

Solving the Problems Of Singleness

Imagine this scene: The preacher is preaching on the Christian home. On the right sits a young woman of college age and a friend of hers who is in her mid-thirties. Neither has ever been married, but both would like to be. Near the front on the other side sits sister Jones, a ninety-five-year-old widow whose husband died thirty-five years ago; she is one of a dozen older widows present that night. In the middle section, near the back, sits sister Brown, struggling to care for three children by herself, since her husband divorced her a year ago. She is just one of several divorced women in the assembly that night. In the back is a sister who is now in her sixties and has never been married; she simply chose the single life. Then there is Mary Smith—a young woman who has never been married but has a child—who has been coming to church services for several months.

With these women in the assembly, the preacher presents a great sermon about the husband/wife relationship and thinks that he has met the needs of all the adults in his audience. Has he? Obviously, he has not connected with the single women, including those who have never married, those who have been married but whose husbands have died, and those who have been married but are now separated or divorced.

If you are inclined to say, “Not many women in the church are single,” I suggest that you think again. The intact nuclear family—husband plus wife plus children—now makes up a minority of homes in some parts of the world.

For instance, in the U.S., if you know an elementary school teacher, ask her about her students; you will probably discover that 50 percent or more of the students in the average school room are from what we would call “broken homes.” The church tends to resemble society in this respect: As more “single-parent” homes exist in society, they are more likely to be represented in the classes and assemblies of the church.

You should also count the number of widows in most congregations. Typically, a woman marries when she is young, her husband dies first, and she lives for several years alone. My wife’s grandmother lived to be 101. When her husband died, she married again. After her second husband died, she lived alone until her death. Altogether, she lived by herself longer than the total amount of time she lived with her two husbands.

What does this mean? If we are hoping to meet the needs of Christian women, we cannot limit ourselves to a discussion of the Christian woman as a wife. We must address the problems of singleness.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS OF SINGLENESS?

For some women, being single may not involve any problems, but for many it does. Let us consider these potential problems and some possible solutions.

Loneliness. The Bible says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” “Man” in that passage means

“woman” as well. A primary advantage of marriage is that it provides a partner, a companion, a friend who is always there. For many, not having such a companion leads to a lonely life. One Christian lady who had been divorced for eleven years put it like this:

The loneliness of a single parent is very hard to overcome, no matter how many friends one has or how well-meaning they are. There are the nights after the children are in bed, the times when decisions are to be made—big or small—when one needs another adult to discuss problems with, the times when one needs to discuss the children. Also, the physical contact with a mate is very much missed after one has been married.

Another Christian woman, a widow, said that her problem was “not having someone to discuss problems with when they arise—like the same day” and “not having someone to plan a certain course of action to be taken.”

Sexual desire. How can the single woman find fulfillment for her sexual desire? Paul indicates that if she cannot remain chaste in her singleness, then she ought to marry: “It is better to marry than to burn” (1 Corinthians 7:9b).

Guilt or low self-esteem. The single woman who wants to be married but is not often lacks a sense of self-worth. The divorced woman—especially the divorced woman in the church—is likely to feel guilty. She is likely to believe that she has failed in the most important relationship in life, and to feel guilty because she knows that God hates divorce. Even the widow may suffer from guilt, thinking, “If only I had done something different.”

Coping without a husband. A sense of frustration and inadequacy can come from trying to function without a mate, especially in trying to bring up children as a single parent. Trying to be both mother and father to a child is certainly not easy. One single mother said, “It tends to wear you out, being father, mother, counselor, friend, playmate, etc.” Single women may have to do for themselves what married women assume their husbands will do for them.

Alienation. The single woman sometimes experiences a feeling of rejection, of alienation, of having no place in a society largely organized around couples and families. Western culture has traditionally operated on the assumption that society is composed of families with two

parents and their children—an assumption that tends to make the single woman feel uncomfortable and unwanted. This may be especially true in the church. A Bible class is likely to be for the “young marrieds.” What about the “young unmarrieds”? When we have people in our homes to visit, we are likely to invite couples or families with children. In particular, young, single mothers (divorced, separated, unmarried, or widowed) may view themselves as being left out. Sometimes they are not welcome in the homes of their married friends because the wives see them as potential homewreckers.

HOW CAN THE PROBLEMS OF SINGLENESS BE SOLVED?

