

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

Spring 2017

9Marks Journal

PASTORING SINGLES



Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



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Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

Why devote an issue of the 9Marks Journal to pastoring singles? One, it's a growing demographic in our culture and therefore in our churches.

Two, it's a demographic that is particularly impacted by our culture's removal of all barriers on sex; by the culture's eroticization of all forms of intimacy, especially among same-sex friendships; by its delay of marriage; by its lies about the advantages of the self-indulgent and autonomous single life as well as the growing enslavement of consumerism; and, in turn, by the extra emphasis churches have given to marriage in order to counter the lies of the sexual revolution. In other words, a number of cultural and pastoral roads all collide in the intersection which is the single life.

Three, it's a biblical theme replete with eschatological promise. Matt Smethurst's article, drawing from Andreas Köstenberger, observes that singleness in creation is nonexistent. Singleness in the Old Testament is uncommon and undesirable. Singleness in the New is treated as advantageous for kingdom ministry. And singleness in the new heavens and earth is universal, when there is neither giving nor receiving in marriage.

Could it be that we as Christians have given too little biblical and pastoral attention to this topic?

Certainly, a single person is far more than his or her singleness. Nonetheless, it's often experienced as a trial (see Eccl. 4:9–11), even while Paul describes it as a gift (1 Cor. 7:7, 32, 38). So trial and gift. We need to maintain both perspectives in all our speaking and praying and preaching on the topic. And doing that requires wisdom.

Why devote an issue of the 9Marks Journal to pastoring singles? To help pastors and members both grow in conscientiousness and wisdom and love for singles. That way, singles and marrieds both can grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Can a Single Person Fully Image God?



Stephen J. Wellum

My short answer is, *yes*. However, the explanation as to *why* this is so requires a whole-Bible answer since on the surface, the answer *seems* to be no. This is especially the case if you limit your discussion to the creation story and the OT covenants. For example, think about what Genesis 1–2 teaches us about the creation of male, female, and marriage.

In Genesis 1, everything seems to center on the creation of male and female on the sixth day (Gen. 1:26–31). On this day, God created man—male and female—to be his servant-sons, his kings and queens to rule over creation and to marry and have children. In fact, this is beautifully portrayed in Genesis 2, where we’re told that no suitable helper was found for Adam from the rest of creation, so God created Eve to complement him (Gen. 2:23). The creation of Eve then becomes the basis for the institution of marriage, which is the foundation for human society (Gen. 2:24), something we tinker with to our societal destruction.

Furthermore, after the Fall and until the end of the age, creation order continues in the Noahic covenant which includes marriage and the family (Gen. 9:1–7). Even under the Abrahamic

and the Mosaic covenants, the assumption is that humans will marry, have children, and carry out the creation mandate. In fact, not to marry and have children is viewed as abnormal. So, if we limit ourselves to the OT alone, it would seem that single persons can only truly image God in marriage.

But this would be a wrong conclusion. Let me explain why in four steps.

FIRST, EVEN IN GENESIS 1-2, SCRIPTURE DOES NOT REDUCE THE IMAGE OF GOD TO THE MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIP IN MARRIAGE.

Marriage is certainly an expression of what it means to be image bearers, but we, *as individuals*, are created in God's image, regardless of whether we're married or not. Otherwise, from conception, we wouldn't bear God's image. We'd only do so after we become married, which is not the case. Instead, it's better to stress that we're created for relationships, which is uniquely expressed in heterosexual marriage, but is not limited to it, as evidenced in unmarried children in families and people in communities.

SECOND, AS VITAL AS IT IS TO THINK ABOUT OUR HUMAN CREATION, WE MUST FIRST THINK ABOUT THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE FOR OUR CREATION, NAMELY, TO BE IN COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR CREATOR.

After all, the glorious triune God of Scripture is the most central person in the creation story, and the purpose of our creation is to know and glorify him. God has created us not merely for each other, as significant as that is, but for his own glory and for covenant relationship with him. We fulfill, then, the purpose of our creation in relationship—first to God, and second to one another, with marriage being but *one* way to express human relationships.

THIRD, WE FIND PROOF THAT MARRIAGE IS *NOT* THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF HOW WE IMAGE GOD THROUGH THE COMING OF CHRIST AND THE INAUGURATION OF THE NEW COVENANT.

Why? Because in Christ's work, he fulfills the previous covenants and unveils God's ultimate purpose for us. In this regard, consider Ephesians 5:21–33 in relation to marriage. In giving instructions for Christian marriages, Paul grounds his teaching in Genesis 2:24 as you would expect. But then he does something unexpected. He says that God created marriage to be a “mystery,” that is, a *revelation* of God's ultimate purpose or plan, which has now been unveiled in Christ's coming.

For Paul, God designed marriage to be a typological pattern to reveal something greater, namely Christ's relationship to his church. This only makes sense if human marriage is viewed *not as an end in itself but as means to a greater end*. In other words, as vital as human marriage is, God did *not* intend it to be permanent in his plan and thus the only expression of our image bearing. Instead, God designed marriage for multiple reasons, but most significantly to point beyond itself to the greater and more ultimate relationship God created us for, namely, for us to be in relationship in the church, and as the church, to be in relationship to Christ.

FOURTH, THIS TRUTH NOW MAKES SENSE OF TWO OTHER NT TRUTHS RELATED TO MARRIAGE.

First, Jesus teaches that as significant as marriage is for this age, there is no marriage in the consummation (Matt. 22:29–30). In other words, God intended human marriage to be temporary for this age and revelatory of something greater. What is eternal, then, is not human marriage but Christ's relationship with the church. If this is so, then marriage *cannot* function as the only place we image God.

Second, this truth also makes sense of Paul saying that singleness is a charismatic gift (1 Cor. 7:7, 25–40). In the OT, there's nothing comparable to this teaching. But now that Christ has come, the new creation has begun to dawn, and the old creation structures are being transformed, including marriage and the family—although this will not fully occur until the consummation. In the church, singleness is *not* viewed as subpar or abnormal, since singles, along with married couples, are part of what is permanent: the church. As God's people, we live out the purpose of our creation and image bearing in relationship to one another and to Christ.

So, can a single person fully image God apart from marriage? The short and long answer is, *yes*. In Scripture, tied to God's created order, human marriage is vitally important, but it's not permanent nor is it the only place where humans fully image God. If we're married, our marriages ought to reflect all that God created them to be. However, the marriage relationship is *not* an end in itself. Instead, the church is—the church which is comprised of singles and married couples as God's new humanity and new creation. Single people, as individual believers and especially as part of the church, fully image God as they build relationships with each other and grow in their relationship with the triune God centered in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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Did Paul Prefer Singleness?



Thomas R. Schreiner

The difference between Roman Catholics and Protestants, at least in the United States, is quite remarkable. In Roman Catholicism, one can't be a priest unless one is single, but in Protestantism (at least in most circles in the United States), it is difficult to become the preaching pastor, or what's often called the senior pastor, unless one is married. A remarkable exception exists in Great Britain where we've seen a number of effective single pastors such as John Stott, Dick Lucas, Vaughn Roberts, etc.

PAUL PREFERS SINGLENESSE

Given the cultural climate in the United States, it's surprising to see how positively Paul speaks about being single. He wishes all people were single (1 Cor. 7:6) and counsels widows to remain single if possible (1 Cor. 7:8). Singleness is preferred because of "the present distress" (1 Cor. 7:26, CSB), and those who aren't married are advised not to "seek a wife" (1 Cor. 7:28). Married people are "concerned about the things of the world" (1 Cor. 7:33-34), but the unmarried are "concerned about the things of the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:32, 34), and thus the single person can concentrate on pleasing the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32). Paul thinks the one who doesn't marry

his fiancé does “better” than the one who gets married (1 Cor. 7:38). Those who don’t get remarried are “happier” (1 Cor. 7:40).

ARE PAUL’S INSTRUCTIONS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7 AUTHORITATIVE?

People react to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 in a number of different ways. Some say, “Well, what we have in 1 Corinthians 7 is only Paul’s opinion.” Such a response is mistaken, for Paul ends the chapter by saying he possesses “the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 7:40), which is another way of saying his words written here are inspired. When Paul distinguishes between his commands and the commands of the Lord (1 Cor. 7:10–12), he isn’t suggesting that his words aren’t authoritative. Paul simply points out that the historical Jesus didn’t speak to the matter of a Christian being married to an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:12–16). Paul’s words in the chapter are authoritative, for he speaks as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

REMEMBER THE CONTEXT

A better response notes the context in which these words are given. Paul likely responds to Corinthian questions, and he isn’t giving his entire theology of marriage in this chapter. Some think “the present distress” (1 Cor. 7:26) reflects a particular problem in Corinth, such as a famine, which leads Paul to speak more positively about being single, though I’m not as persuaded of this reading.

In any case, to construct a proper theology of marriage, we must read the entire Bible, and especially the foundational text in Genesis 2:18–25. I think it is fair to discern from the Genesis account that it is God’s intention for most men and women to be married. Paul himself recognizes that one must follow one’s gift with respect to marriage and singleness (1 Cor. 7:7). When we consider Genesis 2 and the fact that a whole book of the Bible is devoted to marriage (The Song of Solomon), it is fair to conclude

that most people aren't gifted to be single. The context of the whole Bible helps us to interpret 1 Corinthians 7.

SOME IMPLICATIONS AND PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

First, it is unbiblical to require pastors to be married. Such a reading misunderstands the requirements of being an elder in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, as if Paul is saying one *must be married* to be an elder, when his point is that if one is married one should be a godly husband and father. Also, it seems quite unlikely that Paul would think that he himself couldn't serve as an elder since Paul was unmarried! Let's acknowledge that American culture often thinks pastors *must be* married, but the scriptures disagree. It is interesting to see how in this area, even among conservative evangelicals, our own feelings and cultural thoughts trump the Bible.

Second, I am as guilty of this as anyone, but let's not assume that everyone should get married or encourage everyone to get married. We need to reclaim the beauty of singleness as it is taught in the scriptures. Devoting one's life to the Lord as a single person is something God commends, but we often view it as a second-class life. Yes, God intends most people to get married, but it doesn't follow that singleness is second-class. Indeed, Paul prefers singleness since one can devote oneself to ministry and to the Lord without distraction.

Third, how can one tell if one should live a single life? If you have a strong desire to get married or strong sexual desires (1 Cor. 7:9), then you should pursue marriage. Paul isn't saying to people who have a longing to be married that they must quench their desires and force themselves to be single. I think his advice is: don't think you must or have to be married. If you can live happily as a single person, pursue such a life and honor the Lord with your time.

Fourth, what does all this have to say to a person who longs to be married and desires marriage but remains single? More and

more people in our culture today find themselves in this situation. When the longings of our hearts aren't realized, we are experiencing what the Bible calls "trials" or "afflictions" (Rom. 5:3–5), though we must remember that married people face trials and afflictions as well. Longing for marriage is an affliction and a trial, and it is probably one of the hardest afflictions a person faces. God doesn't promise that the difficulties in our lives will vanish, and he doesn't guarantee the desire to be married will be fulfilled.

But he does promise he will be with us as we go through the fire and the flood (Isa. 43:2). He calls upon us to trust him and to give ourselves to him, knowing that he loves us and that he knows best for our lives. In everything, he is working to make us more like his Son, Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28–29). Let me close by encouraging you to read this very helpful article on singleness by Vaughn Roberts.

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How Did Paul Pastor Singles?



Frank Thielman

What can we learn about pastoring singles in our church from Paul's example of singleness and instruction about singleness in the New Testament?

It may come as a surprise that Paul actually has a lot to say about Christians who are unmarried and how they should view their unmarried life. Paul zeroes in on the topic in 1 Corinthians 7 in answer to some questions the Corinthian Christians had written him on marriage, singleness, and divorce. There must have been a lot of “singles” in the Corinthian church: many early Christians were slaves (7:21), and many slaves had no control over whether they could marry. In addition, mortality rates were high and divorce was common, so many early Christian singles had probably been married before (7:8, 15, 39–40). In God's providence, then, 1 Corinthians 7 shows us how Paul pastored singles in first century Corinth, and, in the process, gives church leaders today helpful, practical advice on how to help unmarried people in their churches advance the gospel in their special circumstance.

First, Paul makes clear that the circumstances of the unmarried are special. His straightforward comments about the need for sexual relations between married couples in 7:1–5 and the

unnecessary danger zone married couples enter when they refrain from sex reflect the teaching in Genesis 2:18–25. That passage moves from God’s comment, “It is not good that the man should be alone” to the conclusion, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.”

God created human beings to be both social and sexual creatures, and marriage is the means he has provided to address the deepest human longings for companionship and intimacy. This leads to a critical principle for pastoring singles. As much as anyone else in the church, those who are single should understand the importance of marriage within the people of God. This must be done in a way that does not make singles feel less than complete or somehow unimportant to the body of Christ. But the answer to the complex question of how to pastor singles in a way that’s sensitive to their situation is *not* to neglect teaching on marriage, or to sequester singles away in their own social and instructional world within the church, away from married couples and their families.

Second, Paul also makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 7 that singleness is not a predicament that needs to be addressed, an emergency that needs attention, or a problem that needs to be solved. Quite the reverse: Paul says twice in the passage that the unmarried state is “good” (7:7, 26), and makes clear that he was himself single (7:8).

But how can singleness be “good” when God said, before creating the first married couple, that it was *not* good for the man to be alone? It all has to do with what Paul calls “the present distress” (7:26), that is, the chaos that the first couple’s disobedience to God introduced into the world. One of the most critical tasks for the church within such a world is the advancement of the gospel, and this leads to another principle in pastoring singles: they need to understand that they have an opportunity to advance the gospel in ways and places that would be far more difficult for married couples and families.

Paul doesn't say so explicitly, but it would make sense if this were why he said "to the unmarried and widows" that "it is good for them to remain single as I am" (7:8). We only have to look at what Paul's life of gospel advancement looked like to see what he means. A few chapters earlier he put it like this: "To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands" (4:11).

It's not that singles need either to marry or to endure massive physical hardship for the sake of the gospel. But they can look at their singleness strategically from the standpoint of the gospel's advancement. Time that married people might spend nursing a sick child back to health, helping a teenage daughter with a job application, or repairing the two clunkers in the driveway, an unmarried person might be able to spend visiting a sick child in the hospital, peeling potatoes in the church's soup kitchen, helping the pastor figure out Excel, or following up a conversation about the gospel with a co-worker with a meeting at a coffee shop. And yes, a single person might, like a single missionary friend of mine years ago, end up flying a helicopter in west Africa that occasionally takes gunfire.

Whether singles advance the gospel in ways that are risky or tame, however, Paul's example also illustrates another important principle of pastoring those who are unmarried. Being single in the church should never mean being lonely in the church. Paul surrounded himself with co-workers in the gospel's advancement, both men (Phil. 2:22) and women (Phil. 4:2-3), and these close friends worked with him to make his ministry possible.

In pastoring singles, it's important to provide opportunities for them to meet each other, become friends, and work together in the common cause of the gospel's advancement. This doesn't need to involve a particular program for singles (though that could certainly help), but it may simply involve keeping singles in the church in mind, inviting them to meet one another, and encoura-

ging them to volunteer together in the work, worship, and witness of the church. In the process, some of them may discover a believing soulmate of the opposite sex that God leads them to marry. But because singleness is good in itself, that certainly shouldn't be the unstated goal of getting singles together.

