# Reflections on (Western) Christian Singleness **[1]**

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Thinking about singleness in the Christian context has never been clear-cut. Jesus and the apostle Paul defied the cultural norms of the day by saying that it is good for a person not to marry (e.g. 1 Corinthians 7:32–33). While it is also still good to marry (1 Corinthians 7:38), Christianity brought a new consideration into the picture: that of ministry (that is, the proclamation of the gospel). A person who is not married has less to worry about than someone who is (1 Corinthians 7:35). Of course a person who is married can still evangelise or be in another ministry (not to mention that having a family itself is a ministry), but a single person has more free time which can be devoted to ministry. However, in Western culture there is a seemingly unquestioned expectation that people—especially within the church—should marry. This can create some tension or even friction, to which I as someone who is single can testify. In this article I want to lay bare some of my thoughts around singleness and I hope that it could lead to some good discussion around a topic which is not (in my experience) spoken about much in the church.

A very good resource on a wide range of topics regarding God, families and the thinking around that is a book called *God, Marriage and Family*1. But even it, in the only chapter dedicated to the topic of singleness, admits that

> Post-adolescent singles are probably the most overlooked social group in the contemporary Western church. While larger congregations typically do have "college and career" ministries (some of which seem to operate at least in part as church-sponsored dating services), and while the topic of singleness occasionally engenders a brief chapter in a book on marriage and the family (witness the current example), for the most part singles have been marginalized within the modern church.

It goes on to give a good, although mostly dry and academic, treatment of the topic. I would encourage other people to read it; however it is necessary for me to admit that doing so has provided me with much information, but few answers (or, at least, has raised a number of questions proportional to those answered). The chapter also focusses on singleness in the broadest possible sense. This means that it considers unmarried post-adolescents, divorced people, widowed people, and others. In this article I have the first of these groups in mind. This is because that is the group with whom I associate. Perhaps some of the points will be applicable to other groups as well, but people who are part of those groups will likely have many other and different issues with which they

additionally have to deal.

## Full Disclosure

I am writing this article as a single male adult. While still reasonably young, I am at an age where the number of singles is decreasing rapidly. I do have a desire in my heart to marry, and have dated. In my romantic misadventures I have made mistakes from which I had to learn. I frequently think about my singleness and wonder about the implications thereof. I trust that I shall be able to carry the cost of singleness (see below) if this can be clearly set out as my destiny, but no such clear revelation has been given to me, and as such I continue in my search for a marriage partner. This article reflects some of the things which I have been thinking of for a while now.

## Finding Encouragement as a Single Christian

My original motivation for wanting to write an article on this topic was the fact that there seems to be little serious encouragement for singles in the church, especially from the pulpit. Most of the encouragement is of the form of "be patient, God will provide in His good time". This presupposes that God does in fact plan for you to marry. And then you come across things like Mark Driscoll's 9 Reason why Real Marriage is for Singles [2]. I am confident that Real Marriage [3] is indeed valuable for singles (just as I found *God, Marriage and Family* invaluable in my thinking about the related subjects), but reason number three basically says "It prepares you, because you will most likely be married one-day!"2.

In the churches which I have seen it seems to be an unspoken requirement that the pastor be married. This might be because of verses such as 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6. The seminary which is associated with CESA, George Whitfield College [4] (or GWC for short), is sometimes jokingly referred to as "Get a Wife Collage", which I think is telling, especially when I consider some friends who have attended or are attending it. I find it difficult to think of examples of leaders in the denomination who are not married or at least not in a relationship. Most are married and have children. The best I know of is Andrew Sach from the UK who visited South Africa last year to speak at the Equip conference [5]; he was briefly mentioned as serving in full time ministry and single.

Again, I have received invaluable instruction about singleness, relationships and the family from church leaders who are married. But it does feel like there is a gap in the communication when the other person has the (spoken or unspoken) expectation that one day "you'll be fine as well (so don't worry)". This can be frustrating, especially considering the concerns around singleness which I address in the below sections.

