

Review

Beth Allison Barr, *Becoming the Pastor's Wife: How Marriage Replaced Ordination as a Woman's Path to Ministry*, Ada MI: Brazos Press, 2025 256 pages ISBN 9781587435898

By Elsie Froment, PhD

Beth Barr asks the question: if a woman intends to be a pastor's wife, what is she getting herself into? Is it ministry by marriage? Is it support staff to pastors? Barr's husband is a pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention. In that Convention, pastoral applicants have been passed over if they are not married. The pastor's wife comes with the pastoral position. She can be interviewed as part of the package, therefore, and there are expectations for her role.

Barr has a PhD in history and is a faculty member of Baylor University. She believes in her role as a pastor's wife. She explores the role of the pastor's wife, knowing that women have been accepted and rejected as Christian leaders throughout history. Because wives support their husbands in whatever vocation they choose, pastor's wives support their husbands in their ministry. Is that their only purpose?

Barr is careful not to obscure independent leadership by women because women were Christian leaders in the ancient world. Female prophets led in both the Old and New Testaments. As murals in the Catacombs of Rome establish, female church house leaders proliferated. They suggest an order of widows with clergy status. The images demonstrate authority, agency, and independence. Marriage to a minister did not automatically suggest a calling for the spouse. It is clear that, until the 1000s, women served in ecclesiastical offices, exercising authority over men. Bertha brought England to Christianity. Such women performed liturgies, celebrated eucharist, and provided religious instruction and pastoral care. This history has been forgotten, marginalized, and explained away.

The gender change of the priesthood came when the Eucharist was sacramentalized. Soon the idea arose that sexually active priests could not transform the Eucharist elements. Female bodies were impure, and priests should be celibate. Sensual desire had to be conquered. This development was confirmed by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Until that time most priests married, but now they were required to give up their wives. From henceforth, priests still had families, but they couldn't marry their concubines. A bishop regulated the sex trade in London but the women in the sex trade were denied a Christian burial.

The pastor's wife role came with the Reformation. Being married became part of the identity of Reformation pastors. The Reformation pastor kept his masculine authority. Transitioning from a concubine to a pastor's wife, still in a supportive capacity, meant that the woman became a model wife and mother for her community. Pastors' wives became a symbol of hope for Protestantism and Radical Protestantism. Expectations grew for the pastor's wife. She was expected to be attractive, raise the family to behave, keep a clean home, provide hospitality, attend counselling sessions, and be on call for her husband. Just as her husband might not share her interests, she might have necessary gifts to assume Christian leadership. Martin Luther's wife, Katherina Zell, was a gifted theologian and businesswoman who preached and wrote biblical expositions. Susanna Wesley carried on her husband's ministry, including preaching, when he was away from home. The Enlightenment believed women were inferior and the Industrial Revolution devalued women's work. The pastor's wife role appears to have been less influenced by the Bible than by the secular world.

Marriage became the expectation for women. Within the patriarchal order, the pastor's wife was seen as the ultimate godly woman. Books began to be written reinforcing expectations for pastor's wives. At my Bible school, all the women had to take a course that was ostensibly for pastors' wives, though that might not be our reason for attending. Our textbooks reinforced the support role. Barr notes that the Southern Baptist Convention gave an award each year to the woman who most exemplified the position. Their seminaries established programs to teach women to be pastor's wives. At the Convention, when women tried to speak, their microphones were turned off. Barr posits that conceptions about pastors' wives are rooted in the politics of respectability.

Barr's book is carefully researched, and end noted. It is balanced. It is not a polemic, as many examinations of history presently are. The style is readable. Barr finds that some Southern Baptist women are especially responsible for the dominant view of pastors' wives in the Southern Baptist Convention. Are expectations predictable on the question of the pastor's wife? Each pastoral couple should answer the question according to their biblical understanding and their support for each other.

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