

Letters to Pastors' Wives

WHEN SEMINARY ENDS AND MINISTRY BEGINS



EDITED BY

CATHERINE J. STEWART

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To the professors' wives who faithfully mentored the seminary wives
at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, during the years of
1999–2002.

Contents

Preface	9
Acknowledgments	13
Introduction	15
 Part 1: The Piety of the Pastor's Wife	
1. Priorities: Putting First Things First <i>Catherine J. Stewart</i>	21
2. Personal Devotions: The Heart before the Actions <i>Margy Tripp</i>	39
3. Humility: The Only Way Up Is Down <i>Lynn Crotts</i>	55
4. Tongue and Thumb: Guarding the Ways We Communicate <i>Barbara Davis</i>	67
 Part 2: Practical Counsel for Us All	
5. Expectations: God-centered or Self-imposed <i>Donna Ascol</i>	77
6. Hospitality: Fellowship or Entertainment? <i>Shirley Rankin</i>	97
7. Friendships over the Long Haul: Our Need for Female Fellowship <i>Betty Jane Adams</i>	107
8. Respecting My Husband: The Foundational Principles <i>Noelle Wilkerson</i>	119

CONTENTS

9. Sharing My Husband: With Whomever and Whenever <i>Joan Hamilton</i>	131
10. Handling Criticism: Two Approaches <i>Mary Beeke</i>	147
11. Conflict within the Church: Keeping Your Heart Pure <i>Sue Rowe</i>	161
12. Ministry Moms: Perspectives from a PK <i>Sarah Ascol</i>	175
13. Depression: A Dark Valley <i>Mary Somerville</i>	193
14. Loneliness and Bereavement: Common to All, Unique to Some <i>Shannon Baugh Onnink</i>	209
15. The Lord's Day: A Hard Day's Rest <i>"Sissy" Floyd Pipa</i>	225
 Part 3: Particular Circumstances	
16. Habitual Sin in the Life of My Husband: Now What? <i>Janie Street</i>	241
17. Ministering in a Different Culture: Aliens and Strangers <i>Pam Schweitzer</i>	255
18. Campus Ministry: Life at the Crossroads <i>Kathy Wilcke</i>	269
 Notes	 279
Contributors	283

Preface

It's Not Good for a Pastor to Be Alone

A wife can make or break a man's ministry. Her influence is felt everywhere. It begins behind the front door as she turns a house into a haven and a home. Without her, there will almost always be something "not good" about the man. Even for Adam in the garden—a perfect man, in perfect paradise, in perfect relationship with God—there was a jarring want about him before Eve came into the picture. How could he image the triune God by himself (Genesis 1:27)?¹

As an anecdotal statement of this, I once heard Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones tell the story of a minister in London during the 1920s. He was of an extremely liberal theological bent and went from one conflict to another in his ministry. Yet, more than anything else, this minister was known for his cheerful, happy disposition. When asked about the source of this joy, he replied, "My wife loves me, and when I go home at night, I close the door on all my troubles and open a door into a realm of peace and rest." Of course, the true Christian needs a deeper source of joy than a good marriage, and we must not lean on our spouses in the way that we should lean only on God. With that said, however, the Puritan Thomas Gataker was surely onto something when he noted, "A good wife is the best companion in wealth; the fittest and readiest assistant in work; the greatest comfort in crosses and griefs; and the greatest grace and honor that can be, to him that hath her!"²

Her presence also has a way of brightening the church and balancing her husband's ministry. In God's kind providence, opposites have a way of attracting one another in marriage. How many times has the tender, personable, winsome, sincerely interested wife served to take the edge off an overly bookish, at times insensitive, and naturally introverted minister? Think of the absentminded professor type. How often has this forgetful soul found himself joined to a highly disciplined and organized helpmeet! Were it not for the safety net afforded by her watchful eye, how many pastoral lunches might this dear man have missed? And we have all met the highly organized, ducks-in-a-row, "Don't interrupt me; can't you see I am pursuing my number-one priority for the morning?" type of preacher. He wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the church were it not for the Abigail-like graces of his wife, who gently reminds him that he is a shepherd of sheep by calling—not a butcher of interruptions!

Writing this the week that Stephen Covey died, I think it is fair to say that marrying such a balancing influence is perhaps the first habit of highly successful ministers! In that regard, have you never noticed that the book of Proverbs—a book designed for fathers who teach wisdom to their sons—ends with the subject of the excellent wife? For the longest time, I used to think that this was Solomon's instruction to the fairer sex—too little and too late, perhaps, but at least he didn't forget women altogether. Then it hit me. The passage isn't directed at women in order that they might become such wives but directed to men in order that they might find them. Remember how King Lemuel started his description: "An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels" (Prov. 31:10)? Isn't it also interesting to note that one of the marks of this woman is that her husband is known in the gates, where the elders sit governing the city's affairs? In light of this, could it be that the book ends on this note to teach the son the last great lesson of wisdom: "Son, when it comes to being wise and having a voice that carries weight in society, whom you choose to marry matters a very great deal indeed"?

