

Biblical Pillars for a Family Foundation
Pillar Seven: Narrow My Bed, Wide My World

The World of Christian Single Adults

Introduction

The title comes from Luci Swindoll's book by that title, written over 30 years ago. At age 50, she was still single. She came to realize, first because the scripture teaches it, and second because her experience confirmed it, that she was fully capable of living as a celibate *Single Adult* all her life and have a full, purposeful and joyous life – even though she would like to have been married.

There is a pressure on singles added to the desire they may already have. Once that pressure was public reputation – “spinsters” were looked down upon, and “bachelors” were viewed as cads or as men with questioned masculinity. Now the pressures are the **cultural assumption** that every person old enough to want to be sexually active should be, that homosexual behavior is acceptable, that living in a series of sexual relationships or an unmarried sexual relationship is normal and appropriate. Each of those were rejected out of hand by most people only 50 years ago, but following the disenchantment with authority in the 1960's, all such public opposition melted away. The result is that single Christians now are faced not only with their own desires for being coupled, but they are directly or indirectly encouraged to live immorally.

There are two opposite problems when dealing with single adults.

One is ignoring them. 47% of adults 18+ in the United States are unmarried (2012 US Census Bureau). If we ignore them, we do so at the risk of God's judgment. James 2:1-4 reads, *“My brothers and sisters, practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by not favoring one person over another. For example, two men come to your worship service. One man is wearing gold rings and fine clothes; the other man, who is poor, is wearing shabby clothes. Suppose you give special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say to him, “Please have a seat.” But you say to the poor man, “Stand over there,” or “Sit on the floor at my feet.” Aren't you discriminating against people and using a corrupt standard to make judgments?”*

The passage could easily be rewritten to say, *“For example, two men/two women come to your worship service. One is married and has a son and a daughter. The other is single and close to 40 years old. Suppose you give special attention to the married one and say, “Hey, it's nice to meet you.” After some conversation, you invite him/her to your community group or out for a meal. But to the single, you say, “Hello. Nice to see you” and then turn away. Aren't you discriminating against people and using a corrupt standard to make judgments?”* We cannot afford to ignore the huge single population of single adults in our midst since they are a big part of our “Jerusalem” (cf., Acts 1:8). God wants to minister to them through us.

A second is catering to singles and/or creating a single subculture. Many churches, in an effort to reach single adults – laudable and biblical – have supported the segmentation that often happens with singles by trying to make classes and studies and social outings largely around the ‘single’ world. It's the same mistake we have made with young people. What *often* follows, though not necessarily, biblical doctrine takes a decidedly back seat to promoting and catering to single adults – especially in the case of looking the other way with unmarried sex, minimizing divorce and its consequences and supporting remarriage for almost everyone.

To do those things is not only to leave aside significant scriptural teachings, but is to create an alternate worldview other than that prescribed in the Bible. It is to leave the created order of one man, one woman for life and to ignore the fact that God has made his world to operate around families, churches, communities, nations predicated on marriage. We live in a “married world” for a reason.

I. Biblical Data on the Unmarried

- A. Genesis 2:18 – It is not good to be alone.
- B. 1 Corinthians 6:18 – Flee *immorality*, which can be defined as sexual interactions between people not married to each other (includes pornography). See also 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4; Hebrews 13:4
- C. 1 Corinthians 7:1-2 – To reduce immorality, it is good to have a spouse (except see “D” and “F” directly below).
- D. 1 Corinthians 7:7 & 7:32 – If possible, being single is better because it opens the door for more focus, time and energy to devote to ministry.
- E. 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 – If someone is unmarried, it is better for them to be married than to burn with sexual lust.
- F. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 – People are not to abandon their spouse. But if they do (for example, because of the spouse’s abusiveness), they are to remain unmarried from then on. Or they can be reconciled (for example, after the spouse has addressed his/her abusive ways).
- G. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 – If someone is married to an unbeliever who desires to leave the marriage, the believer is not bound. The issue of “bound to what” is a matter of debate.
- H. 1 Timothy 5:9-16 – A widow is to be cared for by the church as a whole if she is too old to work, if she has no family who can help her and if she has distinguished herself as a servant within the body of Christ.

