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Beth Phillips
erp31@cam.ac.uk

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1 Cor 7 and Singleness in the Church

BETH PHILLIPS

In issue 9/1 of *Leaven*, “Family,” Eleanor Daniel challenged readers with the important task of “Confronting the Myths of Singles in the Church.” In so doing, she asked if we had forgotten Paul’s admonitions in 1 Cor 7, urging us to “spend some time wrestling with” our theology concerning marriage and singleness. I was thrilled at this suggestion because I had already decided that the 2001 Pepperdine Lectureships on 1 Corinthians was the perfect opportunity to grapple with this extremely important theological and ethical issue. I hope to use Eleanor’s challenge as a springboard from which to develop a constructive theology of singleness.

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS IN THE CORINTHIAN CONTEXT

During the era in which the Corinthian church was developing and Paul was carrying on this correspondence with them, there were movements within Greco-Roman religion, Judaism, and Christianity alike that viewed “sexual abstinence . . . as a means to personal wholeness and religious power.”¹ These groups had in common a philosophical dualism that separated the physical from the spiritual, rejecting the former and valuing the latter. As Gordon Fee has noted, this dualism could result either in the belief that how one conducts oneself in the physical realm is irrelevant (which may have been the belief of the sexually immoral members at Corinth whom Paul reproves in chapters 5 and 6) or in the belief that one must distance oneself from all things physical and sensual in order to be spiritually pure (which may have been the belief of the members Paul is addressing in chapter 7).² This dualism may have also influenced the pneumatology and eschatology of some Corinthian Christians. Perhaps they considered themselves to be “spiritual” or “of the Spirit” in this dualistic sense, and thus that they had already fully become everything they were meant to be.³ Additionally, Jesus had taught that “those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Luke 20:35).⁴ Some Corinthians had apparently found themselves worthy and considered themselves spiritually resurrected, perhaps leading them to question the validity of sex and marriage.

PAUL’S ADMONITIONS

We cannot be sure that the scenario described above was exactly the situation at Corinth,⁵ but it seems to make the most sense of the subjects that Paul addresses and the ways in which he addresses them. Whatever the situation, we can be sure that in chapter 7 Paul was giving his response to something about which the Corinthians had written concerning sex and marriage, since this portion of the letter is marked by the transitional phrase: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote” (7:1a). They may have asked Paul questions about sex and marriage to which he responded, or they may have simply told him what they believed on the subject (which is the interpretive decision made by



the NRSV in placing the sentence in 7:1b, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman,” in quotation marks, signaling that Paul was quoting from their letter instead of stating his own opinion on the matter).

There are three main messages that echo throughout Paul’s admonitions to the Corinthians in this chapter: (1) It is good to be single, but that does not mean it is bad to be married. (2) The goodness of singleness is located in the unique ways in which single Christians are suited for spiritual focus and readiness for ministry. (3) The point really is not whether one is single or married. God gives both stations in life as gifts; neither should be devalued or avoided. The point is that whatever our marital status, we must not let anxieties of this world cloud our undivided devotion to Christ.

IT IS GOOD TO BE SINGLE

If our reconstruction of the Corinthians’ physical/spiritual dualism is correct, and if we assume that Paul is addressing the consequences of that dualism, then we find that it may have had several serious implications in the life of the Corinthian Christians. Apparently, some married people decided they should no longer have sex (verses 3–5), others decided they should dissolve their marriages (verses 10–13), some who had been widowed decided never to remarry (verses 8–9), and some who were engaged decided they should not marry after all (verses 36–38).⁶ Paul’s instructions to enjoy healthy sexual relationships within marriage and to avoid divorce at all costs surely come as no surprise to us. But perhaps more of us are surprised that he basically agreed that those who were engaged or widowed should not get married (verses 8, 25–26, 38). Paul did not want this to be a legalistic requirement (verse 35), continually reiterating that marriage was an open, viable, and blessed option (verses 9, 10, 16, 24, 28, 36, 39). Yet he also continually came back to his own conviction that singleness was inherently good (verses 7, 26, 32, 34, 38).

WHAT IS SO GOOD ABOUT BEING SINGLE?

