

Chapter One
FAMILY MATTERS

Before I agreed to marry my husband, Gary, I had already said I wouldn't marry a preacher or a missionary. It wasn't that I didn't like preachers; I just wasn't sure what they did with their time! I was afraid to marry a missionary because I wasn't sure how missionaries paid their bills. (I have since learned that this can be true for any person on a budget.)

Before I understood how carefully God prepares our path and leads us in His ways, I said a lot of other "never's." I had a lot to learn about trusting the Lord Jesus for everyday life. You may have even made the kind of statements I made: "I'll never leave my mother, I'll never leave Vancouver, I'll never stand up in front of women, I'll never move to the Canadian prairies, I'll never move to Dallas again, and one thing is certain: We'll never live in California!"

The words may sound silly to you, but the truth behind them made sense to me: *Family matters to me*. And the family that mattered all lived on the West Coast. As my love for Gary grew and my understanding of God's mysterious ways of guiding His children strengthened (Proverbs 3:5–6), I began to trust His heart even when I did not understand His ways.

This book reflects what I believe God is looking for in the church today: godly women who are willing to fulfill the eternal purposes of God by ministering to women and so enabling the church to be spiritually healthy.

There has never been a time in the history of man when the idea of womanhood draws more opinions from people around the globe. The post-modern world offers women a smorgasbord of options, all clamoring for attention. In a way like never before, the church of Jesus Christ tries to define what a woman is, could be, or should be.

The serious Christ follower who has straddled a few decades knows the importance of staying focused on the eternal purposes of God. She cares about His purposes because she knows they are bigger than her personal

plans. She recognizes that God's purposes are grander than any programs created by the human mind. She is convinced that God's purposes for Christian women make the arrogance of a rebellious culture fade into the dust. Whether the Old Testament: "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Proverbs 16:9) or the New: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28), you will find God carefully working out His purposes in the world. Nothing any one of us can dream up will change the Father's eternal purpose to call us to honor His Son: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9–11). Paul says God's primary tool through which He works today is His church family (Ephesians 3:10).

That was the part that was missing in my equation: The family that matters to women must include the local family of God. The God of the Bible looks at the concept of "family" with the panoramic lens of the camera. He was not bothered that I moved away from my family of human origin so much as He wanted me to open my heart to the church family. He had spiritual mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters I needed to meet so they would help me grow up as a Christian woman. I found myself repeating the words of the Lord Jesus Himself: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

As Christ followers, we must come to grips with discipleship. We cannot follow the Savior without giving up our lives. We cannot fulfill God's purposes without being intimately connected to His church, the local expression of His body. This means I am never apart from the family. When I married a preacher and moved away from my human family, I made that marvelous discovery. God's family shows up everywhere, in towns and cities around the world. They cluster together in groups and, regardless of their size, God's intention is that they reflect His eternal purposes. God's purposes for the church are similar to those of the human family: It's where people learn to grow up and show off the glory of God! For our purposes, it is where women can learn to become fully developed Christ followers.

LESSONS FROM THE FAMILY

The purpose of this book is to convince you that as a woman, *you are essential to your local church's spiritual health*. Since the local church is the supernatural womb where baby Christ followers are nurtured, you are a spiritual mother. The local church is the nursery in which Christian toddlers are trained and the home where God's children of all ages are disciplined to maturity. You need to be part of that process. Since at least half the members in any local church are women, as Christian women of this generation, it is essential for you to understand your part in God's purposes for His family. When women use their gifts to minister to women, the church grows in spiritual health; women achieve their God-given potential and His purposes.

What Women Value in God's Family

When our children were young, our family traveled across the United States and Canada to family camps where my husband would speak and we would be together as a family. One of our favorite pastimes on the way was pulling out memories from the past. It was a way we could walk down memory lane, discussing names, events, treasures, favorite times, or teachers whose lives influenced us for good. We appreciated honoring people who helped us understand what it meant to be grown up.

Each woman I have ever met has stories, memories from the past of women whom God has used to influence her for good. As women tell me what these women have done to help them achieve their God-given potential, I encourage them to write a note of thanks for what the person means to them. If you were to write such a list, it might include a mother, an aunt, or a teacher. You may remember someone who was in your life for a single moment or has been with you for a lifetime.

In a thousand responses, some of the things women value about these influencers are interesting to me. Because *women want to be understood*, they said they valued those who listened to them. They said they valued those who *knew and used their name* as well as those who *missed them when they were gone* and kept in touch with them. But most of all, the kind of woman valued most was the one who *modeled an authentic relationship with God*.

