



Singles and the Church

I suspect that many of you who pick up this issue will be married. You will see the title of the issue, and of this first article, and will be inclined to turn the page looking for something else to read that relates more to you and your situation. You will think, "I'm not single so this doesn't apply to me." But wait! Keep reading, because this article applies to all of us in the church, young and old, married and single.

A problem

I want to begin by addressing a problem in our Reformed Churches of New Zealand: the strength of our families. You are probably thinking, "I should have turned the page. Pastor Haverland is barking up the wrong tree! Our strong families are a great *plus* in our Reformed churches, not a problem!" And that is true. Our churches hold a clear covenantal theology, we emphasise God's faithfulness to his promises from one generation to the next, and we urge parents to teach their children to love God and obey his commands. When we gather for worship there may be three, or even four generations of some families present in the church all worshipping the Lord together. This is a great strength and a wonderful blessing.

But often our strengths are also our weaknesses. Our churches are sometimes so focused on family members and relationships that those outside of these family circles are ignored. Family members may not see much of each other during the week and when they see each other after the services on Sunday they immediately gravitate to each other to enjoy a good catch-up. As they prepare to go home they invite their children and grandchildren for lunch or dinner. There is, of course, nothing wrong with having family members over for meals, and nothing wrong with building strong families and maintaining strong ties. My concerns are expressed in the following questions: "Who is looking out for those who do not have family members in the church? Who is caring for the singles who lack the extensive family network you enjoy? Who talks to them after church? Who invites them home for lunch or for dinner?" Sadly, all too often, the answer is, "no one", or "hardly anyone". Singles in our churches can feel isolated and lonely.

The appropriate response is not to downgrade our emphasis on the covenant, nor to loosen off our family ties but rather to widen the scope of our conversation, hospitality and ministry so as to include those not directly connected to our families. In this article I want to offer some suggestions about how to do this. But first, what does the Bible have to say about being single?

Biblical teaching on being single

On the sixth day of creation God created Adam; "*The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.*" Later that day the Lord God said, "*It is not good for the man to be alone.*" So God made Eve, "*a helper suitable for him*" (Gen 2:7, 18). This means that the usual or typical pattern for human relationships is for a man to be married. Most men and women seek to be married.

The entrance of sin into the world, however, has disturbed this general pattern. When people give way to the temptations of their sinful nature they may break their promises of marriage, commit adultery and walk away from the partner of their youth. As a result many people who were married are now single. Others look for companionship and even "marriage" with someone of the same sex, and we are seeing an increase in same-sex marriages and civil unions. Many older women are widows because their husbands have died, often many years before them. The widespread effects of sin mean that there is sometimes an imbalance between the number of men and women in a country. Times of war, such as the two World Wars, and the civil wars that have troubled many

countries have caused the death of millions of young men leaving many young women without a man to marry. The one child policy of China, and the cultural preference for a son, means that many of the young men in that country will never marry.

Yet singleness is not always a result of sin. One day Jesus was in a discussion with the Pharisees about marriage and divorce and the disciples were listening in. Jesus gave a strict limitation on divorce citing “marital unfaithfulness” as the only ground for such an action. When the disciples heard this they said to him, *“If this is the situation between a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry.”* In response Jesus spoke positively about being single,

“Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”

Matthew 19:9-12

Jesus himself was single. So was the apostle Paul. He wrote to the church in Corinth, *“I wish that all men were as I am. But each one has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that”* (1 Cor 7:7). His singleness enabled him to travel extensively as a missionary because he was free from the concerns and obligations of looking after a wife and children. He wrote, *“I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided”* (1 Cor 7:32f). He went on to make the same applications to women who were unmarried and married. A single person can serve the Lord with undivided and focused energy. Paul gave this advice *“because of the present crisis”* (v 26). He wrote this letter to the church in Corinth in 55AD from the city of Ephesus. Fifteen years later the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Roman armies. The Romans were already persecuting the Jews and the evil emperor Nero was extending this persecution to Christians. In view of those troubled times of distress Paul, out of pastoral concern for their well-being, advised those who were unmarried to remain so; *“Those who are married will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this”* (1 Cor 7:28).

