Single But Not Alone

Richard van de Ruit 9 May 2019



Perhaps I should start with sharing that I have been happily married for over 28 years to my lovely wife, Sue. It would therefore be easy to conclude that I should not be the one writing an article on singleness. This is also an argument used with regards to the teachings of the apostle Paul on marriage and married life. It is therefore my desire to present a Biblical perspective on singleness and fulfilment in singleness for my unmarried brothers and sisters in the church, and the indispensable role they have to fulfill within the Body of Christ.

The High Calling of Singleness

Singleness is not an abnormality, an incompleteness, a punishment by God or society, a malformation or disability. It is not an inability to be fully functional, a curse from God, a subjection to loneliness or a cross to bear only to be resolved by marriage. Do we truly believe that singleness is a high calling of God? Do we affirm our singles in our faith family? Do we uphold singleness as a high calling? I believe that there is a great joy in singleness and that it should be embraced by the family of God, both by marrieds and singles.

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We have many examples in the Bible of men and women who served the Lord as singles. Jesus is the most obvious example, and there is also John the Baptist, Anna the widow prophetess, Mary Magdalene, Paul the apostle and some of the other apostles. In the Old Testament we have Daniel and his three friends, Nehemiah, Jeremiah and Mordechai. These men and women were surely not pining for marriage and being unfulfilled in their unmarried status.

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Outreaches & Missions

There is a great opportunity for the advancement of the Kingdom by training, encouraging and releasing the unmarried into outreach and missions. Singleness is especially a benefit in areas that may involve danger and sacrifice. There will be no spouse or children left behind. Just think for a moment of Nate Saint and the other four missionaries who died in Ecuador in 1955, all leaving young families behind. What about John Allen Chua, who recently perished in reaching out to the people on the North Sentinel Island in the Bay of Bengal. John left no wife or children behind and was acutely aware of the dangers and potential sacrifice he would make connecting to the inhabitants on the island. He informed his parents and his friends of the dangers involved. The question is simply: are we following the pattern of the world or following the call of our Good Shepherd who Himself laid down His own life for His sheep?

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Not Good to Be Alone?

In the creation account, God states that it was not good for man to be alone. So doesn't God Himself state here that it is not good to be single? It is important to consider the context. Adam had a unique mandate, which was to procreate and fill the earth, but followers of Jesus have a completely different mandate. His mandate was to fill the earth and for this he needed a wife. Our mandate is to make disciples of all nations and fill the earth with the message of the Gospel, and we can do this as couples or as singles.

Let us now consider the different circumstances in which a person may be single.

1. Singleness Resulting from Not Finding a Spouse

This is a common phenomenon. It seems that in some parts of the world, committed Christian women outnumber Christian men. This poses a numerical problem. As one lady told me once: 'There simply aren't enough nice, Christian guys around.' This can be a huge temptation for women (and men) to seek potential partners outside of the community of faith. But we know the Scriptures are clear on this point: 'Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers' (2 Corinthians 6:14). Our commitment to Jesus should result in us living by and being devoted to His standard and to the development of the culture of the Kingdom in our lives.

2. Voluntary Singleness

This is the person who has decided not to marry. Paul himself makes it clear that he had received the gift of singleness: 'I wish that all of you were as I am [unmarried]. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.' (1 Corinthians 7:7) And: 'I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. … An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit… that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.' (1 Corinthians 7:32-35).

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For Paul it would have been very difficult to embark on the mission that lay before him if he had a wife in tow. In the above passages, Paul makes it clear that an unmarried man or woman can be completely and undividedly devoted to the Lord's affairs.

This surely makes it clear that the Lord can fulfil all our needs and is committed to being the One who truly fulfils the deepest needs in a person. A person who has chosen to remain single, to be more useful as a worker in His vineyard, trusts that the Lord will be like a spouse, and that he or she will be complete in Christ. This is a high and honourable calling!