I. Synthesis

- A. “Singleness” can occur in four ways:
 - (1) As a calling or estate God gives someone which frees them to live a full life of ministry (1 Cor. 7:7, 32), obviously with other close relationships since we are members of one another (1 Corinthians 12:12)
 - (2) As a time before an adult marries (in NT, female called a virgin and no name for a male)
 - (3) As the result of being widowed (female name in NT is widow, but there is no name for a male widow. The closest word used is “unmarried.”)
 - (4) As a result of being divorced.
- B. Some basic biblical principles on sex and singleness:
 - (1) Sex is a gift to married couples for procreation, unity and enjoyment. There are no biblical grounds for single adults being sexually active.
 - (2) Anyone who is single should use it to maximize their potential for ministry to seniors, children, youth, other adults or one’s own children, either in reaching out to those without Christ or to building up the Body.
 - (3) If one is struggling with lust, marriage is better than that.
 - (4) If one has divorced their spouse, they are to remain single or reconcile with that spouse.
 - (5) If one has an unbelieving spouse who divorces them, we are to be at peace with them. We are no longer *bound* (interpretive decision here: bound to what? OPTION 1: to a marriage covenant (*and therefore possibly eligible for remarriage*) or OPTION 2: to make things work out with them (*and therefore nothing is being said regarding eligibility for remarriage*)).

II. Other Common Issues

A. Single Women Wanting to Be Married

Excerpt from Robert Hicks (professor of pastoral theology at Seminary of the East) article, *Why Can't Men Be Men?* *Discipleship Journal*: Issue 81, May/June 1994.

"Laura desperately wanted to get married. She had attended college and then graduate school, but her heart's desire was to find the right guy and settle down. As she finished her master's degree, no husband was in sight.

When she asked me what she should do, I replied, "As much as marriage is a noble, divine institution, I do not believe it's the chief end of man." She looked a little surprised. I finally asked her, "What is the chief end of man?"

"To glorify God, of course," she answered.

"Then go, live your life to the glory of God, and don't think you can't do that without being married."

As I understand New Testament theology, the apostles had a high regard for marriage. But we must remember Jesus himself made a pivotal redefinition of what constituted "family." The New Testament family centered around those committed to doing God's will in the world (Mark 3:35). In addition, Jesus made it clear that those who can be the greatest threat to our walk with Him are those of our own household (Matthew 10:35–37).

I conclude, therefore, that the greatest thing a single woman can do about single men is to get on with her own life. Finish school, develop a career, go to the mission field, learn a new skill. Just don't wait around, thinking God can better use you married than single. Men are neither the enemy nor the end-all for single women. All of us are here to glorify God in whatever circumstance we find ourselves."

B. Men Unable to Be Men

Robert Hicks (professor of pastoral theology at Seminary of the East, author of *Uneasy Manhood*, Thomas Nelson, 1995), op cit.

First, they have had a serious lack of fathering. My father hunted and fished with me. We flew airplanes together, were on a skeet team together, and he was my biggest fan at athletic events. He wasn't a "touchy-feely" kind of man, but he was always there for me. In comparison, most young, single men I know today describe their fathers as either absent, alcoholic, or uninvolved in their lives. This lack of a father's influence has left a trail of adult "little boys" looking for someone to affirm them as men.

My second observation relates to the first. In the absence of nurturing fathers, many men have learned to look for and receive their affirmation from women. Gary, a twenty-nine-year-old CPA, still lives at home. He allows his mother to dictate his life. She scrutinizes his friends, dates, and schedule. She expects him to be with her every Sunday for dinner. Gary deeply resents the power she wields over him, but wouldn't think of moving out or risking her disapproval. Why does he live like this?

In the past, older men helped younger men define their masculinity. But in today's society, that role often goes to a woman—first to mothers and then to other women in a man's life.