Paul affirms the goodness and usefulness of singleness. He does this both directly in 1 Corinthians 7, and in the example of his own ministry. The church of every age should do this too by encouraging singles—whether never married, divorced, or widowed—to look on marriage positively, but to see their singleness as an opportunity that God can use to advance the gospel in the company of other like-minded believers.

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9 Ways to Pastor Those Longing for Marriage



Matt Smethurst

Shepherding single Christians who desire marriage and battle discontentment is not always easy, but it is a privilege. And it is a stewardship entrusted to every pastor.

Here are nine things to teach and emphasize to discontented singles in your church.

1. “CONTENTMENT IS DEMANDED OF ALL CHRISTIANS, NOT JUST SINGLE CHRISTIANS.”

It’s vital to remember, and to communicate, that single Christians aren’t some special class of humans who *really* need to work on contentment. We all do.

Discontentment, after all, isn’t a feature of single hearts; it’s a feature of human hearts. It’s “common to man” (1 Cor. 10:13), polluting every life stage since Adam and Eve weren’t content to trust the word of God over the whisper of the snake (Gen. 3:1–7).

If we’re honest, discontentment can feel rather small compared to other sins. But it’s not small. It’s serious, because it tells a lie about God: that he is insufficient to meet our needs.

Single or married, no one has to be taught discontentment. We all have PhDs in the subject already. Even the apostle’s discovery

of the “secret of contentment” didn’t come naturally; he had to *learn* it (Phil. 4:11). He enrolled in the school of contentment, and so must we.

Cultivating contentment, then, is less like medicine and more like a healthy diet. It happens over the course of months and years, not hours and days.

So, tell single Christians in your church what you tell every Christian in your church: God’s ultimate aim is not to change your circumstances, though he might. It’s to change *you*.

2. “CONTENTMENT DOESN’T MEAN YOU CAN’T DESIRE OR PURSUE MARRIAGE.”

I hope this goes without saying, but I’ll say it just in case: To the degree that “God is sovereign; be content” is code for “God is sovereign; stop desiring or pursuing marriage,” it is lousy advice.

The human heart is complex. It can both long for marriage and long for God’s will—even if that will doesn’t include marriage. Jesus himself experienced an unfulfilled longing while bowing to his Father’s plan (Matt. 26:39).

In fact, it’s a mark of spiritual maturity for a believer to bring their longing for marriage to heaven’s throne, pouring out their heart before the God who hears and cares. Resignation is a feature of Stoicism, not Christianity.

3. “YOU ARE NOT A HUMAN-IN-WAITING.”

Being single isn’t an obstacle to being fully human; it’s an expression of it. A woman’s life, for example, doesn’t “really” begin when she becomes a wife or a mom, but when she becomes a royal image-bearer of God.

Pastor, gently remind the discontented single person that their marital status is not their defining characteristic. Words like “single” and “married” are fine, but they make far better adjectives than nouns.

Many well-meaning people have a tendency, I think, to make singleness either everything or nothing. Someone who's made it *everything* will always lead with some variation of "Are you seeing anyone?" Someone who's made it *nothing* will prescribe contentment like medicine—the "God is sovereign; be content" misstep mentioned above. As pastors, we must affirm both the discontented single's desire while at the same time not act like it's the only thing going on in their life.

Of course, no observation bears greater significance than that history's most complete person never had sex and never got married. If singleness is deficient, then so was Jesus Christ.

4. "YOU CAN UNIQUELY PICTURE THE GOSPEL."

Along these lines, Scripture is clear that marriage is a gospel mirror, reflecting the union between Jesus and his bride, the church (Eph. 5:32).

But does this mean the single Christian fails to mirror the gospel? Not at all. Godly singleness reflects the church in this age as we wait, with expectant hope, for our Savior's return. In fact, I think single people can enjoy a special kind of solidarity with Jesus that married people cannot. He is, after all, awaiting his wedding day (Rev. 19:6–10).

Sam Allberry puts it like this: "Both marriage and singleness point to the gospel. The former reflects its shape, the latter its sufficiency." Pastor, help single Christians in your church to see how they can uniquely reflect the sufficiency of the gospel as they await the ultimate wedding.

Speaking of the chaste single woman, Elisabeth Elliot (1926–2015) went so far as to write:

When she gives herself willingly to [Christ] in love, she has no need to justify herself to the world or to Christians who plague her with questions and suggestions. In a way not open to the married woman her daily "living sacrifice"

is a powerful and humble witness, radiating love. I believe she may enter into the “mystery” more deeply than the rest of us.

5. “YOUR SINGleness IS A GIFT AND A CALLING.”

We live in an erotic age in which human beings are routinely reduced to their sexuality. The insistence, then, that chastity is a gift to embrace and not a cross to bear is as countercultural as it is biblical.

Paul could not have been clearer that singleness is a good gift from God:

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. . . . So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. (1 Cor. 7:7–8, 38; cf. Matt. 19:10–12)

Now, simply informing someone that singleness is a gift is not always helpful. There’s such a thing as an unwanted gift, after all. Labor to show them *why* the gift is beautiful in heaven’s sight. Help them see the possibilities that lie beneath the wrapping.

Singleness isn’t the kind of gift you unwrap and put on the mantle; it’s the kind you put to use. And the gift isn’t addressed to the single person only, but to their entire community. *Everyone* benefits from the life of an unmarried person who has embraced this calling—this deployment—from the King himself.

In his book *When the Church Was a Family*, Joseph Hellerman makes a striking observation:

Paul’s concern in 1 Corinthians 7 was not to ask how singleness fits into God’s kingdom plan. Paul was addressing the issue of how *marriage* fits into his kingdom plan. Single people are already with the program. They are “concerned about the things of the Lord” (v. 32). Married people are the ones who need help sorting out their priorities.

Single Christians aren't in a holding pattern, awaiting their job responsibilities in God's kingdom. Let's not communicate otherwise in our churches.

6. "IT'S LIKELY YOU'RE STRATEGICALLY POSITIONED FOR GOSPEL GOOD."

This one is tricky, since there's a fine line between telling singles they're likely *able* to extend themselves more freely for the gospel and implying they're *expected* to. The former is encouraging; the latter is not. The former puts wind in the sails; the latter adds weight to the boat.

The world champions the single life because of all you can do for yourself. The Bible champions the single life because of all you can do for others. Where does the beauty of singleness shine brightest? Not in exotic trips or Netflix binges or waking up on Saturday at the crack of noon, though those things can be nice. Singleness shines brightest in the ability to serve, to rise to the occasion, to drop everything at a moment's notice and—as one single friend was able to do—make travel and funeral arrangements for a family who'd suddenly lost their child.

So encourage singles in your church to embrace their relative freedom and flexibility as the strategic deployment it is. This doesn't just have implications for their ministry (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:32–34), but for their friendships, too. As Allberry observes:

For those of us who remain single, we might not experience the unique *depth* of intimacy with one person that a married friend might, but we can enjoy a unique *breadth* of intimacy with a number of close friends that comes from having greater opportunity and capacity than married people typically have to invest in close friendships.

7. "GOD IS WITH AND FOR YOU NOW."

One of the best ways you can love someone desiring marriage is to help them see that God is always sovereign and wise and

good to his children—and he’s not about to stop with them. He knows what’s best for them (wise), he wants what’s best for them (good), and he will bring about what’s best for them (sovereign). Charles Spurgeon put it beautifully: “Remember this: Had any other condition been better for you than the one in which you are, divine love would have put you there.”

This is not a flippant or flimsy platitude. It’s rock-solid truth on which the Christian stands.

It’s difficult to improve on Paige Brown’s words in her remarkable essay, “Singled Out for Good”:

Accepting singleness, whether temporary or permanent, does not hinge on speculation about answers God has not given to our list of whys, but rather on celebration of the life he has given. I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me. It is a cosmic impossibility that anything could be better for me right now than being single. The psalmists confirm that I should not want, I shall not want, because no good thing will God withhold from me.

8. “YOU ARE PART OF THE ULTIMATE FAMILY ALREADY.”

Late-modern Western culture conflates sex and intimacy, but Scripture does not. God’s people, gathered in kingdom outposts called local churches, are meant to be the most intimate communities on earth.

For a man or woman in Christ, nothing ultimate about them is single. They are a child in the Father’s house (1 Tim. 3:15), a member of the Son’s body (1 Cor. 12:12–27), a stone in the Spirit’s temple (Eph. 2:21–22).

And, unlike their marital status, these realities will endure forever.

In his book *God, Marriage, and Family*, Andreas Köstenberger makes the interesting observation that Scripture unfolds, if anything, in a pro-singleness direction:

- Singleness in creation: nonexistent
- Singleness in the Old Testament: uncommon and generally undesirable
- Singleness in the New Testament: advantageous for kingdom ministry
- Singleness in the final state: universal

To be sure, you're called to lead your church in honoring marriage (Heb. 13:4). But take care not to do so at the expense of singleness—a stewardship entrusted to some of us now that will characterize all of us forever.

9. “JESUS IS ENOUGH. REALLY.”

The local church is indispensable to the Christian life, and the ultimate reason is because of its all-sufficient cornerstone and head, Jesus Christ.

I once heard my friend Bethany Jenkins remark that if Jesus isn't sufficient for her when she's single, he won't be sufficient for her when she's married.

Don't you love that?

Pastor, remind the singles in your church that they already have access to the deepest and most meaningful love relationship there is. Period. If they get married, that's great, but it will only add a dollar of approval and love to the billion-dollar net worth they already possess.

Again, contentment in singleness doesn't show up as a muted desire for marriage. The most beautiful thing, in fact, is when single Christians acknowledge their longing for a spouse—and yet testify to the sufficiency of Jesus in the midst of the struggle. The world has a category for a single who acts like marriage isn't a big deal. But what it doesn't have a category for—what the world can neither understand nor explain—is a single who longs for marriage while declaring, “His grace is sufficient for me” (2 Cor. 12:9).

As Allberry puts it, “The key to contentment as a single person isn’t being content in singleness; it’s being content in Christ, as a single person.”

SHEPHERD THEIR GAZE

Far from being a second-class calling, godly singleness is a vital stewardship entrusted to many of our brothers and sisters—some for a season, others for life.

As you shepherd those longing for a spouse, don’t miss the opportunity to listen, to comfort, and to speak truth in love. And the best way you can love them is to direct their gaze not ultimately to their circumstances, but to the greatest single person who ever lived.

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Pastoring Discontented Singles



Jeremy Pierre

Let's attempt an experiment in discourse, shall we? You may recognize a few of the following statements from the chatter of your own social circles.

"Isn't she just the sweetest thing? How on earth is she still single?"

"He's single, but he still has great leadership potential."

"No, I'm not married. Just single."

Each of these statements refer to the *fact* of a person's singleness. But human beings are incapable of discussing bare facts. We hold opinions about those facts—or we could say, *interpretations* of those facts. Perhaps you could sense the negative interpretations of singleness that sweated through the surface of these statements: If a woman is attractive enough, there's simply no explanation for singleness; leadership is best proven as a married person; singleness is a reduced status ("just") compared to being married.

This basic distinction between fact and interpretation is helpful when pastoring discontented singles. By interpretation, I just mean the meaning they confer on their singleness, how it feels to them, what opinion they hold regarding it. If singleness is a fact, then discontentment is the interpretation.

Identifying discontentment as an interpretation does not delegitimize it. But it does help singles process their experience before the Lord. How do we know discontentment is an interpretation? Well, the fact is, not all singles are discontent, and those who are discontent may be so for different reasons, at different levels of intensity, or with different frequency. Some struggle with a more occasional discontentment, triggered by specific interactions or situations, while others struggle with a more chronic discontentment that lays over their life like a fog that never quite clears.

A good pastor has to be a good listener—and after being a good listener, a good guide. This is true of any situation church members find themselves in, including being discontent with singleness. So, here's a brief strategy for helping someone process their experience of discontentment about being single.

“HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR OWN SINGLENES?”

Questions like this are an attempt to help singles understand the meaning they're conferring on their singleness. In the broadest sense, those who are discontent are perceiving their singleness as a form of suffering. So, before you jump to “the gift of singleness” language, I'd strongly advise you to explore why, for them in particular, singleness hurts.

These reasons can range from straightforward loneliness to a broader disappointment that permeates other areas of life. The experience can involve fear of being excluded from intimacy or jealousy of those who appear to enjoy such a privilege. It can include guilt for not being assertive enough, self-loathing for not being attractive enough, frustration for not being pursued, or a general despair over the whole mess.

All these experiences indicate some evaluation of their singleness, that it's hindering them from something they want. In other words, marriage *represents* certain values to them, and they are painfully aware of not having access to those values. As a pastor,

you want to help them be aware of those specific desires before the Lord. But before we get to how to process desires before the Lord, let's throw in another contributing factor to their interpretation of their own singleness.

“HOW DO THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU SEE YOUR SINGLENES?”

Singles are all-too-aware of how others interpret their singleness. Parents and family members are often quite eager to share their opinion explicitly, or to make the kind of comments that drip with implicit meaning, like the statements in our little experiment above. Often, you can help singles immensely by freeing them from the meaning that other people confer on their singleness.

That includes family members and close friends. But it also includes the public discourse they're part of—the pastors they sit under, the popular bloggers they read, the romantic comedies they watch, even the stories they've been told since childhood. What meaning does their culture give to singleness? Often, there's a lot of unintended error (and even some stupidity) mixed in.

Both their own perspective and the perspective of their culture on singleness needs to be submitted to something higher.

“HOW DOES GOD SEE YOUR SINGLENES?”

God says at least two things about singleness: It is suffering. And it is a gift.

Don't jump to the gift part without affirming the suffering part. In the broadest theological terms, suffering is the pain of living outside the immediate presence of God, where we were designed to live in perfect intimacy with him. The benefits of that intimacy are reflected in the marriage covenant he established for man and woman (Gen 2:18). For a person who desires those benefits, not receiving them is a form of suffering, since he or she is being excluded from what God calls good. Affirm these desires. In

other words, lacking these values God created as good involves the same kind of suffering acknowledged in the Psalms (for example, Psalms 31, 37, 38, 42-43, 73).

But place these desires in the larger framework of how God leads his children in this present age of waiting. While for some this is the specific gift of singleness (1 Cor 7:6-7), that's not my point here. My point is that God is clever enough to make even suffering a gift. God often withholds things he agrees are good to compel us onward to things he says are best.

This is Paul's secret of contentment: that whether good is given or withheld, he considers the value of knowing Christ Jesus as surpassing it all. This was something he acknowledges he had to learn (Phil 4:11). Sometimes, in the rush to get to Paul's victorious statement about contentment—"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"—we forget that contentment is learned. And the learning environment is necessarily hard for everyone.

It is a process of learning to continually submit our interpretations to God's. We consider what he says about knowing Christ as the highest value that orders all values. As singles learn to view their singleness through this lens, they'll find a growing contentment. This contentment will not be free of pain—since there is genuine suffering—but it can be free of grumbling.

If discontentment is an interpretation, then so is contentment. It's a single person resting in the fact that what he most suffers from in his or her singleness isn't permanent. It's not part of his lasting identity. If Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of any benefit marriage may partially provide, then no single person is shut out from what's best.