A wife has a way of shining as a beacon in the community. Ministers by the very nature of their task are always on the run. I sometimes feel that

I am always going from home to study to pulpit to parlor to hospital and back to home again. I don't get much time with my neighbors. Catherine has proved invaluable to me over the years. She jogs in the morning and stops to talk to all the neighbors as they take out the trash and do their yard work on the weekends. She knows the names of the cashiers and baggers at our local grocery store. She takes time with people whom few others ever stop to notice. She stands behind me like the welcoming glow of a sunset in a Thomas Kinkade painting, where even the snow looks warm! I always appear much kinder when she's near me. Many in our community who think well of me actually hardly know me, but they know Kate, and the favor reflects on her husband.

All this to say, while I suppose it is possible for a man to be an effective minister without a godly wife to help him, it will be very difficult, and for the most part, it will be impossible. May God use this book to help our wives to help us, so that more and more we might all have cause to say with old Mr. Cotton: "Women are creatures without which there is no comfortable living for man. . . . They are a sort of Blasphemers then who despise and decry them, and call them a necessary evil, for they are a necessary good!"³

REV. DR. NEIL C. STEWART
July 2012

Acknowledgments

“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23

There are a few people who did not contribute to this book but whose time undergirded it. I would like to thank Linda Breen, Kate Dyer, Camille Hebert, Dorsey Ketcham, Lee Ann Koon, Tracey Shannon, and Ellen Smith for their help when my eyes became glazed over! These women have given freely and without complaint to this project.

My dear mother spent her vacation time with our family while I worked on this book. Thank you for flying thousands of miles to visit us and watch your daughter bury herself in a project!

I am indebted to Terry Johnson for his time and wise counsel. Only a man of seasoned experience in ministry could have afforded the insight he provided for this book.

For our five children, Hannah (my tireless assistant), Benjamin, Eleah Marie, Josiah, and Samuel—you are the ones who gave of yourselves sacrificially for this book. You sacrificed a mommy more than a few times. May countless lives be helped because of your selflessness.

Finally, and most importantly, my dear husband, Neil, who shares my zeal to see pastors’ wives equipped to serve their husbands—your sacrifice at every level is a further demonstration of a man devoted to Christ’s cause. This book would not be in existence without you. You gave me the privilege of being a pastor’s wife. Thank you.

Introduction

A Journey into Ministry Life

*A*s you enter a new season of life, I want to remind you that the Lord has bestowed a rare privilege on you. It is my prayer that as you read through these letters you will find friends, sisters, and mentors in the dear women who have contributed to this book. They have not yet arrived at their final destination, but they are well-seasoned pilgrims who have trod the path as ministry wives. They can wholeheartedly testify to the Lord's never-failing mercies along the way. I know that I speak for all the women writing to you when I say, "We write as beggars showing another beggar where God has so graciously fed us along the ups and downs of our own lives immersed in Christian ministry."

Let me first of all give you a whistle-stop tour of my journey into ministry life and the circumstances that led to the writing of these letters. I was, by today's standards, a young bride. At the age of twenty-one, I had completed my degree in theology and found a young, earnest Christian husband. He had just completed medical school, and I was embarking on postgraduate studies. While we had discussed the probability of a call to the ministry, its reality always seemed a long way off. With both our families living nearby, we established our baby daughter and ourselves in a comfortable little home in Northern Ireland. Life seemed to be rolling along quite nicely.

Suddenly, one spring day, the peace was shattered. My husband arrived home from work and announced that the call to preach was fast becoming

an irrepressible burden on his soul. I can openly admit that although we both shared a desire to engage in full-time Christian ministry, I was not prepared for the break from our earthly home, from our families, or indeed from the security of a physician's paycheck.

In God's kind providence, he brought us to a seminary all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. There in Mississippi we were surrounded by people in similar circumstances who were seeking to faithfully obey a call to ministry life. For our husbands, this was the first exciting step in fulfilling God's divine purpose as instruments in spreading the Word. We women, however, saw these same events from an entirely different perspective. While we all recognized God's call in our husbands' lives, we were much more prone to place our focus on the everyday practicalities of student life.

Mercifully, this tendency had not gone unnoticed by the wives of the Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) faculty. And so, when we arrived on campus, we found ourselves surrounded by an established network of support, intended to equip the wives of ministry students. Every Thursday night, several godly, mature pastors' wives mentored us. Their persistent desire to teach and equip the young women provided us with some of the finest wisdom imaginable.

At the time, we probably didn't realize the full extent of what we were receiving, but we all look back to each of those women with deep gratitude for their sacrificial example to us. This book is largely born out of a desire to impart this same wisdom to other wives sharing our calling and to assure you that there really is nothing new under the sun, not even to the wife of a pastor!