As women help men define what masculinity ought to look like, men tend to become passively dependent on them. If a man's primary affirmation comes from a woman, he lives in tremendous fear of rejection and will not risk the loss of what little affirmation he may receive from her.

A third observation has to do with what I call the "evil sex" cultural perspective. As I've spoken to singles' groups around the country, I've noticed how some men just sort of "hang around" after meetings. Their shoulders curl forward, their facial expression is flat, and they display little intensity or vigor of speech or step. They strike me as hollow shells—male in gender but without manhood.

Are these men "passive" by birth or by socialization? I'm not sure. But I do know that for three decades, many in the women's movement have deemed testosterone an evil hormone and labeled the male species as the evil gender. Perhaps this large-scale, cultural perspective has produced a group of single men who have started to believe male-bashing messages.

For more on this important topic, see Robert Lewis, Raising a Modern Day Knight and Rocking the Roles and course, Men's Fraternity: Search for Authentic Masculinity.

C. What if I'm a single who has been divorced – is there hope for me?

1. We need to make sure we know what hope is and where it's from
Psalm 62:5 – *My soul, wait in silence for God alone. My hope is from Him.*
Lamentations 3:24 – *"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I have hope in Him."*
Romans 5:3-4 – *And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope...*
We ALWAYS have hope in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14).

2. On the subject of a divorced person being remarried, we just have to read what the Bible says and then decide whether or not the Lord has given us permission to remarry. (See FBC worksheet on divorce/remarriage.)

- Malachi 2:16
- Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:1-12
- Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18
- 1 Corinthians 7

3. After three months of extensive prayer, study through every passage related to divorce, reading four books, and a weekend long retreat of discussion and reflection, the FBC elders concluded that remarriage after divorce is not an option for a Christian if the previous spouse is still alive.

If a couple studies the scripture and conclude otherwise, the elders welcome them into fellowship and they are not considered different than any other person. But FBC pastors and elders cannot counsel towards marriage any divorced person whose previous spouse is still alive, nor can they perform the ceremony.

In this way, we (a) guard against the possibility that we are supporting what could be (and what the elders believe is) adultery, (b) we hold up the high place of marriage as a permanent relationship and (c) we still minister to people where they are without judgment.

D. Gift of Singleness (1 Corinthians 7:7)

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“Demystifying The Gift Of Singleness” – Albert Hsu

“The gift of singleness” is a very misunderstood phrase. Some think it means that you’ll never want to marry or have any sexual temptation. Others think the gift of singleness dooms you to a permanently lonely life.

The only scripture that refers to singleness as a gift is 1 Cor. 7:7, where Paul writes, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind” (NRSV).

This verse is as revolutionary for the issue of singleness and marriage as Galatians 3:28 (about Jew and Gentile, male and female) is for racial reconciliation and gender equality. This verse says only that some have one gift and some another. Paul does not say that those who are single receive some supernatural empowerment from the Holy Spirit to help them enjoy singleness. Nor does he say that the gift is permanent. All he says is that such a state is to be considered a gift.

Our problem is that we have often confused the gift of singleness in 1 Cor. 7 with the spiritual gifts of 1 Cor. 12. There Paul lists gifts that involve special empowerment by the Holy Spirit for some task of ministry: preaching, teaching, healing, and the like. In those cases, the Holy Spirit empowers the gift, which is what makes it a spiritual gift.

But this kind of language is entirely absent from 1 Cor. 7. Paul does not say that the Holy Spirit empowers a person to live a successful single life. And he does not include singleness in his list of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor. 12. These are two different kinds of gifts. While one might legitimately call singleness a gift, it is incorrect to call it a spiritual gift.

What does this mean? “The gift of singleness” is simply a description of an objective status. It is an exhortation to look at your marital status as a gift. If you are single, then you have the gift of singleness. If you are married, you don’t.

Here’s how we can read 1 Cor. 7:7. “I wish that all were as I myself am [single]. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind [singleness] and another a different kind [marriage]” (NRSV). Some have one gift and others have another. Some are single and some are married. If you have one gift, you don’t have the other. They’re mutually exclusive.