The challenge of growing in Christ so we influence other women for good in the churches in which we meet is no less important now than it was when women first followed Jesus and served in the early church. The

questions still need to be asked: How can the church release the spiritual potential intrinsic in her women? What kind of woman is God looking for, and how can she influence others for good? What steps does the church take when it seeks to urge women to use their gifts for the good of the Christian family and the glory of God? What kind of woman does the church need in this generation? Why should women minister to women in the context of the local church?

Unless these questions are answered on the basis of the eternal written Word of God, the spiritual health of the local church is in jeopardy. The promise of a new generation of godly women is at stake.

What God Values in His Church

God values women who are committed to becoming fully developed Christ followers. To be devoted to Christ is the beginning. To become a fully developed Christ follower is to know what God values in His church, why He values it, and how He loves to see it portrayed before a watching world. We discover when we read His Word that He praises women like Mary, the young teen who submitted to His will without knowing everything there is to know. We see Him welcome a woman like the Samaritan, whom the disciples would have ignored had *they* wanted a drink. We see Him ministered to by wealthy women of Herod's court as they traverse Palestine with Him and His disciples. We hear His delight with women like Mary of Bethany, who sits quietly at His side listening to His heart and are so glad He protects her from the anger of Judas and the rest when, at the right time, she unselfishly pours out her treasure on Him. He values single women who are passionate for His glory. He respects married women who uphold the honor of marriage and mothering. And after His return to heaven, His apostles continued His high regard for women in the early church. We know He is pleased when women like John Mark's mother open their homes to the church family. We read of women using all kinds of gifts, whether a businesswoman like Lydia, a theological thinker like Priscilla, or a domestic woman like Phoebe.

Because women are behind the scenes at every turn in the growth of the New Testament church, we come to a single conclusion: What God values, we must value. We must not value one woman over another because she is our kind or fits in with a particular group the way we think important. We must value every woman who belongs to the Savior, recognizing that God is pleased when she fulfills His purpose in the church.

EMBRACING THE PLAN

To ignore His plan for our lives is to refuse His blessing upon us. As we reexamine the Scriptures, we will discover that God is less concerned about tradition for its own sake than we are, unless the tradition constitutes a command. He is more concerned that women in God's family experience personal transformation. He is also not as impressed with the new programs or novel implementations as we are. He is more concerned that *we know Him through His Word so we may obey His will*. His words to Martha remain the same to us: Stop worrying about how many things you need to cook or serve. Mary is listening to Me, and she has chosen the better part (Luke 10:38–42).

DETERMINING FACTORS FOR WOMEN'S MINISTRIES

Where you live, your age as a Christ follower, the stage of your life, the size of your church, or the nature of your spiritual gift is not the determining factor for the Christian life or women's ministries. The determining factor is this: the present health of your spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Are you more committed to doing what you have always done than you are to spiritually growing up? Are you more focused on doing Christian events than living a corporate or personal godly lifestyle? Are you living with joy in the local church family in which God has put you? How concerned are you about the spiritual health of your brothers and sisters in Christ who meet with you weekly in Christian community? If the spiritual health of the women in your church depended on your commitment, how healthy would your church be? These are the questions to ask if you would become a woman who ministers to the members of the body as God intends you to do: for the good of the whole family and the glory of God.

STARTING OUT

Most of us do not know what we are doing when we begin to serve the Lord Jesus except that we are seeking to obey Him. We may have had a friend or family member teach us some basic life principles, but very few of us ever start with everything in place. We know we love Him. We know we want to be known as His disciples. But for the most part, just as in our human childhood, we learn as we go. We learn by doing, by serving,

by following. So it is only right to ask the questions: When and where do we begin in order to see a ministry to women thrive and grow? At the outset of this book, let me suggest some things I have had to learn as a reluctant servant.

Begin Where You Are

You have been placed in your family and a specific local church by the providential working of God. Whether you are part of an organized women's ministry in your local church or are simply committed to ministering to women in your church, you are called to be a spiritual leader. A leader is simply someone who influences another person for good. With leadership or influence comes the ability to effect change in others. Influencing others for their spiritual good may include the ability to cast a vision for what women can do. Influence is able to convince others of the value of the vision. It is the ability to motivate a team to achieve the purpose of the vision so they finally embrace the vision themselves. It is doing what Moses did when God called him. Though he was reluctant, God taught him to begin where he was. He had to take him from the desert to Egypt, but when Moses got there and God convinced him He would go with him, he was all there. Oh, there was a fairly heated discussion about who would be the leader, but once Moses realized *who* had called him, he stopped his arguing and won this epitaph from the writer to the Hebrews: "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house" (Hebrews 3:5).

