

MINISTERING

GOD'S GRACE

C A R I N G

F O R

W I D O W S



BRIAN CROFT
& AUSTIN WALKER

FOREWORD BY MIKE MCKINLEY

“Let’s face it, widows are easy to overlook in our culture today and, unfortunately, that is increasingly true due to the decline of the nuclear family in the West. But the Bible is clear—taking care of widows is not optional, it is a biblical imperative. Croft and Walker have done a masterful job of laying the biblical foundation for caring for widows and then providing clear, specific, and practical guidelines on how to do that in your church. This is an important book for all pastors and lay leaders or any believer committed to reaching out to widows in their church and community.”

Bob Russell, Former Senior Pastor, Southeast Christian Church,
Louisville, Kentucky

“This book is a wonderful, in-depth guide explaining an important aspect of what Scripture calls ‘true religion,’ that is, to visit and care for widows in their distress. Both theological and practical, this is one of the best resources on the topic and is a must read for churches not only seeking to be compassionate, but to faithfully practice biblical justice.”

Nathan Ivey, Pastor of Mercy, Sojourn Community Church

“Every Sunday as I look at my congregation, I am keenly aware of the women (and men) who have lost their beloved spouses in recent years. They are lonely. They are mourning still. They may even feel awkward among God’s family. I am so thankful for this book, which reminds pastors and churches that we have a biblical mandate to love these dear ones, ministering the Word, by the Spirit, so that widows are cared for temporarily in light of eternity.”

Jay S. Thomas, Lead Pastor, Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill,
North Carolina

“This is a gem of a book, full of helpful advice when it comes to pastoring, loving, and caring for widows in our congregations. I personally found it challenging, and I can see it being a helpful tool in teaching church members about their responsibilities to the widows in our midst.”

Mez McConnell, Senior Pastor, Niddrie Community Church,
Edinburgh, Scotland; Founder, 20schemes

“While reading this book, I went ‘Ouch!’ more than once because it points out ways in which we have been negligent in looking after the widows in our church. This is certainly one area in which we need reformation. I trust that my ‘Ouch!’ will be turned into action so that God may smile at our church as he sees the way we will begin to look after widows in distress in our midst. All of us who are church elders and deacons need to get back to this religion that is pure and undefiled before God!”

Conrad Mbewe, Senior Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church in
Zambia, Africa

“We see them in the congregation; they rarely sit together; they occupy their customary place; and they have many friends. They are examples in femininity, humility, usefulness, and faith in a heavenly Father. They are the widows, but shudder at being labeled as such. They look to their preachers for the gospel message to exalt Jesus Christ. They look to their pastors for total respect and graciousness. They look to their fellow members for holy love and genuine friendship. They look to be remembered within the nuances of the body of Christ. This is what Croft and Walker enable us to do, to become better pilgrims on our way to the blessed gathering of all the elect, to be unashamed at the great reunion. ‘Well done for helping widows in their affliction.’ We need such help in this area, and then we find that increased thoughtfulness in one dimension encourages consecrated words and feelings in very different relationships within the holy body.”

Geoff Thomas, Pastor, Alfred Place Baptist Church, Wales

CARING FOR WIDOWS

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AUSTIN WALKER

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 **CROSSWAY**
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Caring for Widows

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Foreword

A year ago, I did not think I needed this book. Our church was mostly comprised of young, healthy people; the few elderly women in our midst were active and low maintenance. But when our congregation merged with another local church whose most prominent members were widows, I realized how much I did not know about caring for these elderly saints. There is probably no group in the church that I naturally relate to less than widows. After all, I have been young, I have been single, I have been married, and I have had children. But I've never been a woman, I've never been elderly and in poor health, and I've never lost a spouse. I know that the Lord calls me as a pastor to lead our church to care for the widows in our midst, but what could I possibly know about caring for people whose daily experience is so very different from my own? For this reason, I am very grateful that Austin Walker and Brian Croft have written this book. They have both faithfully practiced what they preach when it comes

to caring for widows, and their experience shines through on every page.

The first part, a careful and clear presentation of the biblical mandate for widow care, landed like a punch between my eyes. It convicted me that I am guilty of an ungodly tendency toward indifference to the needs of these elderly saints. It's not that I don't care, but as a pastor I am often preoccupied with a crowded schedule of appointments and study obligations. I don't often go looking for people who might be suffering quietly. I don't often think about ways our church could creatively care for the widows in our midst. But if our God declares himself to be the protector of the widow and if he was indignant when Israel failed to care for its widows, then how can his church claim to represent him if we do not care for the widows in our midst? I was left with the clear impression that I need to do so.

