

The Role of the Pastor's Wife: What does the Bible Teach?

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Abstract³

The purpose of this article is to identify biblical pillars and parameters for establishing the role of a pastor's wife in a local church. The thesis of the article is that the Scriptures do not in any way define or prescribe the role of the pastor's wife, so we must infer the framework for her ministry as the pastor's wife from what the Scriptures teach about her identify, role, and purpose as a woman, a wife, and a believer. We propose that she is first a woman, designed to image her Creator, and then a wife, who ministers to her husband as his helper, and finally a believer who finds her identity in Christ and serves Him according to the gifts and calling He places on her.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to identify biblical pillars and parameters for establishing the role of a pastor's wife in a local church. It is well known that the Scriptures contain no explicit teaching about "the role of the pastor's wife". Therefore, we must infer the framework for her ministry as the pastor's wife from what the Scriptures teach about her identify, role, and purpose as a

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woman, a wife, and a believer. We shall begin by examining three key Old Testament passages (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:18; Prov. 31:10-31), which lay a biblical foundation for understanding the role and purpose of women and wives. Next, we shall explore the implications of her identity and ministry as a New Testament believer. We shall conclude with some observations about her role as the pastor's wife.

Our thesis is that the Scriptures do not in any way define or prescribe the role of the pastor's wife. She is first a woman, designed to image her Creator, and then a wife, who ministers to her husband as his helper, and finally a believer who finds her identity in Christ and serves Him according to the gifts and calling He places on her.

2. Her purpose as a woman and a wife

The pastor's wife is first and foremost *a woman* and *a wife*. Nowhere does the Word of God intimate that she belongs to a special class of women. Everything the Scriptures teach about the identity, role, and purpose of women and wives in general applies equally to the pastor's wife. A thorough understanding of her biblical role as a woman and wife must be foundational to the way she perceives her life and ministry. When she understands the reason for her creation as a woman, she will be able to build upon it as a foundation to establish her purpose and realise fulfilment in life as she is placed in different roles and positions.

2.1. She images her Creator (Gen. 1:26-28)

The climax of creation came on the sixth day as God created humankind, "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). "The creation of humankind is specifically noted as a creation of 'male and female,' stressing the fact that God created 'man' as 'male and female'" (Sailhamer 1994:13). Both men and women are created in God's image, that is, to resemble and represent Him (Frame 1991:227; cf. Grudem 1994:442). Humankind represents God in the world and is under His Lordship, exercising "control, authority, and presence in His name" (Frame, 230). He concludes that men and women equally bear

the image of God “in their sexual differences, even in their differences with regard to authority and submission” (p. 230).

While scholars agree that both men and women bear the image of God, there is some debate about whether each gender bears the image individually, or whether only in their union the couple fully bears the image of the Triune God, imaging the complementarity of unity in diversity. Lazenby (1987), for example, tends to focus primarily on the incompleteness of either gender without the other, thereby indicating the unity of the male and female within the sexual relationship of husband and wife to image God equally. Fitzpatrick (2003), by contrast, identifies the female, as well as the male, as created in God's image. Each is an equal representation of God. She identifies six key aspects in which men and women image God, namely, in calling humankind to rule, relate, reproduce, reflect, rejoice, and rest like Him (p. 30). In each of these areas, male or female equally represent God. Fitzpatrick does not claim that they together, in union, image God; individually, both men and women image God.

On this point, we believe Fitzpatrick is truer to the biblical evidence than Lazenby. Both man and woman equally represent God. Each human being is created to bear God's image, therefore this could not be limited to a husband and wife relationship. Single Christians need to understand they are created in the image of God. However, the completeness found in the marriage relationship must be considered, as a Christian couple become one (Gen. 2:23; Eph. 5:31) they become the image of God in unity.

Being created in the image of God establishes human beings' purpose in life—each person is created to image God. We were each created to resemble and represent the Lord. Since we do not see bearing God's image as something purely static, such as wearing a jacket, we are using the expression *imaging God* to convey the active, dynamic outworking of resembling and representing Him. Human beings resemble God by who they are, but also by what they do. Therefore, believers may *image God* by feeding the hungry, giving wise counsel to a wayward friend, or on a continual basis as displaying unconditional love and respect to their husband or wife.

