however-many kids.'" One of our church members from India explained that the rules of English grammar might be the reason the Indian pastors said that they have "one" wife instead of "a" wife.

Even so, in this area of the world, monogamous marriages are not assumed. I suppose it couldn't hurt for married pastors to affirm that they are married to *only* one wife!

Besides the "only one wife if you're married" clause, 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 list nearly 20 requirements for a potential under-shepherd of the Lord's sheep.

But where is the list of qualifications to be an elder's *wife*? Scripture-based ecclesiology offers no explicit job description for the office of pastor's wife, because there is no such office.

Empty Nesters to Nursing Moms

There is no office for the elder/pastor's wife, yet many wives feel pressure (or even a desire) to function as an honorary elder or unpaid staff member of the church. Direction in ministry for a pastor's wife can take on many forms, but one specific ministry ought to be valued over every other service opportunity she may be gifted to do or feel passionately about---that is, a wife's ministry to her husband and family.

To state it negatively, a pastor's wife's ministry to her husband and family should not be regarded as nominal and diminishing in comparison to other opportunities to serve in the church.

Pastors' wives love Jesus, love their husbands, love their churches, and want to serve the Lord. Of course a pastor's wife wants to be "sold out for the kingdom." But she would be selling the wrong domain if she punted her God-given responsibility of faithfully serving her husband and family. None of us really wants to neglect or disown this main ministry that God has hand-picked for us. Pastors' wives, just like every other church member, need discipleship, intentional care for their soul, and direction in ministry.

The subject of "seasonal ministry" was brought up around the lunch table where I sat with the other elders' wives in our church. Some are empty nesters or nearly empty nesters. Others have nursing babies at home. The nature of our husbands' work varies. Our husbands also have various issues with physical health that limit or redirect their efforts in service.

Between the pasta and Panini, we marveled at how exceedingly difficult it would be for all of us to be called to the same area of formal service in our church. Our gifting and passions differ greatly. But we share one ministry in common, which is ministry to our husbands---to be his one wife with all the power of Christ who so mightily works in us.

1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 for the Pastor's Wife

As our pastor-husbands "equip the saints for the work of ministry," we must come alongside and support them in this calling. One place to start looking for specific ways to minister to our husbands is the list of elder/pastor qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We can assume there is reproof and instruction from these passages to apply for ourselves.

One example is immediately apparent but perhaps seldom taught. An elder "must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive" (1 Timothy 3:4). The harrowing task of managing his household is given to Christian men. Ever since the Fall in the Garden of Eden a man's efforts to lead his family have been met with opposition from within and without. We're sinners who marry sinners and give birth to more sinners. A man who aspires to the office of elder aspires to a noble thing. But first he must die to himself and lead his family likewise. Surely an elder could do this task of managing his household with greater dignity and confidence when his wife is walking with the Lord and supporting her husband, his leadership in their family, and his leadership in the church.

Many women's Bible studies discuss how to become a "Proverbs 31 woman." *An excellent wife, who can find!* These studies would also do well to caution women against becoming a "Proverbs 21 woman." "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman" (Proverbs 21:9, 19). I like to joke with my husband that when I am "a quarrelsome and fretful woman" then he is in *double* trouble. Our roof is less than habitable, *and* we live in a desert!

Are you a quarrelsome and fretful wife? Are you the common denominator of dissension and strife in your home? Or are you a supportive and helpful wife? Are you building your home by God's grace in order to

bring it under the headship of your husband to the glory of Jesus? Or do you foolishly tear down your home with your own hands ([Proverbs 14:1](#))?

There are other general qualities in these passages that every Christian man ought to aspire to. An elder must be "hospitable." How can you support your husband as he invites both strangers and also loved ones into fellowship? An elder must be "above reproach." How can you graciously support your husband's commitment to living a life of integrity? Every wife ought to cheerfully support her husband's grace-driven and grace-sustained efforts in being sober-minded, self-controlled, gentle, and holy.

One character trait unique to men who aspire to leadership in the church is their ability to teach God's Word. An elder must be "able to teach." It might seem wives cannot help their husbands in this regard. Not so! I'm so thankful the Lord started pointing out to me ways that I could support my husband in his ability to teach in our first semester in seminary. Ten years later I still have to ask myself these heart-questions as I aim to support him: Do I respect my husband's hard work in study? Or do I resent the time he spends preparing to minister the Word? What are some creative and sacrificial ways I can budget time, money, and resources to help my husband as he seeks to be "able to teach"?

No Matter Your Age, Get Titus 2 Help

Many pastors' wives are young. Some of us are newlyweds. One woman wrote me an email a few weeks ago and said she was a "pastor's wife in training" as her fiancé just started seminary. Like me, she was struggling with fears and insecurities about the role she would assume once they were married and her husband started pastoring. Sometimes a pastor's wife with little experience in life, marriage, and ministry is thrust into leadership roles simply by association with her husband.

Instead of giving in to fear that we are incapable and insufficient, we should rely on the sufficiency of Christ and lean into the older women in our lives who can teach us how to love our husbands and children like Titus 2 describes. Surely a pastor's wife who models humility and teachability is leading other women faithfully in her example of biblical womanhood. A wife who draws on the strength and creative energy of God "who richly provides us with everything to enjoy" ([1 Timothy 6:17](#)) will not lack anything she needs for service to her husband.

Pastors' wives need specific support and encouragement to be excellent wives to their pastor-husbands. After all, she's the only wife he's got!