If the first part of the book was helpfully disquieting, the second half of the book laid out an encouraging path forward to change. Written with a voice of wisdom and pastoral sensitivity, it answers almost every practical question you could have. Do you want advice on the differences you'll experience visiting widows in nursing homes as opposed to the hospital? You'll find practical advice in these pages. Do you want a suggestion about what to write in a note you leave at the hospital if you arrive and the widow you are visiting is unavailable? You'll find it in these pages. Like every volume in the Practical Shepherd-

ing ministry, this book is a veritable field guide to faithful pastoring.

The widows in my congregation owe a debt of gratitude to the authors of this book. They will doubtless receive better care as a result of their pastor reading it.

So if you are involved in church leadership in any capacity, you should stop reading this foreword and start reading the book itself. The widows in your church will thank you!

Mike McKinley
Sterling Park Baptist Church
Sterling, Virginia

Introduction

There are many exciting and encouraging evidences of late that Jesus Christ is at work through his Spirit in his church. There is a recovery of biblical preaching. Churches are making membership more meaningful, which has led to the recovery of church discipline in many congregations. The gospel is being more clearly preached, and this has led not just to conversions but intentional discipleship of those new converts in local churches. No one can deny the explosion of fruitful mercy ministries in many churches that has led to a more proactive effort to care for the poor, adopt orphans, and seek to remedy the homeless, hurting, and oppressed. Truly the Lord continues to build his church, and these are but a few of the many signs of this unstoppable work.

There are, however, chinks in the armor of these encouraging recoveries. The recovery of biblical preaching in some churches is the result of a pragmatic approach to the church that might fade when the next fad arrives. Faithful gospel preaching in some circles appears to be a reaction

to the crushing effects of legalism in the church and quite possibly represents a swing that might squeeze out any rigorous pursuit of holiness in the next generation. This fresh emergence of intentional mercy ministry in the church has led, on the one hand, to a greater extent of care by God's people to orphans, the poor, and the oppressed. On the other hand, widows do not always receive the care that God expects his people to provide.

For some reason, a large portion of the evangelical church has missed the biblical warrant to care for widows, while still engaging in care for the fatherless and the poor. Even those who see widows as being among those whom God particularly calls his people to protect, provide for, and nurture still sometimes fail to make it a priority. In part, this neglect could stem from an inability to know how best to care for a widow. As a result, widows still remain largely overlooked and forgotten in the church. The aim of this book is to accomplish two goals: (1) to inform the reader of the biblical imperatives upon God's people for this task, and then (2) give practical helps on how pastors and church leaders can particularly minister to widows. But before going any further, an answer to the most obvious question about this issue is necessary—who is a widow?

Compassion in a Fallen World

A widow is a married woman whose husband has died and who remains unmarried. In the Bible, mourning,

weeping, and a sense of desolation, disillusionment, bitterness, loneliness, and helplessness were often experienced by a widow following the death of her spouse. The loss of a husband was often a social and economic tragedy. Once the main source of her financial support was lost, the widow often fell into debt and poverty. Becoming a widow made her vulnerable. In the Bible, she was frequently placed alongside similar people in need such as the stranger (the landless immigrant) and the fatherless (e.g., Ex. 22:21–22; Deut. 24:17–21). Her plight could be aggravated further if she had no able-bodied children to help her work the land of her former husband. Because of all these changed circumstances, widows were often marginalized. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that in ancient Israel they were regarded as being in need of special protection.

We live in a fallen world where, sadly, death destroys earthly friendships and relationships. Few circumstances in life are more devastating than the death of a husband. Of course, a husband also experiences grief and feels acutely that sense of desolation arising from the loss of his best friend and closest companion—his wife. Thus we find, for example, that Abraham mourned and wept for his Sarah (Gen. 23:2). The Bible has comparatively little to say about living as a widower, however, and much more to say about being a widow. One reason for this distinction is the fact that a widower is not in the same vulnerable position as a widow.

When the Lord God first made this world, he made Adam and then formed Eve from the body of Adam. They became husband and wife, and as long as they continued in obedience to God, death did not threaten to separate them. Once they had sinned against God, however, death entered the created world. Adam was to live for 930 years (Gen. 5:5). Was Eve widowed? The Scriptures remain silent. Since the fall, however, widowhood has become a permanent reality in this world.