Whether or not she is a pastor's wife, every woman (and every man) is created to image her Creator in character and action. Her quest for her proper role in life and ministry must begin with an awareness that she is to resemble and represent the Lord in all she is and does.

2.2. She helps her husband (Gen. 2:18)

Genesis 1:26-30 provided a telescopic overview of the creation of humankind. In Genesis 2:4-25, the narrative focuses on the creation of human beings in greater detail, providing a microscopic perspective on the same events he treated briefly in 1:26-30. Just as the creation of humankind in God's image marked the pinnacle of the creation narrative in Genesis 1, so the creation of woman (Eve) as a suitable helper for man (Adam) marks the climax of chapter 2.

The meaning of the noun "helper" (*'ēzer*) in Genesis 2:18 has been much debated. The word essentially refers to a "helper, assistant, i.e., one who assists and serves another with what is needed" (Swanson 1997:§6469). The majority of its twenty-one occurrences in the Old Testament depict God helping human beings (Schultz 1980:660; Zodhiates and Baker 1993:§H5828). Since God Himself can be a "helper", it is clear that neither the word *'ēzer* nor the role of "helper" imply any sort of inherent inferiority. What it does imply is that the "helper" plays a supporting *role*, rather than bearing primary responsibility for a task.

In the Hebrew text, "helper" is modified by the "suitable for him" (*kěnegdô*), which "seems to express the notion of complementarity rather than identity. ... The help looked for is not just assistance in his daily work or in the procreation of children, though these aspects may be included, but the mutual support companionship provides" (Wenham 1998:68). Patterson (1994) argues that the word denotes function: "Designed as the perfect counterpart for the man, the woman was neither inferior nor superior, but she was alike and equal to the man in her personhood while different and unique in her function." Piper and Grudem (1991:408-409) point out that God has created woman as man's loyal and suitable assistant to help tend the Garden and for procreation. The function of Eve is not less valuable to the maintenance of the Garden or to

the furthering of humankind, but the shared responsibilities involve each accomplishing complimentary tasks.

Peace (2005:49) attests to the fact that both man and woman were created to bear God's image. However, due to the fact that man was created first and given the responsibility to rule over the earth it becomes woman's responsibility to be a helper suitable for man as he carries out his ruling. Each person performs different roles within the relationship, each equally important and of worth, but distinct in authority. Many feminist theologians will disagree with Peace contending the idea that females are in some way subordinate to their male counterparts.⁴ As Rosenzweig (1986:277-80) points out, God instructs humankind to be fruitful and multiply and to rule over all creation equally. The usage of the Hebrew term *'ezer*, according to Rosenzweig, denotes far more than the English term helper can offer. The term indicates an "indispensable companion".

Defining the specific creative purpose for woman is vital for understanding her role as a wife, for the two are unmistakably intertwined. Should a woman be single, her primary purpose is to image her Creator and to glorify Him; she is singly focused (1 Cor. 7:34). Should a woman be married, joined to a man, her primary responsibility is to image her Creator and to glorify her husband (1 Cor. 11:7). A woman joined to a man in marriage is called to be his *'ezer*, "a helper suitable for him", one to provide help or relief, one who surrounds, one who comes alongside and who comforts her husband, an indispensable companion" (Harris, et al. 1980). Fitzpatrick (2003:39) ably identifies this calling:

⁴ It would be very easy to become caught up in the gender role debate as we look at specific responsibilities assigned to wives within the marriage relationship. For the purpose of this study, it is not necessary to enter this debate. It is important to note that male and female, although equal in worth are formed differently. They are not only different physically, but also psychologically (Culver 1987:45). After the fall of man, both Adam and Eve were identified for certain roles. God instituted that Eve would bear children and nurture her family (Gen. 3:16), and that Adam would find hardship as he worked the ground to produce food (Gen. 3:17-19). From this standpoint, we acknowledge woman's place within the family and alongside her husband.

