Reflections on Christian Loneliness [1]

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I previously wrote an article on Christian singleness [2]. It highlighted a metaphorical elephant in the room—that while there is an expectation to be in a relationship and settle down, this does not happen for all Christians. Indeed, the expectation is not a biblical one, but rather societal. I was encouraged by how well the article was received. Today I want to touch on a related topic: that of Christian loneliness.

The topics of singleness and loneliness should not be confused. One can be single, but through church, family and friends not feel particularly lonely. On the other hand, as many introverts would tell you, one can be surrounded by people (perhaps even be in a relationship) and still feel lonely.

Being a Christian and feeling lonely is a great *faux pas*, especially for the church. One can argue that someone may have a God given mandate to be single in order to do gospel work. However, the Bible, and especially the New Testament, is clear that community—the taking care and encouragement of others—is fundamental to church life. Yet I believe that many Christians feel lonely and isolated (which is highly ironic).

I would like to explore three areas of Christian loneliness. These are just my perspectives. In this article I would primarily like to raise awareness that there are people who feel this way... at least one who thought about it enough to be able to write about it.

Loneliness in Community

A Christian who feels lonely in community is a serious charge against a church. As mentioned, the book of Acts and the epistles are full of examples and pleas for church to be inclusive, nurturing and in harmony. Jesus also went out to those who were poor, oppressed and lonely. Even in the Old Testament, the theme of community is big1.

The truth is that humans are humans: there are certain people whom you associate with, understand and appreciate better than others. This is normal with our limited cognitive abilities. It also has to do with personality and a plethora of cultural influences. In small churches, it can be difficult to find people with whom you "click". For example, if a group of people have a tight bond because they share a passion for contact sports (which is a significant touch point in my culture outside—and sometimes even inside—of church), then I am always going to be on the fringe of that group, even if they try to welcome me in, because our superficial, our extramural, activities do not overlap. This disconnect can (and has) led to surprisingly awkward silences. Likewise, if you have a passion for tabletop games or interpretive dance or carpentry, and no-one in church shares that passion, then you are likely going to look outside of church for companionship with someone who does.

Now, these behaviours are not very Christian-like (although also not always necessarily wrong). We

should be able to associate with all people in the church family and encourage and be encouraged by them. This is definitely something that each of us needs to strive for and there is no excuse for excluding or dismissing someone. That said, we are finite; we do have limited capabilities, faculties and time. Those of us who are introverts can establish strong and meaningful personal bonds, but with a small amount of people. Then, when confronted with our mandate to be open with all, we shrink, and are exposed as members of the church who effectively have a disability—our very personalities.

This tension between our human limitations and and our emotional needs, and our mandate in the church is something that each of us—whether introvert, extrovert[2] or whatever psychological or cultural label you are willing to wear—will need to work on until we are perfected for perfect communion when we are reunited with our Lord.

Loneliness in Ministry

Loneliness in ministry can be experienced by people who otherwise do not feel lonely. In many, if not most, churches, there are heavy lifters who answer the call of some or other ministries. It could even be the pastor. They recognise that the work is important and that others rely on it. They also realise the burden that a call to ministry can be. It could be a single person trying to head up a homeless ministry or going door-to-door, or it could be band leader who feels that no-one else is truly committed, or it could even be a pastor trying to run a church by himself but drowning in a sea of admin (before even getting to basic ministerial duties). Calls for others to help and assist fall on deaf ears. Their eyes might seem genuinely pained, or their face could be deadpan when giving their excuse for not being able to participate[3]. In the end, only one person has felt the unrelenting call to be faithful to that ministry, although they are wearied by it (whether it be that the weekly work is too much, that there is no-one to alleviate the stress, or vacations which cannot be taken).

Not everyone has all gifts and can serve in all capacities. However, there is also a school of thought that say that unless you have tried (and failed), one does not have a legitimate excuse for considering yourself unfit for a particular kind of ministry.