As pastors, we must help singles be patient with the process of learning contentment by not acting like they should be able to see their singleness merely as a gift. For many, it *is* suffering. But God's grace will help them suffer well in hope.

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7 Dos and Don'ts of Discipling Singles



Whitney Woollard

The assumptions are really what kill. It's almost always assumed singles are either dying of loneliness or burning with lust."

Nodding, eager to hear more, I thought back on similar accounts from singles in different churches. By trying to listen and learn from singles—young, old, male, female, divorced, widowed, working, students, seminarians—my goal was to get the inside scoop on their experience as *singles in the church*.

As my friend continued, I balked at how ignorant some people can be—praying publicly for singles based on these assumptions of lust or loneliness. Seriously? I congratulated myself on never doing something so insensitive (or stupid!).

But my air of superiority didn't last. Before long, my faulty assumptions were illuminated. I thought about how I've dismissed a single's angst *assuming* "he just needs to get married." Or how I've recommended a single to babysit last minute *assuming* "her schedule is flexible." Or how I've asked single persons what they thought of the new guy/gal at church *assuming* a desire for marriage without asking.

I cringe now to think how my own assumptions have led to insensitivity. I've been genuine, but ignorant.

GENUINE, BUT IGNORANT

Chances are you've been genuine but ignorant, too. Maybe you haven't prayed publicly for a single's burning lust (and I really hope you haven't), but you, like me, have unconsciously said or done hurtful things to singles in your care. Despite genuine affection, ignorance of what singles actually think, feel, and need has led to awkward and even damaged relationships.

It turns out a lot of these "discipling disasters" could be averted if we just stopped assuming long enough to listen. Imagine that?

So I tried to do just that: sit down and listen to a bunch of single people. As I listened, I learned how nuanced singleness in the local church can be—nuances that we, brothers and sisters in Christ and especially leaders in the church, would do well to be mindful of. There are simple things we can do (or not do!) so singles in our midst know we love them and respect them as fellow image-bearers of God.

ADVICE ABOUT SINGLES, FROM SINGLES

The following, therefore, is a list of discipleship DOs and DON'Ts that the singles in your church need you to know. It's for me as a married woman as much as it's pastors and other church leaders. Together, let's strive to love and care for singles in ways that are helpful rather than hurtful.

1. DO: GET TO KNOW THE PERSON.

Singles are whole persons with full, interesting lives. There's much to learn about these brilliant, thoughtful, godly people in your church. Look for ways to get to know them. Ask them about their lives. Talk to them in the foyer before or after church. Have them over for dinner or get coffee and hear their story. Find out their

interests and passions—they have hobbies! Laugh with them and enjoy their presence. Show genuine interest in knowing them as a person.

DON'T: ASSUME THAT SINGLENES DEFINES HIS OR HER LIFE.

Singles are not less of a person or half of a person just because they're single, so don't treat them as such. One woman pointedly said, "Get to know me first and realize singleness is just a piece of who I am, one part...It's not *who* I am. It doesn't define me. Jesus defines me." Recognize that "single" isn't an identity statement. It's just one piece of the *real person* you're getting to know.

2. DO: INITIATE DISCIPLESHIP RELATIONSHIPS.

Singles want to grow in their relationship with Jesus alongside you. But they don't want to burden you or your family's schedule by asking for time. Think of the relief if *you* initiated the relationship. Ask someone to meet over coffee for an hour every week or every other week to read through Colossians and pray together. Ask someone to come over while the kids nap to talk and pray. Ask someone if they could meet you downtown over lunch to discuss theology and life. There are lots of options, all of which begin with you initiating.

DON'T: START ANOTHER PROGRAM.

Singles don't need programs. Too often, singles' ministries feel like a meat market where all the singles are sent to meet and marry. Or, they're a place for the lonely people to gather together and focus on their singleness. I acknowledge that helpful singles' ministries exist. But the people I met with expressed a desire to focus on Jesus and grow as disciples in organic, non-programmatic ways with people from all different seasons of life (not just other singles).

3. DO: ASK, “HOW CAN I PRAY FOR YOU?”

Singles covet your prayers. Like you, they need prayer for all the real stuff of life putting demands on them—busy jobs, exciting opportunities, stressful relationships, growth in godliness, open doors to share the gospel, etc. Next time you’re meeting with a single, ask them: “*How* can I pray for you?” Then listen to them, make note of the requests, and pray for them.

DON'T: PRAY BASED UPON YOUR OWN ASSUMPTIONS.

You may be asked to pray for someone’s battle with porn or struggle with loneliness. But to assume every single person is burning with lust or dying of loneliness is simplistic and, quite frankly, offensive. When you have the opportunity to pray for a single person, especially in a public setting like a small group, don’t assume they need “relieved” of their singleness or that they even want “their singleness” prayed over.

4. DO: UTILIZE SINGLES IN THE CHURCH.

Singles are indispensable resources to the church. One person explained, “Due to the nature of singleness, we have a flexibility of schedule that lends itself to being able to do all sorts of ministry, from helping with the seniors to giving a new mother a few hours of reprieve. The possibilities are endless.” Don’t be afraid to ask them to serve! Everyone I met with expressed a desire to utilize their singleness well for the kingdom of God. Examine various ministries in your church (e.g., small groups, prayer nights, youth and children’s ministries, worship team, teaching roles, member care, global workers, women’s ministries, etc.) and ask yourself if gifted singles can be better utilized in any of these areas.

DON'T: MAKE THEM THE CHURCH'S WORKHORSES.

Singles are not the church’s professional babysitters or full-time interns (unless, of course, they actually are). There’s a tempta-

tion to use singles as your default volunteers for everything from childcare to congregational meeting cleanup. While they do have freedom to serve the body, don't take advantage of this freedom to make sure your church is running smoothly. Also, don't assume freedom means they don't have anything else to do. Respect the fact that singles have commitments, work, responsibilities, and the need for rest just like everyone else.

5. DO: RECOGNIZE SINGLES' NEED FOR INTIMACY.

Singles are not exempt from the deep human need for intimacy—intimacy with both God and one another. The body of Christ should be a place where singles can find deep human connection. Practically, this looks like believers inviting and integrating single people into their lives: eating meals, doing devotionals, watching football, folding laundry, laying around on a Saturday reading books and talking about life, laughing at YouTube videos, cleaning up, having redemptive conversations, fighting sin, even snuggling with your baby. Don't take for granted that the single person living alone doesn't experience some of these relational components as naturally as a family of five.

DON'T: ASSUME MARRIAGE AND CHILDREN ARE THE ONLY WAY TO FULFILL THIS NEED.

At the same time, though marriage and family is one primary way intimacy is fulfilled, don't assume every person you know needs to get married and have children in order to flourish as a true human. Put simply: don't pity the single person. Jesus, the truest human, showed us what it looks like to thrive as a single person in deep relationship with his Father and fellow friends. Although the single person does crave intimacy, the church needs categories for desire to be fulfilled beyond marriage and children.

6. DO: PLACE THEM IN APPROPRIATE LEADERSHIP ROLES.

Gifted, qualified singles should be serving in appropriate leadership roles. I was recently encouraged when a trained female seminary graduate was asked by the lead pastor to start a women's Bible study in her church. This gifted, qualified, *single* woman was perfect for the role—and her pastor recognized this! She's now leading Bible studies, discipling one-on-one, and preparing to teach women at a conference. Her love for Jesus and his Word, her theological training, and her humble heart all qualify her to serve in this leadership capacity, none of which has to do with her marital status.

DON'T: WAIT UNTIL THEY'RE MARRIED TO ASK THEM TO LEAD.

Many singles fear they won't be taken seriously in the church until they're married. If you hesitate to empower a gifted, qualified person in the appropriate role simply because he or she isn't married, then you're only reinforcing this fear. Need I remind us all that the founder of our religion (Jesus) and the greatest missionary in our movement (Paul) were both single, so there *is* a precedent for a single person to lead powerfully in the kingdom of God.

7. DO: REACH OUT TO SINGLES AT YOUR SUNDAY GATHERING.

Be intentional about *seeing and sitting with* singles on Sunday mornings. One woman shared how bittersweet Sundays were because she loved her new church but dreaded going alone, feeling invisible and out of place. Another told me how hard it is to converse in the foyer as a single person when everyone else is married. A simple, easy way to love singles is to sit with them during service, chat with or stand beside them in the foyer, or grab coffee before service and walk in together. It might seem inconsequential to you, yet doing so reminds them that you see them and their presence on Sundays matters to the body.

I would also encourage you to be mindful of practical needs throughout the week. As a woman, I was struck by the needs of single women in the church, particularly older widows or women who don't live close to male relatives. Offering to help put together IKEA furniture, work on their cars, or help them move will display the gospel to them in tangible ways.

DON'T: REDUCE SINGLES TO A PERSONAL "PROJECT."

Although you should see the singles at your gathering, don't scan the room for potential matches during service. Sure, singleness can be lonely but it's not a problem to be fixed or a disease to be cured. Don't make it feel like it is by playing cupid in the church. Placing unneeded pressure on the singles in your midst to marry or having two people over for dinner in hopes of them "hitting it off" is an awkward and uninvited experience for most singles. See them by loving them personally, not by "seeing" who is available to set them up with.

These last few months have been filled with building relationships with singles and discussing the things of God over good food and hot coffee. Though I've had "insert foot in mouth" moments, they've been gracious and incredibly helpful. I'm honored that I got glimpses into their lives.

What a gift to the church! Be encouraged, Christians, to pursue relationships with singles in your church, making small changes that will over time reap large dividends in the life of your church.

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Singleness in Modern Culture



Owen Strachan

Of all the many cultural shifts the church did not see coming down the pike—and possibly at the top of the list—may be the growth of singleness. Many churches and Christians handle singleness with grace. Others don't. Nod along if any of these land:

- *Well-meaning older women asking younger women why they're still single.*
- *Singles showing up to hang out with a "group of friends," only to find out that they're the lone unattached person amidst a sea of couples, unwittingly the 3rd or 5th or 7th or 9th wheel.*
- *The pastor is preaching marriage to the skies, while seemingly forgetting that roughly 30% of his congregation is, in point of fact, unmarried.*

The list goes on. We begin here not to offer a group-hug for anyone, but to reckon with a tough reality: the church hasn't always treated single men and women well. It's important that we do so, though, because according to *The Atlantic*, the average age of first marriage in the United States is 27 for women and 29 for men.

This data point has shot up in little time: in 1990, the average ages of first marriage were 23 for women and 26 for men; in 1960, it was 20 for women and 22 for men. This is a seismic shift, and one that has occurred in short order.

The reasons for this cultural change are numerous. The sexual revolution has undoubtedly had an effect on the way young people view their futures. Sex is now decoupled from marriage in the eyes of many non-evangelical folks. Lisa Wade's horrifying *American Hookup* has documented this shift. The youthification of American society has played a role in this trend as well. As sociologist Jean Twenge famously noted, this is the age of "Generation Me." Further, urbanization has opened up opportunities for life-change, career advancement, and personal exploration that would boggle the mind of past generations.

We could go on, but the point seems clear enough: our culture has changed, and it's had an effect on many godly men and women. The pastors of Christ's church can decry these changes, but they have a greater task: engaging singles well.

I've got three quick suggestions toward that end.

FIRST, PASTORS CAN ENGAGE SINGLENESS BY CHALLENGING THE SEXES TO WISELY PURSUE MARRIAGE.

Many of the men and women who are currently single will be married in the not-too-distant future. The exact number is hard to pin down, but roughly 80 percent of currently unmarried people will at some point get married.

Yet here's the question: how do you get there? For Christians who love Scripture, the answer has to involve returning to the biblical script. The script for most men and women is as clear as it is ancient. According to Genesis 2:24, a boy becomes a man; when a man, he shows that he is mature in part by leaving his father and mother; as he leaves, he pursues a woman to marry. This is not really that complex, though the living out of this plan

can be, to be sure. Pastors cannot instantly marry off all the single men and women who are called to marriage. They can, however, celebrate marriage from the pulpit and in a serious and direct way challenge young men to embrace manhood. For many men, this will involve pursuing a godly woman, taking steps to provide for a family, and developing by the grace of God as a spiritual leader.

In our opt-out, do-what-I-want kind of world, pastors shouldn't assume a snarky aside or a stray comment will get the job done. I think pastors would be well-served by teaching on this matter in a series of equipping sessions. The point is not to harangue single men. The point is to lovingly and firmly *help them*. Pastor, the culture is selling them a vision of singleness that is self-directed, personally-sufficient. You have something vastly better to offer: the enchanted vision of human flourishing grounded in God's biblical plan for the sexes. Offer it to them.

Going after the men, by the way, will lend serious aid to the godly young women in your care. Many of them want to be married, but they know because they are a student of the Word that men, as a mark of their lifelong marital calling, must lead in forming a relationship.

If you want women to thrive in the deep joy of marriage, challenge the men, even as you help the women see that the culture is happy to sell them a lie, too. Feminism has taught many women they don't need a man, when many of them have been made by God to be married. Women seem generally less susceptible to a life of irresponsibility and aimlessness than men, but godly single women will richly benefit from teaching on the goodness of marriage, too.

SECOND, PASTORS CAN ENGAGE SINGLENES BY CELEBRATING THE SET-APART LIFE.

Our work is not done in ecclesial terms, however, if we stop here. We have to go further. We have to make clear that Paul views the

life set apart to God, without the cares and entanglements of marriage, as a really good option, even the best one, perhaps (1 Cor. 7:25–35). He sees much kingdom service issuing forth from set-apart singleness. We must take care to distinguish this form of the unmarried life from the hedonistic cultural version, of course, lest we be misheard in our age of the unending high school existence.

Part of how we do this is by celebrating from the pulpit the example of Jesus. Jesus was zeroed in on the will of God. He was sent to earth by his Father, and he lived to do his Father's will. He called the Father's will, in fact, his "food" (John 4:34). The single man or woman who loves Christ cannot obey the Father perfectly, but he or she can accomplish much good by the power of gospel grace. Godly singles can take deep pleasure in serving the Lord. They can know the happiest and holiest man who ever lived, the God-man, never tousled his son's hair, held a tea party with his little girl, or laughed at an inside joke with a spouse. Jesus was single all his earthly days, and he was surpassingly satisfied in God.

We should celebrate the life Jesus led, and make clear that his is a viable and even exemplary path for single men and women.

THIRD, PASTORS CAN ENGAGE SINGLENES BY PREACHING A RICH DOCTRINE OF VOCATION AND SERVICE.

Whether singles are called to marriage or to lifelong celibacy, they have work to do. For a good number of church members, there may be a period—perhaps a lengthy one—when they don't know their precise calling. For these individuals, as for the whole church, pastors should develop a rich doctrine of vocation, helping the congregation to see that it is God-honoring to work unto the Lord in myriad professions and calling (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:23–24). If singles don't know what to do, exactly, they can hear

from their leaders that their work matters to God, and gives them a great outlet for their gifts and interests.

Pastors can also help singles discover the beauty of serving the church. Life for every believer is not about us; it's about God, and the Godward life necessarily involves church membership. (I think someone has written something about that.) Service to the church may not mean anything particularly spectacular; it may entail serving in the nursery, teaching a Sunday School class, shoveling the sidewalk before morning service, and the like. But all this service, performed in union with Christ, matters. It glorifies God, it fits the cruciform shape of the Christian life, and it makes us more fully human.

