Shepherding the flock of God can prove one of the most exciting, enriching, and satisfying duties a man can undertake on this side of heaven. Yet, shepherding the flock of God is not a particularly safe enterprise. It is a life task which exposes the man of God to intense trials, to deep disappointments and heartaches, to haunting questions from within and without. Above all, the undershepherd is subjected to the unrelenting burden of accountability to the Lord of the universe for the spiritual care of a flock for whom Jesus himself died!

Brothers, we are not sufficient for these things, and we all know it. Yet we rejoice that, in his unbounded wisdom, Jesus has sent the Comforter to aid us in our frailty - to counsel, to encourage, to strengthen, and to help us in the great cause to which we have been called. And for most pastors, God has also graciously and providentially provided a human helper - a woman - to walk at her husband's side as his covenant helper in this grand mission to exercise stewardship of God's flock.

The pastor's wife is certainly a rare species with a very peculiar calling. She often keeps her husband's long hours, shoulders his pressures, feels his disappointments, and suffers his defeats - often as profoundly and as deeply as he does. She is thrust into the role of chief analyst of his sermons and administrative innovations. She is called upon to catch grammatical errors and to sniff out inconsistencies in his church letters, to befriend that woman in the church no one else can abide, and to brainstorm solutions to problems no one else can solve.

She is often the single human agent of God who can accurately evaluate her husband from God's perspective - the single voice that can help him navigate safely around the beclouding opinions of those, on the one hand, who see not a single weakness in him, and those, on the other hand, who cannot bring themselves to admit he has a single redeeming quality. God only knows how many days a few well-chosen words of encouragement from her lips are all that stand between her husband's perseverance in the pastorate and his permanent resignation from the ministry.

I do not think pastor's wives are to be pitied, nor is pity what most of them seek. The pastor's wife cannot, and really should not, be shielded from most of the painful experiences active ministry generates. Such experiences are intended by God to deepen her faith and character. Let us make no vain attempt to exempt her from the Refiner's fire.

Yet it is fitting to recognize that her relationship to her husband places her in a uniquely vulnerable position. She is one flesh with the pastor, yet she is not a pastor. She is a member of the flock, yet uniquely susceptible to the pressures the shepherd of that flock endures. And in this position, she is easily exposed to any number of trials and to not a few stray bullets.
But I submit that one of the most significant trials many pastor's wives suffer is a needless trial for which her well-meaning husband is ultimately responsible. Many a pastor places upon his wife, or permits others to place upon her, ministry expectations that are not biblically mandated but rooted in the quicksand of human tradition and our cultural milieu.

I challenge those who are pastors or who will be pastors (here and overseas), to faithfully shepherd your wife by purposefully and biblically steering her ministry in the local church. By extension, I also challenge those who are actively involved in a local church to possess a biblical philosophy regarding the ministry of the pastor's wife and to appropriately influence your assembly in that direction.

To proceed, let us take up this question: What is a pastor's wife supposed to do? What is her job description?

The Bible specifically addresses the functional ministry of the pastor. He is to be a man, the husband of one wife. He is to lead the flock of God, to protect it, and to feed it. He is to restore the fallen, to seek the lost, and to pursue the spiritual health of the flock. But what specifically does God want his wife to do?

A POPULAR BUT DEFICIENT MODEL OF HER RESPONSIBILITIES

Most of us will carry out our ministries in smaller churches around the world. My address may be less applicable in larger church settings. But in smaller churches there usually awaits the new pastor's wife a fairly entrenched, if somewhat fuzzy, expectation of the responsibilities she is to fulfill in the assembly. This unwritten job description will vary from church to church but it tends to reduce itself to the basic notion that she is to serve as the assistant pastor to the women.

No one, of course, will articulate this expectation, for when stated, it rings hollow in our biblically trained ears. In fact, few if any will have ever zeroed an unfettered thought upon the matter. But many parishioners, nonetheless, will default to the expectation that the pastor's wife should assist her husband in shepherding the women of the assembly.

To illustrate, compare the following commonly promoted expectations of the pastor's wife with the biblically mandated function of the pastor. She will serve as director of women's ministries, that is, she will guide and provide visionary leadership to the ewes of the flock. She will function in some capacity as a teacher—she will feed God's Word to the ewes or to the lambs of the flock, and preferably to both. She will soothe the weary, protect the vulnerable, bind up the wounded, seek the lost, rescue the wandering. In a word, she is to serve as the shepherdess of the assembly. Or, with a twist of Americana, she is to function as the first lady of the church.