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase The Message reads: “Sometimes I wish everyone were single like me—a simpler life in many ways! But celibacy is not for everyone any more than marriage is. God gives the gift of the single life to some, the gift of the married life to others.” Paul tells us to acknowledge the value of both singleness and marriage. Both are gifts of God, to be honored and treasured.

Furthermore, the gift of singleness does not determine an unalterable lifelong destiny. In fact, everybody starts out with the gift of singleness. The “gift” of singleness is descriptive, not restrictive. It does not prevent singles from getting married if they so desire and circumstances permit. Neither singleness nor marriage is a permanent state; both can be temporary.

In addition, the metaphor of a gift exchange affirms that singleness and marriage are gifts of equal value. It is rude to refuse a gift, to tell a giver that you don’t want what you received and throw it back in his or her face. However, it can be entirely appropriate to exchange a gift for a different one of equal value.

Think about taking a Christmas gift back to the store. You can’t exchange it for something that’s more expensive. But you can exchange it for something of the same value.

So it is with marriage and singleness. When a single gets married, it is not a promotion, a step up to a more valued position, as though marriage were a more expensive Christmas gift. Rather, it is an exchange of one gift for another of equal value.

- Albert Hsu

E. How Does the Single Fit Into the Body?

One conviction of the FBC Family Ministry is that **Single adults participate fully in the family of God.** How does that work?

We see 1 Corinthians 7 extolling singles, *“An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs. A married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but to that you may live righteously, undivided in your devotion to the Lord.”*

- Bill B – his wife left him in his 40’s
- Mike R – never married but uses his singleness to minister in China
- The apostle Paul contrasted with the apostle Peter
- Diane’s aunt whose husband died in his sleep
- Judy – divorced

The single has many places to serve and fellowship. Some of these are apparent and some he or she has to develop or discover. Some obvious places include music ministries, men’s and women’s ministries, counseling ministries, community groups, learning centers, children’s and youth ministries. Jesus had many single women around him in his ministry, as did Paul. And both of *them* were single men.

While we all need community because we are designed by God as people needing connection, it is especially important for singles to have a community. They need the support of others and they need to be able to give to other adults. They also need the spiritual challenge and encouragement of others since without it, they could grow discouraged and fall into a variety of temptations. See Hebrews 3:12-13, 10:24-25.

III. Common Issues for Single Parents

- A. How to think through/resolve divorce if there was one
- B. How to resolve issues of absent father if that was an issue
- C. Emotional desires / loneliness / unsatisfied sexual appetites
- D. Financial pressures
- E. Children putting parents at odds if there's been divorce
- F. Time pressures of doing everything without someone to split the load
- G. Questions of propriety of marriage and of dating
- H. Feeling out of place – like a “second place citizen”
- I. Lack of perspective on decisions because no one to bat it around with

Please be sure to complete the following homework.

Homework

- A. Read pages 78-81.
- B. If you are married, consider thinking through how the larger community of which you are a part includes single adults and whether any changes might be in order.
- C. If you are single, come up with three things you gained from this lesson (including the homework reading) as either a new thought or a meaningful reminder and commit yourself to God's purposes in honoring Him and making the most of your kingdom contributions.

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Singleness: A Biblical Perspective

How Scripture challenges our cultural assumptions about singleness

By Albert Hsu

Donna, a 40-something college professor who had never married, was a member of her church's music ministry. One December, her church prepared a short take-home worship service to be used on Christmas morning.

The pastor explained from the pulpit that this service was to be a family observance, with parents lighting candles and reading blessings. No mention was made of people living alone or singles living with roommates.

"Where do singles fit into this?" Donna wondered to herself. She felt hurt and overlooked. The implication seemed to be that only married couples with families could properly celebrate Christ's birth.

