

Transcript for the podcast “Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women.”

Hosts: Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher

Episode 3— Guest: Brian Croft

Date Aired: February 18, 2020

Eric Schumacher 00:01

Welcome to Worthy, a Christian podcast that celebrates the value of women. Each week, we bring you conversations with women and men on the value of women in the church, home and society. We won't always agree on everything, but we do agree that God is glorious, the Bible is true, women are valuable, and respectful conversation on this topic is essential in our day. Our guest on the program today is Brian Croft. I am Eric Schumacher, and this is my co-host,

Elyse Fitzpatrick 00:48

Elyse Fitzpatrick.

Eric Schumacher 00:49

Brian is the husband of Kara and the father of four children. He's the senior pastor at Auburndale Baptist Church in Louisville. He's the founder of Practical Shepherding, a senior fellow at the Mathena Center for Church Revitalization, and an adjunct professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, as well as being an author who has written or contributed to over 25 books. Brian, welcome to the podcast.

Brian Croft 01:16

It's good to be with you all.

Eric Schumacher 01:18

Yeah, Brian, I've known you and known of you for I don't know how many years it's been now, at least over a decade, I think.

Brian Croft 01:27

Yeah, it's I was thinking that about 10 years, probably.

Eric Schumacher 01:30

Probably about 10 years. And I remember when Practical Shepherding was in its infancy, and it's sort of exploded. And not overnight. But a lot of hard work. I know you put into that, and a lot of good fruit coming out of it, I think. Do you want to tell us just a little bit about it?

Brian Croft 01:51

Yeah, so Practical Shepherding started about 10 years ago. So it came out of, really out of the work I was doing in my local church as a pastor, and had a heart to raise up young men for pastoral ministry. And as the Lord started sending some young guys our way, I just felt called to train them in pastoral ministry in ways that I knew the seminary wasn't. And so taking them with me to go visit widows and hospital visitation and all that, just realizing that's the best way to train guys. And over a few years of that, I started writing about it, and that's kind of where the books came from. And so Practical

Shepherding really came out of a mentoring internship program we had at our church to just raise men up for pastoral ministry, and then it just eventually evolved into ministry that, you know, not just resources, but trying to care for pastors and care for their souls and dealing with a lot of different situations, tough situations with pastors. So that's really what it's evolved to.

Eric Schumacher 02:53

Yeah, a lot of good coming out of that. And I really appreciate your perspective on practical aspects of ministry and caring for pastors. We use your books here at our church, when we do mentoring, you know, potential elders, apprentices, that sort of thing. And I don't really know of many other works out there, like what you're putting out. And for our listeners, Brian's produced a lot of little books, just on how to do a hospital visitation, how to do a funeral, how to do these little things that bring wisdom, just from practical experience. With things like, have a breath mint, you know, before you go do your hospital visitation, or whatever. But really good stuff from practical to making sure the gospel is centered in those things. And then even your social media presence. I really appreciate helpful things you put out for pastors. Every Saturday, I see you asking for prayer for a pastor, because he might be dealing with this on Saturday. And so a great blessing there. As we think about the practical aspects of pastoral ministry, I've noticed Practical Shepherding has a couple of women on staff dedicated to women's ministry. What are some practical lessons you've learned about being a pastor to women and having women as your partners in ministry?

Brian Croft 04:26

Yes, so I think the women on staff at Practical Shepherding is just us trying to fill the need of realizing, number one, that we needed more women's just voices speaking into the ministry, and helping us understand some things. Something that for a lot of years, I did not do well. I can... I wouldn't say that it was intentional, I just saw it. I saw that as less valuable than a man's voice, but simply because I'm dealing with pastoral ministry, and I'm a complementarian, I believe that the pastoral office is reserved for men. So a lot of the focus was on men and I, I missed how much that women's voices are still incredibly valuable in those kinds of, even in speaking into those kinds of matters, number one. Number two, we're trying to care for a lot of pastors' wives just as much as the pastor. And we realized we had significant deficiency in meeting women who were pastors' wives, who understand what it means to be a pastor's wife, and women who are doing women's ministry. You know, I know, what a wonderful insight, right? I mean, so that women, pastors' wives would be able to speak into the lives of other pastors' wives better than men. And so, you know, we eventually caught on and realized, yeah, we got some gaps here. So we, my wife, who's a pastor's wife, and has been doing a lot of this kind of just helping with caring for pastors' wives through the years in a very informal way, helped launch the ministry and we were able to pull in a couple other ladies. We added a woman to our board of directors Practical Shepherding, which has been really helpful to have a lady's voice on a board full of men and a lot of them are pastors. So I think we just finally realized that this was a deficiency in our ministry, just to have voices that weren't present there. And they have been shown to be very helpful.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 06:20