## To Marry or not to Marry?

There are statements in the New Testament which indicate that not everyone is destined to marry. For example, in Matthew we find this passage:

> His disciples said to him, "If this is the case of the man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry." But he said to them, "Not all men can receive this saying, but those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. He who is able to receive it, let him receive it."
>
> Matthew 19:10–12

Here the word "eunuchs" probably does not refer to people who have been castrated, but to people who keep themselves from marriage (and sexual immorality) "for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake". It is "given" to certain people. With language such as this, one might assume that it would be obvious

who are to be single and not. Perhaps the person destined to be single would be free from the desire to marry (I do know such people, although admittedly they are mostly still relatively young in their adulthood). I was once speaking with a friend about the fact that God may require of us to be single for our entire lives (we were both single at the time). She replied by saying that surely God would not put the desire in one's heart to be married if they were not destined for it. However a few months ago I found one counter-example to this. Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher in the 19th century. He is considered to be the first existentialist philosopher. He was also a Christian. Kierkegaard was madly in love [6] with the young Regine Olsen, who was also infatuated by him [7]. After being friends for a couple of years, Kierkegaard proposed to Regine, who accepted. However, after a few months Kierkegaard began to have doubts about the prospect of marriage. He felt that being married would distract him from his work and, ultimately, his service towards God. He broke off the engagement, thereby devastating Regine. Even her family pleaded with him to reconsider. But Kierkegaard treated Regine coldly and distanced himself from her. His diaries, however, reveal his true feelings: that he indeed continued to love her. But he also wrote

> I have no alternative than to suppose that it is God's will that I prepare for my examination and that it is more pleasing to Him that I do this than actually coming to some clearer perception by immersing myself in one or another sort of research, for obedience is more precious to Him than the fat of rams.

Søren and Regine's story is truly tragic. Regine eventually married another man, but Kierkegaard never married. While he had the desire for marriage, it was never fulfilled for him. One might attempt to find solace in the fact that this was an isolated, perhaps delusional case. But I am sure that there are others. Indeed, a hauntingly similar thing happened to two friends of mine. It shakes one when you do see it happen, and you have to ask yourself: am I destined to remain single, and has God chosen not to make this path easy for me? This would be no different from a Christian who has homosexual attractions. They might have attractions which they cannot help, and they know that they must remain single, and perhaps lonely, to live out God's will for their life. If this is to be reasonably expected from people in the Christian church who struggle with homosexual attractions, why can it not be reasonably expected of people who "struggle" with heterosexual attractions? Yet other people still that I know set out with a firm conviction that theirs is a missionary's life and that to be married would be a burden to their calling, only to eventually find themselves in the pangs of loneliness and longing.

I am sure that there are people serving who do feel content with their singleness, despite what society and the community says, and I am happy for them. They would perhaps not have the concerns and issues I lay out in this article as it is a non-issue for them. But I suspect that many, if not the most, of the single young adults in a church do have issues and concerns, and would prefer to be someday married.

## Singleness as a Burden

> What is more, the only call of God that Western Christians fear more than the call to missions is the call to a life of celibacy.3

One can feel quite sheepish if one has been really wrestling with the issue of one's own singleness and would like to share it with others. This is not always easy to do—for example, trying to share it in a prayer meeting alongside someone asking for prayers because someone in their family has been diagnosed with cancer, or someone who has lost their job. And if one finds oneself in a position where you are not in a disciplining relationship with another more mature Christian (or the person with whom you are is for whatever reason not receptive to the topic), then this can quickly become a burden which you have to carry by yourself and mull over (or drown out with outside distractions, whichever is required). And as a young adult you can easily find yourself in this position, because the culture emphasises marriage, and exalts the virtues of a life of devoted singleness only as some theoretical virtue. Perhaps it is even secretly discouraged, for the fear that it might lead to a revival

of some of the monastic ideas, or other Roman Catholic ideas from which the reformation broke away?