Over the years of being a pastor's wife, I have had the joy of meeting countless women who share the same privileged lot in life that I have. The one enduring lesson that has been embedded in my mind is that there is no right "type" of pastor's wife, only the one whose heart is wholly set on serving Christ. In this book you will find the beauty of various personalities, character types, and giftedness interweaving the pages of these letters. We are not called to fit into a certain mold but to be helpmeets to our

husbands, helpmeets who enable them to serve God more effectively with us at their side than they ever could alone.

I would like to point out that the views expressed in these letters are the authors' own and may not be representative of the other contributors' opinions. May the Lord use the words of these women as a channel of his grace to equip you for a life of ministry.

CATHERINE J. STEWART

July 2012

Part 1

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, flowing lines with small dots and a central diamond-shaped ornament.

The Piety of the Pastor's Wife



CHAPTER ONE

Priorities: Putting First Things First

Catherine J. Stewart

A pastor's wife must be both efficient and effective in her work. She must be efficient in her ability to stay on task and get a never-ending list of chores done on schedule. Even more importantly, however, she must be effective: she must get the right list of chores done on schedule. To do this, she will need priorities.

Catherine grew up around horses, and in Ireland you spell horse "w-o-r-k." From her earliest days, she was trained to work, and work she does, with proficiency and with pleasure! I often stand amazed at her ability to plan and prioritize and simply get things done. Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that she might actually be a machine—a beautiful, blue-eyed machine, but a machine nonetheless. She is to chaos what magnets are to heaps of iron filings, yet she is no neatnik! The order she brings to our home glows with the glory of Christ, reflecting his mind, obeying his Word, serving his glory. Of all the virtues I cherish about Kate, I think this is the one I admire most

of all: she keeps first things first. I can think of no one better equipped to write this chapter.

REV. DR. NEIL C. STEWART



Dear sister in Christ,

From the very outset of this letter, I want you to know that the life you now possess as the wife of a pastor is the most privileged life you could ever desire. It may not always seem that way, but God has cocooned you in a place where you will constantly be exposed to his Word. This is a manifestation of his love toward you in Christ. As the prophet once wrote, “I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11).

With confidence of his never-failing goodness toward you, I want to help you to take a look at your life and be certain that you are putting first things first. During my college years, I had a dear friend who set me a wonderful example of a biblically prioritized life, and the lessons I gleaned from her still order my life today. As I sojourn through this passing world, those lessons continue to hold me in good stead. With God’s help, I hope to be to you what my good friend was to me.

My husband loves to illustrate spiritual truth in an earthly way. He once came out with a statement that has always stuck with me: “Heart attacks don’t just suddenly occur; they happen one hamburger at a time.” My dear sister in Christ, this principle also holds true in the heart of our spiritual lives. Failure does not occur out of the blue but is the result of a lifetime of bad habits, putting off until tomorrow what we should have set in order today. Sadly, the wives of pastors are not exempt from this great threat. If we do the wrong things at the wrong time, they will come back to bite us. None of us wants failure to be our legacy. All of us want

to reach the end of our lives in glorious victory. If we are to do this, if we are to avoid Satan's many "beautiful" but deadly daggers, then we will need to put on the whole armor of God and be strong with the strength that Christ provides. Only then will we reach the Celestial City when our earthly journey is done.

So where do we begin? First of all, we need to identify our current priorities. Whether we see it or not, our lives are already prioritized. The daily habits we establish, the manner in which we speak, the people with whom we spend time, and the places we go all indicate where we have placed the focus of our hearts. The habitual bent of our soul reveals where we look for satisfaction, security, and significance. Do we look to God for these things, or do we scatter our hopes elsewhere?

Think, for example, of the woman who finds her satisfaction, security, and significance in the fair opinion of others. She spends her life chasing people's smiles and fleeing their frowns. Her satisfaction is always fleeting, hanging insecurely on the good favor of those she really values. Likewise, her security is always crumbling, and her significance—the sense that she has lived a life worth living, a life that has counted for something—is always one faux pas away from evaporating. Such a woman knows no rest. Her life is like a line of dominoes. Once one falls, the others will soon follow.

Pastors' wives are perpetually surrounded by spiritual matters and submerged in the life of the church. These waters can be treacherous. Without a heart firmly rooted in Christ, we will drown in them. Christ alone can give us the satisfaction, security, and significance for which our hearts long. Our natural, idolatrous tendency is to look for these things in the broken cisterns of the world and all its empty promises. "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32). We must flee without looking back.

Search your heart. What do you want out of life? Where do you root your desire for satisfaction, security, and significance? Are you searching for it in the right place? What are the things you feel you need—the things without which you would feel life is not worth living? When do you tailspin into despair and panic? Only you and God know what your heart really

wants. One local pastor put it well when he said, “What the heart wants, the heart gets”; i.e., whatever is most important to you will drive every moment of every day. Indeed, we all constantly pursue what our hearts want. It is an inevitable fact of life. The question is, are we pursuing God’s priorities or only our own?

