



What Women Wish Pastors Knew
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CHAPTER 1

“PASTOR, I’M TIRED”

Walk into most churches in America, have a look around, and ask yourself this question: “What is a Christian woman?” ... Don’t listen to what is said, look at what you find there. There is no doubt about it. You’d have to admit, a Christian woman is ... tired.¹

John Eldredge

WOMEN COME TO CHURCH for many reasons: They love the Lord. They want to support you, your family, and your ministry. They want to see lost people led to Christ; the sin-guilty forgiven, the sick healed, and the loveless loved. They want to work hard for God and to leave an eternal legacy for those who follow them.

But, Pastor, you should know: today’s Christian woman is tired. Women listed exhaustion as their number one issue. Why do Christian women want you to know this? Do they want your sympathy? Do they want you to think they are hardworking Proverbs 31 women? Do they want to justify why they sit on back pews and run late for worship services? Do they want you to stop asking them to work in the nursery, cook church suppers, and arrange altar flowers?

The answer is no. They want you to understand that their attendance and church involvement often come at great personal sacrifice. In order to attend and work at church, a woman will often give up sleep, rest, solitude, and all personally refreshing activities—such as a walk in the woods or coffee with a friend. She will drive herself to exhaustion in order to accept the jobs you request of her.

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She also wants you to know that if she declines your requests, she'll wrestle with her decision long into the night. She will take her refusal to heart, and it will usually bring her embarrassment, self-disappointment, and feelings of guilt. She might even consider herself a spiritual failure, a woman who lets her pastor down when he needs her.

Her sincere and legitimate refusals will never slide off her heart "like water off a duck's back." They'll stick like sharp briars.

Why? Because she loves you and your family. She appreciates the time, energy, and prayer you put into your ministry. You and the church are meaningful and life-giving to her and her family. She values the hard work you do. She knows how you reach out to hurting individuals in the name of Christ.

But a woman can have so many demanding responsibilities with family, home, children, career, and community, she simply does not have the physical strength to take on one more job. Even if the pastor himself personally asks her.

Most women won't tell their pastors they are tired. After all, they reason, the Proverbs 31 woman never got tired. Instead of admitting exhaustion, many women will push themselves to sickness in order to support you and the church. Other times, when exhaustion gets the best of them, they'll simply give up trying to do everything expected of them and leave the church. They figure leaving the church is less painful than declining the requests.

Women today carry heavy loads of work—at home, at their jobs, *and* at church.

George Barna sounds a "note of caution regarding the high price women may pay for carrying excessive levels of spiritual responsibility." He writes: "While women represent the lion's share of Christians and the majority of participants in religious activities, many women appear to be burning out from their intense levels of involvement." His research shows a telling "22 percent slip in church attendance [among women] since 1991," as well as a "21 percent decline in the percentage of women who volunteer to help a church."

He concludes: "Women's monumental effort to support the work of the Christian church may be running on fumes." He advises churches to "consider whether or not they are providing sufficient opportunities for women *to receive ministry* and not just *provide ministry to others*," and that "we may continue to see tens of thousands of women leaving the church unless there is a widespread, aggressive, thoughtful approach to recognizing and appreciating women."²

IT’S A FACT: CHRISTIAN WOMEN WON’T REST

God created the human body to need rest. Regular rest. Put your hand over your heart, and feel it beat and rest, beat and rest, beat and rest. What would happen to that life-giving muscle if it beat and beat and beat and never rested? It would burn out.

That’s exactly what is happening to Christian women today. They are working hard, and they are not resting. In fact, women tell me they feel guilty when they rest. They consider hard work spiritual-ness, and rest idleness. They push themselves to exhaustion to avoid idleness.

Some women measure their level of spirituality by the amount of work they do. After all, they admit, the Proverbs 31 woman worked with eager hands, got up while it was still dark, set about her work vigorously with strong arms, and never let her lamp go out at night. She never ate the bread of idleness and surpassed all the other women with all the noble things she did.³

An Arkansas woman writes: “Women are overcommitted. They often tend to equate ‘the busier I am’ [with] ‘the more spiritual I am.’ They feel it is expected of them to multitask and to be leading in several different capacities. All of this overcommitment (at church, home, community, job, etc.) is a recipe for burnout, stress-out, and unhealthy and unhappy women.”

THE PROVERBS 31 WOMAN AND CINDERELLA

Why do women work so hard and try to do everything so well? One reason might be that, as little girls growing up in Christian homes, many women were taught to be like two great women: the Proverbs 31 woman and Cinderella. They strive to walk in their shadows—a superwoman from Proverbs who “brings her husband praise at the city gate” and has children who call her “blessed.” And a drop-dead gorgeous Cinderella who will one day “live happily ever after” with a handsome prince.

Women are taught to be beautiful, shapely, intelligent, quiet, gentle, and gracious. Society expects them to be strong and powerful, keep a husband satisfied and happy, raise up Harvard-bound kids, and find brilliant careers that bring money, fulfillment, and prestige. As *Christian* women, they are also expected to work sacrificially in church, thus doing the Lord’s work to “earn their reward.”

Can women today maintain spotless homes, corporate careers, happy husbands, brilliant children and, at the same time, cook like a Food Network star, decorate like Martha Stewart, look like Barbie, play tennis like Serena Williams, and evangelize like Lottie Moon? Of course not.

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When, by reason of human physical limitations, they can't keep up, women often experience guilt. It's false guilt of course, but it certainly feels like the butcher knife of real guilt. So she tries to work harder—in her home, her job, her mothering, her marriage, and her church. Some women wear exhaustion like the red badge of courage. Fatigue becomes who they are—their primary identity.

BURN OUT OR RUST OUT?

