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The Historical Connection: *Blame It on Katie!*

*L*ife is about relationships.” If I have heard my husband say that once, I’ve heard it a million times. Over the course of our lives, this truism has been proven time and time again. We married in 1970, when my husband served as minister to students at the Sagamore Hill Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. (Basically that meant that our dating excursions were primarily to seventh grade boys’ go-kart races and middle school retreats.) We then moved on to pastor in Oklahoma and Florida, eventually returning to Texas. Of our years together, twenty-five have been in the pastorate.

Over the years I have noticed something that always occurs when we see someone from one of our former churches. Rarely does anyone ever say to my husband, “I remember your fabulous sermons!” (much to his dismay). And in my case, no one yet has said, “I remember those fabulous dinner parties you gave!” Instead, the conversation always goes like this: “I remember the day you

buried my mom,” or “I remember when my husband had his heart attack and I looked up in the ER, and there you were,” or “I remember when you prayed with me at the altar when my grandbaby was so sick,” or “You baptized me and I have never forgotten it,” or “You led me to Christ on the beach during spring break.” Over and over, we hear (as do many of you) how God used our pitiful attempts at ministry to bring comfort and healing to our congregations. And it is always in the context of a personal connection, the relationship of not only pastor to people, but child of God to child of God.

Our culture cries out for authentic relationships. With the impersonal nature of most communication these days, such as text messaging and e-mailing, the dynamics of genuine relationships are sadly lacking. This is never more important than in the body of Christ, especially in ministry. “It’s a bridge called ‘relationship’ that leads to a land called ‘trust.’”¹

In the context of ministry, it appears to me that a new model for ministry wives has emerged over the last decade. This new model is based on the reality of life as it truly is in the ministry world today. We may not like it or approve of it, but “it is what it is.” With the explosion of new church plants filled with people of non-Christian backgrounds and experiences, the traditional expectations of the minister and wife have conformed to the look of our twenty-first century culture. Whether this is good for the cause of Christ or detrimental to it is irrelevant here. My purpose is to identify some of these changes and explore how they currently relate to the life of the ministry wife. Kay Warren has made this observation: “I think pastors’ wives today see themselves more as part of an active team. Instead of the husband ahead and the wife behind, I think they see themselves more as side by side.”²

It is important also to remember that these models are blurry and very general. There are many factors that make up a church’s expectations of a minister and his wife, such as local culture, ethnic differences and practices, theological systems, geographical

influences, and denominational traditions. Nevertheless, there are some commonalities that can be identified. In order to understand where we have been as ministry wives in the history of the church, it is helpful to see these models from the panorama of a historical perspective.

H. B. London and Neil Wiseman made this observation:

Through 2,000 years of Christian history, the role of the minister's mate has changed often, and it continues to change rapidly. Even in a single ten- or fifteen-year period, variations have often moved from caring companion to hearth keeper to resident sacrificer to spiritual sustainer to ministry partner to energetic helpmeet to institutional church leader to deputy pastor. But whatever direction the minister's wife's role tilts at any moment of human history, it always involves a position of trusted support for the work of ministry. And it is always an invaluable asset in the service of the kingdom.³

The Ministry Wife in the New Testament

There is not a specific model for ministry wives in the New Testament, despite what many church members may think. No, playing the piano and directing vacation Bible school are not requirements found in the Bible for the preacher's wife. While there are many biblical examples of gifted and wise women, there is no specific description or requirements listed for the wife of a pastor, outside of a few distinguishing, although general, character traits. Some might suggest the stellar New Testament teaching team, Aquila and Priscilla, found in Acts 18. However, while the church met in their home and they actively taught the Word of God together, the Scripture does not specifically identify them in the role of pastor and wife.

In Paul's pastoral epistle to Timothy instructing him on church ministry, he lists the requirements for a pastor (1 Timothy 3:2-7),

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followed by similar traits to be exhibited in the life of a deacon (vv. 8–10). He then describes the wives of these leaders, listing characteristics which should be found in her: “Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things” (v. 11).