Go with the Goers and Prayers

Do not wait for the big plan. Do not strategize or scheme for something you can't possibly do. Begin where you are with the women God has placed in your life. Begin by praying with another one or two women who really believe God answers prayer and blesses obedience. As you read God's Word, pray together for Him to lead you.

Many years ago, I learned this firsthand in Calgary when the churches in our city hosted a Billy Graham crusade. Our third child had just begun kindergarten. I found I had a few hours of discretionary time besides the time given to my Bible study group. So I became the prayer chairman for the crusade. I planned a prayer rally. Hundreds of women came to the rally. I announced at the rally our plans for prayer groups around the city, and many women were motivated to pray. One hundred invitations went out

asking women to join me at my home for prayer. I was a little nervous wondering what would happen were everyone to come to our home.

I didn't need to worry! When the day came for the prayer time, three ladies came to my house. I was annoyed. "If I can't get women to pray for Billy Graham, who in the world would they pray for?"

I carried my irritation with me to the meeting Charlie Riggs led for the follow-up volunteers at the Graham crusades. I will never forget his challenging words after I whined about my disappointment. He told me, "Elizabeth, go with the goers." He defined the goers. "The women who got in the car and came to your house to pray are the goers!" Then he quoted James 5:16b, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." We prayed for many weeks together and saw God answer our prayers.

Similar scenes have been true for me over the years in women's ministries. A few show up to study God's Word or pray or serve. They are the "goers." They are those who count on God's faithfulness. They will be among those who are faithful to God in small things when no one but God is looking. Those who are faithful in the small things can be trusted with greater things. Always go with the goers, the pray-ers.

Begin with a Plan

Repeatedly throughout Scripture, God is said to work according to eternal purposes (Ephesians 3:10–11). He does not act without a plan. Nor should we! The Lord Jesus did His earthly work based on a team of followers, sometimes three, other times twelve, sometimes as many as seventy-two. For a thriving women's ministry to work, plans need to be made on two levels: the personal level and the partnership level.

As a woman of influence—and every woman who calls herself a Christ follower influences someone—you will never get beyond the need to have a personal plan for godliness. You will need to do the following well.

- Take care of your own soul first. (Psalm 1:1–3; Proverbs 4:23; 1 Timothy 6:20)
- Think biblically about influence and leadership: It is a call to servanthood. The Lord's approval is the primary goal. (2 Timothy 4:6–7)
- Know why you are doing what you are doing. Purposes are bigger than plans, and God's purposes are the grandest of all! (Proverbs 16:3–4; Romans 12:1–2)

- Resolve to be congruent where your inside thoughts and attitudes match your behaviors and choices. (1 Thessalonians 2:5–12)
- Choose to be proactive rather than reactive, knowing that at the end of the day you will give an account not to your mother, your father, your husband, or a good friend. You will give an account to the Lord for the resources He has put in your hand. (1 Thessalonians 2:4; 1 Corinthians 3:10–15)

Partner with Others

When you partner with others to grow a thriving women's ministry, there may be a tendency to think that if positions get filled, then the job will get done. A careful look at leadership or influence confirms that thriving women's ministries require a team of women who commit to develop people over positions, who share a partnership rather than programs, and who view women's ministry as a lifestyle rather than an event. They apply principles from God's Word to present needs. They value the process of coming alongside one another as a team, working from the roots up instead of the top down. Regardless of the size of your church or the stage of your women's ministries, you will need to partner with others in a plan.

The first step is always to seek the Lord together. Look for women whose heart He has prepared and begin to pray—together. Pray the prayers of Scripture, pray without ceasing, pray at all times, pray on your own, and set time aside to pray together. It is in the context of prayer and the Word that we come to know God's heart and understand His ways. He wants to be involved in your planning.

People are the essential asset in building a team. Get to know the women in your local church who possess personal godly character and are already involved in other women's lives in a godly manner. You are not looking for warm bodies to fill a space. You are seeking others who share your love for God, His will, and His ways and who care for women. Pray with these people asking God to lead you where He is already working.