Vocation and service: two major areas of life that are often neglected in the pulpit, but that help the people of God find purpose and hope in this fallen, often lonely world.

CONCLUSION

In a church culture when singleness can be treated like a contagion or ignored altogether, pastors can lend great strength to single men and women simply by engaging them as individuals. The means of engagement I have proposed aren't fancy or complex. They involve basic attention to the reality of singleness, to the widespread nature of singleness today, and to the biblical handholds for a doxological life.

We may never prove completely able to stop the dear elderly folks from sizing up the latest single church members and asking them what's going wrong with their lives. What we can do in our church culture, however, is engage single men and women as people, not problems. We can offer them biblical truth and wisdom and hope. We can be the church to and for them—for no matter what this earthly life holds, as members of the people of God they are and will be married to Christ, who laid down his life for his bride.

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A Gospel-Centered Framework for Ministering to Lonely People

DW

I meet regularly with an unmarried Christian man (let's call him Martin) in his mid-forties who was for years a full-time drug addict, with its attendant life of theft, unhealthiness, and untrustworthiness. Since he came to Christ, he's undergone a gospel-driven metamorphosis, and reaped the spiritual and material blessings of sobriety. Martin now has his own apartment, food, healthcare, and transportation, all paid for via public assistance (he cannot physically work). For a once-hellbound man who subsisted on whatever petty cash the occasional shoeshine would produce, Martin's relative bounty would seem to preclude him complaining about, well, anything. So it surprised me when, a few weeks ago, Martin confessed to me how lonely he was, and how there seemed to be no escape from it. In spite of all he now had, he still felt a tremendous emptiness and lack of human relationships.

This moment clarified something for me: other good things in life cannot fill a human being's need for companionship.

But the world seems to be paying less and less heed to Genesis 2's maxim that it is not good to be alone. In our age, one of the creeping and relatively new features (some might say pathologies) of American life has been a rise in relational detachment. Since

the 1980s, the percentage of American adults who say they're lonely has doubled from 20 percent to 40 percent. In the Washington, DC area, where I live, 81 percent of individuals age 20-34 are unmarried, and the statistics are virtually the same for other urban centers that have proven to be an irresistible draw for the millennial generation.

The trend line of growing isolation and singleness is clear. So, how will the local church minister to growing numbers of people who remain single? How will pastors and elders serve congregations of believers for whom being single doesn't just mean being unmarried, but being alone?

Ministering to those who are single starts with a recognition of Jesus' special, intimate, eternal relationship with the believer. Believers struggling with a sense of being unloved, abandoned, or isolated can rest on the Bible's promises of being intimately loved and known by the God of all creation. He will never leave us or forsake us. He abides in us. He calls his sheep out by name. He is with us until the end of the age. And one day, we will be with him face to face for all eternity, in a way so satisfying that there will be no marriage.

But we must exercise a great degree of pastoral wisdom in knowing when and how to use this bit of theology as encouragement. To someone who might be hurting in loneliness, these words may come off as patronizing, a hollow remedy for the greyscale moments of absence and unhappiness.

Single people living in The Now know all too well Jesus cannot be the "plus one" to the office Christmas party. He can't go pick up your prescription when you're bedridden. And he won't softly lean his head into your shoulder while watching a movie on the couch. Sometimes, acknowledging and empathizing with the pain an individual may be feeling is the best relational balm for sorrow, and often offers a foundation of trust for future pastoral interactions. Use discretion when mi-

tigating the hurt of loneliness, so that your well-intentioned concern doesn't come off as a facile platitude in response to practical sorrows and frustrations.

Moreover, your theology must be accompanied by ministerial action. Here are some tips:

FIRST, MAKE SURE YOU ARE SPENDING TIME LISTENING TO SINGLE PEOPLE.

The single person's surplus of quiet moments is sometimes used to unhealthily ruminate on aspects of life he or she isn't fond of. This feedback loop of self-focused negativity can undermine a single Christian's recognition of what the Lord *has* provided in their life, creating a too-deep focus on what he or she *doesn't have*. Make sure you can hear what your single congregants are thinking and feeling so that you can pastorally correct an inner monologue, which, if left unchecked, can turn dark and sinful.

Your pastoral correction should begin with making sure single people are responding to despair over loneliness by communicating with God, as David does in Psalm 142. In verses 1 and 2, David confesses a deep need for God to be merciful in his affliction. In verse 4, he shows the utter despair and loneliness he is feeling. In verse 5, he doesn't give in to despair, but rather he communicates trust to God in the midst of his despair. He concludes in verse 7 with confidence that God will eventually deliver him.

SECOND, HELP DISCOURAGED SINGLE CHRISTIANS FOCUS ON HOW GOD CAN AND DOES USE SINGLE BELIEVERS TO ACCOMPLISH MINISTRY THAT MARRIED CHRISTIANS WOULD OTHERWISE NOT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO DO.

Urge them to take comfort in the fact God is using our time of singleness to complete his eternally significant work, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 7. We belong to the Lord anyway, and he is fit to

use our life in any way he chooses. In my life, if that has meant spending time in a dingy apartment with a former drug addict rather than taking a vacation with a wife, to him be the glory.

THIRD, SINGLE OUT SINGLES.

Elvis Presley once remarked, “I get lonesome occasionally. Sometimes I get lonely in the middle of a crowd.” A common experience for lonely people is to feel at their most unknown and forgotten amidst swarms of people. Single out people who are on the periphery of your church and build a real relationship with them in one-on-one settings.

I realize it may be more expedient for, say, a family to have several single people over at one time for dinner. This is perfectly fine, but a better tactic, where possible, might be to have one individual over at a time. Consistently spending time exclusively with a single individual will reinforce to them that they are a distinct, valuable person in the local body of Christ, not just one among many in a herd of singles.

FOURTH, CHECK YOUR OWN PRIDE IN YOUR ASSOCIATIONS.

The world can regard the individual past prime marrying age who is single as a “loser,” “spinster,” “weirdo,” “one who never came out of the closet,” etc. But just as we’re all born as outcasts, separated from God, we must image Christ in calling to ourselves those who the world looks down upon. Paul writes in Romans 12:16: “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.” So does James plainly exhort us: “do not show favoritism” (Jam. 2:1).

The sad reality of life in a fallen world is that many single, lonely people may indeed have behavioral patterns, unflattering physical characteristics, or personality quirks that have repelled potential spouses or other people generally. All the more reason we should actively pursue their spiritual good.

LASTLY, PRAY.

Pray for the single and lonely in your congregation from the pulpit (though not by name!). Pray for singles who are feeling cold would be warmed by the love of Christ. Pray they would find wonderful spouses to marry. And pray that your church and its members would have a framework for ministering to those for whom life can routinely feel just a little bit harder.

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Diagnostic Questions for Ministering to Single Women



Mary Willson

In my present station in life, I have the joy of ministering among women of various life-stages, circumstances, cultures, and geographical locations. Because I'm single, many of these women ask me questions publicly and privately about singleness and ministry among single people. I'm often reminded how important it is that we single people engage in fellowship with men and women in different life-stages and circumstances (and vice versa!). Our whole-body fellowship helps to cultivate empathy for brothers and sisters in Christ who are lonely *in marriage*, or who have children rebelling against Christ, or who are impoverished, or who battle chronic illness, or . . . the list goes on. We're family in the Lord Jesus, and this must shape how we talk about singleness among Christians.

Below, I've compiled the questions women most often ask me. Pastor, as you are preaching through the Scriptures and thinking about applying the text, you might consider whether your text addresses questions like these. If you dealt with one a week for a year, consider how equipped single people would be! It may also be helpful to discuss select questions with ministry leaders

in your church, host a seminar for single people on Christian dating, or write a pastor's column discussing questions relating to family life in the church.

Two disclaimers. First, many single men may be asking these same questions. I've focused on questions from women simply because this reflects my predominant experience. Second, I regularly hear single people say that they don't like it when others assume all single people are the same. Not all single women, for example, want to be married and/or give birth to children. Not all single women feel insecure about being single. Not all single women think their singleness affects their professional relationships. And so on. Single people aren't monolithic, and neither are the questions they ask.

So, here are questions *some* single Christian women ask.

1. QUESTIONS RELATING TO IDENTITY.

As a single person, do you ever feel that something's wrong with you? If so, how do you deal with that feeling—is it the sort of thing you ignore, or the sort of thing you talk about with someone else to see if it's true? Do you feel a sense of shame about being single? Do you wrestle with identity issues because you have a strong personality? (Apparently I have a strong personality.) Have you ever thought it would be best to adjust your personality in order to attract a man who might otherwise be intimidated by you? Why does everyone assume I'm having an identity crisis just because I'm single? Why would God design me as a nurturer (or whatever else) and give me such strong desires to know intimacy in marriage and motherhood and yet withhold that from me? How will I ever experience satisfaction in life with unfulfilled desires and longings this basic to my person?

2. QUESTIONS RELATING TO LONELINESS AND LOSS.

How often do you feel really lonely? What sort of relationships do you cultivate in your life to keep from getting lonely? Am I always

going to feel this sad about being single, or are there seasons to it? What does it mean to be “content” in my singleness? Can I be sad and content at the same time? Why are holidays so lonely for me, and should I start making different holiday traditions as a single person so that they’re not so horrible? What do I do when all my friends are married with children, and they only talk about their kids when we get together? Is it important to have friends who are also single? How do you deal with sadness and jealousy when a friend gets engaged/married, or announces she’s pregnant, or talks about her sex life? How am I supposed to “rejoice with those who rejoice” when they get engaged or pregnant, if they don’t “mourn with those who mourn,” like me? How often do you grieve that you might not ever be a mother? Is it okay to grieve something like that preemptively (like in your 20’s and 30’s), and how do you grieve that in a healthy way? How do you handle the fear of being alone in your old age, with no one to care for you?

3. QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE WORKPLACE AND “WORK/LIFE BALANCE.”

What do healthy “boundaries” look like as a single person? What habits do you cultivate as a professional to ensure that you stay spiritually, emotionally, and physically healthy? What do you do when your supervisor takes advantage of your singleness by making you take all the evening meetings, holidays, etc.? (I hear this about supervisors more often from women in full-time occupational ministry.) Do you vacation differently as a single person to be sure you get adequate rest and renewal? Since you’re not married, do you have an accountability partner that makes sure you don’t let work swallow up your life? When my married friends talk about all that they’re juggling, do they not understand that I have to make all major decisions by myself and handle all life’s logistics by myself—and do all this on one income? What do I do when I feel like a married male colleague is being inappropriate?

te with me or with another female? Is it wrong that because I'm always in the office or traveling for work, I lean on my coworkers (mostly married men) to meet my emotional needs?

4. QUESTIONS RELATING TO DATING.

What does a healthy friendship look like with a man? Can single women and single men of comparable dating ages “just be friends,” and if so, how? Is it wrong for me to take initiative with a man to pursue a potential romantic relationship with him? If I go out of my way to try to meet a husband, does that mean I'm not trusting God's sovereignty? What do you think about online dating? How can I trust God when I've been dateless for a decade? With regard to contemporary dating practices, what's off-limits for Christians? What does it look like to date Christianly as an older single? When we talk about best dating practice, how do we distinguish between biblical principle and cultural preference? As an introvert, how am I supposed to meet a man when, the older I get, there are fewer “natural” places for me to do so?

5. QUESTIONS RELATING TO SEXUAL ETHICS.

Is it possible that I'm single because God is punishing me for my past sexual promiscuity? Are you ever tempted to compensate for not having sex by indulging in something else—like pornography, masturbation, romance novels, romantic comedies, soap operas, food, or exercise? What are some good disciplines for older dating/engaged couples to promote sexual purity? Can I go on a long vacation with my boyfriend, and can we share the same hotel room if we're not having sex? Why or why not? Can we sleep in the same bed and/or spend the night together if we're not having sex? Why or why not?

6. QUESTIONS RELATING TO FAMILY LIFE IN THE CHURCH.

If I'm same-sex attracted, how do I develop godly, intimate friendships with other sisters in Christ, and how do I communica-

te with them about this aspect of my life? How can I develop godly friendships with brothers in Christ, single and married? What are some things of which I need to be aware in my relationships with male ministry colleagues? When you're in ministry with a married man, do you go out of your way to include his wife when you communicate with him on emails, texts, and so on? How am I supposed to fit into my church family, when I feel invisible every Sunday as an older single person without children (or as a divorced or widowed woman)? Why does my local church's women's ministry only offer Bible study at 10 am on Thursday morning? Why does my church not address the challenges of single mothers and think about how to make us feel welcome in social settings?

7. QUESTIONS RELATING TO CULTURE AND THEOLOGY.

What is the “gift” of singleness, and how do you know if you have it? Why does our culture exalt marriage over singleness? When God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone,” does that pertain only to marriage? Does it also pertain to men and women partnering in gospel ministry? What difference does it make to single people now that there will be no marriage in heaven? What bearing does this have on our relationships, and how can we train ourselves to think biblically about being single in light of the new heaven and the new earth? How can my suffering become spiritually productive? As a single woman committed to following Jesus, how can my commitment to sexual purity be spiritually productive among my non-Christian friends, who consider this utterly bizarre?

Lots of questions, I know. **Is the teaching ministry of your church answering them for singles in your midst?**

In all this, may we rely for wisdom upon our great high priest—the one who embraced singleness to the glory of his Father, who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet is without sin. In

every conversation, may God equip us to play the role of the faithful groomsman, gladly pointing the church to her Bridegroom: “I must decrease, but he must increase!”

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Can Christians Marry Non-Christians? A Biblical Theology



Mike Gilbert-Smith

“t feels so right, so right. How can it be wrong?” These words were written by Ben Weisman to be sung by Elvis Presley, but I’ve often heard a variation of them by unmarried Christians beginning to get romantically involved with a non-Christian.

This is then often backed up by a flurry of other comments:

“I used to think the Bible said that I shouldn’t be unequally yoked with unbelievers, but I went and looked at 2 Corinthians 6 in context and it doesn’t seem to be talking about marriage *at all*, but rather about how Christians are to be separate from non-Christians within the church. I then tried to find *one* verse that says that a Christian shouldn’t marry a non-Christian and I couldn’t find one. I spoke to Christians I trust and they couldn’t find one either—*not one verse!* So, I guess I was wrong, and I’m free to pursue this relationship.

Anyway, he/she is *really* interested in the gospel and told me that my faith is something he/she finds really attractive and wouldn’t want to change at all. In fact, I think he/she will be more encouraging of my faith than lots of Christians would be.”

Some temptations common to many singles—like struggling with porn—are shaped in such a way that the Christian *knows* they're wrong, and so the problem will often be that, in their guilt, they'll stay hidden. Once confessed, the problem isn't recognition that they've sinned; the problem is the slow, painful process of repentance.

But the temptation to get romantically involved with a non-Christian tends to be framed differently. People tend not to hide it, but instead attempt to justify it—first to themselves and then to other Christians who are trying to warn them of the path they're taking. If it *feels* right, then they go back to look at the Bible to try to *prove* that it's right.

In this article, I shall not be trying to give a method for counseling people who are facing such a temptation. Such an article would include a clearer picture of what marriage looks like: making decisions about career, where to live, how to spend money, how to raise children, etc. All of this is compounded when you and your spouse are living for different things. To explore some of those things better, consider [this article](#). Above all, such counsel will involve a careful examination of motivation and a re-examination of the trustworthiness and goodness of God who doesn't call us to compromise in our devotion to him, but to trust him.

