

True Companion

true companion

Thoughts on Being a Pastor's Wife

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Thoughts on Being a Pastor's Wife*
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To Mary Lou Busby,
a long-time friend
and faithful pastor's wife.

contents

preface 9

introduction 13

PART I · YOUR MARRIAGE

1	Your Husband's Helper	17
2	Loyalty	23
3	Stumbling the Minister	31
4	Flying Solo	37
5	Praying for the Pastor	41

PART 2 · YOUR CHILDREN

6	The Congregation at Home	49
7	Qualifications	55
8	First Principles	57

PART 3 · CHURCH DUTIES

9	The New Pastor's Wife	65
10	Your Relationship to the Church	71
11	Expectations for the Minister's Wife	79
12	Sunday Morning	85
13	Preparing for the Lord's Day	87

<i>14</i>	Bearing Burdens or Heavy Lifting	93
<i>15</i>	Cheerleading or Keeping Perspective	97
<i>16</i>	Counseling in the Church	101
<i>17</i>	Women's Ministry in the Church	109
<i>18</i>	The Benefits	113

PART 4 · CHALLENGES & TRIALS

<i>19</i>	When the Minister Needs Help	119
<i>20</i>	When Friends Leave	123
<i>21</i>	Friendships	129
<i>22</i>	Thick Skin	135
<i>23</i>	Vulnerability	145
<i>24</i>	Hospitality	151
<i>25</i>	Self-Evaluation	157

preface

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Before we get started talking about what it means to be married to a pastor, I need to introduce myself.

First I have to tell you that it never occurred to me that I might marry a minister. I was converted in college, and I had never known a minister's wife in all my life. I remember well the pastor of the church I attended with my family in high school, but I have no recollection of his wife. I'm not sure I ever thought of him as a family man at all. He just appeared in the pulpit in his black robe each week.

When Doug and I got married in 1975, he was pursuing his college degree after spending four years in the US Navy (submarine service). We imagined that after he finished (he got a masters in philosophy), we would be involved in some kind of Christian work. Doug grew up in a Christian home, and his father, a gifted evangelist, had started non-profit evangelistic bookstores in college towns. We assumed we might end up doing something very similar. We had both

spent time working in his local bookstore, and I had been part-time staff for Inter-Varsity.

Our church was founded just a few months before our marriage in 1975. We were enthusiastic supporters, but it never dawned on us that in a very short time Doug would himself be the pastor. About a year and a half into it, our pastor announced that it was his last Sunday. He wished us all good luck and said something about how we should do whatever the Lord led us to do.

We didn't have any elders. I don't think we even had a statement of faith. But we had about thirty to fifty people, mostly very young like we were, and my husband had the guitar up front leading the singing. So there we were.

We tried to find someone else to take over as the pastor, but it soon became clear that God was calling my husband to do this thing. He didn't want to. I didn't want him to. It seemed impossible. All I knew was that I didn't want to be a pastor's wife. How's that for a glamorous beginning? There was no time for seminary training. My husband had to train on the job, and so did I.

This book is the result of a little newsletter for ministers' wives that I started a few years back. I believe that most women in this role feel a little inadequate, and it may be nice to know that you're not the only one. So if this book seems chatty, it's because I have gathered up some of those old newsletters to use here. And if I sound motherly, it's because my husband has been a minister now for over three decades, and I have a silver mine growing in my hair.

So welcome to my random thoughts about being a pastor's wife. I hope and pray that this will encourage you to see the significance and joy of your calling.

introduction

SO YOUR HUSBAND IS A
MINISTER

“So your husband is a minister!” That comment can conjure up all kinds of stereotypical ideas. It did for me. I had no idea what a minister’s wife was supposed to do. I assumed she probably had to play the piano and wear a beehive hairdo. Or at least she would have to be in the choir. None of those things were possibilities for me, and I don’t know what I was worried about because our church had neither a piano nor a choir at the time. Even so, I felt very intimidated at the idea of being the woman who was married to the minister. I was still in my twenties, and I didn’t want to start wearing pumps and matronly dresses. Well, that was hardly a worry since my husband was preaching in his jeans back then (it was the 70’s after all), and I was wearing long, flowy dresses to match my long, flowy hair. So you see, all my fears were ungrounded.

But what about everyone else’s expectations? What would they expect me to be? We lived in a very small, old

apartment. How could we host Bible studies and church meetings? Would I be expected to organize Sunday school or have everyone to dinner? Would everyone be looking at me? Would I ever see my husband? Would he ever get a day off?

About this time I spoke with my very jolly friend Mary Lou whose husband was a new minister. I told her all my concerns and she reassured me that I wouldn't have to play the piano or be up front. She described herself as a "behind the scenes" pastor's wife, and I thought that sounded perfect for me.

The thing that really settled my heart and mind was realizing that God would equip us both to do whatever He called us to do. I didn't have any worries about whether my husband was up to it. All my doubts had to do with me. The great relief came when I realized I would still simply be *Doug's wife*. That was something I had been doing for a couple of years already, and though I was no expert, at least it was familiar territory. In fact, I liked it. So even though my husband was taking on new responsibilities, my primary responsibilities would remain the same. I would still be my husband's helper, with no fancy titles, and that sounded reasonable enough.

So let's start there.