Why do you suppose it is that we generally don't think in those terms of, you know, women's voices, a woman being on a board, a women's voice being necessary in ministry? Where do you suppose that originates? In our thinking? Or?

Brian Croft 06:37

That's a great question. I tell you I will answer, I think in two ways. Number one is I think there is an extreme side of the complementarian movement, where women are just devalued, in general. I think a lot of those men wouldn't say that, I think they don't even think they think that. But, I do believe that is a manifestation of it. And, I think honestly, it comes from a lot of, I think it comes from men who have not seen, just have not experienced, for whatever reason, women with a strong voice, who speaks up and says things and contributes, in a way because they, a lot of women in these in these pastoral male circles aren't invited and welcomed into speak into it. So I have found a lot of times it takes a strong woman to speak up, and then go, "Hmm, that was really helpful." And they start to realize that there's more women who can speak into these things, even though they may not be pastors and in these complementarian environments. So I think part of it is that. The other part is one that I can personally relate to, and that is that I, I think I deceive myself. I can relate to some degree to the first example I gave. And I would have told you, I valued the voice of women, but I did not make good effort to try to hear the voices of women on some of these matters. And so what I found, which is kind of second thing I was going to mention, is that in training a bunch of young men for pastoral ministry, I believe the first decade and a half of my ministry- first decade is at the church have been there about 16 years- as I was training these men for ministry, it wasn't that I was trying to suppress women, or their abilities to be able to lead and speak and have a voice in our church, I was just pretty consumed with trying to train the men. And so I think that's how, at least that's how it happened for me. And when I finally had some strong women who are very, you know, very valuable to our church, have a lot of wisdom and a lot of situations, my wife being one of the main ones that has continued to just speak up and press me on some of these things in a good way, I finally started to see that: "You know, I thought I was for women in our church, more than I think I am." And I say about three or four years ago is where God really started stirring my heart. My convictions, you know, biblically didn't change but I really started to see how deceived I was that I really wasn't helping women thrive in our church like I feel like I need to be able to as a pastor. So for me, it was pretty subtle, and, kind of passive, but I definitely see that as a way that wasn't helping women thrive.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 09:28

So as you have talked this way- or have you talked this way- around the guys, the younger guys that you're trying to train, how receptive are they, and also, as you've talked to older, you know, more seasoned men, how receptive are they to the kinds of things you're talking about?

Brian Croft 09:49

When I talk to older men, who seem to have had this, a strong conviction along these lines, I find, they don't see, still, it's almost like it's a blind spot. Because I feel like I had the blind spot for a long time. And hopefully I'm beginning to see it. But you know, that's the tricky thing about blind spots, right? But I would call it a blind spot, I think these men are convinced they love women, they value them equally to men, and that their voices matter just as much as men. And yet, we functionally don't do that, we don't function in that way, when we practically flesh this out. Theoretically, we would acknowledge that- I can personally relate to that, I believe that I, I have been one of those men in the past. So I think older men have a harder time when you press them, because they, I don't know, they feel like they're not doing what [inaudible.] The younger men I'm finding are more receptive, just because they're teachable, and

willing to learn. And, of course, you know, if I have a good relationship, and they respect me, and my opinion, you know, it just gives me an opportunity to speak into these things and challenge them. A lot of them are young and married, and trying to figure out how to be a good husband and a faithful husband and in their marriage thrive. So it's like the younger men understand, "okay, I'm starting to see I didn't know nearly what I thought." And it creates this kind of teachable environment with younger men, I find that it's a bit harder with the older seasoned men.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 11:22

You know, too, I wonder, and I would like you to speak to this. You know, I wonder if the younger men- because I've seen that exact same thing- I wonder if the younger men because they have grown up during a time in a context where there are a lot of women with prominent positions and strong voices, and they're sort of more used to it, maybe than the older guys are?