A wife who is reflecting God's helping character desires to sustain or uphold her husband; she strengthens, comforts, and seeks to protect him. Because of her love for the Lord and for her husband, she endeavours to dispel his fears by being trustworthy and gracious. She leans for strength upon the Lord so that she might share that strength with her husband. In her heart he finds shelter and protection from the world; he finds a companion who offers him what he really needs: help in his God-given calling.

It is evident that a wife could never fulfil her husband's all-encompassing needs, as only God can. However, it is also evident that God's calling for the wife is that of great responsibility and elaborate care which can only be ministered through the gifting and grace of the Holy Spirit, a strength for which her husband may praise her (Prov. 31:28).

Aside from Genesis 2:18, the other major biblical passage dealing with the purpose of a woman is Proverbs 31:10-31, which teaches about the responsibilities of a godly wife.

2.3. She serves God and family (Prov. 31:10-31)

Proverbs 31:10-31 is a key biblical passage outlining the responsibilities and roles of a noble wife. This passage of scripture is a perfect description of a noble wife's duties and accomplishments. It illustrates a wide range of activities in which the wife may engage, varying her role and sphere of influence. Thus, the wife is not limited because of her gender or position; rather, she is praised for them (vv. 28-31).

The NIV's "noble" (v. 10) renders *ḥayil*, a root with the basic idea of "strength"; other nuances derive from this root idea (Harris, Archer, and Waltke 1980:§624a). When applied to a wife in Proverbs 31:10, the word refers to a woman who is strong in character, hence virtuous (Harris, Archer, and Waltke, 1980:§624a; Brown, Driver, and Briggs, 2000, s.v. 2; Gesenius and Tregelles 2003, s.v. 3), yet retains the nuance of one who is able or capable (Koehler et al. 1999, s.v. 2). The Proverb 31 wife is both virtuous and

capable, a woman renowned for her “superior achievement in every area of life” (Hawkins 1996:19).⁵

This poetic passage of scripture identifies a godly woman who is able to find fulfilment in her home, community, and career (Shelley 1994:910). The noble woman is committed to the good of her husband and family (vv. 12, 15, 21, 27-28); she is godly, wise, and kind (vv. 10, 20, 25-26, 29-30); she is industrious and productive (vv. 13-14, 17, 19, 22, 27); she is an entrepreneur and leader (vv. 15-16, 18, 24, 26); her character and that of her husband is praiseworthy (vv. 23, 30-31). Many more adjectives could be used to describe the noble wife; however, the crux of the matter lies in her character and her relationship to her God—she is one who “fears the Lord” (v. 30).

Her responsibilities encompass a wide range of activities relating to her core purposes, which, in our opinion, are to image her Creator and to help her husband. Everything that she does relates to these two purposes. She reflects God's character as she extends her hand to the needy, gives wise counsel, and protects her household (vv. 20, 25, 26). She helps and works in unity with her husband, seeking to provide for his basic needs (e.g., clothing and food), establishing businesses and maintaining them, bringing security and respect (vv. 11, 12, 13-25). She rules over creation as she plants her vineyard, uses natural materials, and protects her family from the elements (vv. 13, 16, 21, 24, 27).

The noble woman is a real helpmeet to her husband (McGee 1981; Wiersbe 1997). “Her heart is faithful to the Lord and to her husband” (Wiersbe 1997; see vv. 11-12, 30). Falwell (1994) aptly points out that “the real worth of a woman is her devotion to God,” he goes on to reference Tate (1971:99) who emphasises that the noble woman is a “person in her own right who takes a full and honored place in the life of home and Community.” These scholars and many others identify the noble woman's godly characteristics and her purpose, in that of relating as helper to her husband, but they do not identify

⁵ Hawkins explores the identity of the noble wife in relation to Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9. He finds that the noble wife has qualities relating specifically to being a wife and mother (vv. 11, 15, 21, 23, 27, 28), who is a model or example of a wise woman but is different to Lady Wisdom. Lady Wisdom is the personification of wisdom. Hawkins (1996:19) aptly points out that neither wisdom nor folly can be limited to a single gender.

these qualities as a reflection of her Creator. Patterson's article (1991:369) proposes that the noble woman has no other purpose than "to meet the needs of her family in the best possible way." In Poythress' article (1991:244), he indicates that the noble wife, who is entrusted with God's property and the management of people, always shows others respect, as they are created in God's image.