For young husbands who will assume their first pastorate in the near future, I implore you to enter your first post armed with the assumption that an unwritten job description awaits your wife at the front door. If this assumption proves wrong, happily discard it, lay down your arms, and take your wife out to dinner in celebration! But if this assumption proves right, you must be prepared to actively steer your wife's ministry against the stream of expectations, perhaps less as a pastor and more as a husband who longs to honor God by
loving his wife. If you do not exercise honorable leadership in this matter, your wife's ministry will undoubtedly be swept along by traditional expectations, and that can lead to great misery.

Please also understand that this leadership will prove necessary not only at the start of a pastorate but for its duration. For even in very innocent ways, new members who join the church over the years will come with an assumed job description in mind. And if their expectations are frustrated by your wife's actual function in the assembly, tensions may arise. An ongoing, educational process will prove necessary.

A BIBLICAL MODEL OF HER RESPONSIBILITIES

The Bible is not at all silent as to the role pastors are to fulfill in the assembly. What the pastor is to do, and the nature of his work are clearly delineated in Scripture. In fact, his work may indeed distinguish him from other men in the assembly.

For instance, he must be able to teach and he must faithfully feed God's truth to the flock. Other men in the assembly may also teach God's Word, but this is not a moral obligation. In fact, some men not "apt to teach" will be gifted by God to minister in other capacities.

But does God's Word distinguish the role of the pastor's wife from the function of other women in the assembly? What does the Bible say about the nature of her work? It says nothing at all! Unlike the pastor, Scripture suggests no unique job description or peculiar function for the pastor's wife in the assembly.

From this silence, we may conclude: Proposition #1: Her ministry responsibilities within the assembly are of the same nature as those of every other woman in the church. I believe sufficient light shines from at least two passages of Scripture to confirm this proposition.

1. Titus 2:3-5: 'Older women . . . are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.'

Paul's admonition indicates that the task of the pastor's wife, even when viewed from the context of the local church, is to grow in godly character and to cultivate a proper relationship with her husband and children. As regards teaching in the assembly, she is to be encouraged to instruct the younger women. But interestingly enough, this particular admonition from Paul indicates that the young pastor should perceive his wife as a student of the older women in the church before she qualifies as a teacher of adult women.

Yet sadly, it is not unusual for a 25 year-old woman to be immediately collared with the responsibility to teach and to counsel all the women in her church. Although no one would even think to entrust such a responsibility to any other woman of similar age, this great expectation is placed upon her by mere virtue of the fact that she is married to the pastor. In antithesis to this common practice, we must recognize that it is not at all wrong for such a woman to enter the church as a learner. In fact, it would appear from Paul's instructions to Titus that we should expect as much. Let the women of the church seek her counsel and encourage her instruction because they have come to appreciate her as a wise woman, not
merely because she is married to the pastor.

2. 1 Timothy 3:1-7: While each of the requirements for an overseer touch the man's relationship to his wife in some respect, notice especially verses 4-5: "[An overseer] must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?"

Even a modest season of reflection on verses 2-7 will reveal the vital role the pastor's wife must fulfill. The stability of the pastor's home is a necessary requirement for his ongoing ministry and she is obviously a major contributor to that stability. Consider carefully the profound implications of the fact that her efforts in the home directly influence his capacities to lead the flock of God! In her role as wife, her daily labors serve to maintain her husband's qualification to shepherd God's flock by helping him remain faithful as a shepherd of his home.

Every pastoral couple wants to hear the accolade: "she is a really good pastor's wife." But there are many criteria upon which such a judgment is popularly based. Too often, such status is conferred on the mere determination that she is a good listener, or a faithful friend to other women, an effective speaker, or a skilled piano player, a stunning administrative organizer, or simply a woman who is "really, really busy serving God."

On the authority of Scripture, I propose that she is a good pastor's wife only in so far as she is a faithful helper to her husband, a diligent keeper of her home, a godly mother to her children, and a solid force in keeping her husband qualified for ministry by building up his home.

One ancillary word of advice to unmarried men headed for vocational ministry: do not be overly exercised with finding a woman who can wax eloquent on theology or who boasts some profound ministry skill. Find a woman who genuinely loves God, who longs to serve him, and who glories in her God-given mission as her husband's helper. If she is willing to follow you anywhere God leads you and if she is willing to enthusiastically orient her life to yours as God-ordained helper, she is a theologian of rare quality and will minister with uncommon skill. Said another way, draw your sense of virtue from the unsullied fount of Proverbs 31, not from the broken cistern of corporate America's model woman.