As you begin to organize your new life as a pastor’s wife, more than anything else I want you to see that prioritizing is not organizing. Before you begin to organize your life, you must first address your priorities. As I try to help you in this regard, please be assured that I don’t want to organize or control your schedule. I don’t want to squeeze you into my mold. God knows my schedule is littered with the debris of human sin and frailty. Instead, I would like to point you to three sources that have proved vital in molding my thinking:

1. Christ: Our Ultimate Example
2. Women of the Word
3. Women of Piety throughout History

CHRIST: OUR ULTIMATE EXAMPLE

Looking at Christ’s life, I have often struggled to know how to effectively apply his priorities to my life. After all, Jesus is a man; I am a woman. His earthly life was outside the home; mine is inside it. His primary calling was to bring the good news of the gospel to many; mine is to bring it to the little flock in our home. Our daily routines bear almost no resemblance to each other. Yet I am persuaded that the focus of my life must be derived from his example in the Word. In particular, three aspects of his life strike me as peculiarly relevant to our call as pastors’ wives: his times of prayer, his obedience to the Father, and the relationships he cultivated with others.

A Life of Prayer

The book of Luke is replete with examples of Christ’s prayer life. From the very outset, Christ’s adult life was marked by the fact that he was

a man of prayer: “When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove” (Luke 3:21–22).

In the next chapter, we find Jesus retreating to a desolate place to be alone with the Father. In Luke 6 we find him going out to the mountain to pray and “all night he continued in prayer to God” (v. 12). Before long we see him take Peter, John, and James up a mountain to pray, and it is the next day before they return (Luke 9). In Luke 11, Christ provides us with the pattern for intercession that we know as The Lord’s Prayer. The list goes on and on.

My dear sister, one of the hardest things to do in the Christian life is pray. It is fairly easy to pick up the Word of God and read a chapter or two, but prayer is different. You see, when we get down on our knees before our Maker, our hearts are laid bare before his all-seeing eye. In the secret place of his presence, when we are alone with our Father, we realize the full extent of our desperate need of grace. Even in our best times, we are unworthy of mercy. Such moments bring a devastating clarity to the soul. They show us for who and what we really are. As Robert Murray McChesney is said to have put it, “What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more.”

Yet in this place of emptiness and total frailty, we find Christ to be our only fullness. Here alone, in his loving embrace, we find satisfaction. No other relationship can ever fill the God-sized hole in our hearts. I feel sure you know this already. The question is, have you experienced it? Remember that what the heart wants, the heart gets. Do you treasure your relationship with your Father enough to pursue him at the cost of every other fleeting pleasure? Oh, how I have struggled in this area. I imagine you do too. How easy it is to pick up the telephone to call a friend, to convince ourselves that our daughter really does need that new dress for Sunday, that we really must bake that cake for a neighbor, or that the shoes needing to be re-heeled can’t wait until a later time. How easy it is to forget God in

the clamorous crowd of second-place things. How lethally simple it is to major on the minors!

So when it comes to putting God first, where do we start? For me, the only time when I can be certain of stillness and solitude is early in the morning before our children arise. This is the time for me to fill my mind with the Divine Majesty. Does that mean that I am up at 4:00 a.m. praying every day? I wish it did. In fact, there are days when I would need to be up at that time in order to beat our five children out of bed! However, it is my testimony that when I am diligent in rising early to spend time on my knees, the Lord deals closely with my soul. In a strange but happy contradiction, he satisfies my deepest longings while leaving me still hungering for more.

You will undoubtedly have a different schedule from mine, but when you are planning out your day, put your personal time with the Lord on the schedule. Consider it a nonnegotiable. As pastors' wives we are in no less need of private fellowship with the Lord than other women are. At times I have found myself depending on the spiritual conversation of our home, the discussion of sermons, and the cocoon of ministry life as a crutch for my soul. In such times my soul emaciates; I become a spiritual anorexic. This is a common trap for pastors' wives. At one time or another, we have all fallen into it. As a great hymn of old so aptly states, I have tried the "broken cisterns," and I can testify that they fail—every time. Do not feed your soul on the run. Do not substitute spiritual snacks for unhurried time before God in private prayer and devotion every day.

Obedience to the Father

Second, Christ's life is distinctly set apart from others through his obedience to the Father. Every day we find him doing his Father's will and fulfilling his Father's plan for his life: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).

Such obedience extended far beyond Satan's temptations, far beyond the extremity of physical exhaustion and the constant desire to stop and rest amidst the unceasing pressures of life. Christ's obedience extended all

the way to the cross. He obeyed God through the gates of hell because he loved us and was determined to do anything and everything to save us. “Going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will’” (Matt. 26:39).

We could discuss Christ’s remarkable obedience forever. Permit me to root his example in your life with a question: “Is the general tenor of your heart marked by a conscious obedience to the revealed will of God?” Be honest with your reply, and repent of any habitual sin that may be inhibiting your walk with Christ. What weights hinder you as you climb Jacob’s ladder? Some weights are lead, others are gold, but if they hold us back, we must cut them loose (Heb. 12:1–3). May the Lord help us both to pursue a life of obedience to his will.