It is the author's opinion that the noble woman, although created in the image of God, also reflects the image of God in and through her godly characteristics as she manages God's creation and interacts with God's people. She is a model helper that God intended for man as she shows goodwill toward him (Prov. 31:12). This woman is strong and able to do all that God has called her to do with the special gifts He has placed in her. We can identify from this passage of scripture and through scholarly resources that the noble woman is not limited to working within the home, but that her efforts are always directed to that of imaging her Creator and helping her husband, thereby establishing her home.

Now that the biblical responsibilities allocated to the wife have been identified, it must be noted that she is unable to perform her responsibilities outside of her relationship to God. Hawkins (1996:22) explains that she has chosen "to anchor her life on the 'fear of Yahweh'". It is vital that special reference be made to highlight the attitude in which she lives her life. She takes her role and responsibilities seriously and enjoys them. This is not done in her own strength; her strength comes from the Lord, for whom she has great reverence (v. 31). This gives her momentum to live unselfishly for the good of her family. Today's woman will struggle to meet any of these responsibilities outside of her relationship with Jesus Christ.

With the understanding that the noble woman relies upon God for her strength let us explore in further detail the significance of the Christian woman and wife. A woman who firmly establishes her identity in Christ builds upon this foundation and is able to do great things with God. I will investigate the importance of the believing wife.

3. Her role as a believer in Christ

In addition to being a woman created in the image of God and a wife committed to helping her husband, we can also gain insight into the proper role of a pastor's wife by considering her identity and purpose as a believer in Christ.

3.1. She must find her identity in Christ

As the point of departure for identifying her role in the church, a pastor's wife must find her identity in Christ. She must understand her biblical womanhood—the reason for her existence, her purpose, and her identity *in Christ*. This knowledge brings her confidence to fulfil her calling, honouring God by supporting her husband and actively serving alongside him and within the body of Christ.

This point, although seemingly simplistic, is important. Women often find their identity in their husbands or in a prominent figure within their lives, sometimes even in their children (Dobson 2004:37). Men, by contrast, tend to find their identity in their vocation (Eggerichs 2004:196). Women tend to be relationship-driven creatures, and therefore find it natural to establish their identity primarily in their husband (Culver 1987:46-47). However, if a woman understands her relationship with Christ, her identity is fixed and secure in Him (Eggerichs, 2004:126), allowing her to be a more confident woman, a better mother and wife (or widow), and ultimately a better servant of Christ.

In Scripture a female believer can be identified as a child (daughter) of God (John 1:12-13), a joint-heir with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17; Gal. 3:26-29), and a vessel or temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:17). As a believer, she becomes a part of the body of Christ, and is endowed with spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:7; Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Pet. 4:9). In Romans 12, Paul urges his readers to evaluate themselves honestly, not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think. A healthy self-image is vital in understanding self-worth. Shelley (1994:1566) indicates that true self-worth stems from understanding one's identity in Christ and accepting how God made and gifted each believer.

Since there is no special office of “pastor’s wife”, it is easy for a pastor’s wife to inherit a set of (undefined) expectations from her congregation, and because she lacks the self-assurance that comes from having a clear sense of her identity in Christ, she feels duty bound to “just accept” all the roles she thinks others expect her to play. As a result, she labours under a burden too heavy for her to bear, and forfeits the joy of serving Christ in the way He created her to serve.

3.2. She should minister in keeping with her God-given gifts

If a pastor’s wife finds her identity in Christ, it will set her free from external pressures to serve Him as He created her to do, that is, in keeping with her God-given spiritual gifts. As she becomes aware and confident of her identity as a woman of God, she is free to use the unique personality and special gifting.