Brian Croft 11:53

Yeah, I think you're exactly right. I think that's definitely part of it. And actually a big part of it. I mean, you don't want to make gross generalizations. But if you think of, even the boomer generation and older, you know, kind of the typical American family life was, I mean, women didn't have much of a voice, in a lot of ways. And I think that's part of it. When you have women that were used to not feeling like their voice was welcomed, and you have men who didn't welcome it, and it was accepted in the culture, it was accepted that way in the church, that, you know, I think that's a lot of what's carried over into this. So for older men, to begin to see some of these things that have swung too far to the extreme, in my opinion, in some different ways, that there's got to be some self-awareness, there's got to be a gut check on their part. Otherwise, they're gonna feel like they have- "I value women, because you know, I want to protect them." "I value women, because I provide for them." Like, that's what that culture understood, and they don't understand the idea of what does it mean to actually hear a woman's voice [inaudible] speaks up?

Eric Schumacher 13:08

Yeah. Brian, you mentioned a couple times, you're having some strong women with strong voices, come to express concerns, perhaps, about their involvement or how they're shepherded and that sort of thing. And I know, I have had a very similar story to what you've described there, and where you think your theology... on paper, you value women, but you start to realize in your practice, you're not. And for me, it's taken some very strong, bold women to come to me and ask hard questions, make hard statements. And sometimes that's even, "here's how women are feeling." Like they have women come to them. And they know kind of what's going on with the women in the church, what questions are being asked, and it can, it's very humbling to hear, and it can sometimes feel very threatening. So, these conversations are happening, and now you're coming with this. And I think it's easy for us as pastors to throw up the defenses, to start making accusations about gossip and divisiveness. What practical advice would you have for a pastor, when a woman comes to him and says, "Hey, here's the concerns I have, and here's the conversations that are happening." What should he do?

Brian Croft 14:33

Well, I can certainly relate to feeling, I mean, threatened is a good word. You know, I think that that's how I felt for years. And I didn't receive well, a lot. I need to acknowledge that I didn't receive well some

of these women that came to me initially over the course of a few years in my church. I mean, bless my wife's heart, man. She has tried our entire marriage to speak up in our marriage, and speak up into these things. And, you know, and sadly, it's just in the last few years, I think I really have started to finally listen. So I'm thinking of a wife that's continued to speak up. And I know that's been really hard for her. And this has been a hard journey for her. She's watched me very, very slowly try to realize, you know, these blind spots. So I would point back again, if a man is receiving, you know, some pushback, some hard things from women in the church: Number one is to be self-aware. If you're feeling fear, and feeling threatened, and to try to figure out what is that going on. Because a lot of times what will happen if a man feels fear or threatened, or insecure, or whatever it is, that's what makes us just kind of shut it down. Like, "I don't wanna have this conversation." And we don't know what's going on in our soul with that interaction. And so we don't ever face what really gets stirred up in that moment. So that'd be the first thing, like be aware of what's happening to you, when a woman who's potentially coming in a loving, respectful way to say, "hey, why is it this way?" I actually had two young single ladies in our church, independent strong gals. And they just came in and said, "so why can't I read scripture in service?" "I'm not exactly sure how to answer that, I'll have to get back with you." And, you know, I remember the first time I got asked that I just totally talked around them, so I should have just stopped them and said, "you know, what? You have blindsided me, I sadly, have not thought through this as well as I should have. And let me get back to you." And instead, I didn't handle it that well, initially. But eventually, I started having conversations with these ladies. And they just helped me understand, okay, so if there's biblical grounds for us to function the way we do, I can accept that, just help me know what it is. And it sent me into this searching for several years to try to figure out okay, as you said, Eric, I'm starting to see blind spots in our where our church is not functioning, like I think it is in practice, according to what I say we believe.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 17:20

So I would like to just hear then, if you if you want to go here, you know, what is it in your church, you affirm the ordination of worthy men, but what is it that you would allow women to do in your congregation? And I'm assuming, you know, we're talking about what the elders have decided and all of that, but to my way of thinking, there's so, so much room, if you even hold to male ordination. There's so much room for women to be involved. So how would that look in your congregation, Brian?