Loneliness in ministry is also not limited to institutionalised ministries. It can also be in interests such as theology or apologetics. As a self-confessed theology nerd [3], I have noticed the strange glances that I get from many people in the church when I talk about things "only" pastors should know about and discuss amongst themselves[4]. As an apologist, I share C. S. Lewis's desire [4][5] for wanting to draw closer to God through learning, thinking, even obsessing. But, some people simply do not think that "cerebral Christianity" is important (even though I would say that it is, in fact, vital). And it is difficult to connect with people at a meaningful level if they do not share your most significant obsession.

Loneliness in Mission

This may seem very similar to the point on loneliness in ministry. However, I want to draw a distinction between discrete *ministries*, and *living a missional* life. A life of loneliness in mission can tie back in to a life of singleness. A husband and a wife can encourage, rebuke and challenge each other when necessary in every facet of life: they are accountable to each other before God. But if you have no-one with whom you are living your life, to whom are you accountable? It could be your family (like a parent or a sibling), or friends in church or a pastor with whom you are exceptionally close. But if those people do not share the same need as you do to be encouraged, rebuked and challenged (because it is perhaps being fulfilled by a spouse), you will always feel like coming off it a little cheated. While mission *can* be done by oneself, our nature to want to be in community and in relationships will always leave us with a longing for deep and meaningful Christian companionship[6]. Two people in some sort of relationship typically have different perspectives and personalities, and such a relationship can bring roundedness to a situation (and, when doing life, every situation). Having to only ever rely on your own perspectives and wisdom will at some point lead to missed opportunities and regrets.

Conclusion

> The Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." — Genesis 2:18

I do not believe that God created Eve because Adam was lonely. Adam, who was God's "good" workmanship did not have some unforeseen deficiency in him which God needed to remedy. Rather, the above is a divine mandate: man will be in community, man will collaborate, man will share and build up *with others like him*. Therefore when we have longing, when we are in the grips of loneliness, it is not a blemish that we have left over from creation: it is because of the Fall, where not only our relationship with God was broken, but with each other as well.

God takes loneliness seriously. We see this in the example of the story of Leah (Genesis 29:21–35). This does not mean that we can make an idol out of relationships. Rather, as Christians we need to remember that, first and foremost, our relationship with our heavenly Father has been restored through Jesus. We may not always feel like that is enough (God *did* mandate human interpersonal relationships even while He and Adam still had an untainted relationship), but it (and His future promises for us) is something from which we can draw strength.

The purpose of human relationships—of love [5]—is to give, not to receive. We need to recognise that, if we can give more, we should (we may not even think that we can afford it). We also need to recognise that some people do not have as much to give as others. With money, we might be able to guess how much someone can afford to tithe by looking at their clothes or their car. With an emotional investment, the only way to know, ironically, would be to get to know them really well and understand their capacities and needs.

- 1. One could argue that this was cultural to the Israelites. However, God does provide instructions about hospitality, for example, so that none may feel and be excluded.
- 2. Introversion and extroversion are defined, technically speaking, in terms of emotional transactions when interacting with other people, not in terms of "shyness" and "boisterousness". An introvert *expends* energy when interacting with other people, especially groups, and they *gain* energy from solitude and quiet reflection. Extroverts *gain* energy from interacting with other people and *lose* energy when spending time alone.
- 3. Not everyone can or should help out with every invitation to ministry that they receive. People need to exercise wisdom. If someone is already tied up with other ministries and a family (which is also a type of ministry), they could very well end up damaging themselves and their other commitments by taking on something new. Those asking for help need to recognise that those whom they approach may legitimately not be able to help. And those being approached need to recognise the need—doing so will mean that the conversation will not end by absolving oneself from responsibility, but that a heartfelt understanding of the situation will mean that they can suggest or be on the look out for others who may be able to assist in that ministry.
- 4. I have been mistaken for a seminary student many times even though I have never had formal theological training.
- 5. This quote, which I attributed to William Lane Craig because it is a direct quotation, is a paraphrase of C. S. Lewis.
- 6. Which, incidentally, is the reason why Christians are mandated to marry other Christians. Indeed, a Christian married to a non-Christian can also experience deep missional loneliness.
- . Photo credit: Ross Pollack [6].

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