“Work is fast becoming the American Christian’s major source of identity,” writes Charles Swindoll. “The answer to most of our problems (we are told) is ‘work harder.’ And to add the ultimate pressure, ‘You aren’t really serving the Lord unless you consistently push yourself to the point of fatigue.’ It’s the old burn-out-rather-than-rust-out line.”⁴

Believe me, Pastor, no Christian woman wants to “rust out.”

Often the church itself plays a role in a woman’s guilt trip because of the expectations demanded of women in congregations.

“There is a not-so-subtle message that often equates salvation with duty to church, and women find themselves leaving hearth and home to meet these expectations that often make their lives far more difficult. . . . When [church roles and jobs] are mandatory and there is no flexibility, a woman can easily be overwhelmed and completely frazzled by the expectations placed upon her shoulders.”⁵

Overwhelmed? Frazzled? Women used these two words a lot on their surveys. A caring pastor can teach women the difference between true guilt and false guilt. He can help them understand that while the Proverbs 31 woman can be a goal to reach for, the inexhaustible twenty-first-century Cinderella-superwoman isn’t.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF REST

A caring pastor can also explain to his congregation a woman’s right to rest. After all, Jesus rested, even though he knew he had only three short years to accomplish his ministry on earth. And he didn’t feel guilty about it. As a human being—the Word become *flesh* (John 1:14)—Jesus knew his physical limitations. To find solitude and rest, he often trekked alone into the wilderness or mountains, or sat on the grassy hills above Lake Galilee, rubbing his tired feet.

Jesus also urged his disciples to rest. The gospel writer, Mark, gives us a special insight into one chaotic event: “Then, because so many people

were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, [Jesus] said to them, ‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’ So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place” (Mark 6:31–32).

Pastor, tell the women in your church that Jesus himself offers them rest: “Come to me,” he invited, “all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28, NKJV).

Women need not feel guilty when they get tired—physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. They must heed Jesus’ call, and take the needed time to rest and replenish themselves. Quiet and solitude make for the best type of rest.

“In quiet and silence the faithful soul makes progress,” writes Thomas à Kempis, “the hidden meanings of the Scriptures become clear. . . . As one learns to grow still, he draws closer to the Creator and farther from the hurly-burly of the world.”⁶

Another prime biblical example of someone who needed rest is the great prophet Elijah. On the heels of Queen Jezebel’s death threats, Scripture says: “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). Exhausted and seized by terror, Elijah traveled alone to the desert. He prayed a defeated prayer, and asked God to let him die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he cried. “I’m totally stressed out and ready to throw in the towel” (19:4, my paraphrase).

What did God do? He made Elijah rest. Elijah lay down under a broom tree and slept. God’s angel woke him with bread and water, and then he went back to sleep and rested again. God’s prescription worked. So strengthened by rest and solitude and nourishment, Elijah got up and “traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb” (19:4–8). You see, God had a job for Elijah. He had an important message to give him. God knew Elijah must be rested in order to climb a mountain and accurately hear God’s “gentle whisper” (19:12).

Believe me, Pastor, that’ll preach to the women in your church!⁷

MEET YOUR CHURCH MEMBER, “SISTER SALLY”

Allow me to introduce you to the “Sallys” in your congregation. They are numerous, and they are tired. Let’s become a fly on Sally’s kitchen wall on an average Sunday morning, as she prepares herself and her family for Sunday school and church worship.

Sally just turned thirty-four. The mother of three girls—ages seven, four, and two months—she works full time outside the home, as does

her husband. Together they are trying to pay off some high medical bills, as well as keep a roof over their children's heads and food on their table. Sally's widowed mother, in ailing health, also lives with the family.

Do you see Sally in her robe standing at the stove scrambling eggs? She spent yesterday cleaning, washing clothes, grocery shopping, preparing meals, and bathing her daughters. She collapsed into bed long after midnight—exhausted. Before she turned out the light, she noticed her husband's winking eye and the telltale grin on his face.

This morning her alarm clock rang at 6:00 a.m. She jumped out of bed, laid out the children's church clothes, woke her mother and husband, and is now getting ready to feed them breakfast. Then she'll clean the kitchen, organize Sunday lunch, dress the children, diaper and nurse the baby, and slip into her own church clothes.

Now begins the race to church. Sally gathers up Bibles and offering envelopes, herds her children out the door, buckles them into the family van, and urges her mother and husband to hurry.

Sally's husband isn't enthusiastic about going to church since Sunday is his only morning to sleep late. He yawns and grumbles on the way. When they arrive at church, they drop off her mother by the main door, hunt for a parking place, and then rush into the building. Sally helps her mom to the seniors class, sees the girls to Sunday school and the nursery respectively, then meets up with her husband at the young parents class. She has already walked—in dress heels—the equivalent of five city blocks. And it's only 9:00 a.m.

After the Sunday school hour, Sally rounds up her children and finds the rest of the family in the sanctuary. Then she slips out, finds a ladies' room, and nurses the baby. She arrives back and sits down just as an enthusiastic song leader asks her to stand. Baby over one shoulder, she sings multiple verses of the new praise chorus. Sally will sit and stand at least six more times before you preach.

After your sermon, she'll meet and greet fellow worshipers, then meander with her husband, mother, and kids back to the van. Everyone is starving, the older girls are elbow-jabbing each other in the back seat, and the baby, now crying, smells bad. They arrive home, unload the van, and Sally kicks off her shoes, changes the baby, and serves lunch. Then she cleans the kitchen, and gets an hour to herself if she's lucky. If the church holds an evening service, Sally will jump up and start all over again. Before Sally goes to bed late that night, she will organize her girls' things for school and day care, pack lunches, and press her business suit.