Every believer is called to the priesthood (Hybels 2004:24-25; 1 Pet. 2:9), a priesthood which was ushered in by the events in Acts 2. This priesthood consists of all Christ’s disciples living in submission to Him, giving their bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, so that each can minister and serve others (1 Pet. 4:7-11).

In His wisdom, God gives each one of His children spiritual gifts which are complementary to their personality and calling. Fulfilment and effectiveness result, in part, from ministering in accordance with their gifts. The New Testament abounds with examples of women serving according to their spiritual gifts, such as:

- Anna: “prophetess ... fasting and praying” (Luke 2:36-37)
- Dorcas: “doing good and helping the poor” (Acts 9:36)
- Lydia: showing hospitality (Acts 16:15)
- Priscilla: teaching “the way of God” (Acts 18:26)
- Philip’s daughters: “prophesied” (Acts 21:9)
- Phoebe: “a servant of the church” (Rom. 16:1)
- Widows: serving and interceding (1 Tim. 5:3-10)

Because of the need for hospitality, all Christian women are challenged to open their homes without grumbling (1 Pet. 4:9). Even if this is not the wife's spiritual gift, it is necessary for the encouragement of the believers (Patterson 1995). While prioritising serving God in the area of her giving, a woman must keep her priorities in perspective. Her relationship with God, as well as to her husband and children, must come before the others in her life and before special service within the community (Patterson 1995).

Women may possess and exercise any spiritual gift (Schreiner 1991:215). These gifts are a stewardship from God. The gifts she receives gives the pastor's wife "a special function to perform as a member of the Body of Christ" (MacDonald 1995; cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11, 29-31; Rom. 12:6-8). The conviction that each believer, including the pastor's wife, is equipped with spiritual gifts from God, endowed and sustained by the Holy Spirit, should be the point of departure for discovering her God-intended role in the Body of Christ. This involvement is voluntary as it stems from a right relationship with God where one's identity is found securely in Christ.

3.3. She should mentor and/or be mentored (Titus 2:3-5)

In the household code in Titus 2, Paul places a special call on the older women, that of mentoring the younger women in the church (Titus 2:3-5). Using "an apprenticeship style of teaching, personal demonstration and assistance" (Smith 2000:157), the older women are to instruct the young women regarding their roles as women, wives, and believers. Patterson (1995) calls this spiritual mothering, "a relationship that suggests training in order to develop sound judgment and wisdom." Such hands-on training was not limited to women in formal leadership positions or to pastors' wives; it was the domain of all the "older", more spiritually mature women to impart their wisdom to other women. This would have been an invaluable discipling ministry in the early church (Schreiner 1991:222-223).

The relationship that developed between older and younger women within the church was in no way formal or structured, but rather nurturing (Patterson 1995). According to Smith (2000:159), the older women were to train the younger in three aspects, namely, relationships with their family, sexual purity, and management of their households (Titus 2:4-5). When the young

women loved their husbands and children, maintained sexual purity, and managed their household with skill and grace, they did not discredit the gospel of Christ.

The importance of the relationship between the older and younger women is significant, especially when discussing the role of the pastor's wife within the church. She is not only a woman offering advice and guidance to younger women, but she may also need to be on the receiving end of the same kind of ministry. Very often Christians tend to look to the pastor's wife as a role model, and yet in many ways she requires a role model herself (Haggard 2004:6-8). Her needs should not be overlooked when seeking to place women in mentoring positions.

There is, therefore, a biblical imperative for the pastor's wife to be involved in mentoring relationships with other women. This does not, however, imply that she must lead a formal women's ministry. If she is amongst the more mature women in the congregation, she should embrace the role of nurturing some of the younger women. If she is herself a young wife and/or mother, she may need to receive guidance from more mature ladies.

4. Her role as a pastor's wife

In her existence, purpose, and calling, the pastor's wife is no different from any other woman in the church; she is simply married to the man God has called to lead a particular local church. Her identity remains in Christ as a believer, and she is called to exercise her spiritual gifts within the church and the community. She is the pastor's *wife*, and a member of the Christian community.