Brian Croft 17:58

That's a great question. I'm glad you asked. This is what I have been trying to wrestle through and really put into practice in our church in the last few years. I will say historically, what I have allowed, and tried to set women up to flourish in our churches. We've had women on staff almost the entire time I've been at our church.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 18:18

So what did you call them?

Brian Croft 18:21

So it depends on the role. So we had, initially we've had, you know, ladies who play roles, organizing ministries and events, you know, bookkeeping, financial stuff, treasurer stuff, all those kinds of things. But about three years ago, we brought on a lady who, who heads up our music ministry. And that was a

pretty big thing in our church. And, it challenged a few people. We tried to ease into this, where she was leading a lot of, you know, rehearsals and organizing things, but it was a combination of her and maybe one of the pastors helping lead corporate worship and things. But we've moved now to where she's been a part of a lot of those kinds of things. We brought on a lady to lead our women's ministry, at our church, and she sits in part of our elders meetings, to be, just to allow us to be able to hear from her and let her tell us what we can do to help serve her. And so she's in a portion of that. And then obviously, she leaves at the point where, you know, we're going to talk about things that just the elders need to be in there for. But, she has portion of those meetings, planning and part of thinking through some of those things. And again, it brings a woman's voice into certain things into our elders meeting, which has been really helpful for us. So the other thing, this last year, we spent three months, I went through a teaching in members' meetings, over this issue and realized in my entire 16 years of pastoring this church that I had not taught publicly on the issue of complementarianism/egalitarianism, what is it? What are women's roles in the church? What can and can't they do biblically? I realized, like, wow, I have not actually taught- you know, there's bits and pieces. So we taught on that with the purpose to then see where the church was after we taught and had a discussion. And this past fall, we actually started bringing ladies in [inaudible] parts of our corporate worship, praying, reading scripture in the service. Some of those other things that typically been, that men had done. Again, it wasn't, kind of wasn't this anti-women, but we can't do this. Again, the philosophy was, "if we have a man to do it, then we're just gonna let a man do it." And we had not thought, "You know what, but we're not helping women flourish in thinking like that."

Eric Schumacher 20:52

What's the response been to bringing women into, like you said, praying, reading scripture, more involvement in the service?

Brian Croft 20:58

Yeah, interesting. We did this, and of course, I've been working through this for years. So I'm kind of ready to just pull the trigger and everybody's like "okay, hold on a second." Because I spent last several years working through a lot of this personally, and trying to figure out really where I am on this issue based on what I see in Scripture. It was interesting, because we had great conversations about it. However, because I, we had these conversations, certain people spoke up, and on different sides, obviously. But as women sat there and listened to that, that was a really interesting, pastoral moment for me, because I'm watching how that was affecting women in the way that some men were speaking up. And, of course, you know, I'm watching the way that, I feel like, I had impacted women in a negative way for years, the way I, you know, spoke about things. So I'm, like, watching all this flash in front of me. And it was funny, because at the end, the church was all for bringing women into play these roles. And then we went to a handful of women we thought, has gifts to do this, and they're like, "yeah I'm not sure I want to do this now."

Elyse Fitzpatrick 22:08

And why? Why do you think they responded that way?

Brian Croft 22:13

Oh, I think I know why they responded that way. They saw that they were going to be to be the catalyst of being able to bring this in. They didn't want to be the center of controversy. That's not why they were doing this- is what was my impression. And, of course, it they affirmed you they're like, "yeah, I'm willing to do this, if the church thinks this would be good. And, you know, I think God's gift to me in this way. But if this is going [inaudible] this much, it's not worth it to me in that way." And I thought, that's, that's been an interesting response. What I had to do is, we got a couple ladies who are bold and courageous, and don't care about shaking things up necessarily. And I said "Okay, I'm gonna need you to go first if you're okay with that." And, of course, some of the staff that we already had, or ladies on staff were willing to do this. And so they started doing this. I haven't heard a thing negative, and enhances the service. Women just pray differently than men do. And I've been struck by that, as we started doing this, and I think others have. And that's what I suspect is like, "Look once we do this, I think it's going to warm some people who maybe you're not sure about this." What's happening is women, other women are starting to see this and they're coming back to us and say "Okay, I'm willing to do this." We're about three months into this.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 23:38