What Paul wrote about that situation applies to many other situations. Married men and women are concerned about how they can please their spouse and so their interests are divided. Single men and women are able to serve the Lord very effectively because they can devote all their time and energy to *“the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord”* (1 Cor 7:32ff). This is evident in the way many singles in our churches have a compassionate ministry to the needy, widows and elderly. Often they have the time that many families do not. Two striking examples of single men having influential ministries are The Rev Charles Simeon (b. 1759) and The Rev John Stott (b. 1921); you can read about their lives and influence in the following pages of this issue.

Suggestions to singles

Accept your situation: The apostle Paul wrote that he had learned to be content whatever the circumstances, in any and every situation (Phil 4:11f). He applied this to being well fed or hungry, to living in plenty or in want. He could also have mentioned that he had learned to be content in his single state. Have you learned the secret of being content in your situation? Have you accepted God’s providential ordering of your life? Are you content in the circumstances in which God has placed you?

Offer hospitality: The Bible commands us to offer hospitality to others (Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2). Often singles expect families to invite them into their homes, but the command to be hospitable is addressed to all of us, no matter what our situation. As a single you could invite a family to your home, or invite in other singles. To do this you would need to be well-prepared, and you may need to accept (or ask for) some assistance from those you have invited. Showing such hospitality is a wonderful ministry to others as well as providing you with opportunities for conversation, fellowship and friendship.

Seek to serve: Some singles are tempted to become introspective and introverted. This is certainly a temptation to resist! Rather, look for opportunities to serve others. Perhaps you could start a

ministry for other singles in your church. What about beginning a Bible study group? What gifts and abilities has the Holy Spirit given to you? Are you using these in the church to your full capacity? Can you teach a Sunday school or catechism class? Are you able to contribute to the ministry of music in worship? Is there an opportunity to be a counsellor in Cadets or Gems? How about going to visit the widows and widowers of your church? Is there a need in the wider community that you can address? Can you be more active in the ministry of evangelism? There are endless opportunities for service in the church and kingdom of Christ. You can't do everything but you can do something.

Suggestions to couples

At the beginning of the year my son-in-law was elected as an elder in another Reformed church. Under his care he has a number of members who are single, over a spread of ages. Recently he asked me, "How do we minister to the widows and singles in our churches?" That is a good question. Here are a few suggestions.

Accept them: Sometimes we look at single men and women with pity as though they have missed out on the joy and fulfilment of marriage. But Christian single people can and do find their fulfilment in knowing God and in serving the Lord Jesus. We have two elderly women in our church who have been single all their lives and have led full, active and interesting lives. Single men and women need to be accepted as full members of the covenant community, affirmed in the church and encouraged in their service of the Lord.

Offer hospitality: When we invite others into our homes we tend to ask those who are similar to us – people of the same age, the same background, having the same family situation. But this is too narrow. There are many single people in our churches who are looking for company and conversation and who would love to join with your family for coffee or a meal. When you invite in another family what about inviting in a single person as well? Look out for singles at special times of the year such as the New Year, Christmas and Easter; these can be lonely times for those who are on their own. Have you thought of "adopting" a single in your church or in your wider community and taking a special interest in him or her, remembering in particular birthdays and anniversaries, especially the anniversary of the death of a husband or a wife? Sometimes we use the excuse that inviting single people into our family homes will only make them feel more lonely and jealous of our situation, however that is assuming too much. We are commanded to offer hospitality to all, not only to those of similar situations in life.

Start a ministry: Some of the single men in the Pukekohe congregation have told me about one family in the earlier days of the Pukekohe church who often invited the young people of the church to their home. This family had a wonderful ministry to the singles that is still remembered and appreciated. I can think of another family in this church in more recent times that had a generous ministry to young men. Is this something you could do? Is the Lord calling you to this area of service?

Conclusion

The Lord places all of us in different situations of life: single or married, young or old, healthy or ill, newly married or widowed after a long marriage. Some of you reading this may be single and may desire to be married, and that is a legitimate biblical desire, which you may pray for and look for. Others of you may be separated, divorced or widowed. Whatever your family status is Jesus calls you as an individual to follow and serve him with all your energy and passion. He calls you to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, to love your neighbour as yourself, and to serve the Lord in your various callings, making the best use of the time and opportunities he gives to you.

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