

# true companion

*Thoughts on Being a Pastor's Wife*

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*preface*

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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

*introduction*

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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.

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PART I

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# *Your Marriage*

*chapter 1*

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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?

## 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,

steady, and dependable in your allegiance to your husband, not wishy-washy or unpredictable. You joyfully support him long-term. This is what the minister needs, and I think he needs it all the more because of the public nature of his calling. He needs the kind of wife who brings him good, over and over again, day-in and day-out.

This kind of loyalty ought to be an established tone in the marriage and in the home. Everyone should be able to assume it. In this house we are loyal to one another; we trust each other. This is a climate of grace.

Loyalty is rare. People look out for their own interests and they ditch or they flake or they switch sides when they feel like it. Loyalty is a matter of the *heart*. A loyal heart is a steady heart, a heart with a solid commitment. No wavering. You can see it in Psalm 57:7, “My *heart* is steadfast, O God, my *heart* is steadfast; I will sing and give praise.” And again in Psalm 112:7, “His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord.”

Our first obligation as Christian women is to have steadfast hearts to God. All our earthly loyalty is derived from His. He is the author and source of all our loyalty.

Next, the wife must be loyal to her husband. She has promised to be loyal and faithful sexually in thought, word, and deed. This means she is content with her man and not looking for male attention elsewhere. She doesn't flirt or get too comfortable with other men. She keeps a courteous, friendly distance.

When Doug and I were first married, we made some hard-and-fast rules about how we each would interact with the opposite sex. Later when he became a minister, we felt all the more committed to guarding both our marriage and our

### chapter 3

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## STUMBLING THE MINISTER

We all want to be five-star helpers for our minister husbands, looking for ways to cheer them on as they preach, teach, and fulfill their various duties, but we can sometimes be the means of stumbling our husbands rather than helping them.

This is not a new concept. Our mother Eve is our primary example of the helper gone amiss, so we know we are fully capable of following in her footsteps and “handing our husbands the apple,” so to speak. *Here, honey. Have a bite of this!* O Lord, deliver us from being the means by which our husbands fall.

But how does this happen? The obvious temptations are clear; it's the subtle ones that can trip us up. The obvious stumbling-block wife is the one we have all seen or heard about who rules the roost and pins back her husband's ears with her insistence that he do things her way. We have a name for this kind of woman. She is the battle axe, and look out if you come within striking distance. She demands

attention, standing there with her arms crossed and her foot tapping. Though your temptation to rule over your husband may be more subtle than this, it is just as deadly.

Consider this possibility. We want our husbands to preach the Word boldly, but what if his bold preaching ruffles some feathers, as it most assuredly will? A minister's wife must be on guard against the temptation to get her husband to tone it down. "But if he keeps preaching like that, everyone is going to leave the church." Of course it all depends on what "preaching like that" means. Proverbs 28:1 says, "But the righteous are bold as a lion." What is "great boldness in the faith" (1 Tim. 3:13) unless it is preaching without fear? And what's to be afraid of? If there were no hard consequences to preaching, then there would be no need for boldness. Boldness is required where there is *danger*.

I think that most women by nature prefer to get along. I confess that I number myself among them, preferring approval to disapproval. Who wouldn't? Don't we all want our husbands to be appreciated rather than criticized, well received rather than dismissed, marginalized, or overlooked? Most wives like it even less when their husbands encounter real hostility either from the congregation, the larger Christian community, or from the unbelieving world. This is only natural and understandable, but it is also a snare. A wife can think she is helping her husband to be more rhetorically effective when she is encouraging him to tone it down, but in reality she may be motivated to keep everyone happy. Having everyone pleased with our husbands is not the highest good. It never is. And once a man begins to preach and teach and lead a church to gain approval from his wife or

## FLYING SOLO

As the years roll by, your life will change and so will some of your responsibilities. We must be flexible women, adjusting to these changes by faith. For example, my kids are grown with families of their own now. At the worship service, they sit together with their children and not with me, which is as it should be. I am accustomed to flying solo at church as well as at other events.

For example, at most of the weddings I attend (and we have quite a number), I sit without my husband. That's normal. And after the wedding, he is sometimes hard to find, but eventually we connect and make our way to the reception, where he may have to disappear again. This is what we do, and I know the dance steps fairly well by now.

The same goes for worship. It is a rare Sunday when I am seated with my husband all through the service. But I don't mind. I have the privilege of having him be my minister as well as my husband. When the kids were little, I sometimes

wished for another pair of hands, but the kids were great. They never pulled any terrible stunts during worship. And, back in those days, we had a children's church service for them during the sermon, so it really wasn't oh-so-very tough. But there were still times that I felt rather stranded. I've learned a lot about navigating since then!

Not only is he gone during the worship service, but he is busy for an hour or more afterwards, visiting people at the door. I try to connect to people and enjoy the time for fellowship. When the kids were young and hungry and eager to get home to lunch, they had to learn to wait. They fellowshiped too, and it didn't hurt any of us.

As the crowd thins after church, I try to keep an eye on my husband, and I can usually tell when he's ready to go. Then I make my appearance, and if I've read him right, we head out the door.

When the kids were little, of course I had to miss church when one or more was sick. Recently another minister's wife asked me what I did to make it a special day for the kids when they had to miss church. I'm afraid I don't remember! I hope I read some Bible stories to them. I always tried to make sick times as sweet as possible, but I really don't recall what I did on those Sundays. You would think I would at least remember what I did for the six weeks when the chicken pox went through the house, but I don't. The only thing I remember about that was the college student who asked me where I went to church! I thought he was joking, but he seriously thought maybe I attended church elsewhere!

When we travel to visit a congregation where my husband is speaking, of course I find myself solo quite a bit,