As a woman who, I've been going to church since 1971. Generally speaking, my experience has been that once you walk into the congregation, you walk into the sanctuary, aside from the fact that women may be on the platform as singers. It's a completely male production, if you will. It's a completely male experience. And so I'm older, so it doesn't probably affect me so much. I'm very used to it. This has been going on for almost 50 years. So that's all fine. But I think for younger women who might be coming into a congregation, and who may already be having to fight against a stereotypical view of Christianity that would say that, "Christianity is patriarchal and Christian men disrespect women." If a younger woman is coming into a congregation and doesn't have a lot of church experience, seeing a completely male experience would be very difficult, I think. And I have to say that, over the last few months, I've been attending different churches. And I've seen a lot more women on the platform, a lot more women praying publicly, reading scripture publicly. And I think it's because a lot of the churches that I visited recently, they're all millennials. So they know that you're not going to do this with millennial women.

Brian Croft 25:30

Yeah, no, I think you're right. I think there's definitely a difference in the generations and kind of the presuppositions approaching this issue. And I think the older generation is going to have a lot more hurdles- has a lot more hurdles- to try to get over this. Because even I, you know, I'm a Gen Xer, I'm in my 40s, and I battled this idea of, well, if I have a man to do this, why don't I just lead publicly? Why don't I just have him do that? And again, for years, I have to acknowledge ignorance on my part that I just didn't think about well, what if, why can't women do this, and what if they want to be able to lead in these ways, I was too caught up. And I think what happens to the older generation, and ours is that we're so afraid of, of crossing some line we've made in regard to whether I'm a complementarian or not, that I think we want to feel safe so we just go to this side. That's what I know I did for a decade. You know, if I had a man to read Scripture, and I had a young guy I'm trying to train to be a pastor, well, I'm gonna prioritize him. I wasn't thinking, "Yeah but she could probably read scripture really well and wants to." And so I need to think about how I help her do that. I just, I didn't think that way, to my shame.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 26:52

And you know, what you're doing, too, in your training, is when you allow a woman to do that, and the young men see that there are men who could do it. What the young men are learning is, they're being trained. And they're being trained to see that, yeah, it's possible for women to do these things. And it's not only possible, but it's right and good.

Brian Croft 27:16

Right. I think I need to acknowledge too, that this has been a progressive- that's why there's blind spots in a lot of ways towards public worship for me on this issue, in a way that I think we did do some really good things to help women flourish in our church for a long time. So we currently have a single woman, on the mission field that we have sent out, it was in a closed country, a dangerous place. But we raised her up, we affirmed her as a church, we're her sending church, and so I mean, we have tried to help women find what ministry they feel called to, and several women who have gone into counseling ministry. We have wanted to train and affirmed and sent out with a blessing to do those kinds of things. So that's why I say it's a blind spot. For me, it was certain areas where what I said my convictions were, were not in the practice. And part of the deception was I think there were other areas, I did do that. But there's these other ways or these other areas of the ones I really feel I look now and see that I missed big time.

Eric Schumacher 28:28

I think thinking through this carefully is particularly important for those of us who are complementarians. Because we live in a culture where we've already got two, if not three strikes against us, just for being complementarians. And I think women who look in- or men and women who look in- on the church with a suspicion that a complementarian doesn't value women, and then asks the question, "Why are all your scripture readers men? Why are the only people who pray men? Why are the liturgy readers, all men? Can women do this?" And we answer back with some inference that's not clear in the Scripture. Or we're just fencing the law, so to speak. I think it affirms the suspicion that we don't value women. And, you know, I think we need to land on our convictions. But you know, here in our church we, a couple years ago, I think we started having women alternate with men on during the scripture reading. We have a liturgical service where we do responsive readings and women have a leader part in some of those. And I had a woman approach me, I don't know, maybe a year ago or so, but she said, we've been on vacation and we attended another church and she said, "I realized that I never heard a female voice in the whole service, and it was weird to me." And it just struck me, what I think, for many years, may be missing with no biblical warrant to have missing, and it gets sad.