PART I

Your Marriage

chapter 1

YOUR HUSBAND'S
HELPER

Since a pastor's wife is still first and foremost *a wife*, she can consider her calling to be very similar to every other wife's calling: she is designed to be a helper. She takes care of her man. Nevertheless, this obvious first duty is the one that can sometimes get obscured and overlooked in the midst of family life and church business. We can get distracted by everyone else's pressing needs and neglect the weighty matter of our own marriage duties. Children have varying needs of their own, and the house is a lot to keep up with. Then there are the calls and interruptions common in many households. So how can any wife manage all this and still keep her husband and his needs from being relegated to obscurity? And what are his needs anyway? Who takes care of him? Surprise answer: you do!

Every wife should appreciate her husband's calling, and the minister's wife is no exception. Though I didn't expect (or want) Doug to become a minister, it was not because I had a low view of what it would take. It was actually the

opposite. Even so, in the day-to-day, year-after-year labors, it is possible to forget that being married to a minister is a unique calling and a great honor. So a wife should maintain a high view of her husband's calling and gifts. A minister is called to shepherd a portion of God's flock, and this is a job that requires much self-sacrifice and patience. I don't have to tell you this, because no one knows this better than the minister's wife. She sees behind the scenes like no one else.

No wonder his batteries need recharging, and the minister's wife should recognize that she is God's primary means to do the recharging. Like any husband, he needs rest, he needs food, and he needs the restorative pleasures of the marriage bed. All these things she should "gift him" as a centerpiece of her own ministry to him. She should view these duties by faith, trusting that God will use them all to bless and strengthen her husband.

A good marriage is a comfort and an inestimable blessing. A minister with a healthy, happy marriage will be far more effective in his calling than if his marriage is anemic or strained. So consider the state of your marriage. Is it thriving? Is it in a slump? What can you do to improve things? God said it was not good for the man to be alone, so do all in your power, by God's grace, to make this true in your own marriage. You don't want him sighing with relief when he heads out the door in the morning. Even a good marriage can be better, so ask God to enrich and deepen your attachment to one another.

Wives are to respect their husbands. How's that going at your house? You may think it's going well and fine, but does he agree? Does your husband feel respected and honored?

Do you do what he says? Remember that vow about “love, honor, and obey”? So consider tuning things up. What has he asked you to do that you haven’t yet done? Are you letting things slide or cutting corners and not telling him? Are you open and honest with him about everything? Does he know about that charge on the credit card? Are you quick to do what he asks? Do you keep confidences?

One of the first principles of marriage is to stay in fellowship with one another. That requires diligence and humility. You are Christians, so you know what to do: you mess up, you seek forgiveness. And you don’t wait until tomorrow—you do it now. Doug and I call this keeping short accounts. If you let sins go by without confession and forgiveness, resentments will pile up and put distance between you. So the first duty is to stay in close fellowship. That keeps you from drifting apart and is a tremendous protection for your marriage.

I hope to be (though it doesn’t sound like a flattering description at first) a “low maintenance” wife or a “two-bucket woman.” (A two-bucket woman is one who can carry two buckets instead of just one . . . in other words, a strong woman.) That means I want to do my job without a lot of oversight and coaching, which frees my husband to do his job. Though we all have times when we need to pour out our troubles to our husbands, we ought to try to be the kind of wives who don’t need that kind of attention *every single day*. It would be unrealistic (and maybe even unnatural) to be the kind of wife who never had a problem, but neither do we want to be his last counseling appointment each and every day. In other words, we want to be applying what we are learning and asking God to enable us to grow in grace so

we are a positive help and not a drain on our husbands. He should have confidence that he is coming home to a woman who has her tasks in hand.

Most ministers (and often their wives) are involved in marriage counseling, and that is only possible if they have healthy marriages themselves. You can't fake it. And though ministers are not exempt from all the temptations and trials that everyone else faces, he has to live out the standards he preaches. He can't do this alone. His wife has got to be on board and willing to work hard on keeping the relationship in good shape.

Doug and I have seen marriages that seemed to be okay for twenty or twenty-five years suddenly tank. The crisis usually brings things to light that should have been addressed long ago, but they've been festering underground. The harvest finally comes in, and there it is in plain sight. So don't let things drift. Address your issues as they come up. If the relationship is neglected, it will eventually get sick. Gardens grow weeds and marriages do too. That's why they need to be tended.

Just imagine what would happen to our country if all the pulpits were filled with godly men who were unashamedly proclaiming God's Word. Men like this need wives who are preparing for them, making their homes places where the family can thrive in an atmosphere of love, affection, and respect.

I'm not saying that the state of the marriage is up to you. Husbands are ultimately responsible for the state of their families. But we wives have far more power than we realize to affect the atmosphere in our homes. We can make it one

of peace and happiness. That's what I'm talking about. This is our privilege and our joy.

LOYALTY

All that the Bible teaches about women applies to Christian women in general, and not just to ministers' wives. But if we are to be helping the women in the congregation to obey God's Word, then we have to be doing it ourselves first, obviously. So all I say here is true for all wives, though I am making special application to the minister's wife.

First of all, she has to be the kind of woman who believes the Bible is true and submits to it in every area of her life. No exceptions. This means she is loyal to God first, and then to her husband and family, church and congregation.

A loyal wife is a security for her husband. "The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life" (Prov. 31:11–12). Loyalty to your husband means that you are a die-hard, one-man woman. It means you are faithful, constant, and true. You don't change, you don't yield (to the wrong suggestions), and you are not shaken. You are firm,