First, all must acknowledge that singleness is not a sin. God does not require a woman to marry. An unmarried mother has obviously sinned, but her sin can be forgiven if she will turn to God and seek His forgiveness. Certainly, being a widow is not sinful. Furthermore, a divorced woman who is living alone is not “living in sin,” regardless of the reason for her divorce. Therefore, those who are married should not look down on those who are single as if they somehow represented a lower species of humanity or a sinful segment of society.

Second, Christian widows should heed Paul’s instructions. In 1 Timothy 5:1–16, Paul said that older widows should fix their hope on God and pray night and day, rather than living in wanton pleasure (1 Timothy 5:5, 6). Ideally, an older widow will have been married only to one man, and her life will have been filled with good works (1 Timothy 5: 9, 10). Younger widows are to marry, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach (1 Timothy 5:14). In 1 Corinthians 7:39, 40, Paul said, “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” Paul’s advice to a younger widow was “Get married, but only in the Lord!”

This advice ought to be tempered by the observation that a woman is better off to remain single than to marry the wrong man! The single woman may become so anxious to marry, so fearful of becoming an “old maid,” that she

marries the first man who seems interested in her—and then lives to regret her hasty decision. She may “marry in haste, repent at leisure.” Marry the right man—a faithful Christian, a good man, a man of integrity. If such a man is not available, wait for him.

What about divorced women? Paul’s instructions to young widows also apply to divorced women, with some exceptions. Before the divorced woman remarries, she must be sure that she has a biblical right to remarry. She should also make certain that she is not making a mistake by choosing the wrong man.¹

Third, single mothers ought to think of their children’s needs. They should not neglect their own needs either. No mother can be a good parent if she does not look after her own physical and mental welfare. Still, being a parent means having responsibility—and that means that, like all parents, you often have to put your children’s needs before your own.

One special need which single mothers must be aware of is that their children must learn how to relate properly to the opposite sex. Since they do not have a father in the home, the mother should find a way for them to have adult male friends outside the home—especially in the church.

Fourth, single women ought to be faithful members of the church. In the church, a single woman can find most or much of what she needs: (1) friends, including others in the same situation (and people who will understand and empathize with her even though they are not in the same situation); (2) help, including help with looking after her children; (3) acceptance (since everyone is welcome in the church of our Lord, no matter what her background or problems or previous situation); and (4) role models for her children. Members of the church ought to make sure that the local congregation meets these needs. We are not to exclude women because they are single. Instead, we are to accept them, empathize with them, and love them. We are to include them in our Bible class arrangements and our activities. We should remember their

¹Often, a woman who has divorced an unsuitable husband marries another man just like the first. For example, a woman who was married to—and then divorced from—a drunkard may marry another man with a drinking problem.

needs as we preach, teach, and provide benevolent assistance, and we should help them with their children. Especially, we should allow and encourage those children to associate with Christian men who can serve as male role models.

DOES SINGLENESS HAVE ANY ADVANTAGES?

Singleness may in fact be a blessing—if not to the single person, then to the church and to the world. Paul said,

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion (1 Corinthians 7:8, 9; RSV).

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–35; RSV).

A single woman has some advantages over a wife. She can give herself more fully to the service of the Lord, without having to worry about caring for a husband and children.

We have often applied this passage to men who preach and do mission work, but we can also apply it to women. Single women, including female missionaries, have often served the church faithfully and well for many years—not just in spite of their singleness, but because of it.

We could name many examples: Elizabeth Bernard served for decades in China as a missionary; sister Orr, a Christian widow from Canada, went to New Guinea to help missionaries there when she was in her eighties. I have known single women who have served abroad as long-term or short-term missionaries and some who have taken time from their busy lives to work on campaigns, helping to save souls. I have been acquainted with others who have served, giving of themselves for long hours at little or no pay, to benefit Christian schools, children’s homes, mission efforts, and local

congregations—all of whom were able to give extra time and attention to the Lord's work because they were single.

CONCLUSION

Singleness for the Christian woman is not an unmitigated curse. If her primary aim in life is to glorify God, she can find opportunities to do more for the Lord than she could if she were

married. Even the Christian woman who is preparing for marriage or waiting for the right man to marry should look to the Lord and to His church for help in overcoming any problems caused by her singleness. At the same time, she can recognize that being single provides her with unique opportunities to do good. Let her, as much as possible, take advantage of those opportunities. ◆

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