At the beginning of the 20th century, about 95 percent of the adult population in America was married. Life expectancy in 1900 was only 47 years, and most people married in their teens. Divorce was nearly unheard of, and those who were widowed remarried quickly. So for the most part, being an adult was synonymous with being married. Being single was by far the exception. As a result, most churches spent most of their time and resources ministering to the needs of married couples and families.

At this end of the century, however, the landscape is quite different. Now nearly half of the adult population is unmarried. About 45 percent of today's adults have never married or are divorced, widowed, or separated. One in four adults has never married. People are staying single longer, no-fault divorce laws are available in every state, and rising life expectancies mean that widows and widowers often remain unmarried longer after the death of a spouse. Now, singleness is almost as likely to be the current status for American adults as marriage.

However, the church has been slow to give more attention to the experiences and needs of single adults. Single adults make up only 15 percent of the average evangelical church. This means most churches are failing to reach a significant segment of their surrounding community.

But many Christians are not yet convinced that their local church should focus more resources on ministry to single adults. A significant barrier to ministering to single people is the view that it is somehow "more Christian" to be married than to be single.

Biblical teachings actually challenge this all-too-common assumption. Jesus revolutionized the relationship between those who are married and those who are single. The gospel brings a new dignity to single persons, valuing them equally with those who are married.

Old Testament Background

In Old Testament times, being single was viewed as abnormal and unwelcome. Like most of the ancient world, Israelite society was a patriarchal culture centered on family clans. People derived their identity from belonging to a family by blood or marriage.

More significantly, God's people had not yet received clear assurance of an afterlife. Old Testament Jews had no guarantee of a resurrection; they only knew that at death they descended to Sheol, the grave. In the Old Testament mindset, the way to eternal life was to have descendants who would remember you and bear your name.

This is why Old Testament narratives often place great emphasis on children, especially firstborn sons. Barrenness was a curse because it meant familial extinction, the end of a family's identity and existence. For example, in Genesis 30, Rachel is distraught that Leah is able to have children while she cannot.

This could have meant that Jacob's children would be remembered as the children of Leah, while Rachel would be forgotten. This prospect was so distressing that Rachel says to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" (Genesis 30:1).

So the curse of being single was not only that one had not married, but more significantly, that one did not have children to carry on the family legacy.

Though Israelite society as a whole disregarded the single person, God used many singles in His purposes. Many of the prophets were single, such as Elijah, Elisha, and Daniel. God commanded Jeremiah not to marry or have children (Jeremiah 16:2) as part of his prophetic testimony, perhaps as a public sign that Jeremiah was placing his trust in the Lord alone, not in a spouse or family.

God also promised Old Testament singles that He would remember them even though they did not have families or offspring. He says to single women, "More are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband" (Isaiah 54:1), and to single men, "To them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons or daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off" (Isaiah 56:5). So by no means did God withhold blessings from His followers because they were unmarried. On the contrary, He gave singles specific assurance that their memory would never be forgotten.

Though God clearly cared for singles, Jewish attitudes against them had grown harsh by the time of the New Testament. According to rabbinical teachings, Jewish men were required to be married and beget children. One rabbi taught, "Any man who has no wife is no proper man." Another claimed that if a man reached the age of 20 and had not yet married, God declared, "Blasted be his bones!" All religious leaders, including priests and Levites, were married. For a rabbi to be unmarried would have been unthinkable.

Jesus: The Revolutionary Single

Jesus came into this Jewish culture and shattered all its prejudices. His teaching and His very identity were revolutionary. Not only was He Himself unmarried at the age of 30, He also proclaimed radical teachings such as, "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30). In other words, He declared that marriage is not an eternal state. The biological family is only temporary.

Jesus proclaimed that instead of having eternal life through sons to carry on the family name, people would gain eternal life through following Him. More important than having a biological family was being in the eternal family of the church. Jesus created a new family in His disciples, saying that whoever did the will of the Father in heaven was His brother and sister and mother (Matthew 12:50).