Paul was placed in the awkward position of agreeing with the Corinthians’ esteem for the single life (“I wish that all were as I myself am . . . it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am,” 7:7–8), while also rejecting their reasoning and its consequences. Apparently, viewing sexuality through their dualistic, “spiritualized eschatology,”⁷ the Corinthian Christians in question decided singleness was good because those who were “worthy” and “spiritual” would not be defiled by sexual relations. In contrast, Paul’s reason for affirming singleness was that unmarried men and women⁸ were “anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord,” while a married man or woman was “anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife” or “her husband” (7:32–34). Paul was concerned with the “present necessity” (a much better translation than “impending crisis”)⁹ of life in the kingdom of God, a life for which he considered those who were single to be better suited since their time and energy could be more exclusively devoted to Jesus and

his work, instead of divided between Lord, spouse, children, and attendant responsibilities. It is clear that Paul’s focus is not on avoiding sexual intercourse, but rather on “freedom for mission.”¹⁰

The point really is not whether one is single or married. God gives both stations in life as gifts; neither should be devalued or avoided.

We should not take Paul’s reference to “the appointed time” as evidence that Paul based his ethics on the belief that Jesus would return within a few years—an interpretation which has led many to the conclusion that Paul’s admonition to remain single had only to do with his views of the impending apocalypse

and *parousia* (thus the translation “impending crisis”). As Fee has shown, living life in between the first and second comings of Christ gave Paul and other early Christians a sense of a “foreshortened future.” Through the resurrection we, like them, see how it all ends and become participants in that victory. Though the victory has not been fully consummated, we participate in every earthly foretaste of that consummation through

Jesus and the Spirit. This “foreshortens” the in-between time. “Paul’s concern is not with the *amount* of time they have left, but with the radical new perspective the ‘foreshortened future’ gives one with regard to the *present* age.”¹¹ Paul is concerned chiefly with Christians’ ability to focus—“single-mindedly,” if you will—on Christ and his kingdom. And therein lies the goodness of the single life: its unique opportunities for dedication to the Lord.

IN WHATEVER CONDITION YOU WERE CALLED . . . BE FREE FROM ANXIETIES

Paul agreed with the Corinthians that singleness was good, but he disagreed about the reasons why. He also disagreed that the inherent goodness of singleness made marriage a morally inferior station in life. “I wish that all were as I myself am,” he said. “But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind” (7:7). To Paul, his singleness was a gift from God. But he also affirmed the gift of marriage that had been given to others. Therefore he encouraged marriage partners to enjoy sexual intimacy (verses 2–5), to seek reconciliation with one another instead of separation or divorce (verses 10–11), and to seize the opportunity marriage offered some of them to be witnesses to their unbelieving spouses (verses 12–16). Again and again Paul told the Corinthians, both married and single, not to despise or seek to change their marital status. “Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called” (7:20). And not only remain, but embrace it as the life “to which God called you” (7:17). He directed everyone, married and single, mourning and rejoicing, poor and rich, to live “as though they were not . . . for the present form of this world is passing away” (7:25–31). This is not an admonition to ignore all things physical, but rather an admonition to “be free from anxieties” (7:32) and present “unhindered devotion to the Lord” (7:35).

THE ANXIETY OF BEING SINGLE IN OUR CHURCHES

For most of us, Paul is addressing a completely foreign error. Few non-Catholic Christians today value singleness over marriage. Paul wouldn’t need to talk long to convince us that *marriage* is not a morally inferior state. Since the Reformation, we have been in such reaction to Catholic dogma concerning celibacy that we have ignored 1 Cor 7 and other biblical affirmations of the blessedness of being single—not the least of which is the example of the life of Jesus himself. Perhaps we need an epistle written to us correcting our view that singleness is a morally inferior state. Although we may never explicitly say that *singleness* is morally inferior to marriage, doesn’t that accurately summarize our assumptions?