This is the closest thing we have to a list of requirements for the wife of a “bishop” or “overseer.” It should be noted that these traits do not reflect giftedness, abilities, or responsibilities, but rather the Christian virtues of reverence, purity of speech, temperance, and faithfulness. Of course these qualities are desired in every Christian woman, not just the wives of ministers.

However, the fact that Paul mentions the Christian character and spiritual maturity of the wife in this passage indicates that her relationship to Christ is significant in how it relates to her husband’s calling. This “good work,” as Paul describes it in 1 Timothy 3:1, includes the spiritual commitment and character of the wife as she serves Christ and His church alongside her husband. We can conclude that there is not a detailed model for ministry wives in the New Testament, as there is for pastors and elders. The only definitive model is that of a Spirit-filled woman, seeking to follow Jesus with all her heart, developing Christlike characteristics, and walking in wisdom.

Ministry Wives in the Early Church

The image of the ministry wife in the early church is shadowy, at best. Most of the information on Christian women from this era relates to the martyrs or the desert ascetics, not pastors’ wives. However, it would be logical to assume that pastors and their wives ministered together. Tertullian (155–222 CE), an early church theologian and apologist, beautifully described the married couple serving Christ together:

How beautiful, then, the marriage of two Christians, two are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the

religion they practice . . . both servants of the Master. Nothing divides them, either in flesh or spirit. . . . They pray together, they worship together, they fast together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another. Side by side they visit God's church and partake of God's banquet; side by side they face difficulties and persecution, share their consolations. To such as these [God] gives His peace. Where there are two together, there also He is present.⁴

We can conclude that a husband and wife serving together as partners in the gospel, in spiritual and marital unity, was not unusual in the early church. In fact, Tertullian praises this image and mutual commitment, using it as an example of Christ's presence in the world. The marriage union in a Christian context gave a strong witness for the cause of Christ in the early centuries of the church.

Celibacy for men and women devoted to ministry was practiced in various regions and encouraged by some church leadership with the beginning of the monastic movement around the beginning of the fourth century. Some chose this way of life, believing that celibacy was evidence of one's true separation from the world and physical desires. Others considered celibacy a spiritual gift or practice loosely based on 1 Corinthians 7. (That's one spiritual gift I have never heard anyone request.) While celibacy of the priesthood had been decreed for many years in various regions of the Western church, it wasn't until the twelfth century that ecclesiastical law was ratified, formally requiring celibacy of the clergy.⁵ Once the church began to rigidly enforce this doctrine, priests and monks were required to put their wives in convents or leave them. As a result, until the time of the sixteenth century, the small amount of information on women is primarily related to the medieval mystics and other women serving within the boundaries of the established church. But with the onset of the cataclysmic events of the Reformation, the

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picture of ministry wives began to take shape and become a great deal more interesting.

The Reformation Model

When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Wittenburg Church in Germany, he had no idea that he was starting a monumental religious and cultural shift in Europe that would have aftershocks for years to come. His vehement objections to the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church hit a nerve, and his writings spread like wildfire. One of Luther's many objections to church law and practice was the requirement of celibacy for the priesthood. Soon hundreds, if not thousands, of priests and monks were leaving their posts for areas in Europe that were not under strict Catholic domination. Even nuns in European convents were smuggling in Luther's material and reading it avidly. Earnestly believing in Luther's teachings, one such group, led by Katharina von Bora, escaped the convent at night by way of a cart carrying empty fish barrels.

These women landed literally on the doorstep of the church at Wittenburg, requesting to be married. Luther agreed to this proposal and matched each woman with one of his colleagues, since they also were former priests and monks. Finally, Katharina, who was quite stubborn and picky, proposed that Luther marry her, and after thinking it over, he agreed. The account of their vibrant relationship and deep love and respect for one another is one of the great stories of Christian history. The fascinating aspect of this story is that Katie, as Luther called her, and this motley group of women changed ministry in their culture. They literally and figuratively threw open the door of the parsonage and ministered not only to their husbands and families, but also to church members and the community.