The key to being a team player requires the ability to work with women different from yourself. To build a team you will need three kinds of people:

A visionary—a woman who *sees where you need to go*

A shepherd—a woman who *takes care of you as you go*

An administrator—a woman who *gets you where you need to go*

Expect Prepared People

Willing people are not enough. Look for those whom God has prepared in different ways through previous life experiences. Look for those who model faithful service in the church. The wise woman finds others prepared by God who can do things she could never do so she can do what God wants her to do. Influencers are good leaders whom God has prepared because they have first been good followers.

Because you have prayed for God to lead you to prepared individuals, you will be amazed how God goes ahead in so many ways. When you ask women to join in serving who are prepared by God, they do not give you the answer, "Let me pray about it for a month!" That is too long to wait if God has already been working in a person's heart. Sometimes a person might say, "Let me pray about it" when she really means, "I don't want to." Press for the reason she can't give you an answer today, and set a date by which you will get an answer from her. For extra study in two kinds of responses to God's call, check out the story of Moses (see Exodus 3 and 4:13–17) and the story of Mary (Luke 1:26–38).

God's Word is clear about His solution to anxiety and worry. It is prayer. The result of Spirit-directed prayer is peace. Any prayerful strategy that God blesses comes with a sense of peace as the Lord assures you that the decisions and directions are from Him. The promise that the Holy Spirit intercedes even when we don't know what to say should give us the quiet assurance of divine peace.

WOMEN WHO WEAR THE FRAGRANCE OF CHRIST

One of the influencers in my life is a New Zealander named J. Oswald Sanders. I have listened to Mr. Sanders by tape on the topic of discipleship hundreds of times. His books on leadership and discipleship are among the best I have read. A favorite story of mine that Sanders tells is about an experiment he did for a Bible college class in Auckland. To teach them the importance of Christian influence on other people's lives, he asked a young woman from another class to come and walk through the class saying nothing. After she had gone, Sanders asked his class if they had noticed anything. "Anything at all?"

A few said they noticed a woman had walked through the room. Some commented on the length of her hair, the color of her dress. Another noted she had said nothing; she just came and then she was gone.

“Anything else?” Sanders pressed the class for another answer.

They could not think of anything unusual until finally one of the young students said, “Her fragrance. Yes, I noticed she was wearing a beautiful fragrance, a lovely perfume.”

“That’s it! That’s influence. The fragrance of your life speaks even when you say nothing.”

Mr. Sanders turned the class to Paul’s discussion of the new covenant where he says, “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved” (2 Corinthians 2:14–15).

The secret to releasing your potential in the local church begins with you. The way to grow a thriving women’s ministry has everything to do with the fragrance you choose to wear. Every woman who becomes a godly influencer among women wears the fragrance of Christ. It comes as a result of spending time with Him. Like Mary of Bethany after she poured out her treasured nard on the Savior (John 12:1–8), the fragrance of His character is all over us and evident to those we meet.

Great abilities do not make you useful to God. Nor do programs you arrange or performances you give because of your gifts. The ministry to women that God blesses depends on women who resolve to bear great likeness to the Savior. Does your church wish to release the spiritual potential among women? Count on God to do for you what you can never do for yourself. Do you want to invest for eternity? See your ministry women as an entrustment from Him, not an intrusion. Do you want a thriving ministry in your local church among women? Make your walk with God the priority relationship in your life, and God, whose eyes range throughout the earth, will strengthen your heart as it is fully committed to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9a). Count on Him for today, and He will establish your tomorrows.

THINK IT OVER

1. Have you been reluctant to serve women in the context of your local church? Why?
2. What in your life does God use as a means for you to serve women in your local church?
3. Who in your church shares a similar concern for women's ministries?
4. If you could change one thing about the ministry to women in your church, what would it be? Why?
5. What one solution would you bring to help grow a thriving women's ministry in your local church?
6. With whom do you pray on a regular basis for women or the women's ministry in your church? What do you pray? How has God answered those prayers?

THINK IT THROUGH

Take some time and think about the way the following women served in the local church.

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| 1. Tabitha/Dorcas | Acts 9:36–43 |
| 2. Mary, John's mother | Acts 12:5–19 |
| 3. Lydia | Acts 16:13–15, 40 |
| 4. Priscilla | Acts 18:18, 24–26; Romans 16:3–5 |
| 5. Other women | Romans 16:6, 12 |