And as one thinks about these things and internalise them, as one wonders whether you are destined for marriage or not, as you think about what other people are thinking, and as you think about (perhaps) a love lost, you additionally begin to wonder whether this is an idol in your life (usually a possibility which you are made aware of after a sermon or reading a book). This furthers the burden. Now you are no longer only battling your own fears and confusions, but your fears about your fears and confusions as well! Does this then force a person to commit have to "commit" to one cause or the other? To resolutely choose singleness, or to perhaps take a pragmatic (see below) and perhaps even forceful approach to seeking a potential marriage partner?

## Benefits and Cost

> Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun.
>
> Ecclesiastes 9:9 (NIV)

As mentioned earlier, being married can be a hindrance to evangelistic and discipling work. For the gain of one very intimate relationship, many other inter-personal relationships have to be sacrificed to one degree or another. You are also now no longer responsible for (and for certain things, accountable to) only yourself, but to at least one other person (depending on whether you have children or not). There are time, emotional and monetary constraints which would not otherwise have been there. However, there is the prospect of life long companionship, and of raising children. But even these things are not guaranteed. Perhaps, as a couple, you find out that you are unable to conceive children. Or you might lose your marriage partner (early) because of an accident or illness. Perhaps they do not die, but become disabled and unable to take care of themselves. Perhaps you have to begin feeding and cleaning them as they just stare helplessly and desperately back at you. Or perhaps your spouse becomes unhappy or otherwise unable to respond to you[4].

A person who continues in a life of singleness will be spared these things, and will be able to devote more time to ministry work and the pursuit of personal goals and dreams. But that person has many other challenges which he or she must face. One who is fortunate may have many friendships, but probably never the sustained companionship which is found in a spouse. Such a person is also likely to see a deterioration in the quality of friendships as more and more friends eventually marry and settle down, or the move to different cities and countries. Their lives become busy and while one sees them once in a while, it is not as frequent as it used to be. You may have a pet, but otherwise no-one will be excited when you come home, or treat you with a special dinner or a massage. And later, as the body begins to deteriorate, and the number of funerals which you attend begin to increase, you have to ask yourself who will notice if you have a heart attack or stroke while alone at home. And when you finally check yourself in to your last home your neighbour will likely still have the prospect of grandchildren coming to visit (or at least the hope thereof), but you wait on no-one.

## Singleness and (Possible) Segregation

I find it tragic that many churches hold to an idea along the lines of "if a man and a woman get too close emotionally, they will eventually likely end up sleeping together". I am sure that there is a very good reason for this attitude: countless people have doubtlessly fallen in this trap. But looking at the friendships which I have had with people of the opposite sex, I can attest that this is not necessarily the case; in fact, it is not even necessarily the case that romantic feelings develop. But in churches I sometimes get the feeling that such close friendships are subtly discouraged; perhaps especially amongst girls and young women[5]. Sometimes people are segregated along gender lines[6]. This can lead to awkwardness in certain social situations where there is no need for it to be[7]. Now I am not saying that all caution should be thrown to the wind in this regard, but as with so many things in the

Christian life, wisdom and a concerning spirit is necessary, rather than a blanket rule of always having to mistrust the motivations of the other person (and yourself!). And if someone has settled on a life of devoted singleness, would this person always be relegated to preferably always only have individual fellowship and discipleship with people of the same sex? What would the room for interaction with people of the opposite sex on a one-to-one basis be?

## A Pragmatic Approach?

The student church which I attended taught a very pragmatic approach to finding a marriage partner. Only four Biblical requirements are set forth for a marriage partner:

- your marriage partner must be a (living) human being,
- your marriage partner must be of the opposite sex,
- your marriage partner must not already be married, and
- your marriage partner must be a Christian.

These four requirements leave little hindrances in approaching any other single person in your church as a potential marriage partner. The idea was to focus on the *work* which a marriage requires: gooey, lovey-dovey feelings might carry a couple through the initial courtship, but there will be times when those feelings have left you and then you need to have the correct way of thinking about marriage8. There is of course nothing wrong with the feelings of being in love, but one should not be blinded by them. Married life can become hard and one needs to understand that a Hollywood notion of love [8] simply is not going to carry you through the tough times.