The Hebrew word translated “widow” is *almana*, and it occurs over fifty times in the Old Testament. The Greek word for widow is *chera*, which is used twenty-six times in the New Testament. It is vocabulary that belongs to this fallen world. In biblical times the terms for “widow” sometimes acquired the connotation of a person living in extreme poverty. While this was not always the case, widows were nevertheless prime targets for exploitation. It was because of this vulnerable state that God himself took steps to secure the protection of widows, commanding his people to show compassion and sensitivity toward them in their need.

Are widows as vulnerable today as they were in former days? Does the twenty-first-century church have any particular responsibilities toward widows, or does the passing of time and the inevitable changes in culture mean that such considerations are no longer relevant? The lot of widows in the Western world may have improved in many ways, but ongoing needs remain despite those improvements. Mean-

while, the plight of widows in other parts of the world continues with widows invariably exposed to suffering from neglect, abuse, and various forms of exploitation.

Every widow experiences grief and invariably feels overwhelmed by sorrow. The transition from being a wife to living as a widow (even if remarriage eventually takes place) is fraught with all kinds of problems. To come to terms with the new situation takes time and is often the occasion when widows most need a patient, listening ear, together with sympathy and wise, sensitive counsel. For example, many widows cry out, “Why me?” and, feeling intense anger and frustration, are ready to accuse God of unkindness. Others suddenly find themselves overwhelmed and swamped with decisions about everyday matters to do with the house or the car, which their husbands usually handled. Still others face the responsibilities of handling the finances with fear and trepidation, and sadly, some have to face the horror of discovering that their spouse did not leave the finances in good order.

Whether the church should cultivate a distinctive ministry to widows is not only to be determined by the sad experiences and trials of widows following the death of their husbands, but also by what God says in his Word. God is described as “a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Ps. 68:5). That one verse alone alerts us to the fact that, as far as God is concerned, widows are the special object of his protection and care. It would seem reasonable to conclude therefore, that if widows are the concern of God in his holy habitation, then it would be a major failing

on the part of the church of Christ—not only her elders, but also her deacons, together with every member of the body of Christ—if they shrugged their shoulders and went on quietly with their own lives, ignoring the needs of widows.

The widow, the orphan, and the poor were covered by laws that protected them in other ancient Near Eastern cultures such as Sumer in Mesopotamia and later in the law code of Hammurabi in the eighteenth century BC. In Egypt, their protection was often the boast of the beneficent king. For example, Rameses III claimed that he had given special attention to securing justice for them.¹ When we look at the biblical texts dealing with the widow, the orphan, and the poor, however, God introduced another element. His concerns for them are embedded in sections of Scripture that deal with the covenant made between God, the sovereign Lord, and his people, Israel, both in the covenant law given at Sinai and at the renewal of the covenant before entering into the land of Canaan.

Religious and social ethics were closely bound together in the ancient world even among the pagan nations. Israel was unique as a nation, and we need to recognize that her social ethic stemmed directly from the Lord of the covenant, her Redeemer. In today's world the danger for the church is that she responds to the needs of the widow only on the basis of broad humanitarian aid. In the secularization of the Western world, religion has become divorced from social concerns and conduct. The Scriptures take us beyond mere humanitarian help, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

Therefore, the purpose of chapters 1–10 (part 1) is to explore the duties of the church toward widows and provide a biblical mandate for churches to develop a specific ministry for widows, especially those within the household of faith. Furthermore, if widows are not to be deprived of the comfort that comes from knowing that their God is the God who really cares for them, then this part will also form the substance of what must be taught to them. The rest of the book, chapters 11–20 (part 2), provides hands-on counsel and practical advice on how to develop a ministry to widows in your congregation. Although this book is written with a ministry to widows specifically in mind, you will find much of what is written here can contribute in other ministries to hurting people. Additionally, these biblical and practical principles can be applied to the care of widowers (men whose wives have died) as well.

Furthermore, the authors are aware that the plight of a widow in many other nations, for example in the African continent and Indian subcontinent, is often far more distressing and severe than in the West. We have not attempted to address these situations in part 2. However, we would underline that the biblical principles outlined in part 1 are universal in their application.

Finally, our prayer is that this slim volume will lead to a more fruitful effort to minister God's grace to all the hurting and neglected people to whom God reveals his tender love and divine care through his redeemed people for his glory.