These women did backbreaking labor. They birthed numerous children, tended gardens and livestock, took in widows and

orphans, served hundreds of meals a week, ministered to the poor, educated their children, and also took part in lively theological conversations around the dinner table. Katie even brewed her own beer, although I don't recommend anyone trying that today. Having been trained in theology and being quite literate, these women and their offspring brought something to the office of the pastor that the church had not been seen for many years.⁶ "Luther's acceptance of children as the core of his rejuvenated life speaks for one of the Reformation's most dramatic shifts. Henceforth the pastor's home, replete with managerial wife and children underfoot, would offer a new model for Protestant couples throughout the world."⁷

Perhaps it is Katie and the other Reformer wives who unintentionally filled in the picture of a ministry wife who not only can somehow manage to do everything on the home front, but is expected to do everything her church desires of her as well. I say, blame it on Katie!

Traditional/Modern Model

This model is one that has been common to most churches and communities for generations. I suggest that this model is performance-based and is usually what most churches expect and want (or think they want) from their pastor's wife.

This template largely consists of responsibilities or jobs that the church members want to see in the pastors' and staff members' wives, such as musical skills (playing the piano, singing solos), organizational skills (directing vacation Bible school or women's ministry events), or entertaining in the home. While this model works very well for women interested and gifted in these areas, it is difficult for those who are not.

When my husband and I moved to Hobart, Oklahoma, to serve at our first church, I was a bit apprehensive about meeting with the wives of the men on the search committee. However, it

was very reassuring for this young, brand-new pastor's wife because they could not have been kinder or more thoughtful and gracious. However, I noticed that the first questions they asked me were, "Do you play the piano?" and "Do you sing?" My answer was "No, I'm so sorry, but I don't!" Some of you readers will identify with me when I tell you that the disappointment on their faces was very obvious. I so wished I could have said yes; however, it would have quickly become clear that while I truly wanted to please them, I had told them a monumental lie.

While most church members say they are happy for the pastor's wife to function as she prefers, the expectations nevertheless have usually been based on her social, public, or organizational skills. It appears that this model is built on the ability of the wife to do the jobs that are expected of her in the church, despite her own gifts or desires. And it should be noted that many of these expectations are unspoken . . . unspoken, that is, until they are not met, in some cases. For an extroverted woman who enjoys people, hospitality, and administrative jobs, this model works well. However, for the more private woman these expectations can be dreadful. These skills may not come naturally to someone like her, and if so, they become a heavy burden to bear. It is the wise woman who works to develop expertise in these areas, yet for some it never comes easily.

On the flip side, the wonderful thing about churches that apply the traditional model is the respect, honor, and care that they usually have for the pastor and his family. One young wife told me that while she was enjoying their new church plant and the nontraditional setting, she missed the genuine care that she and her children received at their former Bible Belt, small town church. There is esteem for the ministry built into this traditional model that is sometimes missing in newer churches. I often told my children that despite some of the annoyances that come with being "PKs" (preacher's kids), they also had the benefit of being prayed for on a daily basis, due to the care and concern

of our people. The traditional model has its drawbacks, but also its blessings.

The Contemporary Model

I do not propose this as a new model, but rather seek to describe what appears to have developed over the last decade in regard to the ministry wife. This pattern is based on the reality of contemporary church culture and is what younger ministry wives who are not in traditional churches are looking to model. New church plants and younger congregations are generally characterized by this generational shift in thinking. A most interesting detailed analysis regarding the distinctiveness of this generation can be found in *The Younger Evangelicals* by Robert E. Webber.⁸

There are three words that seem to best describe newer or less traditional churches and what they are seeking to develop within their faith communities: *authenticity*, *value*, and *relationships*. Of course, these concepts overlap, but I do believe they best describe the contemporary model of ministry wives that has emerged.

Authenticity

This is a cliché for this generation—everyone wants “authenticity.” What exactly does that mean? Synonyms for this word are *genuineness*, *legitimacy*, and *validity*. In “Christianese” this translates into “being real.” The members of a church want to have a genuine relationship with their ministers and their wives—based on friendship, community, camaraderie, and common goals. While there are varying degrees of an authentic relationship, we can be sure that the expectations of this newer model are based on a ministry wife’s transparency, common experiences, and honest conversations—all within the boundaries of what is appropriate, of course.