But is there perhaps a problem with being too pragmatic when considering someone as a possible marriage partner? What does one do when someone seems like a perfectly good potential marriage partner, but you are simply not attracted to that person? What if the other person is perhaps less pragmatic and rejects you? Also, any relationship involves compromises and one needs to weigh them. Are you willing to sacrifice some of your future dreams and aspirations, as well as your current habits and comforts, to be with a particular person? And will that person similarly be happy in making similar sacrifices? Does one meticulously think over these things and try to plan them out (with our limited foresight of the future), or is there a point where we simply trust in feelings and emotions, as well as God's love and providence? And where would that point be?

## The Future Hope

> [9]One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, who were loaded with the seven last plagues came, and he spoke with me, saying, "Come here. I will show you the wife, the Lamb’s bride." [10]He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ... [22]I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. [23]The city has no need for the sun, neither of the moon, to shine, for the very glory of God illuminated it, and its lamp is the Lamb. [24]The nations will walk in its light. The kings of the earth bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. ... [27]There will in no way enter into it anything profane, or one who causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.
>
> Revelation 21:9–10, 22–24, 27

Jesus taught that no-one would marry (or be married) in heaven (Matthew 22:30). For a long time this always seemed like a slight anti-climax to me: it certainly does away with the idea of loving someone forever! While I do not know how it will be like on the new earth, I suspect that everyone will be sharing with each other in perfect love (as there would be no sin and no time constraints), so there would be no need for marriage9. This seems like a great prospect and I am looking forward to getting to know my brothers and sisters and sharing in the glory of God with all of them for all eternity! We are often so entrapped by the desires and expectations of this world that we forget

what is coming.

## Conclusion

I have presented some personal thoughts on the topic of Christian singleness. Some were frustrations, other were observations, while also briefly describing my own position. I had no single point which I wanted to carry across to you, the reader, but I do hope that this article in some way contributes to an oft-neglected topic. I can imagine that other single brothers and sisters wrestle with many of the same issues, but also with many others which are particular to their situation. I hope that a discussion around these matters will prove to be fruitful.

I realise that this article had a somewhat negative tone. That probably is a reflection of where I am at the moment. But perhaps these concerns are too deep to be considered from this vantage point. Perhaps it is a consequence from being single in our Western culture. Perhaps we are looking too hard at the trees of our own desires and expectations to see the forest of the Kingdom of Heaven.

*Soli Deo gloria*.

- 1. Kostenberger, Andreas J., and David W. Jones. God, Marriage, and Family - Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation *[9]*. 2nd ed. Wheaton, Illinois, USA: Crossway Books, 2010.
- 2. Reason number 9 ties into this: "If you come to our church, maybe you will find another single Christian and then you can marry!" This sounds like what Köstenberger referred to as a "church sponsored dating service", which reinforces his point on how the topic really is overlooked even when teachers attempt not to.
- 3. *God, Marriage and Family*, p. 167.
- 4. A friend of mine is married to a person who suffers from depression. While a devout Christian and always looking for positives and encouraging others, my friend endures mostly silently with a lacklustre, unenthusiastic spouse—not because of traits or choice, but because of a crippling illness. It is heartbreaking to watch and one can but pray for God's mercy and kindness on them both.
- 5. Another such discouragement supposedly is to not let men know that they have feelings for them if the man has not made the first move. I think this is to guard against "desiring your husband" (Genesis 3:16). But I fail to see how this gives a woman charge over a relationship, especially if there is none yet! Rather I think that a woman giving an indication to a man of here interest can open up dialogue and opportunity where there would otherwise only be heartache and longing.
- 6. Although admittedly I can see the benefits of doing this in certain situations, but not necessarily in as many situations as it ends up being done.
- 7. I am of course referring to one-man-one-woman relationships. Being in groups is encouraged and is a good way to get to know a bunch of people better at one time. But there is a certain connection which can only be made with people on an individual level.
- 8. Especially in contemporary culture which is very much focussed on the self and where it is sometimes encouraged to forsake something like matrimonial promises in order to go find happiness and self-fulfilling elsewhere.
- 9. We would also be fully united with Christ. It would therefore no longer be necessary to have marriage as a mere symbol of the union, love and devotion between Christ and the church.

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