Brian Croft 30:16

Yeah. And I would also add that I think, you know, I'm a church revitalization guy and I came to a church that was about to die, and it was really broken and dysfunctional and unhealthy. And part of my story is, I came into a church where there was this complete absence of like, solid, biblical, godly male leadership. And so one of the tasks I felt I had, was to try to raise that up in the early years [inaudible.] No elders, you know. And so, I remember in the early years, that was a big emphasis, because I felt like it was one of the things we were lacking. It hit me about at the decade mark, that when I started wrestling through this, like kind of asking myself, you know, honestly, "how did we get here? How did I

miss this?" And I have to say, from my story, one of the things was, I realized in the early years, that was one of the big fights, finding male, biblically qualified male leadership in our church that didn't exist. And I hit the point where it's a much healthier place, we had elders, we certainly had plenty of male leadership and all of a sudden, I went, I haven't changed. I haven't changed the way I'm approaching this, I'm still functioning raising leaders up like I'm in my second year at this church. So history, I think it matters in these churches, too, especially with a pastor who stays a long time. He will kind of stay on his same [inaudible] I think unless something sets it up a bit and makes him have to rethink it to make sure he knows what he believes about it.

Eric Schumacher 31:46

Yeah. And I think that point's, good. You know, I found myself in my previous church, where I was the lead pastor. I remember when we started, just including men in the service, as opposed to just me, there were women who were saying, "Our men don't step up. They don't stand up and pray. It's always the women who pray at our prayer meetings." And these godly women wanted men to stand up and do these things. And like you, I was giving a lot of attention to raising up men. And then I have women coming to me going, "we don't get theological training, like you're doing with the men" and "we don't get..." And it can be, I think what you said earlier about checking your heart, that you can start to feel sorry for yourself and say, "don't you see what I'm trying to do with the men?" And, yeah, it's... women who are willing to say those things are your allies and blessings.

Brian Croft 32:56

Yeah, yeah. And I think if, when a man feels threatened by a woman, whatever is going on, oftentimes- I have found this in my own life, and in just caring for the souls of a lot of male pastors- and that's, it often says more about who we are and things that we wrestle with than it even says about that woman and what she's trying to communicate to us. Once a man realizes that, then he knows what kind of work he needs to do around this more so than just trying to push back on and dismiss maybe what that lady is trying to share with him.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 33:29

Well, thank you so much for your time today, Brian. If people want to find out more about Practical Shepherding, how would they do that?

Brian Croft 33:43

Yeah, best thing to do is to go to the website, practicalshepherding.com. Contact us through the website there. My direct email is brian@practicalshepherding.com. So if somebody wants to email me, they're more than glad to be able to do that, that email comes directly to me. So I'll be the only one to see it.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 34:04

Great. Thank you so much for that. And then also, you're on the socials. So you want to give us that so people can follow you?

Brian Croft 34:14

Sure, Twitter is @PastorCroft. And then we have- Practical Shepherding is on Twitter and then Facebook as well. We have a Facebook page for both of those things.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 34:28

Perfect. Thank you. Thank you so much for your time and for your endorsement of the book. I particularly loved the fact that you were so open in your endorsement and also so open in what you've had to say today about how you've been struck by the Lord. You know, Augustine "Lord, you struck me with your Word and I loved you." You've done a wonderful thing here being so humble and really talking about your own struggle. We really pray that that's going to be something that a lot of pastors will begin to deal with. Just by way of reminder for our listeners, the book that we've written is entitled Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women. And you can get that anywhere books are sold. We're also on Twitter at Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women. [@theworthybook]. We have a website, which is worthybook.org and we're also on Facebook at TheWorthyBook. If you enjoy this podcast, you can help us and you already know what I'm going to say. Please go on iTunes, rate, review, subscribe to our podcasts. Let people know that what we're trying to do is promote a perspective, a conversation about the value of women among Christians, and thanks for being here.