Relationships with Others

Third, I am struck by Christ’s earthly relationships with other people. He ministered to many, yet he kept a small cadre of close friends with whom he enjoyed the closest and deepest intimacy. Despite spending three years in public ministry, he spent most of his time in close proximity to the twelve men he wanted to influence most of all. Christ devoted his efforts to teaching, eating, sleeping, and fellowshiping with these twelve disciples. Among them, he treasured three men more than the others.

We need to consider the focused impact that our Savior had on a few souls and its subsequent widespread effects. Just like Christ, we must focus on the few we most need to influence. As with all charity, this effort begins at home with the little flock God has entrusted to our care. Never forget that we are wives and mothers before we are anything else. No amount of success in the church and in the world can ever make up for failure in the home.

We must remember that our children are natural-born sinners. By default, their hearts are wayward and full of folly. If they are ever to be salt and light in this dark world, they will need the love and compassion of

Christ to penetrate their souls with saving mercy. It is our role to tenderly teach and apply the Word of God to their hearts and minds on a daily basis. If they do not hear and see it from us, from whom will they ever hear it? The way we live before them, the habits we cultivate, the priorities we exemplify, and the identity we have in Christ all leave a never-ending impact on their never-dying souls. Our children are covenant children, and while the responsibility of teaching the Word to them lies primarily with our husbands, we are the ones with whom they will spend the most time.

When I come to die, I am quite sure that I will not look back over my life and wish I had poured more time into the tangibly attractive distractions of the world. My greater concern will be that I influenced my children for the kingdom of God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. When I consider the far-reaching implications of the time Christ spent with the twelve disciples, I am reminded that the gospel has subsequently been brought to millions of lost sinners. Though we may become caught up in the minuteness of the seemingly small realm of influence currently before us, a family well raised will be a mighty weapon in the hand of Christ. It will reap fruit forever.

There will come a time when your little ones are up and gone and your primary sphere of influence will change. But when your children are young, try not to be distracted from first things. If you get this right, you will be well set by God's grace to become a Titus 2 role model in the years to come. Too many pastors' wives forsake their primary calling in order to become a Titus 2 woman before their time. Little do they know it, but their best efforts disqualify them before they even begin.

WOMEN OF THE WORD

Now that we have spent some time reflecting on the priorities of Christ, it seems a natural progression to consider some women of biblical times whose lives exemplify their priority choices. There are many women whose lives are marked by these choices, yet only a handful of them are directly related to men who were used as either prophets or ministers of God's Word.

Examples to Avoid

Let's begin with some examples we would do well to avoid. Though some of our priorities as pastors' wives are apparent to the public eye, others will remain hidden. The manifestation of our real priorities will sometimes become more apparent when we are faced with trials of varying degrees.

You have often heard mothers warn their children of the consequences of disobedience and the painful results of acting without thinking. One of our children has a delightful passion for all things adventurous, hesitating at almost nothing! We warn him of the consequences that will befall him, but he invariably ends up learning the hard way!

God has graciously supplied us with a few scattered examples of women whose choices reflect a similar immaturity. These examples warn of the consequences that invariably fall to those who live with a careless disregard of what really matters. For the most part, these tragic examples are a direct result of women forgetting their place and the role God has assigned to them in the church and in the home. I think you will agree with me that when we find ourselves willfully engaged in compromising situations, it is generally because we have made a similar mistake.

Consider Numbers 12:2, where Miriam, the sister of Moses, while standing alongside her brother Aaron, seeks preeminence for herself. "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it."

Miriam stands as a solemn warning to us of a woman's natural propensity to disregard God-given male authority. We all know that our sinful natures incline our hearts to usurp male leadership—some to a greater degree than others—but nonetheless, we all too often find ourselves with the mumblings of Miriam's heart. No doubt, my sister, you desire to be submissive to your husband, but there will be times when you will think you know better than him. There will be occasions when you will want some of the credit for his labors. You will want your opinions to be heard. After all, you are his "better" half.

My sister, do not be deceived. At such times we must remind ourselves of the dire consequences of speaking without thinking. Miriam paid dearly for her presumption. She became a leper and for a season was cast out of the camp. Imagine the shame that must have filled her heart. All this befell her because she lost sight of her calling to serve, entertained delusions of grandeur, and despised the man God had set in charge over her and the people of God.

We women thrive best when we embrace the place and the ministry God has entrusted to us, not when we reach for positions of authority God never intended for us to occupy. We must take heed to our hearts. Lest we despair, though, we must not forget the Lord's kindness in his dealings with Miriam. Mercifully, his chastening hand relented. Miriam's season as an outcast lasted only seven days. This should comfort us in our repentance. His mercy really does endure forever.

