

Logia Forum
Faithfully Single

34/3 (2025)

Since God created human beings in His image as male and female, their marriage reflects the physical union of Christ with the church. Yet marriage is not the only way that Christian men and women resemble him and show something of his likeness. They do that too in a single, unmarried state. That, too, meets with God's approval. After all, Jesus himself never married. Nor did the great prophet Jeremiah (16:2), or the great apostle Paul (1 Cor 7:6-8)!

The single life is not at all abnormal and uncommon; it is quite normal and common. According to the latest figures, more than half the population of Australia is single. So too are most members of my congregation! Yet, even though the single life serves its own God-given purpose and has its own beauty, its importance receives far too little attention in the church.

While Genesis 1 describes the creation of Adam and Eve together at the same time, Genesis 2 depicts the creation of Adam, the first human being, before the creation of Eve. By Adam's original solitude God shows us that this is the primary state of every human being. All people are created first of all as distinct, complete persons each with separate bodies. Their bodies distinguish them from the animals and other humans; they disclose that they are separate persons, each and every one with their own souls. By their interaction with God and the world around them, they become aware of themselves as persons, each with a unique relationship with God, and as agents who are able to act in their own right. That helps us understand how God views single people. Like Adam before the creation of Eve, they enjoy the primary mode of human life in the body that even those who marry share before they marry and still share when they are married. That original solitude is an essential part of our humanity. Each single person reminds us of that.

We live in a society that belittles the unique contribution of single men and women in many different ways. The worst slight is that those who are sexually inactive are viewed as somehow inferior or even odd. They are not real women or real men. Yet that is quite untrue. We do not become real women or real men through sexual maturity, sexual intercourse, or parenthood. Our manhood or womanhood, is given to us genetically at

conception. Our masculinity or femininity does not come from our engagement in sexual intercourse. That may, in fact, damage it. It belongs to us, even if we are sexually inexperienced and sexually inactive. It is our human birthright. At the most, sexual activity confirms our sexuality. But it does not at all establish it.

Since that is so, the sexual status of single men and women is just as significant as it is for those who are married. It is always in play and always adds something good in every situation. Just think of the role of unmarried uncles and aunts. Think, too, of the significance of relationships between brothers and sisters and cousins of the opposite sex. That is also true for the friendships of single people with those who are married, whether it be of the opposite sex or the same sex. They are all a source of enrichment and fulfilment quite apart from any kind of overt or covert physical sexual interaction. That applies even more for those who are single Christians. In all of their contacts with people of either sex, they mirror something of Christ to the people who surround them. They are meant to embody and model true friendship that transcends erotic attraction and interaction.

Sadly, we live in societies where friendship has become difficult for most people, if not almost impossible for young people, whether it be with people of the same sex or people of the opposite sex. This is so because our obsession with sexual intercourse and our sexual identity darkens and distorts all our relationships. So the love of a man for another man or a woman for another woman and the love of married women and men for someone else than their spouse is regarded with suspicion as latently or blatantly erotic. When all relationships are sexualized, friendships are greatly diminished and often undone. In that context, the church is to be a sexual safe place that contributes much to the recovery and promotion of embodied friendship for friendless people.

Single men and women have a very significant part to play in every Christian community. They remind us that the church is God's holy family rather than an association of families and married couples. All members of God's family are brothers and sisters with each other, because they have God as their Father and Jesus as their brother. So unlike the human family and marriage, which are provisional because they belong to this age, our relationship with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ is eternal (cf. Mark 3:33-35; 10:29-30). Thus, in the New Testament, fellow Christians are most commonly called brothers. All Christians enjoy fraternal friendship and love with the other members of their congregation and the church at large (Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1 Pet 1:22; 3:8; 2

Pet 2:9). Close fellowship with another Christian is the most profound kind of friendship that we can enjoy in this life because it is eternal. So single Christians show us that the spiritual friendship of believers transcends sexuality, marriage, and the family.

In Matthew 19:10-12 Christ surprises his disciples and us with his counter-cultural teaching on the single life. He transforms the term “eunuch,” which was commonly used as contemptuous description for single people, by adopting it as a badge of honor for single people. In response to his claim that God did not sanction divorce, the disciples had remarked that it would therefore be better not to marry at all. Jesus agreed with them, but with the proviso that it was only better for some people. The single life was itself a vocation, a gift from God (Matt 19:11; see also 1 Cor 7:7). He then adds that there are three kinds of single life that each have their contribution to make.

Some people, says Jesus, are born “eunuchs,” men and women who were unequipped or ill equipped for sexual intercourse. This could be for lack of sexual organs, the possession of both kinds of sexual organs, or the total absence of sexual desire. Even though they are treated with contempt in most societies, and even though they were excluded from the priesthood (Lev 21:20) and participation in the divine service in ancient Israel (Deut 23:1), Jesus accepts them and affirms their worth. We must, too. They are no less human and valuable than sexually functional men and women. They, in fact, remind us all that since the fall we have all been damaged sexually by sin so that our bodies no longer function fully as they should.

Some people are made “eunuchs” intentionally or accidentally by other people. They have been sexually disabled in some way, whether it be by castration or some other kind of genital mutilation, by gender reassignment, ill health, or the experience of incapacitating sexual abuse. Jesus also accepts them and affirms their worth.

Last, some people have made themselves “eunuchs” for the sake of God’s kingdom. They have freely and willingly chosen a single state of life as part of their calling to serve God. That kind of celibacy is a special spiritual gift, a gift of grace that is given only to some men and women. It cannot be required of anybody or imposed on anyone; it is given to them by God and received by them in faithful obedience to their calling. It is a holy, spiritual state of life in God’s kingdom, the kingdom that has been ushered in by Jesus. It brings its own demands and its own rewards. In fact, the Lutheran confessions claim that this kind of celibacy “is a gift that surpasses marriage,” a gift that frees a person from domestic

distractions and demands for undivided, wholehearted devotion to Christ (Apol 23.39-40). It surpasses marriage because it is a gift of grace from God, a spiritual gift rather than a natural endowment (1 Cor 7:7). By their single-minded' bodily service of God, those who have been called to this kind of single life, reflect Christ's own whole-hearted service of his heavenly Father in his unmarried life on earth.

What then is the purpose of God's call to celibacy for the sake of His kingdom? That is spelled out most fully by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8 and 25-35. The purpose of celibate single life is threefold. First, it frees single people to serve the Lord more simply, directly, and whole-heartedly than married people, whose loyalty is necessarily divided between pleasing their spouse and pleasing their Lord. So, for example, Paul could not have served as the apostle to the Gentiles if he had been married and had to care for his wife and their children. Secondly, it acknowledges that all Christians owe their chief allegiance to their Lord, who has reclaimed them bodily for himself to live and work with him. It is, lastly, a reminder that marriage, even at its best, is a provisional reality limited to this age. The union of husband and wife prefigures the ultimate, perfect physical union with Christ and intimacy with each other in the communion of saints. So, the celibacy of single Christians is a by-product of their physical devotion to the Lord in the divine service and an aid to its enactment in their vocation. It reminds us of the ties of eternal, fraternal friendship and love in his body. The devotion of unmarried Christians to Jesus bears witness to the devotion of Jesus to his heavenly Father in his earthly life as a man. Like matrimony, faithful singleness is a God-pleasing, holy way of life (1 Cor 7:34).