Rather, I shall offer a brief biblical theology of dating unbelievers. I want to make the point that it is a matter of obedience to God *not* to pursue a relationship with a non-believer. I'm going to try and make it as clear as I can that however it *feels*, those *feelings* are temptations to call right that which God calls wrong; those *feelings* are not accompanied by any affirmation from God.

If someone's rationale for *not* getting romantically involved with a non-believer hangs on a couple of proof-texts taken out of context, then I'm pretty sure it can be removed by a couple of moments staring into a pair of eyes, some attention, and the excitement of a potentially fulfilling lifelong relationship.

It's also my painful experience that when the weak foundation of such a conviction is removed at the beginning of a potential relationship, it will not be a time when someone is in a good position to examine more carefully the Bible's teaching and build a stronger biblical foundation.

A BRIEF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

My hope is that this article will be of some use to people in such a situation, but of more use to the Christian who, long before the temptation arises, needs to make a stronger resolve not to get romantically involved with a non-Christian.

And just to be clear: getting romantically involved is likely to happen if you spend a great deal of time with someone of the opposite sex one-on-one. I recently had a painful conversation with a dear friend who said he'd never planned to get romantically involved with someone. But he'd spent hours and hours with her one-on-one after midnight over several weeks.

If you don't want to get romantically involved with someone, don't spend hours one-on-one. If you're having good gospel opportunities with someone of the opposite sex, introduce them to some godly Christians of their sex. If they're really interested in the gospel, they'll be just as delighted to hear about it from them as from you. If the Lord wants you to be married, he'll make it clear that it would be possible for you to pursue such a relationship by them coming to faith!

Furthermore, a proof-text for not dating a non-Christian is a strange thing to expect for a few reasons.

First, dating as we understand didn't really happen in biblical times. Secondly, "whom should I marry?" is something that would flow out of a whole biblical theology of what marriage is, rather than merely a verse or two of rules.

It's my contention that if it's forbidden for a Christian to marry a non-Christian, then it is at the very least a deliberate walking into

temptation to date a non-Christian. If you can't marry them without a supernatural conversion wrought by the Holy Spirit in their heart, over which you have no control, then it would be both extremely foolish and very unkind to consider such a marriage in the first place.

Now, I hope to demonstrate how clearly the Bible says it is sinful for a believer to marry a non-believer.

1) Genesis 1: Marriage is to display God's image by obeying God's commands for fruitfulness and dominion.

In Genesis 1:26–28, God designs marriage to be a partnership in ruling creation under his rule. If we don't acknowledge that we're ruling *under* God's rule, then we're ruling under the rule of an idol, or a combination of a whole series of idols.

Practically speaking, this impinges on every single decision you have to make as a married couple. For example, how do you decide what you should do at any point in your life? Should you:

- 1) do what pleases the Lord?
- 2) do what pleases yourself?
- 3) do what pleases others?

For the Christian, number 1 trumps number 2 and 3. For the non-Christian, there is only 2 and 3.

2) Genesis 2: Marriage is a partnership in doing God's work.

Genesis 2 fleshes this out more. Genesis 2:15–17 shows how Adam is prophet/priest/king in the garden kingdom where God has put him to rule within the constraints of God's ultimate kingship (symbolized by the two trees: blessing and life for living under his rule; curse and death for refusing his rule). The rest of the chapter details how Adam is incapable of fulfilling his calling to be prophet/priest/king alone. He needs a suitable helper in order to do that, so Eve is provided so that together they will fulfill God's calling to bring glory to his name under his rule.

Therefore, marriage is a partnership. “It is not good for man to be alone” isn’t true primarily because man is lonely: it’s true because he’s incompetent, even before the Fall.

God did not create man alone to be competent to fulfill his calling to image God. He created man and woman in relationship to do that. Single men and women can do that also, particularly in relationship to the church under the love of Christ, the fulfillment of marriage.

So, in a Christian marriage, marriage is a partnership in the gospel. Conversely, marrying a non-Christian necessarily makes marriage a partnership in something else.

Why would a Christian choose to enter such a partnership?

3) Genesis 3: Marriage is harmed by sin.

Genesis 3 shows how our marriage gets messed up by sin. Adam and Eve go from naked and unashamed to hiding from one another.

In the curse, God pronounces how marriage post-Fall is a battle of one sinful will against another:

Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you. (Gen. 3:16)

This means *all* marriages are hard. But in a Christian marriage, spouses have the opportunity to call one another to submit one’s sinful wills to God’s perfect will. When marrying a non-Christian, you lose out on the blessing of having a spouse who calls you to submit your will to Christ, and instead have a spouse who has no interest in being called to submit their own will to Christ.

4) The Old Testament warns against marrying unbelievers.

In the rest of Genesis, we see a huge effort made to ensure the people of God would only marry those who trust the Lord.

In Genesis 24, we see the great lengths Abraham goes to—combined with God’s amazing answer to prayer—to ensure that his son Isaac marries believing Rebekah.

In Genesis 27:46–28:9, we see Rebekah and Isaac’s disgust at the marriage of her son to Canaanite/Hittite women. This isn’t racism: it’s religious.

In Genesis 34:8–9, Hamor invites the sons of Jacob to intermarry with the daughters of Shechem (a town that has just proved its character in the mistreatment of Dinah). To intermarry with this town rather than distance themselves from such defilement would have been the ultimate compromise; it would have destroyed the people of God in the first generation.

In the conquest of Canaan, the Lord gives strict prohibitions against intermarriage:

Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. (Deut. 7:3–4)

This prohibition is repeated in Joshua 23:12, and the trajectory of intermarriage never assumes or expects the Canaanites would end up being converted.

Intermarriage is also the downfall of kings: even the super-wise Solomon (1 Kings 11) and most obviously Ahab (1 Kings 16–19). More positively, a sign of repentance for God’s people was their repentance of intermarriage in Ezra 9–10. On the other hand, if a foreigner was *already* converted, then there was absolutely no prohibition against marrying them. In fact, this is seen as a positive (Zipporah, Rahab, Ruth).

All this biblical evidence makes me think that “I’ll keep following Jesus even with an unbelieving spouse” is a very proud statement that underestimates our own weakness, and presumes upon God’s grace.

5. Old Testament positively pictures believing marriages.

Positively, Proverbs 31 calls the young man to look out for a woman of noble character. The climax of the poem, and the source of everything noble about her, is reached in verse 30:

Charm is deceptive,
and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears
the Lord is to be praised.

What is it that would most attract you to a potential spouse: charm, beauty, or fear of the Lord? With a non-Christian, there can only be the first two: deceptive charm or fleeting beauty.

Ruth and Boaz is among the most beautiful pictures of believers marrying. He provides and protects; she trusts and takes godly initiative. It's a wonderful love story of how a woman who has come under the wings of the Lord comes within the love of a godly man.

6. New Testament texts imply the prohibition to marry unbelievers remains.

In the New Testament, there are a number of asides that make it clear this Old Testament prohibition still stands.

A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.
(1 Corinthians 7:39)

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)

Though this second verse isn't explicitly about marriage and offers a more general principle that the church should keep itself disentangled from fellowship with pagans, what closer fellows-

hip would one desire than the fellowship with one's spouse? Does one want a marriage that's *not* a fellowship? In reality, it will end up being a "fellowship" or "partnership" in *something* but it will not be a partnership in the gospel, and therefore it will tend to entangle the believer in precisely the way 2 Corinthians 6:14 warns against.

1 Corinthians 9:5 – Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?

This suggests that having an unbelieving wife would at least disqualify from ministry. If you ever aspired to be an elder in a church, then this would disqualify you.

Those who demand New Testament evidence for the prohibition of intermarriage with unbelievers will find these texts. Simultaneously, they will *not* find a single verse even suggesting that the Old Testament prohibition of such intermarriage is lifted for the New Testament believer.

7. A clearer positive vision for marriage revealed in the New Testament.

The New Testament then gives a clearer revelation of marriage: it's a partnership that pictures the redeeming love of Christ for his church. The whole point of marriage is to picture the gospel (Eph. 5:21–33; Rev. 21:9–27). Beyond that, it pictures the very relationship between the Father and the Son (1 Cor. 11:3).

To marry a non-believer is like two artists trying to paint two different pictures on the same canvas. You're trying to paint a picture of Jesus and the church, but your spouse is trying to paint something entirely different.

Or, to take a musical analogy, it would be a partnership where one person is trying to sing one song, and the other is trying to sing an entirely different one. You sing: "I want this song to be

about Jesus,” while your spouse sings, “It’s just you and me.” There can be no ultimate harmony.

When a believer is married to a non-Christian—either through former disobedience, their own conversion, or their spouse’s apostasy after marriage—that’s the painful, discordant, but ultimately God-glorifying song that must be sung. But it isn’t the song marriage was designed for, and not one a Christian should deliberately seek to write.

What’s the purpose of the life of a believer? Jesus tells us in John 17: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

The believer lives to know—and in knowing, to love, honor, worship, and follow—God through his Son Jesus Christ.

It’s far better to live without a spouse and within the company of the church, than with someone who is living for a life that’s not eternal.

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Redefining Intimacy



Ed Shaw

I once googled the word *intimacy* and found the images to be 99 percent sexual. In our Western world today, intimacy equals sex. Want to experience intimacy? You need to have sex. The two are nearly always inseparable in our minds.

We illustrate this in our instinctive interpretation of just one Bible verse. It records part of a lament the Old Testament King David composed on hearing of the death of his best friend, King Saul's son Jonathan. And it contains these moving words:

I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.
(2 Samuel 1:26)

Today it seems impossible for anyone to read this song without thinking that David and Jonathan must have enjoyed a sexual relationship. Didn't you find yourself quickly sniffing out something homoerotic about them? Off the back of this one verse, some have even claimed biblical approval of gay relationships— all because David says Jonathan's love for him was better than a woman's. We just can't stop ourselves.

But what about the more plausible theory that Jonathan's simple friendship was more precious to David than his complicated relationships with women? (First Samuel 25:42 -44 lists three wives at this stage of David's life.) Why is it not possible that he enjoyed the non-sexual intimacy of his friendship with Jonathan (also a married man) more than the sexual intimacy of his relationships with Abigail, Ahinoam and Michal? Why not conclude that he's not saying Jonathan was better in bed than his wives—but that Jonathan's friendship was better than anything David did in bed with his wives?

Sadly, we don't seem to be able to conceive of that possibility today. Such intimacy must mean sex. Our sex lives are meant to be the best things about our lives. But I think that tells us more about our relationships today than David and Jonathan's back then. We live in a society whose only route to true intimacy has become the joy of sex.

And the consequences for someone like me sound pretty tragic: no intimate relationships because I'm saying no to sex. My life will thus be a lonely one without the sort of relationships that any human being needs to survive, let alone thrive. No wonder so many think the celibate life I've chosen just isn't plausible—that I'll either wither away slowly or (preferably) give up on it very soon.

INTIMACY MATTERS

Human beings need intimacy. Without it we die inside—even if we might keep going through the motions on the outside. God himself speaks clearly of this need (Genesis 2:18). Church minister Kate Wharton helpfully fleshes this out:

Ever since God declared that it was “not good” for Adam to be alone, human beings have been living alongside one another, sharing life together. I need other people in my life. I need them to offload to after a bad day; I need them to work alongside me in ministry; I need them to share a bottle of wine with

me as we put the world to rights; I need them to point out to me the parts of my character that need working on; I need them to celebrate with me when good things happen; I need them to spend my days off and holidays with; I need them to give me a hug and tell me every-thing's going to be OK.¹

I need intimacy in all these ways. So I need to be in an intimate sexual relationship, to have “someone special.” That would seem to be the point that she’s making. But it’s not. She’s a single woman (not same-sex attracted—just for the record) who is talking about the God-given need for us all to live our lives in community. She’s making the much-ignored point that God’s answer to the problem of human loneliness is not just the sexual intimacy of marriage, but everything that first marriage made possible. From it came more people and the possibility of life in community. In denying me a sexual partner, God is not denying me intimate relationships—he provides them in countless other ways.

So, interestingly, I don’t feel it is God who is preventing me from having intimate relationships. Instead, they are often closed off to me by our society and sexualized culture. The world in which we live cannot cope with intimate relationships that aren’t sexual—it makes no sense; it’s just not possible. So I’ve had to pull back from deepening friendships with both men and women out of fear that they are being seen as inappropriate. None of them were—but the supposed impossibility of non-sexual intimacy meant we felt under pressure to close them down. That’s been very hard at times.

But what’s been hardest is how the church often discourages non-sexual intimacy too. Our response to the sexual revolution going on outside our doors has sadly just been to promote sexual intimacy in the context of Christian marriage. And to encourage people to keep it there by promising this will then deliver all the intimacy they’ve ever wanted. Journalist Andrew Sullivan makes this point:

The Christian churches, which once . . . held out the virtue of friendship as equal to the benefit of conjugal love, are our culture's primary and obsessive propagandists for the marital unit and its capacity to resolve all human ills and satisfy all human needs.²

I wish I could say this wasn't true. But it is! If our churches put as much time and energy into promoting good friendships as they do good marriages, life would be much easier for people like me. And, interestingly, much better for everyone else too. Sullivan goes on to point out a tragic consequence of this Christian idolatry of marriage:

Families and marriages fail too often because they are trying to answer too many human needs. A spouse is required to be a lover, a friend, a mother, a father, a soul mate, a co-worker, and so on. Few people can be all these things for one person. And when demands are set too high, disappointment can only follow. If husbands and wives have deeper and stronger friendships outside the marital unit, the marriage has more space to breathe and fewer burdens to bear.³

We need to read the whole of our Bibles again. In them, we will keep finding passages that urge us to promote and protect marriage (in just the book of Proverbs: 5; 7; 21:9), but we will also keep discovering (perhaps for the first time) a surprising number of passages that urge us to promote and protect friendships too (Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:5-6, 9-10). We need to start doing both—not only so that people like me survive and thrive, but so that our marriages and families do too.

INTIMATE FRIENDSHIPS

And this will only happen if we aim at intimacy in friendships as well as in marriage. Intimate friendships are what make my life possible today. I have a number of relationships with people

who know me very well. They know most things about me—the good, the bad and the ugly. And they love and care for me, despite that knowledge, and I return the compliment, despite the similar knowledge I have about them.

Phil and Caroline are two single friends that I drink gin and champagne with—though not at the same time! They laugh with me and at me (an excellent combination) and are two of the people with whom I most like to spend time. I go on vacation with them each year along with a whole group of other friends who have shared our lives with one another for a good decade or more. It's a beautiful thing.

To take another sample, let me tell you about my friendship with Julian, Mark, Matthew and Neil. We met at a Bible college. We always sat together in the same part of the lecture room. We gradually got to know each other. Off the back of a scary talk about all the ways in which we could shipwreck our lives and ministries, we formed an accountability group with the aim of keeping each other walking Jesus' narrow way. We knew each other quite superficially before that talk—thirteen years later, we know each other very well.

And that has meant getting to know each other intimately. Intentionally sharing the details of our lives that we'd rather have kept private but that have really benefited from seeing the light of day in good Christian company. I was first open and honest about my sexuality with this group of friends. They'd built up a good track record of being trustworthy people you could share hard things with—mainly by sharing the hard things they were going through themselves. Intimacy breeds intimacy—just being open and honest with other human beings encourages everyone to keep on sharing and caring. They are, as a result, the people whom God has most used to keep me going as a Christian. I couldn't be more grateful to him for them.