Martha is, of course, another woman who allowed her priorities to slip out of place. As pastors' wives, we can easily fall into the same trap. Our home serves as a place of grace to others, and we often have much work to do in terms of preparation. The work doesn't stop there! We want the time spent by guests in our home to be pleasant, so we carefully attend to all practical needs to make that possible. It is a joy to prepare for God's people. It is good and noble to make our guests feel welcome and comfortable. However, the simple mistake of placing the emphasis in the wrong place at the wrong time can have long-term consequences on our souls.

Remind yourself of the parable of the sower. One of the weeds that can choke out the Word is busyness. Sometimes our family home seems to have a steady stream of guests coming and going, and it always delights me to open our home to any folks who wish to stay with us. However, on more than one occasion, I have missed the blessing of getting to know our guests because I have been too busy attending to the "next thing." Busyness can seem so very necessary, yet it can be a huge hindrance to cultivating true fellowship. Actively seize as many opportunities as you can to listen to the words of wise guests, and be assured that if their meal

is a little late due to your interest in their conversation, they are unlikely to complain!

I would encourage you to read further into the lives of other women whose misplaced priorities bore bitter fruit. Sarah's desperate attempt to have children through Hagar produced a whole nation of godless people. Job's wife was a snare to his soul. Indeed, the damage we can do to our husbands in private is immeasurable. Let us not serve as a Mrs. Job, discouraging our husbands at every juncture, but rather let us radiate Barnabas's perpetual efforts to serve as an encourager.

Examples to Embrace

In 1 Samuel, we find Hannah on her knees in prayer. She is barren and brokenhearted, yet while many a woman would have grumbled at her husband or lashed out in vindictive malice at her rival (in this case, Peninnah), Hannah takes herself to a better sanctuary. She pours out her heart to God. Should we not follow her up to the throne room of heaven? Yet, if we are honest, when it comes to responding to the difficulties of life, this is the road less taken. I find it much easier to take my problems to my husband. This, of course, is perfectly appropriate, but not as a first port of call. Many times God has used Neil's absence to remind me that the first ear I should approach is that of my heavenly Father. After all, he tells us, "I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you' " (Isa. 41:13).

How easy it is instead to put my trust in the hands of a man who knows the Word of God and whose life is marked by holiness, almost as if he has the power to aid me. Paul Miller recently wrote a book titled *The Praying Life*. In it he repeatedly illustrates the power of prayer over the frailty of human conversation. Whenever anything comes into your mind that causes you to flee to a human being for help, view it instead as an opportunity to draw near to God. Hannah is a delightful example of this.

No doubt it may be a great challenge to you, but as pastors' wives we cannot run to others with our concerns. We cannot pick up the phone and

discuss the trying times of ministry with friends in the congregation. In fact, without our husbands' prior approval, we are not at liberty to discuss any church problems with anyone. This may well be one of the hardest things about a life in full-time ministry. We have fewer earthly bolt-holes to which we can run when times are hard. Unexpectedly, however, this has been one of the greatest blessings in my spiritual life, and my soul has been deeply nourished by the need for verbal restraint. The lack of an ever-present human ear has ultimately led me to my knees in prayer, driving me to cultivate a deeper relationship with the One whose ears are always open, whose heart is always warm, and whose hand is always ready (Ps. 34:15).

The godly woman of Proverbs 31 remains our richest example of a perfectly prioritized life, both spiritually and practically. If you and I could implement everything this woman did, we would be pillars both to the church and to society. There are exhaustive Bible studies on this paradigm of a pious woman, but for now I would ask you to reflect on just one verse: "The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain" (Prov. 31:11).

The rest of chapter 31 is an unfolding of verse 11, providing us with an explanation of why this woman's husband can safely trust her. She is described as a very organized woman of great practical effort. While her personal devotion to God is not mentioned, it is certainly assumed, and her acts of great piety are an outward reflection of a heart devoted to him. If your husband can safely trust you, his ministry will never have the unnecessary burden of a constantly frenetic, tumultuous home life. Neil and I have always sought to establish regular communication in our home over everyday practicalities. It has proved invaluable. I know the things that make our home a haven for my husband, and my endeavors to fulfill his desires bring a degree of harmony that allows us to enjoy our home life to the full. While it may seem rather elementary, one of the greatest services you can offer to your husband is to make your home a refuge of peace amidst the storms of life. When he returns from a hard day, he can close the door on conflict and rest in a little harbor of peace. The reverse

is also the case: few things are more debilitating for your husband than to open the front door and walk into another world of conflict. Hitler learned this lesson the hard way: no one can fight a war on two fronts.

WOMEN OF PIETY THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Mary Love

As a young pastor's wife, I was eager to find women from previous generations who had exemplified remarkable piety. There are few who stand out like Christopher Love's wife, Mary.

Christopher Love was born in Cardiff in 1618. From the earliest years of his conversion, he pursued a call to the ministry. After receiving a bachelor's degree from Oxford in 1639, he became the chaplain to a sheriff in London by the name of John Warner. It was through the sheriff that he first met his future wife, Mary Stone. Love is perhaps best known for his strong advocacy of Presbyterianism during the English Civil War. Following his death, Mary wrote a 140-page memoir of her husband, giving us a glimpse of his humble piety.

