An Appeal to Pastors, Friends and Family Speaking to Singles [1]

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Words are powerful; never before have we been so aware of the reach and impact of words. What someone *means* may not be what someone else *interprets*. In this article I would like to raise awareness of how certain things, said to single people (who are discontent with their singleness and desire a partner), are not helpful or constructive, even if spoken with the best of intentions and optimism.

We live in a time where many people have become hypersensitive to how things are said. Causing offence has become a mortal sin. Gone are the days of careless, off-the-cuff remarks without being held accountable for them. I am hesitant to join the ranks of those who perpetuate this culture of hypersensitivity over offence for every little slight, even if unintended. I also have sympathies with the people who have those best of intentions: there is bit of narcissism to expect everyone to have the perspectives and sensitivities which oneself does (while oneself, in turn, still lacks many). My purpose in writing this article is not to vent past instances of offence taking, but simply to raise awareness that there can exist a disconnect between what is said to a single person (with the best of intentions), and what they interpret.

"When You Marry"

The first issue is expressing the certainty that someone will marry. The gospel never promises that everyone who wants to be will be happily married. Despite Paul's letter to the Corinthians, not everyone who wants to marry will (be able to) find a marriage partner. In the same way, not everyone who is poor will find material wealth; not everyone who is sick will be healed; not everyone who has an ambition will see it fulfilled; all this, despite the best of efforts. Expecting marriage is nothing more than a kind of prosperity gospel. Only God knows the future, and only God can reveal it. Unless one has been given a prophetic vision, being certain of someone else's future is callous and arrogant, insofar as that one projects their expectations, perhaps even their own story, unto others. This is not constructive. I am very much open to the idea of people receiving prophetic visions of the future, but most people do not claim such a thing. We live in a world which has bought into the Disney dream that everyone deserves, and will find, their prince or princess. But this is a pipe dream, and nothing like this is promised in the Scriptures. There simply does not exist a universal promise made to all people to this effect. True, most people will marry. (Many of those marriages will not be easy in any case.) But one cannot use this statistic to express certainty, despite what you think or wish for someone to deserve.

"Finding a Spouse"

Another issue is the language of "finding" a spouse. The intention may be innocuous enough, but for those who have approached prospective partners, and been rejected, this is not a kind or helpful thing to say. The only way a man can "find" a wife1, I say ironically, is on websites where one can order Russian brides2. Approaching a prospective partner requires that they reciprocate. If they do not, there is little or nothing one can do; often it is not even that person's "fault" for being rejected3. Such rejection is never nice, and using language which downplays the emotional risks and turmoil of seeking a marriage partner is not helpful.

Conclusion

Comforting singles who do not want to be so is difficult. It could very well be that God intends for them to remain single for very good reasons; and that they may even still find contentment. We cannot know this for certain. Singles need to be comforted with the gospel when necessary, encouraged by the church (and not in the sense of perpetuating the aforementioned platitudes) and, importantly, challenged to be busy and outward looking, and not make their struggle their defining identity.

Any other suggestions would be welcome.

- 1. This is apart from arranged marriages, such as are found in India today where the parents and family act as a screening and dating service provider. This method is foreign, misunderstood and frowned upon in Western culture (if for no other reason than being a strange idea).
- 2. I shudder to think what a woman would need to do or where she would need to go to "find" a husband in this sense...
- 3. Indeed, this person may have, for whatever reason, have rejected others themselves. "Finding" a partner is not purely a pragmatic exercise [2]; there is an emotional component as well and sometimes one simply cannot respond to a particular person.

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