3. Involuntary Singleness

This is the kind of singleness that is enforced upon a person by others. Jesus touches on this when he responds to the question from the religious leaders regarding marriage and divorce. When He gives His reply, His disciples respond as follows:

'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.' Jesus replied, 'Not

everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.' (Matthew 19:10-12)

Jesus lists three kinds of eunuchs:
– Those who are **born eunuchs** (genetic defect or birth disorder)
– Those who are **made eunuchs** by others (through castration)
– Those who **choose to live as eunuchs** (voluntary singleness)

The first is the result of a birth defect that cannot be changed. Nature, in its fallen state, has decided beforehand that a man (in this case) would not be able to procreate or consummate a marriage. They are, by birth, predestined to a life of singleness. However, they obviously can marry and become one emotionally and spiritually, but will not be able to consummate that marriage and bring forth children. This would also result in their marriage partner not being able to enjoy the physical aspect of marriage. Nevertheless, two people could agree on this matter. Just think of Nick Vuljicic who has married but will never be able to give his wife a hug or a helping hand. Yet he and his wife are very happily married and have together accepted the physical limitations in their relationship.

At this point, we might also consider those who are same-sex attracted and have come to repentance and restoration in Christ but continue to experience undesirable same-sex attraction. They might choose to remain single, springing from their commitment to Jesus.

> Are you able to accept being single for the rest of your life if it would serve the Kingdom?

The second is the result of a violation inflicted upon a man by others. This often happened in the ancient empires. Those who served at the king's court were castrated so they would not interfere with the royal harem. Though it was not considered a punishment but rather a high honour to serve in the royal court, it was still dehumanising and cruel. This was most likely inflicted upon Daniel and his three friends, and on Nehemiah. Diseases, war and accidents can also be a cause of this condition.

Jesus finishes His statement to His disciples with a challenge: 'Are you able to accept this? Are you able to accept being single for the rest of your life if it would serve the Kingdom? That is, if God would ask this of you?'

The third has already been addressed under the heading 'voluntary singleness'.

4. Singleness Resulting from Death

Marriage is ‘until death do us part.’ When this happens to the spouse, the widow or widower stays behind and has once again become single. Because death dissolves the marriage covenant, the remaining spouse is free to remarry. However, the Bible does address this matter: ‘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) The instruction is simply: within the family of believers, a widow or widower is free to remarry but can and should only marry another believer. However, he or she does not need to remarry.

Paul also gives the following instruction to the believers in the church in Corinth: ‘Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.’ (1 Corinthians 7:8) Paul too remained unmarried to be more useful to the Lord in carrying out his apostolic commission, to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

5. Singleness Resulting from Marriage Breakdown

This is probably the most painful cause of singleness. It is not the purpose of this article to address the causes of marriage breakdowns or in which scenarios it is permissible to remarry. The point is that divorcees find themselves alone again and possibly not free to remarry. Singleness resulting from divorce, especially for the partner who did not want the divorce, is extremely painful. Not only for both the marriage partners, but also for any children involved in the breakdown.

To remain single in such a circumstance is a commitment that the man or woman makes to Jesus, trusting that He will fulfil their needs in every aspect of life.

> Do you believe that the Lord is in your singleness?

It is a profound testimony to make such a commitment for the following reasons:

– If children are involved, they will witness that the marriage covenant and vows that were made are lasting and cannot be dissolved by a divorce.
– It has a powerful message for the whole church family as well as the unbelieving onlookers.
– There is always an opportunity for restoration of the broken relationship. The abandoned spouse keeps the door to restoration open.
– The commitment to the Lord to be one’s sole completer and provider in every area of one’s life is also a powerful testimony.
– It is a strong testimony of commitment to the teachings of the Bible.

The Challenge to the Unmarried

Do you believe that the Lord is in your singleness? Whether you are fulfilled in your present status or not, it is very important to accept your present situation as from God. He will use it in your life and use you in the lives of others. Once you are totally fulfilled in Jesus and in His love, sustained and satisfied by his presence, even a marriage partner will not fully satisfy you. Your singleness is from the Lord and you need to seek to glorify Him in and through this. Perhaps you do all this already, which is fantastic, as he will use you as a source of encouragement to the unmarried folk around you.

Every Member is Important

I would like to close again with what Paul writes to the believers in the church in Corinth: 'Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.' (1 Corinthians 7:8-9) As a church family, we are called to encourage and build up every member of our faith family. Every member has a wonderful opportunity to practice hospitality and, in this way, we may even entertain angels unawares! We need to open our hearts and homes to those who are lonely in the situation that they find themselves in and remember that God sets the lonely into families (Psalm 68:6). Are you that family?