Married pastors, permit a further word of exhortation at this point. It is your responsibility to steer your wife's ministry and to help her to see the stellar importance of her function as a wife and mother. Many will quickly place untold expectations upon your wife if they are permitted to do so - expectations which if fulfilled will render it virtually impossible for her to succeed as a noble wife and mother. Under the pressure of such expectations, the ministry of a pastor's wife can directly harm the ministry of her husband, often subtly turning him into her helper.

If her ministry responsibilities are permitted to overtax her ministry to her family, she may begin to tear down her home rather than to build it up. And she may even sense that this is
happening. Such realizations will inevitably lead to deep discouragement and disillusionment, particularly when there seems to be nothing she can do about it. Ironically, the chief culprit in all this is often the man who shares her bed every night. He has permitted others to dictate her responsibilities and has thus fumbled his responsibility as her loving head.

Let us affirm, then, that the primary duty of the pastor's wife is not to fulfill the expectations of the church, but rather, as one Puritan pastor put it, to pursue "connubial felicity." But understand, it is not her job alone to set her course in this direction. Ultimately, this charting must be initiated by her husband and promoted by discerning men of the assembly.

At this juncture, worthy suspicious may be arising in the minds of some. Perhaps you are thinking: "I wonder if he just wants to protect his wife and excuse her lack of involvement in the church. Maybe he is arguing this way in order to defend his 'cozy little family' ideal and to assure that his wife never gets her feathers ruffled. Maybe he just shows up at services like the Queen Bee and sits in the front row while others do all the work." Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I believe that if a pastor leads her wife faithfully, she will be a model of fruitful and energetic ministry in the church. This leads us to . . .

Proposition #2: Her ministry responsibilities within the assembly are to reflect the specific function for which God has uniquely qualified her.

Like every other woman in the assembly, the pastor's wife is to diligently pour out her life in service to God as he has fitted her to serve in that particular assembly.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 18-20: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good . . . But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body."

Consider carefully the Spirit's words: "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." God has a specific purpose for the unique ministry capacities with which he has sovereignly equipped each pastor's wife. She should thus serve in accordance with God's gifting as a member of the body in which he has placed her, not in accordance with human expectations of responsibilities inhering in her supposed position.

If she is a hand, she should serve as a hand, not as a knee, and not in any event as pastor to the women. If she thrives on teaching and visionary leadership, she should be loosed to these endeavors and pointed to glory. Although, if her capacities lie in such areas, a note of caution should be sounded. A pastor's wife who excels in the spotlight may struggle mightily in her role as submissive helper to her husband. It may prove considerably tempting for a woman thus gifted to find her fulfillment in the praise and responsiveness of the woman of the church (and other churches) while downplaying the significance she attaches to Proverbs 31-type praise from the lips of her husband and children who rejoice in the benefits of her private ministrations to them.

So the crux of the issue is, what has God gifted her to do? She should be encouraged to do that. What God has given her to do may not be what the previous pastor's wife was
empowered by God to do. And if not, resistance may well be forthcoming from some in the assembly. But pastors, remember that God has providentially assigned your wife to minister to this particular body and he may well have designed that she minister differently than the previous pastor's wife. She is not the previous pastor's wife. She is not your home-church's pastor's wife. She is your wife. And she is who she is by the grace and ordination of God.

Permit me to address another potential misconception at this point. My burden is not that most pastor's wives are overworked. As far as I am concerned, we should all work ourselves to death in some aspect of God's cause. Anathema to the culture of ease and safety so many pastors and their wives are embracing today. The pastorate should never be viewed as a profession we perform for a time in order to accumulate wealth and maintain optimal health for retirement.

My burden is, rather, that many good women are pressured to perform duties they are ill-equipped to handle and are piled high with expectations they could not possibly fulfill. A sweet spirit and a servant's heart enable many of these same women to shoulder tremendous pressures with stoic resolve. But when she suffers under unbiblical expectations, the inevitable result is a deep-seated frustration and fatigue leading to diminished effectiveness in her function as wife and mother, which in turn diminishes her husband's capacities to pastor, thus harming the very church she is struggling so hard to serve. This all-too-common phenomenon is particularly troubling when she is performing functions (out of deference to traditional expectations) which other women in the assembly are better equipped to perform.

A PERSONAL WORD OF TESTIMONY

Beth was only 25 years old when I accepted the call to pastor the church I have served now since 1989. She was a godly woman, mature beyond her years. But she was the polar opposite of the previous pastor's wife. As I assumed the leadership of our church, I purposefully resisted asking anyone what the previous pastor's wife did. My objective was to lose Beth to use her many abilities to the glory of God, most of which are very behind-the-scenes type of gifts. Not everyone appreciated my approach.