This authenticity works both ways. It is also what younger ministry wives are seeking for themselves. They may ask, “Can I serve my church in the area where I am truly gifted, not only where

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I am expected to serve?” A wife may be expected to teach a women’s Bible study or organize church events on a regular basis, especially if the former pastor’s wife served in that way (see traditional model). If this is where she is gifted and is something she enjoys, then it works well and everyone is happy. But what if that is not her spiritual gift or skill, much less her real interest? Perhaps her gift is in evangelism or prayer. Will the church give her the freedom to utilize her giftedness in the most effective way? This requires the church members’ respect and cooperation as the minister’s wife seeks to follow Jesus and use her gifts to strengthen the body of Christ.

*A*T NO TIME in modern history have ministry wives been as educated or had as many educational opportunities as today.

Value

This refers to the inherent worth that the wife brings to the ministry partnership of husband and church. It seems that with the onslaught of the Information Age, a yearning to hear and be heard has surfaced. This accounts for the enormous popularity of blogging, which allows anyone with Internet access to voice his or her ideas and opinions in the public arena. Information is couched within one’s “story,” emphasizing the individual’s experience. The phenomenon of YouTube, which allows anyone to demonstrate his or her brilliance or stupidity to the entire world, speaks to this generation’s desire to see and be seen. The social interaction and networking that Facebook and MySpace provide online is an indication of the desire to know and be known. Never, in the entire history of the world, has it been possible to connect and interact with as many people as it

is now. This is unprecedented and allows a certain customizing of one's social relationships. Those you wish to invite into your space as your "friend" are given access, but those you don't wish to include are denied that access. This is an interesting cultural value and is ultimately reflected in the way the younger generation views ministry wives and vice versa.

A ministry wife's significance, then, is not just related to the fact that she is married to the minister, as some kind of afterthought. Rather, she is perceived as not only his wife, but also a person in her own right, with gifts and skills that enhance not only their ministry together, but also the church as a whole. It should be noted that most evangelical seminaries now recognize this by offering theological education and training for ministry wives, formal and informal. If a woman chooses not to go the traditional theological educational route, there are excellent certificate programs that offer courses in systematic theology, church history, home management, and personal spiritual development for the benefit and enrichment of the wife. At no time in modern history have ministry wives been as educated or had as many educational opportunities as today. This enhances their value to their husbands, as well as to the church body. In the future, this may also lead to wives being employed by the church to serve in their areas of expertise.

Relationships

There is no question that there is a fascination with relationships in our culture. This is demonstrated every single night on television, with the extreme popularity of reality shows. The combination of seeing people as they really are (authenticity) mixed with the emotion of relationship issues is a recipe for high ratings. While the audience may watch *Survivor* for the gross-out factor (eating live worms, for example), the real questions are, "Who will be voted off the island? And what are the reasons?" This interest in complex and volatile personal relationships in our culture, of course, is carried over into the church.

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Those who desire relational authenticity also want personal connections built on transparency, genuine caring, and sharing. In the traditional model previously mentioned, the ministry wife is “put on a pedestal” by the congregation to be admired and imitated in what she does and how she does it. She represents to some the model of perfection. I seriously doubt if many younger ministry wives (and probably a great number of older ones also) want to be on a pedestal, since it looks really lonely up there.

Shaping this newer model is the need Christian women have for a standard in developing authentic Christlike characteristics as wives, moms, friends, and leaders, according to Titus 2:1–5. For the women who were not raised in Christian homes or churches, this modeling is crucial to their own spiritual growth and understanding. No one needs to know how to act like a Christian at church; it’s the day-to-day responsibilities, schedules, and conflicts that call for genuine faith and obedience. One thing women my age hear over and over is the desire of younger women to be shown what it looks like to live as a Christian wife and mom. They desperately need to be mentored and befriended by older Christian women who can demonstrate how to navigate the challenges that come with following Christ in a twenty-first century world. It is no coincidence that many of our newer churches, pastored by younger men, have developed mission statements that emphasize discipleship and faith, within the context of a community made up of authentic relationships.