In a slight aside, it is interesting to note that Christian psychologist William Struthers sees this sort of godly male intimacy as the main answer to the current epidemic of pornography addiction among male church members. His is a persuasive theory:

The myths of masculinity in our culture have isolated men from each other and impaired their ability to honor and bless one another. Too many men have too few in-timate friends. Their friendships run only as deep as the things they do together. By finding male friends to go deeper with, the need for intimacy can be met in non-sexual ways with these male friends. When this happens the intensity of the need for intimacy is not funneled through sexual intercourse with a woman; it can be shared across many relationships. Sexual intimacy may be experienced with one woman, but intimacy can be experienced with others as well. Not all intimacy is genital, so do not feel restricted in your relationships with your brothers in Christ.⁴

His point is an interesting one: our sex drives are not just lessened by sexual intimacy; they can be satisfied by non-sexual intimacy, by friendship too.

My personal experience is that the power of sexual temptation lessens the more time I spend among friends with whom I am non-sexually intimate. That might sound weird, but I think it just proves the point that true intimacy is found not just in sex but also in friendships, so I'm don't have to live life without that intimacy just because I'm not getting any sex. For me, that has involved intentionally making sure my friendships with members of both sexes are more and more appropriately intimate. For other same-sex attracted people, I know that intimacy in friendships with their own sex can lead to more sexual temptation, but with honesty and accountability in place, there is no need for them to be totally avoided.

So, do you want to do your own part to tackle the plausibility problem? Work on making your friendships more intimate. I'll ha-

zard a guess that this will be quite a challenge. We are far too used to them remaining very superficial (especially if we're men). Biblical counselor Paul David Tripp is on the money when he writes:

We live in interwoven networks of terminally casual relationships. We live with the delusion that we know one another, but we really don't. We call our easygoing, self-protective, and often theologically platitudinous conversations "fellowship," but they seldom ever reach the threshold of true fellowship. We know cold demographic details about one another (married or single, type of job, number of kids, general location of housing, etc.), but we know little about the struggle of faith that is waged every day behind well-maintained personal boundaries.

One of the things that still shocks me in counseling, even after all these years, is how little I often know about people I have counted as true friends. I can't tell you how many times, in talking with friends who have come to me for help, that I have been hit with details of difficulty and struggle far beyond anything I would have predicted. Privatism is not just practiced by the lonely unbeliever; it is rampant in the Church as well.⁵

If, instead, we all started living in interwoven networks of increasingly intimate relationships, all of our lives would be much better.

INTIMACY CREATION

But how can we do that? How can we begin to construct these much-needed networks?

First of all, we need to make time for people. Friendships are built not through snatched conversations before and after church but when we linger in each other's company. So what activities do we linger over? Well (delete as appropriate): cooking, eating, drinking, washing up, watching TV, taking the kids to the playground, DIY and window shopping all immediately spring to mind. Start inviting people to do these things with you

(you'll probably be doing most of them anyway)—you'll soon get to know those people better.

Second, begin to share some intimacies with your friends. Trust them with your worries, doubts, fears and pain; ask them questions about their own. One of my best friendships was founded on just one afternoon's conversation when he asked me a few good questions. Others have developed slowly over years as we've honestly shared the ups and downs of life together.

Third, persevere! I love Anne Lamott's observation: "Rubble is the ground on which our deepest friendships are built."⁶ I keep getting friendships wrong and am tempted to run away whenever I've made a mess of them once again. But my best friendships are the ones that have imploded—but then been slowly rebuilt. Friendships so often really get going after the first argument or misunderstanding and the careful, painful conversations that follow.

Want some more help with your friendships? My friend Vaughan Roberts has recently written a short book on friendship that would be the best place to turn.⁷ We've recently encouraged our whole church family to read it. In it, he honestly shares his own realization of the superficiality of many of his friendships and what he did to change this—based on what the Bible says about the importance of intimate friendships. Why not read it after this book?

APPLICATION QUESTION

How can we all develop more intimate friendships?

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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Singleness, Same-Sex Attraction, and the Church

A CONVERSATION WITH



Sam Allberry



Rosaria Butterfield



Christopher Yuan

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following is an email conversation between Sam Allberry, Rosaria Butterfield, and Christopher Yuan questions on same-sex attraction, singleness, and the church.

* * * * *

1) Suppose you have two single individuals, and one of them is single because he or she experiences strong same sex attraction (SSA) and assumes marriage is therefore impossible. How is pastoring or discipling the one different from pastoring or discipling the other?

Sam Allberry: Glad to be doing this with you all. Thought I'd get the ball rolling with some initial responses, and we can build from there.

In one sense there's no difference: none of us knows what God has for us in the future and whether he wants us to be married or single. But there's likely a difference in expectation. The person

with SSA may feel it is less realistic that they will get married and so be looking at long-term singleness, whereas the other person may still be assuming or hoping that marriage is in their future. Either way, each will need confidence in what their heavenly Father has for them, and that whatever happens will be an expression of his goodness to them.

Both will also need to work to cultivate friendships. One mistake we sometimes make in pastoral ministry is to assume that those who are likely long-term single will need to work hard at establishing friendships but that those who are married do not. The longer I'm in pastoral ministry, the more I see the damage done by not investing in rich friendships, for both marrieds and singles alike.

Christopher Yuan: Sam, thanks for kicking this off with some great insight! Here are some of my thoughts.

I'm grateful the emphasis here is correct, centered upon pastoring and discipling. Often, same-sex attracted (SSA, I'm using this as an adjective) individuals who seek assistance fixate upon their temptations toward the same sex (as if those temptations were their only problem) and end up with an anthropocentric attempt to eradicate indwelling sin via developmental psychotherapeutic methodology. This is wrongheaded because the goal for *any* struggle with sin is putting ourselves in the path of God's grace through the Word, prayer, fellowship, etc. Amidst all this, mentoring and discipleship plays a key role as we walk with and guide individuals through the means of grace.

On the one hand, we should help our same-sex attracted single friend know that their struggle with sin may feel unique, but it's not fundamentally different. Each individual we pastor or disciple is an image bearer who experiences the consequence of the Fall: original sin, indwelling sin, and actual sin. The sin of same-sex sexual behavior or same-sex sinful desires aren't the worst of all

sins. So, in order to mortify the flesh daily, these SSA people require the same grace as everyone else. Unfortunately, SSA individuals often feel like and are treated like they're the worst of sinners. To alleviate this, they must be reminded that they need the same grace as everyone else.

On the other hand, pastors are often concerned about SSA individuals developing an attraction toward the pastor/mentor. On this point, there are a few things that must be said. First, we must realize that just because an individual may experience attractions toward the same sex, this does not mean that this person is attracted to every person of the same sex.

In seminary, I sought out a classmate who I respected to begin praying together weekly. I knew he was aware of my background having lived as a gay man. The first morning we met, he told me, "I don't ever want to be a stumbling block to you. Please let me know if you begin having attractions toward me." It was one of the most awkward situations in my life. SSA men need be shown what healthy and godly same-sex friendships look like. I had loved men in the wrong way (sexually and romantically) and I needed to be shown how Christian men ought to love one another in God-honoring ways that are non-sexual and non-romantic but still intimate.

Certainly, we must acknowledge the possibility of attraction, but this often either begins with or goes together with co-dependency. Watching for co-dependency should be a part of any discipling relationship. In particular, lesbian relationships rarely begin sexually, but with unhealthy relational enmeshment. We must use godly discernment while pastoring/discipling, and be aware of unhealthy codependency, as we would with any person. There's a line we must walk between fostering healthy intimacy and avoiding co-dependency. However, that line is wide enough where we can comfortably develop godly friendships. I trust Rosaria may be a good one to comment on co-dependency.

I often find SSA people to be at one of two extremes. Either, they believe that it's *impossible* for them to ever get married, or they believe that marriage to someone of the opposite sex is the solution. In either case, I want to pull them away from a fixation with their sexual attractions and their relationship status and focus instead on the means of grace.

However, I would also want to dispel some false truths. For the first scenario, God is able to do anything, which means he can give a SSA individual—even one with strong attractions—the desire for a person of the opposite sex. I know several for whom this has occurred, even as same-sex temptations may not go away completely (similar to other sin struggles). I also don't believe that *sexual* attractions need to be the bedrock of marriage. *Agape* love must be (self-sacrifice, selfless, holy love). Attractions and passion and desire must be present for marriage, but it doesn't necessarily have to be a raging sexual passion. Actually, marriages built upon sexual passions can turn out to not honor God and fail. I often tell people that I may actually have it *easier* to find my possible/potential spouse because I can see other women as daughters of the most high God and not as an object for my sexual pleasure. I can spot out her spiritual maturity, love for the Lord, and attention to the habits of grace, as opposed to being clouded in my discernment by strong infatuations.

For the second scenario (the individual who believes marriage is the answer), I would tell him or her that marriage is a great blessing but it will not be the resolution for your sinful desires. I'd tell him or her to keep that hope but put it on the back-burner. And for now, since he or she is single, I'd encourage them to focus on pursuing Christ without abandon as a single person. Preparing for marriage isn't the goal of a single Christian, but it can be used as a healthy motivator toward proper ends. And there's no better way to prepare for marriage than by being grounded as a woman or man of God. If we want to love someone and be loved,

we must first love God. This is why the greatest commandment comes before the second commandment. The only way for me to love others well is to love God first. (Okay, maybe this answer was a little long!)

Rosaria Butterfield: First, I am so thankful to Sam and Christopher for launching these questions. You brothers covered so much rich and important terrain here, and I have very little to add. I'm going to focus my answers more on addressing the discipling of women in both examples above.

First, the difference between these two individuals is that the one with SSA may feel an oppressive, chronic loneliness, while the other may feel bitter envy about friends who have gone on to marry. It's vital when standing with a Christian in her grief—whether we feel that grief to be well earned or not—to try to see things from her point of view. It does very little good to say, “Your broken leg is just like Bob's!”

Jeremiah Burroughs book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* is a great resource to use when discipling either individual. In addition, I'd want to find out what each person is experiencing in church culture. A person experiencing SSA deals differently with many churches' match-making culture. It can feel threatening, and it can also launch dangerous self-talk: “These people don't understand me and they never will.” We do little good to disciple and pastor individuals well if our church's culture is toxic—and too often, that's the case.

Second, while it's true that for many people sexuality and sexual attraction is fluid and changes over time, and also that the best marriages are between people who are spiritually and affectionally matched first and foremost, telling this to someone with SSA feels like you're giving her a rebuke, that you're telling her she just needs to snap out of it. I've disciplined women who have deep, painful responses to even the thought of heterosexual intercourse.

For women, SSA can be motivated by either a strong draw that becomes sexual over time, or a strong opposition to any sexual expression that involves penetration.

Third, for the woman who is seeking biblical marriage. We need to be aware that for many women, engagement requires a sometimes painful loss as well. Most college-attending evangelical women start out wanting to change the world, with dreams and plans that are grand and great. Generally speaking, these world-changing desires are the desires of individuals; they run parallel to other desires—marriage, family, etc.—but they seldom interact. But with the prospect of engagement comes the promise of headship—and a loss of a certain kind of independence. I'm not saying this to criticize it or condemn it. Biblical headship of wife to husband is a beautiful picture of Christ and the church. But when discipling women we would do well to know that women who want to be a godly wife must also pray for a tender heart to submit to her husband. In marriage, husband and wife learn by faith and discipling headship and submission; these things don't come naturally to any of us. Single women need to know that while this “switch” in roles (from independent change-agent of the world to faithful wife and, if God provides, mother) is a God-ordained blessing, it also comes with a sense of loss of who you once were.

2) How can churches do a good job of integrating people who experience strong same-sex attraction into the life and body of the church?

Allberry: It's perfectly OK to live without sex—Jesus himself did—but none of us is designed to live without intimacy. Tragically, we live in a cultural moment in the West where we have funneled all our thinking about intimacy into one expression of it—the romantic or sexual relationship. This is now virtually the only place where people believe they can find and express intimacy.

As long as this is the case culturally, and as long as it's reflected in our churches, it will be very hard for any single person to feel as though the Christian sexual ethic is plausible. So we need to make sure our church family really is a family. Jesus promises that “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” So it *should* be the case that anyone who has joined our churches is able to say they've experienced an *increase* in intimacy and community. In other words, one of the most urgent ways of pastoring singles, SSA or otherwise, is to pastor the rest of the church about how to be family together.

And this needs to be two-way. I think it can often be a mistake to put all the singles together in a “singles ministry.” Married people often struggle from a lack of deep friendships outside their marriage, and children need the input and example of other honorary aunts and uncles in the church. Singles can be hugely blessed by being involved in family life. So we need to encourage friendships that cross generational and marital divides.

Yuan: I agree with Sam. Integration is key. As most churches can attest, the “College and Career Group”—what I often call the singles ghetto—is not always the place where vibrant and regular discipleship occurs. Often, it becomes something akin to a Christian meat market. I've learned so much from Barry Danylak who has written on a biblical theology of singleness. We need to realize that the nuclear family is temporary, while the church—the family of God—is eternal. Under the old covenant, the family of God grew by procreation, while under the new covenant, the family of God grows by regeneration.

The responsibility of integration rests upon non-singles (i.e., married people). It's not usually appropriate for a single person

to integrate and invite themselves into a family's home. However, it's *more* than appropriate—it's a *must*—for families and couples to invite single sisters and brothers into their home. Single Christians are our sisters and brothers, our daughters and sons, our aunts and uncles—not related by human blood, but by the shed blood of Christ.

Butterfield: Evangelical churches have lost the art of integrating people into the Christian family and living communally as a family of God. The lost art of Christian hospitality has put undue burdens on single people and undue expectations on what the church is supposed to do.

My husband Kent and I and some of our children are the only believers in our family. If we didn't have other believers take up their roles in our home, we wouldn't have brothers and sisters, and our children wouldn't have aunts and uncles and grandparents. This knowledge that worldwide believers are family of God extends beyond the home, of course, but that doesn't minimize the importance of doing life together *in* the home.

Kent and I see the covenant of marriage as a launching pad for this kind of living. In our home, almost every night involves dinner with our extended family members in the church and people in our neighborhood. We linger long over our meal, and we bring out the Bibles and Psalters while the dishes are still on the table and people are still picking at their food. That's okay. Jesus ate and drank, too.

After devotions, Kent gets out the flashlights and walks home the children who belong elsewhere, and the rest of us clean up the dishes. While the children take their showers, the adults talk. Almost every night is like that at our house, because our children are older and our house is relatively stable. We also use our guest room almost constantly, especially during holidays when loneliness creeps up on people.

Too often, Christians who struggle with SSA have been made to feel like the church's outcasts. But we know that people who struggle in God's way—mortifying sinful desires, drinking deeply of the means of grace, being faithful members of a Bible-believing church, repenting of sin and applying faith to the facts of our loss and pain—are actually heroes of the faith. When people know they belong and are loved, that changes everything.