Part 1

The Biblical Warrant

Austin Walker

Christ's Example and James's Principle

The Lord Jesus Christ serves as the model and example for his church. He took particular note of widows. We may think of the widow in the temple with her two mites (Mark 12:41–44); the widow of Nain, whose one remaining son was restored to life (Luke 17:11–17); and the widow in the parable about persistent prayer (Luke 18:1–8). Sometimes widows were on the receiving end of injustice. It is no surprise, therefore, to hear how Christ exposed the scribes and Pharisees because some of them were exploiting widows (Mark 12:40). Additionally, the words he spoke and the actions he took regarding his own mother while he hung dying on the cross demonstrate to us how like his heavenly Father Jesus really was. He was full of understanding and

compassion and, as a faithful son, acted to ensure Mary's needs were met.

This moving episode is recorded in the latter part of John's Gospel (19:26–27). Despite all of Christ's sufferings and agonies, he remained selfless and occupied himself with the needs of different people. For example, he considered Peter and the disciples who had all scattered like frightened sheep. There was the penitent thief alongside him. In particular, Jesus entered into the sorrows of his mother as he hung on the cross. At this point in her life, she was almost certainly widowed. Why did Jesus give a sacred charge to John to treat Mary as his own mother? It was because there was no husband or other family in a position to care and to provide for her after his death. The Lord Jesus was fulfilling his obligations to his mother with demonstrable filial love and great tenderness of heart, obeying the fifth commandment in the process. John's response was immediate. We read that "from that hour that disciple took her to his own home" (v. 27).

The Lord Jesus did not choose to provide Mary with silver, gold, or any other precious possessions that might have been a means of supporting her now that she was alone. Rather, he ensured she was cared for in a secure home by the man who was recognized as being the disciple closest to Jesus and was perhaps the most loving and tenderhearted of those men.

Here in the Lord Jesus Christ is the priceless example of care for widows that, as we shall see, reflects everything

the Scriptures teach in both the Old and the New Testaments. Can the church of Christ turn a blind eye to such an example?

Compassion for Widows:

A Vital Principle of True Religion

The pattern for the church's conduct is also established by the principle laid down by James: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (1:27). James explains the nature of religion that God accepts as genuine. It is interesting that he does not give us a full picture but instead focuses on two aspects of true piety that demonstrate what it means to "be doers of the word" (1:22). "To visit orphans and widows" is one vital part of that true religion.

This involves far more, however, than dropping in on an occasional friendly social call. The term "visit" in the Greek was used to describe the action of a doctor who, in visiting sick patients, showed care for them and supplied their needs. James intends his readers to understand that these visits should be deliberate, involving regular personal contact and practical involvement with those in need. This principle was given to ensure that appropriate sympathy and relief was ministered to widows and orphans.

The reason for this care is given in the same breath—orphans and widows face trouble that is peculiar to their

situation. Such visits were intended, then, to alleviate their distress—in this case, their difficult, trying circumstances; their grief; and their loneliness. In addition, it meant taking steps to ensure that they did not become the victims of unscrupulous individuals (even family members, in some cases) who would take advantage of their situations and exploit them. As will become more evident in this book, orphans and widows represented two of the most needy groups in the ancient world. The Old Testament Scriptures provide the backdrop and examples to the situations that James only touches on here.

If God himself is the defender of widows (Ps. 68:5) and shows compassion for them as discussed in the introduction, then the church of the Lord Jesus Christ can scarcely turn its back on their troubles. Rather, Christians should reflect their heavenly Father and their Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Such compassion and love ought to be freely, cheerfully, and willingly displayed and know not to expect to be repaid. “Widows who are really widows” (1 Tim. 5:3), according to the Bible’s definition, are almost invariably not in any position to return material favors.

The Price for Neglecting Widows

One of the oldest books in the Old Testament is the book of Job. There we find that Job was accused of wickedness by Eliphaz. By neglecting to relieve widows (22:9) together with other sins, Eliphaz claimed that Job had brought God's judgment down on his own head. Job vigorously denied Eliphaz's explanation for his sufferings, and later on, referring to his alleged treatment of widows, called on God to visit him in judgment if indeed he was guilty of such wickedness (e.g., Job 31:16).

Job was innocent. Although Eliphaz wrongly accused Job, he was right in principle. There *is* a price to be paid for neglecting and abusing widows. If God is the defender of widows, he will not turn a blind eye or deaf ear to their cries.

God's Indignation at the Ill-Treatment of Widows

On several occasions the Old Testament prophets exposed Israel's wickedness because of the ways in which Israel had treated the widow, the orphan, and the poor.² Anyone who ignored the cause of the widow, who oppressed her, who preyed on and exploited her, or who ill-treated her in any manner was flying directly in the face of God and could expect to be confronted with his curse and judgment.