In all my years of reading, Mary's calm repose of soul and steadfast spirit remain an unparalleled example of Christian fortitude under pressure. Her piety shines brightest in the days leading up to her husband's execution. During the days of Oliver Cromwell, the British Parliament sentenced Love to death for his involvement in a conspiracy to establish Charles II on the throne. On July 14, 1651, Mary wrote a final farewell to her prison-bound husband. It drips with the assurance of faith and the deep contentment of soul that one can learn only from long experience of reposing in the arms of God.

O that the Lord would keep thee from having one troubled thought for thy relations! I desire freely to give thee up into thy Father's hands, and not only to look upon it as a crown of glory for thee to die for Christ, but an honor to me, that I should have an husband to leave for Christ. . . . Thou leavest but a sinful, mortal wife, to be everlastingly married to

the Lord of Glory: thou leavest but children, brothers and sisters, to go to the Lord Jesus, thy eldest brother.¹

Were we to find our husbands in a modern-day parallel predicament, I wonder if we would empathize with such sentiments. Would we willingly deny our own desires? Are you and I giving our husbands the liberty to have a heart wholly set on the glory of Christ? Mary Love's steadfastness of spirit is evidence of her trust in the sovereign hand of her heavenly Father. This, in turn, is evidence of a woman who spent much time on her knees and in the Word. This kind of firmly placed faith does not come easily but only through personal effort to spend time alone with Christ.

Margaret Baxter

As you walk through ministry life, you will find that your husband is naturally drawn to particular writers. There is one Puritan, however, who has had an almost limitless impact on the lives of Reformed pastors: Richard Baxter. He is the "pastor's pastor." During the times when you are unable to comfort your husband, those times when he needs a man to get alongside him who has walked in his shoes, Baxter is just the man to place before his weary soul. (His book, *The Reformed Pastor*, is probably sitting on your husband's bookshelf.)

The Reverend Baxter chose to marry later in life, at the age of forty-six. His wife was younger than he, a mere twenty-three years of age. Margaret Charlton was the daughter of a landed proprietor and justice of the peace. She grew up in a home of considerable wealth where her parents were renowned for their piety and devotion to Christ. Margaret received theological instruction as part of her education and was urged to consider her need for a personal relationship with Christ.

Despite her privileged instruction, Margaret was better known for her social life and flighty frivolity. Initially she sat under Baxter's ministry out of a sense of duty to her mother rather than from an earnest desire for Christ. Baxter's preaching, however, proved attractive to Margaret's intel-

lectual mind. She began to listen attentively to his sermons. He put a stone in the shoe of her heart. A deep conviction of sin began to grip her soul, and it was not long before she came to a solid and saving knowledge of Christ.

The story of the events leading to their marriage is well worth a read—a veritable feast for the soul. For the purpose at hand, however, I would like to focus your attention on her priorities as a pastor's wife. Despite the fact that Margaret remained unconverted in her youth, the Lord used her mother's religious instruction to mold her character for her future role as Mrs. Baxter. In a sense, Margaret's conversion put living, loving flesh on those bones. We might compare her experience to the apostle Paul's voluminous knowledge of the Old Testament. While he was Saul, this knowledge lay dormant, dead, and devoid of spiritual usefulness. But once the lights came on, this lifeless, legalistic bookishness became a lively library of earth-shattering power. So it was with Margaret. She never knew it at the time, but in her heady days of girlish silliness, the Almighty was equipping her to be a remarkable woman of God.

Once converted, Margaret devoted considerable earthly resources to further her husband's work. She did this initially by freeing him from the need to accept a salary. Within the church, she helped those who were in some measure of financial strain. It seems that the pleasure she discovered through such generosity entirely replaced her former desires to live in affluence. Despite significant limitations of space, services were held at the Baxters' new home. News of Margaret's kind, charitable manner spread like wildfire through the parish of Kiddeminster. Her presence by Baxter's side made him stronger and more effective for Christ than he ever could have been alone.

She thus became a great favorite in the parish. Helping to gain for Baxter a firmer hold on the respect and affection of the people, she much contributed to the popularity and success of his ministrations among them, thus becoming his fellow helper in the work of the Lord.²

Margaret's piety found a much more private outlet after her husband's imprisonment. Baxter was arrested after refusing to swear under oath that

it was unlawful to take up arms against the king. Margaret's response? In joyful submission, she followed him to prison. There she maintained her famously happy disposition! In fact, Baxter found her companionship to be more cheerful in prison than at any other time in their lives. She made the very prison cell a place of great comfort for them both.