This reality should come out of the Christian home, not the church-sponsored small group. Can you imagine what a difference it would make if all the Christian homes in all of our churches actually did this? Of course, there are seasons of life when we weren't able to do this; for example, when my mother was dying, or when we had just adopted our teenagers out of foster care. There needs to be an ebb and flow on this. But if *no* homes in your church are practicing radical hospitality, then that points to a problem, a cultural problem from within.

3) How has the legalization of same-sex marriage made it harder to pastor singles generally?

Allberry: It has further reinforced the idea that a life without sexual fulfillment is not really worth living. So much of the rhetoric behind the push for same-sex marriage had to do with how unfair it is that some people can't call their chosen forms of intimacy "marriage" and how this is an intolerable way for them to have to live. Therefore, the legalization of same-sex marriage has further increased the distance between how our culture understands sex and marriage—in particular, their relation to human flourishing and the biblical worldview. Singles are now made to feel even weirder in our culture, at least if they're standing for celibacy. This unfortunately underlines the prevailing idea that the only real intimacy that matters is ultimately sexual.

Yuan: The legalization of same-sex marriage made pastoring singles harder in that it normalizes, romanticizes, and even celebrates something God does not—namely, same-sex relationships. With that being said, I do believe in a God who is completely and utterly sovereign over all things. What God says in his Word is true, specifically in Gen 50:20: “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” Even in humanity’s sin, rebellion, and fallenness, God is still sovereign. So, although the world normalizes, romanticizes, and even celebrates something that God doesn’t, people are more ready to talk about their own personal struggles with sexual sin. And this opens up a door.

In what way? For the church to not only talk about sexuality from the pulpit in a pastoral and compassionate (i.e., not just treating this merely as an ethical issue, but more importantly as a pastoral opportunity) and with each other full of grace and truth (John 1:14), but also to talk about their own struggles, whether it be with pornography, whether it be with lusting after someone who is not our spouse, whether it be a tend toward relational idolatry (what I call co-dependency) and/or whether it be experiencing attractions toward the same-sex. This is an opportunity for the Church to talk about this and be able to begin praying for one another, holding each other accountable and thus, pursuing holy living together in the community. I believe that the best place to be working through issues of sexuality is not in the world but in the Body of Christ. The Church should be the safest place in the world. But are we safe?

The legalization of same-sex marriage has elevated marriage as one of the “highest ideals of love.” This is precisely what you will find in the last paragraph of the majority opinion written by Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy. Rosaria and I wrote a response called, “Something Greater than Marriage,” in which we argue marriage isn’t the highest ideal of love. God is. We need to help people *not* idolize the good gift of marriage, but worship God

alone. The main source of our contentment and joy should not be in another person such as our spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend. It must be in Jesus Christ alone.

Butterfield: Yes, because the legalization of same-sex marriage has made the concept of sexual orientation a civil right. Sexual orientation began as a 19th-century category invention that rejected the idea that people are made in the image of God and instead categorized people based on their different objects of sexual desire. This matters because Christians need to mortify individual sin while at the same time remaining aware of how sin is rooted in culture.

In the 20th-century, sexual orientation became an idol of sexual autonomy. By this century, it became a civil right. The gospel is on a collision course with sexual orientation as a category of personhood; this is precisely why the category of “gay Christianity,” celibate or not, is unbiblical and unhelpful. There’s no way to be “seeker friendly” in this climate without falsifying a biblical sexual ethic.

But the love of Christ that the church must teach today is real love—atoning love, the bloody love of Jesus, who knows his people best and loves his people most. We must proclaim that repentance of sin is the threshold to God; that repentance of sin brings glory to God; that repentance of sin refreshes and restores the believer.

The culture of same-sex marriage makes sexual orientation an excuse clause for sin, an invitation to bypass the blood of Christ. To counter this, the church must show that there is no shame in repentance, and that, instead, a life of repentance and humble submission to God is in fact the best barrier to shame, as all who repent and believe are given robes of righteousness, stand in the blood of Christ, and are called sons and daughters of the King. This is true even as we struggle with sin. The mark of a believer is union with Christ as we struggle with sin, including sin that we never chose in the first place.

4) In your discipling, do you encourage Christians who live with strong same-sex attraction to pursue marriage (biblically defined)? If so, what do you say? How hard do you push, etc.”

Butterfield: No. Christians are called to esteem biblical marriage as it reflects Christ and the church. Biblical marriage is by God’s design, but God did not design all Christians for marriage. And biblical marriage should not be seen as an end unto itself. Manipulating people into a calling that God has not given is cruel and crushing and dangerous.

We are to pursue holiness. Having said all of this, if I am discipling someone who struggles with SSA and desires to be biblically married, then we need to start with Christian disciplines that prepare her to be a biblical wife. No Christian should start the search for a biblical spouse by looking outside for someone to come along. You must look inside first; you must turn over the pages of your heart with the Bible in hand. For many people with SSA, the sexual love that God celebrates in biblical marriage grows out of strong biblical connection with your spouse, by a trusting and deep friendship, by the recognition that husband and wife are prayer partners for life, by the desire to serve and please and help you husband, by a trusting willingness to share, by an open vulnerability. If single Christians who struggle with SSA are pushed (manipulated, really) into biblical marriage by the church, the church needs to take stock of what this implies. This manipulation implies that the church sees singleness as second-hand gospel citizenship. And if singleness is second-hand gospel citizenship, then we are serving a second-hand King. God forbid.

Yuan: Great question. When I was teaching at Moody Bible Institute, I would often disciple young male students. There were some who experienced same-sex attractions and there were some who did not. My response would be essentially the same:

I encourage them to pursue holiness. In my first book, I introduced a concept called holy sexuality which I am fleshing out in my forthcoming book titled *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Re-centering the Sexual Identity Conversation around Biblical, Systematic, and Practical Theology*.

Holy sexuality pertains to how Christians ought to live day-to-day in light of their sexual attractions. I chose this phrase to juxtapose and ultimately help us do away with the heterosexual/homosexual orientation as personal identity paradigm. Scripture is clear that there are only two options on how to live day-to-day in light of our sexual attractions. The first option, if you're married (biblically defined), is complete faithfulness to your spouse. The second option, if you're single, is complete faithfulness through chastity or sexual abstinence. Therefore, holy sexuality is either faithfulness in marriage or chastity in singleness.

When students ask, "How do I know whether I'm called to be married or single?" I tell them that I cannot foresee the future; however, I can see in the present. And whatever situation they are in now (married or single), live that out all for the glory of God (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17–24). I know that pastors often bewail that the young men in their congregations are dodging responsibility and commitment and don't want to get married. I do think that this is a concern. But the problem is that these men are spiritually immature. They don't need to be pushed to pursue marriage. They need to be pushed to pursue Christ and put themselves in the path of God's grace through the means of God's grace. The best way to pursue marriage is to grow in God's grace.

From my experience in the church and in Christian institutions of higher education, the problem is *not* that people are avoiding marriage. The problem is that they almost idolize marriage (hence, Moody Bridal Institute). We know all the clichés: ring by spring, MRS degree, etc. But as people of the new covenant, we know marriage is not "better" than singleness.

Again, I want to point people to Barry Danylak's excellent work, *A Biblical Theology of Singleness*. Marriage between a husband and a wife is temporary (Matt. 22:29–30). It's just a shadow/mystery of the eternal reality of the eschatological marriage between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32). And when the eschatological reality of our ultimate marriage is actualized, there will be no more reason for the shadow (of marriage between a husband and a wife). Therefore, singleness isn't a temporary state before marriage. Marriage (between a husband and a wife) is a temporary state before eternity.

I would also tell single young men I'm discipling that a calling to singleness does not mean that the calling is lifelong or does not change. God's calling can change over time. He may call someone to do something for a chapter of his life and then God can call this person to something else. We should be open and willing. If God—who is sovereign—has not provided a helper, then live fully in the calling of a single man, joyfully, consistently, and persistently putting himself in the path of God's grace. If God has provided someone who could potentially be a helper, approach this relationship with care and in community—being sure to seek wisdom from strong Christian peers, mentors, pastors, and parents.

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How to Fold Singles into Your Family



Sean DeMars

Our church has roughly 1,000 members. Many of those members are single. Most of them, by God's grace, feel loved and connected to various families in the body. I think of one sister in particular who has a standing dinner with the same family every Wednesday night.

How do you think the families in your church are doing at loving single people? Do you think they strive to fold single people into their lives? If there's room for improvement, how do you think you can shepherd families into maturity? Maybe it's the Puritan in me, but before we get into the nitty-gritty of how to shepherd well in this area, we should take a minute to consider the matter theologically.

A THEOLOGY OF FOLDING

The gospel jewel has many facets, adoption being one of them. In adoption, those with no family are folded into the family of God. God doesn't predestine us to a vacuum-sealed experience with himself; he predestines us into a family (Eph. 1:5). In the gospel, God saves us from being slaves of Satan and redeems us as sons of God (Gal. 4:5–7).

Everyone who has repented of their sins and trusted in Christ is a literal child of God. The illustration of family is more than a metaphor. Everyone who has been born of the Spirit (John 1:13) is literally a member of the same family (Gal 3:26). Jesus himself told us that those of us who belong to him by way of new birth are closer to each other than those of like bloodlines (Matt 12:48).

MAKING IT NORMAL

Pastors will care for single sheep who are single for various reasons: some young members simply haven't found a spouse yet, some members have lost a spouse and are now widows/widowers, and some may have been divorced earlier in life and have yet to or may never remarry.

How should a pastor shepherd the single sheep in his flock well without trying to force marriage upon them, make them feel like second-class citizens, or treat them like charity cases? One of the easiest ways to serve single members is by cultivating a church culture wherein members understand themselves to be *family* members, not merely *church* members.

This hits particularly close to home for me as a man who grew up without a father, but who nevertheless found spiritual fathers in the church (1 Tim. 1:2, 1 Cor. 4:16). That experience was profound for me as a young man, and is still impactful as I look to older men as spiritual fathers. I found, and am still finding, family in the church where the Lord saw fit not to give me family in the flesh.

I've tried to pass on this blessing by folding singles into the fold of my family. More than a few times over the last 12 years, the young single people I disciple end up moving into our home. After all, if we really believe we're members of the same family, then it's not difficult to open up our homes and our lives to those who are in need of family.

Of course, every pastor can't open his home to people. You're a pastor, not a superhero; your house is a home, not a hotel. I get it.

But here's the thing: pastoring isn't about doing everything yourself, but rather, equipping the saints to do the work God is calling them to do (Eph. 4:11–12).

This philosophy of ministry is not without its difficulties. If nothing else, it can just be awkward. But folding people into your family is nothing more than opening up your life to others, warts and all.

BJ, a young man who lived with us for a year, saw me love my wife well while she was pregnant and wake up early to read my Bible; we even memorized the book of Ephesians together. But BJ *also* saw me snap at my wife after a long day at work and open the computer when I should have done devotionals. That's uncomfortable.

Later, BJ sent me an email and told me that while living with my family and me he saw how incredibly human I was. But more than that, he saw how heavily I leaned on Christ to put my flesh to death and grow in holiness. BJ needed to be discipled, but he also needed family. I couldn't offer him a perfect family, but I could offer him a family that follows Christ, and I think BJ would tell you how powerful that was for him.

PRACTICAL STEPS

So as you go about the business of leading your flock, here are a few things to consider:

1. Encourage families in your church to see heaven as their home, not just their house. Encourage them to be on the lookout for opportunities to serve those who miss their family or who have no family to miss in the first place.
2. Remind families that singles aren't just good options for babysitting, but brothers and sisters whom God has brought into your church family, and should be incorporated into the life of your family in intentional ways.

3. Whenever the doctrine of adoption comes up in your preaching, don't miss the opportunity to make helpful applications from the text for the families in your church.
4. Model familial love to singles as much as you can in your own life. You don't have to invite people to live with you, but you can take single people out to lunch or connect a widow with another single lady in the church for prayer and encouragement.
5. Always be looking for opportunities to remind members of your church that, even though they may not always feel like it, they *are* members of the same family. They *will* spend eternity in heaven around the same dinner table (Rev. 19:9). Encourage your members, brother pastor, to take every opportunity to live out the eternal realities of the gospel here in the present. It will only get better as we go.

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Using the Holidays to Host Singles



Andy Johnson

I love the happy and chaotic noise of my three children staging a morning “wake up attack” as they leap onto a sleeping adult to awaken them with pillow-blows, giggles, and tickles. I *especially* love the sound early on a holiday morning, coming from down the hall out of our guestroom while my wife and I contentedly pull the covers up to our chins in our own, locked bedroom.

Ah . . . the joys of inviting an unsuspecting single-adult friend spending a holiday with our family.

Over the years, we’ve become convinced of the value and joys of incorporating single friends into special family times, especially during holidays. And some of our motivations are not even self-serving. So here are a few comments intended to encourage you to fold single-adult friends into your special family events.

1. A LITTLE CAN MEAN A LOT.

I’m not sure when we first started inviting single friends to join us for family events. It was probably to a child’s birthday party or a holiday dinner. But over the years a surprising number of our family traditions have grown to center around regularly inviting particular people to join us. But whether it’s a long-time family

friend or a new friend coming to a first-time holiday gathering, it can mean a lot to them and our family. We all benefit from being a part of families and you don't have to form a new family of your own to enjoy and profit from family relationships.

2. MORE IS ACTUALLY MORE.

And, frankly, having an extra set of hands around for birthday parties, not distracted by their own kids, can be a massive help. That's why we do sometimes feel a little guilty that so much of our "service" to the single-adults in our church ends up looking a lot like help for us. But they don't seem to mind. It's a symbiotic thing. We enjoy the extra adult help, and they enjoy our crazy, fun household. And hopefully along the way, there are some good gospel encouragements that float in, too.

I know this from first-hand experience. I remember being single at 25, and at 30, and at 35, and even when 40 was growing visible in the horizon of my life. I eventually (and happily) got married out of the blue, it seemed, at the age of 37. But in nearly two decades of adult single-living, one of my fondest memories is a few church families that intentionally drew me into their lives—not just as a one-time guest at a holiday meal, but for birthdays, school celebrations, special outings, and even for family vacations. I think the parents valued me as an example of a Christian young man to their kids, and I got more blessings than they realized.

3. TRADITIONS AREN'T JUST A FAMILY THING.

This won't be a hardship for your kids, either. Kids love traditions, at least our kids do. And some of the traditions they hold to most lovingly (or manically) involve friends who aren't our relatives. Whether it's having a long-time adopted Auntie at their birthday party, or the friends we've invited for years to help us decorate our Christmas tree, or the young woman and her widowed mom who are our regular Thanksgiving guests. If we do anything more than

once it becomes “a tradition” in the minds of our kids. And we’re pretty happy about that.

We think it’s great that in our family now “traditions” tend to be largely about who’s joining us rather than specifically what we do. And news that a certain single person is joining us for an event almost always result in happy-dances from the kiddos. I’m delighted for our children to grow up thinking more about relationships than food—or even presents. Okay, they still like the presents more, but we’re making progress.

4. NOT JUST CHRISTIAN FRIENDS.

This isn’t just about time with Christian friends. Most every Thanksgiving, my amazing wife happily prepares a meal for more people than our ample house can really hold. In addition to our beloved “regulars,” we also try to fill a number of seats with international students. As we talk to our children in advance, they get excited to learn a little bit about the culture or language of folks that are coming. “How do you say Hello in Turkish?” our five-year-old asks for the twentieth time.