Not long after commencing our ministry, I was visited in my office by a disgruntled couple. They came with a long list in hand to complain, in part, about my wife's ministry in the church. I patiently listened to their complaints, noting that not one word of objection addressed any moral failing or immaturity in Beth. I patiently pointed out to this couple that the list of expectations they read to me ably described the ministry of the previous pastor's wife. The reason my wife was not leading the women's Bible study, not teaching Sunday School, and not performing functions of highly visible leadership in the church was because she had no desire or gifting to function in such capacities.

After detailing a long list of vital, albeit unassuming ministries my wife was actively performing, the surprised couple before me queried why I did not broadcast all of this to the assembly and work to make Beth's service more visible. I reminded them that she was not serving to be seen but serving precisely as her husband and pastor desired, in accordance with her God-given gifts.

That was a crucial meeting. I remember to this day the temptation to cater to that pressure...
and to make significant adjustments by bending Beth into the mold of popular expectations. And the truth is, she would have cooperated fully to her detriment, to the church's detriment, and to mine. But by God's grace, I held my course against that challenging gale. I chose to protect my wife from human expectations and to give her wings to fly according to her God-given gifts. And she has soared!

Beth has never led a woman's Bible study, but she is my most trusted counselor of women, displaying time and again a firm grasp of the proper application of biblical truth to daily life. She has never spoken at a ladies retreat (not yet!), but now that she is middle-aged, she is enjoying a fruitful one-on-one ministry to younger women. She has never served as a Sunday School teacher, but she has rendered care to many children in her home and has profoundly influenced many of them in the ways of God. Why she has no interest in standing before others and speaking when she has so much to say, I will never understand. Why the woman who delivers so many "home runs" during informal counsel has so little capacity to address an assembled audience, I will never comprehend. But God does, and that's all that matters.

Beth has never personally organized an all-church meal, although she is always found helping at such meals and has won many hearts with her cooking (the "Men's Breakfast" faithfuls have to be restrained from canonizing her!). While she has never provided visionary leadership to any particular ministry, countless are the people she has built up and helped through various spiritual and physical trials. She is one of the hardest working women I have ever known and she is a strong force for God in our church.

But above all else, I can say with full conviction that any success I have known as a pastor has more to do with the kind of woman Beth is in our home than with any skill I may possess or any effort I may have made in ministry. At every turn, in countless ways, she makes me a better pastor and a better man. I could never use my capacities in the way I use them if she was not the wife and the mother that she is. And she is happy in all of this. And in all of this, we feel the smile of our Creator. He it is who designed for Adam a suitable helper. He it is who described the noble wife as one who orients her life to her husband and brings him good, not calamity, all the days of his life. He it is who gave us the vision that a husband can be respected in the city gates because of what his wife accomplishes from home-base (Proverbs 31). How happy are they whose God is the Lord!

I do not broadcast the joys of chocolate because everyone understands that joy without hearing from me. I broadcast the joys of my relationship to Beth in the context of ministry because it pains me that many do not understand our joy.

I remember speaking not long ago to a 23 year-old pastor's wife. She was ecstatic with the opportunity she and her new husband had to serve God's people. The prospect of life together in the service of God is a hope difficult to match and her exuberance indicated as much. But not long after that conversation, Beth and I spoke again to this same woman. Her enthusiasm for ministry had vanished. She relayed to us the horrors of ministry in a church which was placing expectations upon her no young woman could possibly meet to anyone's satisfaction. Blinded by tradition and blinded to his responsibility as her protector, her husband offered his wife no help. She was on her own and suffering. And today he is on his own suffering the consequences of a bitter divorce.

By no means do I intend to suggest the church this man served was responsible for this
couple's divorce. Nor do I intend to suggest this pastor's failure to steer his wife's ministry in the assembly was the root cause of their marital demise. I do believe, however, that traditional expectations concerning the supposed job description of a pastor's wife contributed to this couple's divorce and resulted in no small loss to that church's health and no small assault on the glory of God in that community.

I am also convinced that confusion regarding the role of the pastor's wife is systematically hindering the cause of Christ in far too many churches. We must get the job description of a pastor's wife right. There is too much at stake to ignore this matter - not the least of which is the honor of Christ whose body we serve and whose wisdom we ride to glory.

Her job? She is the pastor's wife, nothing more. She is the pastor's wife, nothing less. As she faithfully fulfills this high and noble calling, as she runs her race in order to enhance her husband's effectiveness, she will receive no accolades from her culture and few if any from those believers whose traditional expectations she disappoints. But as she honors her Maker's design and faithfully pours out her skills in the advancement of Christ's cause, she will feel the pleasure of God. And that is all that really matters here, and all that will matter for eternity.

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