We married people tend to assume a lot about those who are single. We assume that marriage is God’s intention for every individual. We assume that a single adult must be (or at least should be) looking for a mate. We assume that young singles live in an in-between time when adolescence has ended but full adulthood has not yet begun. We assume that they are immature, but that it’s nothing a good mate wouldn’t fix. We assume that older singles have given up what must have been a life-long hope of finding a mate, and we pity them. Or if they once had a mate, we assume that their newly single lives must be empty and meaningless, and we pity them too. We assume singles will be awkward at our dinner parties. We assume they want us to find them dates. We assume they aren’t right for most jobs in ministry. We assume they would make better leaders, teachers, counselors, and better friends if they were married.¹²

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Paul valued singleness because he believed it was not accompanied by the same anxieties as marriage. Our assumptions concerning singleness often create a church culture in which singles are faced with extreme social anxiety, and, when we attribute our assumptions to God and associate our assumptions with the will of God, we create spiritual anxiety for singles as well. Paul was careful not to “put any restraint” on the Corinthians by making them feel that they *had* to stay single (verse 35). Unfortunately, we have not been so careful. We put the opposite restraint on our brothers and sisters by making them feel that they have to get married if they are going to be fully human, fully Christian, and fully integrated into the life of our churches.

TOWARD VALUING SINGLENES AS A GIFT

In his book, *Families at the Crossroads*,¹³ Rodney Clapp offered an important critique of the American concept of the “traditional family.” He asked Christians to reconsider the ways in which we’ve idealized and idolized the nuclear family unit and assumed that one particular interpretation of family was God’s plan.

What if single members were encouraged to embrace their singleness as a vocation (whether temporary or permanent) central to the life and ministry of the church?

Clapp examined several ways in which the “traditional family” model ignores or opposes biblical principles, one of which is the value of singleness. Albert Hsu has taken up and expanded upon that aspect of Clapp’s critique in *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness*.¹⁴ Hsu’s book is an excellent and accessible introduction to the experiences of Christian singles, what the Bible says about singleness, and how our common views of singleness need correction. One chapter includes a “brief history,” and is a valuable summary of biblical and historical views of singleness.

However, Hsu follows most Western church historians in focusing only on the Christian West. When we ignore the Eastern developments of Christianity, we miss an opportunity to glean an important lesson concerning the value of singleness within the Christian community.¹⁵ Very early in the history of Christianity (no later than the third century, perhaps as early as the second), Syriac-speaking Christians began practicing the first form of Christian consecrated celibacy.¹⁶

Unlike forms of Christian asceticism and monasticism that were soon to develop in the West (and later spread into the East as well), celibacy among these Christians was neither based on philosophical dualism which devalued sex and marriage, nor lived by individuals who isolated themselves from the rest of society.¹⁷

What if married members were encouraged to look to the single, not as immature inferiors but as unique imitators of Christ and witnesses to Christ’s truth in our midst?

It was based on the desire to imitate and follow Jesus in every aspect possible.¹⁸ These celibate Christians were called the *ihidaye*, which meant “solitary” in three senses: (1) singleness, (2) single-mindedness, and (3) devotion to Christ, the *Ihidaya* (or “only begotten one,” “unique one”).¹⁹ The *ihidaye* valued marriage as well as singleness.²⁰ Their lifestyle was not viewed in opposition to marriage, but rather as a blessing and testimony to the entire community. They were dedicated to prayer, fasting, and ministry.²¹ These vocations were not seen as separate from or

peripheral to the society at large, but as central to the communal life.²²

What if we viewed singleness in our churches more like the early Syriac Christians? What if single members were encouraged to embrace their singleness as a vocation (whether temporary or permanent) cen-

tral to the life and ministry of the church? What if married members were encouraged to look to the single, not as immature inferiors but as unique imitators of Christ and witnesses to Christ's truth in our midst? The life of singleness has the potential of witnessing to us concerning simple living, devotion to prayer, availability for ministry, the ability to live whole and happy lives without sex, and whole-hearted dedication to Christ. Instead of singleness being a transition that should be shortened, or a late-in-life intrusion that should be dreaded, singleness could become a cherished opportunity. "Singles ministry"—instead of feeling like the youth group after youth—could be a meaningful component of the life of the congregation. The valuable lives and witnesses of our single brothers and sisters could be moved out of the periphery and honored as central to our togetherness.