This opening of our home to strangers has become for our kids a normal part of what one does at Thanksgiving or Easter or Christmas. And the benefit of seeing a family organized around an overt love and submission to Christ has made deep impressions on a number of young adults from nations where such witness are rare.

5. SLEEPOVERS AREN’T JUST FOR KIDDOS, EITHER.

But you don’t have to say goodbye after the plates are cleared off the table. A few weeks ago, my wife was away for a couple of nights. So, naturally, I took the time to plan a sleepover...inviting a 20-something family friend to come stay with us. The kids were excited, he seemed to have a good time, and I had an adult to help shape conversation during dinner and breakfast. And, of course,

he got the benefit of the aforementioned “wake up attack” . . . while I got 15 more minutes of sleep.

6. GOOD THINGS GENERALLY DON'T “JUST HAPPEN.”

Having these kind of relationships takes some advanced planning and a small measure of commitment. In the rush and bustle of life, we have to decide this is the way we are going to live.

Opening your home to single friends may sound daunting. But try to imagine your home as a refuge from the outside world that is frankly pretty barren at times. Consider what it might mean to draw even one or two single friends into your family. Give it a try. You might be surprised how much fun, help, and fruitfulness might result.

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Reforming College Dating through Discipleship



Allen Duty

During my freshman year at Texas A&M, I began following Jesus. I had been girl-crazy since the second grade, so I was eager to understand how a Christian should think about and pursue dating relationships.

While some of my peers encouraged me through their counsel or their example, most other college men—even those who professed to follow Christ—approached dating like everyone else on campus. As a relatively new Christian, it was discouraging—and confusing.

Thankfully, I met a few older men in my local church who disciplined me faithfully before and during my dating relationship with my wife. But my experience was unusual then, and 15 years later, it's still unusual for most college men. Experience has taught me that most older men in the church fail to engage college men in discipleship, leaving young believers to figure out a lot of life—including dating—on their own.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Older men in the church can help college men develop a God-honoring approach to dating by

encouraging them to imitate godly examples, embrace biblical values, and involve the church.

IMITATE GODLY EXAMPLES

First, we must encourage college men to imitate godly examples. Paul wrote, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). The apostle Peter exhorts elders in local churches to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pt. 5:3).

When examining the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, one of the first things you’ll notice is how ordinary they are. They’re remarkably *unremarkable*. And that’s exactly the point. Elders are to be examples to the flock, modeling ordinary faithfulness for others.

Many college men only focus on the type of woman they want to date and marry, and fail to consider how they must grow to become a man *worth* dating and marrying. Thankfully, God has given us clear instructions on which qualities we should encourage them to pursue. They should aspire to be:

...above reproach...sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable...not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. (1 Tim. 3:2-3)

With our encouragement, college men can aspire to more than winning the intramural championship or beating *Call of Duty*. They can aspire to godliness, which Paul teaches, “is of value in every way” (1 Tim. 4:8). And as they aspire to godliness, they will become the kind of men we’d be delighted to have leading our churches—and dating our younger sisters-in-Christ.

Paul told the Ephesian elders, “You yourselves know how I lived among you...” (Acts 20:18). For college men to imitate godly examples, they need to be able to observe our way of life.

Discipleship doesn't have to mean adding more meetings to your already-busy schedule. Perhaps it'd be better to invite a college student over to enjoy dinner and to observe family worship. Maybe he would gain more insight—and life skills—from working alongside you as you rebuild a section of your fence on the weekend.

It's been said that we tend to replicate what we observe. If that's the case, the best thing we can do for college men is give them godly examples to imitate by inviting them into our ordinary lives.

EMBRACE BIBLICAL VALUES

Second, we must encourage college men to embrace biblical values.

In the 21st century, many college men have roughly the same criteria for a girlfriend as the rest of the world. They're looking for someone physically attractive who shares their interests and has a likeable personality.

Those are good, even desirable qualities in a potential girlfriend. The problem is that there's nothing distinctively Christian about them, and to put those qualities at the top of the list is to major on the minors.

Take beauty, for example. Our culture idolizes physical appearance, but Peter commands women,

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. (1 Pet. 3:3-4)

The problem is that college men haven't made it very easy for college women to prioritize “the hidden person of the heart.” College men have communicated, through their public comments and private addiction to pornography, that physical beauty is more valuable than cultivating “a gentle and quiet spirit.”

The woman described in Proverbs 31:10–31 has many desirable qualities. She is capable, industrious, and wise. But her greatest quality is her fear of the Lord. Proverbs 1:7 teaches us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That fear is displayed in personal and corporate worship, love for the local church, and love for the lost.

We must encourage college men to value women whose fear of the Lord is evident in their words and actions. And we must challenge them to repent of their lust—not in word and talk but in deed and in truth (to borrow language from John). Agreeing that using pornography is sinful is different than taking proactive steps to rid any hint of sexual immorality from your life.

Sermons, books, and articles (like this one) can be helpful resources, but only *people* (like you) can help college students repent of worldly values and embrace God’s values through conversation and prayer.

INVOLVE THE CHURCH

Third and finally, we must encourage college men to involve the church before and during the dating process.

It has been my observation (and my own personal experience) that college men tend to approach the dating process as lone rangers. Many students will notice a woman, begin spending time with her, pray about dating her, and ask her out—all before saying a word to any older men in the church.

In Hebrews 13:17, God commands us, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, *for they are keeping watch over your souls*, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (italics mine).

Let me be clear: college men have the freedom to act on their own initiative and ask a woman out on a date. But the issue is not *freedom*; the issue is *wisdom*. Is it *wise* for a college man to enter

into a dating relationship without first seeking counsel from those watching over their souls? I think not.

However, this is not something most college men have ever been taught, especially those who didn't grow up in a healthy local church. The only way they know how to date is as lone rangers.

So, we'd do a great service to college men by encouraging them to date within the context of community. This doesn't mean every dating relationship has to be "approved" by church leaders, or that every interaction between two college students needs to be chaperoned. But it does mean that college men shouldn't allow their relationships to lead them to neglect gathering with the local church for worship and service (Hebrews 10:25). It does mean that college men should welcome accountability and practical help to "walk in the light" as they date their sisters-in-Christ (1 John 1:7).

Dating in the context of community is perhaps the most radical exhortation I could suggest, given the individualistic nature of our culture. But if we believe that involvement in a healthy local church is God's primary plan for discipleship, then we must encourage college men to involve the church before and during the dating process.

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Must Elders Be Married?



Andrew Davis

One of the most significant early steps we made in the journey of church revitalization at First Baptist Church in Durham was filtering deacon candidates according to biblical qualifications. At that time, FBC's polity consisted of a single elder, a "board" of deacons, a slew of committees, and congregational authority expressed in voting at church conferences. The deacons exercised an unbiblical role as undershepherds, working with "the pastor" to achieve the ministry of the church. Deacons were elected by a democratic process with almost no filtering at all—the top eight vote-getters simply got in. Often, this meant the community's most successful business leaders or hardest working volunteers became deacons. In short, it was a popularity contest.

So, when we began to require deacon candidates to give testimonies of their qualifications based on 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, things began to change in a remarkable way. Since then, the roles of elder and deacon have themselves been reformed by biblical standards, as the process of choosing qualified candidates for both offices has also gotten more robust and healthier.

However, it's possible to use these passages in 1 Timothy and Titus in a wooden way and therefore filter out godly candidates

whom the Lord has qualified to serve. But before we overly filter, we must make sure we've "rightly divided" (2 Tim. 2:15) the relevant passages. To be overly restrictive based on these passages can prove to be almost as harmful as to have little or no restrictions at all.

So, let's get to the question at hand: can single men serve as elders, or must they be "filtered out" for not meeting the "husband of one wife" qualification (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6)? In short, I believe filtering out single men is overly restrictive, and therefore cause churches to miss out on some rich blessings the Lord has given.

This restriction wouldn't even come to mind except that the passages seem to be teaching it. But a closer look shows that such an approach leads to unhealthy, even absurd conclusions. For example, it would eliminate Jesus, Paul, and (it seems) Timothy from the office of elder. It would also negate the powerful case the Apostle Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 7 for the benefits singleness brings to ministry. Paul celebrates single servants as being "free from concern" and able to focus completely on how they may please and serve the Lord, living in undivided devotion (1 Cor. 7:32, 35).

Based on this, single men who serve as elders can highlight these very truths in the life of the congregation, especially since it's so unusual, at least in the Baptist churches I've been around. Just as married elders can live out in front of their congregations the immeasurable value of a healthy marriage and godly parenting, so also can a single elder live out the superior aspects of the single life, as celebrated in 1 Corinthians 7.

Beyond this, to forbid single men from serving as elders based on exegesis of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 3 leads to some unhealthy parallel conclusions. For example, would not a widower be excluded from serving, since he is not *presently* the husband of one wife? One can imagine a man losing his wife and his ministry in the same day, all from an overly restrictive interpretation. Similarly, what about childless men, or fathers of only one child? Wouldn't they be exclu-

ded? After all, Titus 1:6 seems to require *children*.

I believe the same way we handle that text applies to how we handle the “husband of one wife” requirement. If a man has children still living at home, they must be submissive to his authority, not wild or disobedient; if a man is married, he must be a “one-woman man,” that is, openly living out Ephesians 5’s Christ-church analogy of marriage. But the text doesn’t require either a wife or children in order to serve as an elder.

Of course, there are some challenges for single elders in the life of the congregation. Their ability to teach on marriage and parenting may be questioned, though it ought not to be. Jesus and Paul were both single men, and they taught on both marriage and parenting. It’s not necessary that Bible teaching must in every case be supplemented with role-modeling. Beyond this, the single elder must walk in open holiness with members of the opposite sex, as Paul commanded Timothy, saying he should deal with younger sisters-in-Christ “in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:2). If he’s seeking a wife, there may be some awkwardness in the courting process if she ends up being a member of the congregation. But these practical challenges must not outweigh the benefits of singleness Paul expounds in 1 Corinthians 7.

To sum up, it’s essential that the filtering process of elder candidates be conducted according to biblical standards. This means that unqualified men must be filtered out. But this also means that qualified men must *not* be filtered out by faulty exegesis. Godly single men may serve as elders of a local church, and their churches will be richly blessed by their single-minded devotion to the Lord in shepherding his flock.

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Single Pastors, Biblical Counseling, and the Local Church



Bert Daniel

Recently, a young, single man who was beginning his first pastoral position contacted me. He wanted to know my thoughts on how an unmarried pastor could build a constructive counseling ministry in the context of a local church.

I don't consider myself to be an expert on this topic, but by God's grace I have learned a few things on the subject from experience. For the past 15 years, I've had the privilege of serving as the pastor of one church. I'm now married, but I spent my first three years as a single pastor.

As the Apostle Paul taught and modeled, singleness can offer certain advantages to Christian ministry (1 Cor. 7:32–35). As a young, single pastor, it didn't matter how much time I spent on Saturdays working on my sermon for Sunday, or how many pastoral visits I made in the evenings, or if I invited a friend over to crash on the couch for a night... or ten nights! Marriage and family simply doesn't allow for such flexibility. It's an exchange I chose to make and would happily make again, but nonetheless Paul acknowledges that the freedom and fle-

xibility singleness affords can be leveraged as an advantage for gospel ministry.

At the same time, singleness presents certain challenges in life and ministry. Implicit in the question posed by the young, single pastor was the recognition that counseling as a single pastor offers its own unique challenges.

So, how can a single pastor build a constructive counseling ministry in the context of the local church? He can do so by giving attention to two things: plurality and accountability.

PLURALITY

Many single pastors have never experienced marriage and children. This can be a challenge when ministering to a congregation in which marriage and children are the norm.

Let me be clear, this doesn't mean the single pastor is *unqualified* to speak into family life. We must remember the bulk of New Testament's teaching on marriage and family comes to us through two single men: Jesus and Paul. At the same time, none of us are Jesus or Paul, and the Bible teaches us experience is not irrelevant. There's a reason Paul instructs "older women... to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children" (Titus 2:3-4). Experience matters.

For example, as a married man, I may be called upon to offer care and counsel to a young couple struggling with infertility. By God's grace, my wife and I have never experienced the pain and sorrow of infertility. This doesn't mean I'm disqualified to speak into the couple's life. I trust that by pointing to the Scriptures I can offer hope and encouragement that will be genuinely helpful. At the same, I believe it would be extremely beneficial to connect the grieving couple to a godly family in the church who struggled with infertility for years and has since adopted children and are rejoicing in God's goodness.

Praise God for how the diverse and varied people, gifts, and experiences in the body can be utilized to provide care for a variety of people!

So, if you're a single pastor and wondering how you can build a constructive counseling ministry to spouses, parents, and children, then I'd like to relieve you of some of the pressure you might be feeling. Single pastors shouldn't be the singular counselor in a local church. Instead, build a plurality. Purpose to raise up an army of biblical lay counselors, who are diverse in experience and station of life and equipped to care for a wide array of folks.

In order to accomplish this goal, you must teach and model discipleship. Through a discipleship culture, some will demonstrate a particular gifting for personally and skillfully applying God's Word to people's lives. Look out for them. Then, invest in them!

Invest in an older, godly couple whose marriage is not perfect but exemplary. Provide them with some excellent resources for premarital counseling; meet with them a few times to discuss the material; and then turn them loose to provide premarital counseling to engaged couples in your church.

Take note of women in your church who love the church and possess a healthy and fruitful ministry among other ladies. Offer to provide them with additional training to equip them to skillfully care for the souls of others. The Christian Counseling Education Foundation (CCEF) offers an excellent online training program for lay leaders. Arrange the church budget so that one, two, or three ladies can be supported to complete the CCEF training.

Whether unmarried or married, pastors should aim to raise up a plurality of men and women in the church who are able to offer biblical and compassionate care for others.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Another challenge for the single pastor is how to protect their purity and reputation before others while meeting with women for the purpose of pastoral care. Of course, this is a concern for married pastors, as well. However, singles should give special attention to this matter given Paul's teaching that a healthy marriage provides a defense against sexual immorality. Singleness does not afford the same defense (1 Cor. 7:2–5).

A good rule of thumb is that your counseling should be personal and when necessary confidential, but never isolated. Here are some standard guidelines to follow (see Deepak Reju's article, "Discipling Men vs. Discipling Women" for more suggestions):

- Do not meet privately with another woman for counseling, not for a meal and not in your office. If you do meet for a meal, have someone go along with you.
If you meet in your office, make sure others are in the same general area. Make sure others can see into your office through a window(s). Also consider keeping the office door open.
- Do not offer ongoing counsel through texting, emailing, or private messaging via social media. These forms of communication are quick, flexible, and easy; they can also provide a context for intimate, inappropriate, and isolated interaction. Either restrict yourself from using these forms of communication for the purpose of counseling, or make sure that you always copy others in your exchanges.
- Maintain consistent accountability with other leaders in your church, which includes a discussion of ongoing pastoral counseling cases.

Wise and careful accountability structures can go a long way in protecting both your purity and reputation among others.

CONCLUSION

The young pastor who contacted me on this topic is not alone. Many single pastors wrestle with the same question. The single pastor can invest in plurality by training members to be skillfully involved in the care of the church. In addition, the single pastor can be serious about accountability by committing to some basic guidelines that will protect him and the church.

Single pastors, you are a gift. Boldly embrace the pastorate the Lord has given you as you faithfully care for his people.

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