Jesus' message was so radical that following Him even took priority over marital or parental relationships. Those who left parents, children, or spouses for the sake of the kingdom would receive much blessing (Luke 18:29–30). While Jesus was not advocating the abandonment of marriage or family responsibilities, He made it clear that following Him was more important than even the dearest of human relationships. Far more important than the question "Are you married or single?" is "Are you a follower of Jesus?"

The religious leaders of Jesus' day presumed that only those who were Jewish, male, free, and married were acceptable to God. They despised Gentiles and Samaritans, scorned slaves and women, and had no place for single people.

But Jesus inaugurated a new society in which one's status before God was not dependent on earthly distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic or marital status. All who would believe, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female—and married or single—could now find salvation through Jesus.

Jesus befriended and ministered to many who were single. A number of key people in the gospel accounts were probably single, including John the Baptist, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman at the well, the widow of Nain, the woman caught in adultery, and the thief on the cross. All were welcome in the kingdom of God.

Singleness and the Church

The Apostle Paul points out that singleness provides practical opportunities and advantages over marriage. He says, “Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this” (1 Cor. 7:28). An unmarried person is “free from concern” and able to be “concerned about the Lord’s affairs” without having his or her interests divided (1 Cor. 7:32–34).

We see this in the lives of Paul’s missionary coworkers such as Silas, Luke, Timothy, Titus, Apollos, Lydia, and Phoebe, all of whom were probably single. Acts 21:9 mentions Philip’s four unmarried daughters, who all participated in a prophetic ministry. In the New Testament, married couples such as Priscilla and Aquila are the exception, not the norm.

Without demeaning marriage, the New Testament gives a new dignity to singleness. Both states are now equally valid ways to serve God. If the Old Testament seems to value marriage more than singleness, the New Testament brings them onto an even level.

The church has not always been faithful to this biblical perspective. The early church and medieval Catholicism overemphasized singleness, presuming it to be more spiritual or more holy than marriage. This resulted in the Catholic doctrine of clerical celibacy. On the other hand, most Protestant churches have overemphasized marriage and the family, believing singleness to be an unnatural state. This has resulted in modern evangelical movements that emphasize marriage and family concerns to the exclusion of singles.

Today we need to rediscover the balance of valuing both marrieds and singles. Some of the greatest leaders of church history lived their whole lives as singles: Saint Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Thomas à Kempis, Bernard of Clairvaux. More recently, Protestant leaders such as Methodist circuit rider Francis Asbury, missionaries Amy Carmichael and Helen Roseveare, and German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer were all single. C. S. Lewis was a bachelor for most of his life, married at age 57, was married for only four years, and remained a celibate widower after his wife’s death. British theologian John Stott, now in his 70s and never married, has had a significant worldwide ministry. Mother Teresa spent seven decades serving the poor in India as a single woman.

A truly Christian view of singleness and marriage will honor both without disparaging one or the other.

A Challenge

The church can best reflect a biblical perspective on singleness and marriage by encouraging all believers to live out the Christian life in their current state. Rather than pushing singles to get married, churches should help singles develop a healthy understanding of singleness, in which one does not need to marry in order to serve God or follow Jesus.

The Christian world offers plenty of books and seminars to help married couples work out marriage problems. But we don’t assume that because some marriages have problems, marriage is a bad state. Rather, marriage is a setting that can be transformed by the redemptive power of Christ. In the same way, the church can help singles face the challenges of being single in today’s world.

Whether you're single or married, it takes real commitment to live an authentic Christian life. *The challenge for all Christians—single or married—is to make a success of the single life if single and to make a success of the married life if married.* One is not better than the other; both have advantages and disadvantages. Whichever one you happen to be, do your best to be a good steward of that gift.

Following Jesus means that some things in life are more important than marital status. But as Christians, we should not think of ourselves primarily in terms of our relationship with another person, even a spouse. Whether we are single or married, our primary identity is as followers of Jesus Christ and members of the household of God.

ALBERT HSU is the author of *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness (InterVarsity)*. He is the print publicity manager at InterVarsity Press. Albert also serves as the worship team pianist at the Christian Church of Clarendon Hills, Illinois.