



THE TITLE I DIDN'T ASK FOR

Eileen Button

I married a banker. I like to remind my banker-turned-pastor husband of this when we're having a particularly difficult time in the ministry. Although I wouldn't trade his occupation (some would say "calling"), my husband's career choice bestowed on me a title I never bargained for when we walked down the aisle.

I am a pastor's wife.

While I know plenty of women who are thrilled to bear this title, I've never worn it very well. I was always confused by the girls at the Christian college I attended who said they felt "called to become a pastor's wife." Since I grew up Catholic, I was astonished to learn that pastors were allowed to marry. More shocking to me, however, was the idea that God would call a woman to be a spouse of someone's occupation.

How do we treat the women (and men) who happen to be married to our pastors? Do we balance them precariously on high pedestals? Do we set impossible-to-live-up-to expectations for them to follow? Are we quick to criticize when they fail or act (gasp!) human? Will we take the time to get to know—really know—their?

Over the years I have been introduced to others without my first name. Just "the pastor's wife," as though the label alone is sufficient in describing who I am. "I'm Eileen," I gently correct. I usually get the same response. "Oh ... nice to meet you." As the conversation progresses, I feel their eyes examining me as though something about my stance, attire, or aura might confirm that I am, in fact, married to a pastor.

What they seem to be looking for—and what they'll never find in me—is perfection. It is assumed that my children never fight, my husband and I never disagree, my home is always clean for drop-in visitors, and my meals are always nutritionally balanced. It is believed that I can, on a moment's notice, whip up a casserole for a funeral dinner or fill in for the pastor. For them, I am a symbol—a projected fantasy of what it means to live a life of faith—not an actual person. Many prefer to believe the plastic persona rather than get to know the authentic, warts-and-all woman behind the smile.

My new acquaintances will often keep themselves in check, being careful not to swear or make a bad impression. Some actually apologize for their lack of church attendance or relay horrifying experiences from the last church they attended. Aisle 8 of the grocery store always makes for an awkward confessional booth.

With a title like mine, it is easy to feel pushed into a box with the lid closing fast. In an age when Christianity seems to be defined more by a political party than with the life of Christ, I am immediately prejudged. Many assume I agree with the outlandish comments spewed by famous evangelicals, and are surprised (at times offended) to learn what I really think.

For those who suppose they have me pegged, I'd like to dispel a few stereotypes. I don't believe Jesus would be a Republican or a Democrat. I applaud those who may not be churchgoers, but whose actions and generosity reflect Christ more than the lifestyles of many professing Christians. I believe God wants for us to prosper, but not necessarily in the way our American culture dictates, and certainly not just for personal benefit.

By the way, I don't wear stockings, pumps, or flowered dresses with lace collars. Nor do I don Tammy Faye-style false eyelashes, wigs, or sequins. I prefer jeans, khakis, and classic T-shirts. I don't volunteer in the nursery or children's church (I've had three children of my own; that was more than enough). I don't perform with the music team. With a voice like mine, no one will let me on, and the only song I know how to play on the piano is "Chopsticks."

However, I try to use the gifts I have been given in the church and community as a teacher, writer, and friend.

Life in a pastoral family can be unpredictable and intense. Obviously we cannot plan for funerals or 3 a.m. phone calls. We hold our breath as we prepare to go on vacation, and I bite my tongue if our children complain about going to church. I've vowed to never respond to their complaints with "You have to! You're the pastor's kid!" I know all too well the claustrophobic feelings associated with the label.

There are those who jokingly suggest my husband has an easy life "since he only works a few hours on Sunday morning." They have no idea what it takes to lead a church, write weekly sermons, counsel those battling addictions, or inspire people to make eternal choices. They cannot imagine the burdens that keep him awake night after night.

Some might find my ideas, opinions, and loud way of laughing (and snorting) a little incongruous for a pastor's wife. But if you take the time to get to know me, you'll discover a person working through the same faith and life issues as everyone else. Just don't forget to ask me my first name.