To bring this romantic ideal down to you and me in our modern-day setting, I want to draw the main priority of Margaret's life to the fore. Some years ago, a young man asked a seasoned pastor what a pastor's wife should be like. The older pastor's instinctive reply was, "She must not be a hindrance; anything else is a bonus!" While I don't know what gave rise to this answer, I am quite certain that neither of us wants to be remembered for "not being a hindrance." (I would prefer to be remembered as a helpmeet suitable for my husband!) So what does that really look like? What was it about Margaret's life that enabled her to behave with such composure?

I am first reminded of the apostle Paul's words:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:11–13)

Paul's response to life is not one that we are naturally endowed with, nor do we all possess Margaret Baxter's happy disposition. However, we do have the same claim on Christ's strength that Paul had. When faced with the daily duty of prioritizing, we must seek to be what Margaret was to her husband; a Barnabas. Our husbands daily encounter the attack of the Evil One, accompanied by the immense mess of a flock of sinful sheep. You and I are generally sheltered from such extremities of Satan's attacks, thus providing us with the privilege of making our husbands' calling a pleasant one.

This is where Margaret Baxter's example should hit home to our souls. Remember how she made the prison cell a palace, both physically

and relationally? What was her focus in doing this? Did she sit on the pity pot and put on a forlorn face, declaiming her miserable lot in life? No, she had spent too much time on her knees for such self-pity to take over her soul. She had learned to trust her Father's plans above her own. She had learned that God's purposes for his people ripen best in the soil of trials. She had learned to be a rose among the thorns, and I want to exhort you to do likewise. Ask the Lord to show you the greatness and wisdom of his ways, especially when they lead you through the vale of tears. Plead with him for wisdom to know how you can bring joy to your husband in his difficult days. Ask the Lord for opportunities to show your husband kindness.

When I encourage you to make such a request, I don't mean that you need to spend hours preparing a gourmet meal, starching his shirts one by one, or lavishing him with the latest piece of technical gadgetry. (Of course husbands love these things too, but that isn't where you will reap long-term fruit for your efforts.) The long-term impact that you will have on your husband's ministry will be largely an effect of your character. You are familiar with the old saying, "If momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." Well, that same principle applies to us as wives. If you aren't happy in your soul, your outward disposition will reflect discontentment. You will have a complaining spirit and perpetually whine in your husband's ear. Your grumbling heart will wear him out, and ultimately it will weaken his effectiveness for ministry. Remember Solomon's wisdom: "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Prov. 17:22).

Such joy doesn't come naturally. Paul had to learn it. He testifies, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content" (Phil. 4:11).

This joy can come only as we learn to do all things through Christ who strengthens us. As you approach the daily ins and outs of ministry life, put on a spirit of holy joy in Christ. Rejoice in the hand God deals you, not the one you wish he'd given! Mary and Margaret found joy living beyond this life. They knew this world was not their home, and this knowledge gave them stability to enjoy good times without needing them and to endure hardship without despair.

It is my prayer that you will be just the kind of helpmeet your husband needs and that the Lord will be your refuge and strength. If our paths should never cross on this earth, I will look forward to the day when we will stand together before our Savior and rejoice in the privileged earthly life he gave us as wives whose husbands were called to be pastors.

Your sister in Christ,
CATHERINE

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between organizing and prioritizing?
2. On notebook paper, draw up two lists: one to identify your current priorities and one that reflects biblical priorities. Make a plan to replace any current, sinful priorities with biblical priorities.
3. Read Job 2:7–10. Contrast Mrs. Job's response to adversity with Hannah's in 1 Samuel 1:1–11. What habits of life lead to the individual responses of these two women?
4. Consider the lives of Mary Love and Margaret Charlton. What aspects of their characters do you most admire? How can you cultivate similar attitudes?
5. Read Isaiah 26:3–4. What steps will you take to keep your mind stayed on God? Why should we keep our eyes upward (Col. 3:1–4)?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Anderson, James. *Memorable Women of the Puritan Times*. 2 vols. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2001.

James, John Angell. *Female Piety*. Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994.

Prentiss, Elizabeth. *Aunt Jane's Hero*. Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2007.

“There is no right ‘type’ of pastor’s wife, only the one whose heart is wholly set on serving Christ. In this book you will find the beauty of various personalities, character types, and giftedness interweaving the pages of these letters. We are not called to fit into a certain mold but to be helpmeets to our husbands, helpmeets who enable them to serve God more effectively with us at their side than they ever could alone.”

“An exceptional book written by seventeen different pastors’ wives and one pastor’s daughter. The letters are personal, warm, convicting, and engaging. . . . I highly recommend this book to all women and especially to pastors’ wives!”

—**Martha Peace**, Biblical Counselor; Author of *The Excellent Wife*

“What a privilege to glean wisdom from these women who have served faithfully in the church and in the home as pastors’ wives. I was challenged, encouraged, and refreshed by this insightful and helpful book.”

—**Trisha DeYoung**, Wife of Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan

“I believe this is now the standard text for seminary wives as well as those pastoral families—pastor and wife—who should set apart time to revisit the timeless themes.”

—**Michael A. Milton**, Fourth Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary; Author; Singer-songwriter

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