It is these three words, then, that I believe best describe the contemporary model for the ministry wife. *Authentic* people *valuing* one another for who they are, loving and living in the context of *relationships* is the primary need of the younger generation today.

An Illustration of the Contemporary Model

A clear illustration of this newer model can be seen today in the political realm. It is obvious that there are parallels in the lives of ministry wives and political wives. While there is no specific re-

quirement (legal or otherwise) for a woman to function in either capacity, there is a heavy load of expectations as well as opportunities that come with both positions. The wife of a minister, just like the wife of a politician, can greatly enhance her husband's career, or she can be a detriment to it. While I personally do not believe that, generally speaking, a wife can "make or break" her husband (except in extreme situations), her influence on her husband is undoubtedly very effective. Never underestimate the power of pillow talk!

However, in our contemporary culture, this spousal influence seems to have taken a more visible and intentional turn. As I write this, we are just coming out of a presidential election season, and a new political power couple with enormous appeal has burst on the scene: Barack and Michelle Obama. Let me be clear that this is in no way an endorsement of their political views. However, I do believe that Michelle Obama illustrates this contemporary model. It is intriguing to watch her as she speaks and interacts with her husband on the national stage. I believe she personifies this newer model, although she is in the political—not ministerial—world.

First, Michelle is authentic—she says exactly what she thinks. This trait may give her husband and his advisors headaches in the future, but she appears to be a contemporary woman who speaks her mind. Of course, that may not always be wise since there is great wisdom in discernment and self-control. Obviously it is best to find ways to phrase harsh thoughts or negative emotions that are not offensive or inappropriate. However, our culture values (or claims to) transparency and honesty, not just political rhetoric. Michelle, who is a gifted communicator, comes across as authentic and quite confident in her husband's and political party's ability to reach their goals.

Second, Michelle brings political weight and value to her husband's campaign. Her law degree from Harvard and her experience in the workforce complement her husband's political ambitions and policies. Her knowledge of law and the political system clearly enhance her husband's image and style, as does her public speaking

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ability. However, education is only one way value is measured. Any talent, interest, or expertise can be useful or helpful, particularly in ministry, if it encourages relationships, strengthens believers, and provides opportunities for teaching as well as enjoyment.

Finally, Michelle seems to relish the relationship she has with her husband and daughters. Along with her skill in politics, she is a devout mother, often mentioning her daughters in her speeches. It is quite clear that she is a strong advocate for her children and is very competent in managing the family household. In other words, it appears that Michelle hasn't minimized familial bonds or sacrificed commitment to her children and husband for the political arena, as some have done in the past. Even in their interaction on stage, this new model is evident. During onstage introductions, husbands and wives normally give the obligatory affectionate hug and pat on the back." The Obamas, however, add another component to this visual—the "fist bump." This newer gesture indicates a vibrant partnership and teamwork, and it says, "We are in this together, baby!" All three of these components are evident in Michelle, and it will be interesting to observe the development of this image in political wives in the future.

Application for Today

WHAT DOES ALL of this mean to us as ministry wives? It means that if we wish to have a voice and an influence in the body of Christ relating to our current culture, we must strive for authenticity, yet always be aware of the appropriate boundaries.

We are reminded that we are valued not only for our contributions to our families, churches, and ministries, but also to the body of Christ as a whole and to the work of the kingdom. And finally, we must always remember that "life is about

relationships”—with our Lord Jesus Christ, our spiritual family, our earthly families, and even ourselves.

Reflection

THE THREE WORDS pinpointed in this chapter are good to examine in light of our own lives and ministry.

- ◆ Am I authentic? Do I feel free to be who I am? Am I willing to let others be authentic also?

- ◆ How do I bring value to the ministry? What are my gifts and interests? What do I take pleasure in sharing with others?

- ◆ Can I remember that connecting with people and living in true community with them is more important than any responsibility in the church? What might I need to change in my life to reflect this belief?