...singleness is no longer a burden or a stigma but a gift—both to those who are single and to those of us who are privileged to be in community with them.

I believe that the New Testament rings loudly with the refrain, "There are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God!" As the people of God, we must continually recognize our need to repent of relegating brothers and sisters to second-class status based on their ethnicity, gender, social status, or marital status.

At the time of Christ, the religious leaders of the day presumed that those most acceptable to God were Jewish, male, free citizens and married. Gentiles and Samaritans were despised, women and slaves had little value, and single people had no place in society. Jesus entered that culture and turned those ideas on their head. He inaugurated a new society where one's status before God was not dependent on earthly distinctions. Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—and married or single—all could now equally find their identity and fulfillment in Christ Jesus.²³

This is the society and the unity to which Paul called the Corinthians, and to which Jesus calls us all. And in this society, singleness is no longer a burden or a stigma, but a gift—both to those who are single and to those of us who are privileged to be in community with them.

BETH PHILLIPS

Ms. Phillips is a member of the Malibu Church of Christ, Malibu, California, and is a graduate student at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

NOTES

- 1 Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 114.
- 2 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 12.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 10–15.
- 4 NRSV used throughout.
- 5 I have described the situation in Corinth in such tentative terms throughout because, although this reconstruction reflects a certain level of scholarly consensus, it is largely based on mirror reading and could be challenged by other readings or historical evidence. However, the implications I draw out of the text for our current situation are not dependent upon this reading of the Corinthian situation.
- 6 Although the meaning of the word translated "virgin" is widely disputed, those who were engaged to be married are likely also in view in verses 25–26. See Hays, 126; Fee, 323. See also James D. G. Dunn, *I Corinthians* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 55. The term translated "unmarried" in verse 8 may actually have the connotation of formerly married. It is used again in verse 11 to describe a divorced woman. Fee takes it in verse 8 as the masculine counterpart to the feminine "widows," and thus renders "widowers" (Fee, 287–288).
- 7 As Fee has called it (Fee, 12).
- 8 Note how Paul consistently addresses both males and females in this section. In a time when a woman was nothing if not a daughter or a wife to a man, Paul's affirmation that women as well as men could have meaningful lives as singles is revolutionary.
- 9 1 Cor 7:26. See Hays, 129; Fee, 329.

- 10 Hays, 129, 133.
- 11 Fee, 339.
- 12 Perhaps this raises the question for some, “Is having single people in roles of leadership and ministry biblical?” This, of course, is a question that cannot be given an adequate answer within the scope of the current discussion, but it raises some further and extremely important questions. When 1 Tim 3 was written, was it intended to be a rulebook for all churches everywhere for all time? When it says “the husband of one wife” (or “married only once”), does it mean that leaders must be married males? It is perhaps more likely that the directive was aimed at the principle of marital fidelity instead of setting a hard and fast rule concerning gender and marital status. The way this rule has often been applied would disqualify Paul himself and the women whom he so highly praised as leaders of the church (Rom 16) from these roles—not to mention Jesus’ own ministry! This is only one example of the ways in which we have narrowly interpreted passages in the epistles as rules, while ignoring the clear ways in which those rules would negate several biblical examples. What, then, is the “higher” view of the authority of scripture? Clinging to those rules regardless of their contradictions, or reinterpreting those passages in ways that make sense within the greater witness of scripture?
- 13 Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- 14 Albert Y. Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
- 15 I am indebted and thankful to Dr. Jeff Childers for drawing my attention to this tradition while I was a student at Abilene Christian University. The fact that I note the absence of this material in Hsu should not overshadow my recommendation. I think his book is an excellent place for single people, married people, church leaders and church members alike to begin in dealing with our profound need in this area.
- 16 Robert Murray, “The Features of the Earliest Christian Asceticism,” in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Gordon Rupp* (London: SCM, 1975), 65.
- 17 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 329–331.
- 18 Murray, 66.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 72–73.
- 20 For examples, see Brown, 329; Murray, 72.
- 21 For example, see Aphrahat, “Demonstration VI: Of Monks,” in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 368.
- 22 Brown, 329.
- 23 Hsu, 173.