There is no biblical basis on which to institute a particular role for a pastor's wife. If she were called to ministry within the church alongside her husband, specific duties would need to be established by the church. The same moral standards required of other leaders, such as the deaconesses/deacons' wives in 1 Timothy 3:11, would apply to her. Thereafter, her functions should take into account her God-given gifts (Schreiner 1991:218-220).

Some churches wrongly conclude that because she is his “helper” (Gen. 2:18), the pastor's wife should serve alongside her husband in the ministry of the church. However, the wife's role as helper does not extend into the area of the husband's vocation. In most societies, both past and present, women are more likely to perform the role of the homemaker (reference.com, 2007), supporting their husband without extending their influence into his work environment. Just as a surgeon's wife functions as his helper without working alongside him in the theatre, so a pastor's wife is called to help her husband *primarily* in relation to their home life.

Admittedly, in his discourse on the rights of apostles (1 Cor. 9), Paul claims that apostles have the right “to take [along] a believing wife” (v. 5). This implies that many of the apostles (including Peter) were married, and that their wives accompanied them on their ministry journeys. It is interesting that Peter's wife is never mentioned by name or by position; Scripture merely implies that he had a believing wife (Mark 1:30; 1 Cor. 9:5). Her role or responsibility within the church may have simply been to perform her wifely duties. Is it possible that Peter ministered to the world, and she ministered to Peter?

Mrs Anna Droke's husband (a minister), said, “A minister's wife has no more call to public duty than any Christian woman in the congregation” (Droke 1914:61-62). The significance of this statement is that it was made in 1914 indicating that the role of the pastor's wife and her involvement in the church has been an unresolved issue for almost one hundred years. The church has taken the role of these particular women and in many cases extended her role into the environment of the husband's vocational position. If a pastor's wife should have a calling to ministry within the church, she should be welcome to fulfil that calling, whether as a paid employee or a willing volunteer. However, should a wife not be called to full-time church ministry, she ought to function within her primary role and spiritual gifting.

Dobson (2004:25) urges all pastors' wives to come to terms with the fact that they are prominent figures within the congregation and are often seen as role models. Nevertheless, the pastor's wife is not an official office within the church. Being married to the pastor should not imply that she must fulfil certain functions; she is a woman of God, as are many other women in the

church. The behaviour of any woman in ministry or leadership must conform to that of 1 Timothy 3:11, that is, she must be “worthy of respect”. Moreover, as a wife, she should be praiseworthy (Prov. 31:30). However, the simple fact that she is married to the pastor does not require of her any service or place her in a position of leadership.

5. Conclusion

We believe the Scriptures do not prescribe a particular role for “the pastor’s wife”. The biblical mandate as regards to her role comes from Scriptural injunctions regarding her identity and purpose as (a) a woman, (b) a wife and mother, and (c) a believer with God-given gifts. Her primary calling is to glorify God and be in fellowship with Him. As a wife and mother, her primary ministry is at home, where she seeks to help and bless her husband, and nurture her children. Her identity is formed in and through her relationship with Christ, and she is called to be a faithful minister of God’s grace both in and out of the church.

When we understand this to be ideal for each woman we can begin to specify extra qualities related to specific assignments or positions within the church. The pastor’s wife finds her primary position in the fact that she is a woman and wife. She is a believer who is to function within her spiritual gifting in the local church. There is no biblical mandate regarding role or responsibility of the pastor’s wife. At most, moral characteristics are required of women in ministry as well as general spiritual characteristics responsible of all believers.

The ideal, from a biblical perspective, for the pastor’s wife is that of any woman who is specifically influential in her conduct, to function effectively as a woman of God, to support her husband, and be an active member of the local church. Older women would have much to offer the younger pastor’s wife in equipping her with the knowledge of homemaking. The older pastor’s wife would have much to offer younger women within the church as a mentor or advisor. This ministry is valuable and necessary.

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