There was a price to be paid for such ill-treatment. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel spoke of the judgment of God that came with the exile. While the ways the widow was treated was not the sole cause of the exile, it was one of the sins highlighted by the Holy One of Israel. The people's failure to uphold the cause of the widow was placed alongside other sins such as shedding innocent blood, following after other gods, practicing immorality, profaning God's Sabbaths, and indulging in bribery. For these and all their sins, Israel was scattered among the nations.

Jeremiah actually warns his contemporaries on the eve of the exile that because they have forsaken God, they will be destroyed, winnowed like grain with a fan, and their widows will be increased (Jer. 15:7–9). It is a telling and sorrowful exclamation in the opening words of Jeremiah's lament over ruined Jerusalem: "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations!" (Lam. 1:1).

God's Warnings Given by Moses

What happened in the days of the prophets was not an unexpected bolt from the blue. The prophets were only bringing to bear God's words spoken much earlier through Moses.³ The Lord God entered into covenant with his people and gave them his laws and commandments. Grafted into the laws were clear instructions about the treatment of the poor—including the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. Anyone who perverted the justice due to any in these vulnerable groups would find a divine curse resting on him. The Lord was jealous in defending the widow and intolerant of any ill-treatment of her. He reminded the people that they had been loved by him when they were strangers in the land of Egypt and that they were to reflect the same love in their care for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in their midst.

The plainest language was used in Exodus 22:21–24:

You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.

Such a warning explains what happened to Israel in the days of the prophets. The Lord declared that not only will he hear their cry and come to their defense, but he will

take vengeance on those who are responsible. Tragically, that is exactly what happened in the captivity and exile of the nation of Israel. Many of the men were killed and their wives and children left desolate as widows and orphans. There was and is a price to be paid by those who neglect or ill-treat those whom God defends.

The Implications for the Church Today

Passages like these, together with the positive commands regarding widows (which we shall consider later in chapter 5), composed the Old Testament teachings that formed the attitude of the dying Savior toward his mother and also of James as he set out the practice of genuine religion in his epistle (1:27). In light of the warnings given by Moses and the prophets, it would be unthinkable for the incarnate Son of God to neglect the care of his widowed mother. James was aware that there is a form of religion that is useless. He would not have hesitated, therefore, to identify with Jeremiah and the other prophets in exposing the hollowness of their contemporaries.

Given these warnings from Moses and the prophets, together with the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and the rule laid down by James, the church of Christ cannot evade the implications which inevitably follow. For elders, deacons, and church members to neglect or ill-treat widows expresses an attitude that is not only the total opposite of the conduct of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

but it invites the chastening hand of God and calls into question the integrity of the church and her identity as the people of God. The neglect of widows is not specifically mentioned by the risen, reigning Son of Man as something he has against any of the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3. However, given the similarity of some of the other sins he holds against the seven churches with the sins mentioned in the Prophets, would it be too much to say that the neglect of widows could provide a reason for him to remove our lampstand from its place? Is there not a price to be paid if we give no heed to what he says about the care of widows?

“RELIGION THAT IS PURE AND UNDEFILED BEFORE GOD, THE FATHER, IS THIS: TO VISIT ORPHANS AND WIDOWS IN THEIR AFFLICTION. . .”

—James 1:27

This important book calls pastors and church leaders to take biblical exhortations to care for widows seriously, offering wise guidance and practical suggestions for ensuring that widows in their congregations receive the support and encouragement they need.

“Croft and Walker have done a masterful job of laying the biblical foundation for caring for widows and then providing clear, specific, and practical guidelines on how to do that in your church.”

BOB RUSSELL, *Former Senior Pastor, Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky*

“I am so thankful for this book, which reminds pastors and churches that we have a biblical mandate to love these dear ones, ministering the Word, by the Spirit, so that widows are cared for temporally in light of eternity.”

JAY S. THOMAS, *Lead Pastor, Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

“Both theological and practical, this is one of the best resources on the topic and is a must read for churches not only seeking to be compassionate, but to faithfully practice biblical justice.”

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MEZ MCCONNELL, *Senior Pastor, Niddrie Community Church, Edinburgh, Scotland; Founder, 20schemes*

BRIAN CROFT is senior pastor of Auburndale Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and the founder of Practical Shepherding. He is married to Cara and they have four children.

AUSTIN WALKER is a pastor at Maidenbower Baptist Church in Crawley, England. He and his wife, Mai, have four married children and ten grandchildren.

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