An Exegesis of 1 Co 7:1-9; 25-40 and its Application to our Ministry among Singles

Daniel Laitinen
South Central District
Spring Pastor’s Conference
April 29, 2014
Last week our church housed a community event put on by Austin PD. The purpose was to address neighborhood concerns including cleaning up a nearby street known for prostitution and violent crime. Austin’s Chief of Police made a surprise visit. His team handed out suggestion cards to be filled out and left in the back of church. (I wanted to tell him this never works). I was wrong. Almost everyone in attendance filled out a card. At the end of the evening the policemen collected the cards in the back. As I was turning off lights and locking doors I noticed one card left behind near the church’s alms box. I thought someone mistakenly placed it there, thinking it was our church’s suggestion box. They must of been wise because they didn’t put the card in. They wanted someone to read it. It said, “Help single women and older people.” At the moment I was finishing An Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:1-12 & the Application to Ministry to Singles.

The card made me think about our ministry. I feel we have a strong marriage and family ministry.  

1 I would argue that it is our strength. We shouldn’t back down about building solid marriages and championing the family unit. But when I consider the population around Holy Word Austin - our immediate neighborhood - I have to wonder if we’re meeting their needs too? We did a professional survey in Fall 2013. The demographics in our 5-mile radius shows that the family structure is very non-traditional. According to the national average our neighborhood has a below-average presence of married couples and two-parent families. Less than half the adults are married. 41% have never been married. Less than 60% of the households with children have two parents.  

2 At the same time many unmarried adults desire marriage. Nationwide, 89% of singles believe they can still “live happily ever after.” 53% of singles want to tie the knot.  

3 Putting the numbers together, I interpret our ministry area as this: singles are the majority. Yet most of them wish to be happily married. Realistically most are not in a position to do so. The reasons vary: career goals, single parenting, fear of commitment, or social pressure. How can the church shepherd singles to recognize the realities of marriage, while at the same time deepen their appreciation for the unmarried life?

How do we minister to singles? There’s a traditional approach: Drop the phrase “and for you single people” into our sermons more often. Have a Bible class for singles. A singles group. Encourage singles to volunteer and serve on committees. These all have benefits. However, Paul’s conversation in 1 Corinthians 7, and the application in this paper, focus on a higher conversation. Not higher philosophically. But a practical conversation about a higher calling.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul stresses our higher calling. At the center of a believer’s life is Jesus’ cross. The cross is, to us who are being saved, the power of God (1 Co 1:18). Throughout 1 Corinthians Paul stresses Jesus’ full and free forgiveness. It is the catalyst of

---

1 Appendix A. The Singles Survey. Laitinen.
2 Analysis of Ministry Area Profile for Holy Word Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas 78753 (5-mile radius). September, 2013.
Christian living. When there is division, unity is found in the mission of the cross (1:18,19). When human intelligence blurs the gospel, the answer is found at the cross, where God reveals his wisdom (1:29,31). When Paul’s apostolic credibility is under fire, he is confident because no other message matters than the cross (2:2,5). Issues of rival leaders are solved when you realize “all things are yours” under the cross (3:23). Lawsuits, back-biting, and revenge are put away when you realize you have been sanctified, justified under the cross (6:11). Adultery, including incest, is put into perspective when you recognize Jesus’ Spirit dwells in you through his cross (6:19,20).

In 1 Corinthians 7, Pastor Paul puts the married state into perspective with the cross. Marriage can distract spouses from the cross. For single people there are times not to pursue marriage. The single life has less distractions. Unmarried adults can enjoy an easier faith and earthly life. The single life is a gift.

7:1 Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἀπτεσθαι.

Translation: Now on to the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”

**What issue is Paul addressing in 1 Corinthians 7?**

*Now on to the matters about which you wrote.* Paul had frequent correspondence with the Corinthians. Previously he had sent them a letter in which he wrote about sexual immorality in Corinth.4 The Corinthians replied to this letter with a letter delivered by Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus.5 In their correspondence the Corinthians asked pastoral advice on a number of spiritual issues. 1 Corinthians 7 is the start of Paul’s pastoral response.6

“It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” Is this a statement Paul finds necessary to make or a Corinthian viewpoint? Translations such as NIV84, RSV and NASB95 leave the phrase without quotation marks: *It is good for a man not to touch a woman* (NASB95). Posed this way the phrase sounds like Paul’s opening argument: he is opposed to sexual relations.

However, would Paul open a discussion about marriage with a thought like this? He was not opposed to sex. God created the life-long union between man and woman.7 God endorses sexual relations.8 Paul himself held a high view of marriage and sex.9 That Paul remained

---

4 1 Co 5:9  
5 1 Co 16:17  
6 Paul discusses marriage (7:1-24, 39-40), celibacy (7:25-38), meat offered to idols (8:1-11:1), worship (11:2-34), spiritual gifts (12-14), the collection for the Jerusalem Christians (16:1-4), and Apollos (16:12). Because the phrase *now concerning* is lacking, we cannot determine whether in their letter the Corinthians asked him about the doctrine of the resurrection (15:12-57).  
7 Ge 2:18  
8 Ge 1:28  
9 Eph 5:22-33
unmarried throughout his whole life remains an open question.\textsuperscript{10} If Paul’s opening statement was, \textit{It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman}, it could be misunderstood that he implies celibacy for all. As we will soon find out, this is not the case. Therefore, maybe Paul is quoting a line from or greatly abbreviating an issue written by the Corinthians in their letter. NIV11, ESV, HCSB, among many others, translate the phrase with quotation marks, making it clear that Paul is addressing the Corinthians’ comment or question.\textsuperscript{11}

Another interpretation challenge is the meaning of ἀπτεοθαι. Does it mean to marry or to have sex? NIV84 translates 7:1, \textit{It is good for a man not to marry}. It’s footnote: Or “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” This discrepancy immediately raises the question:

\textit{What is it that the Corinthians believe is not good: sex or marriage?}

The word ἀπτω, here in its present middle infinitive form, ἀπτεοθαι, means \textit{to touch intimately, have sexual contact}. It’s object is the genitive γυναικος, woman or wife. Louw-Nida includes the idiom \textit{to marry a woman}.\textsuperscript{12} On the other hand Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich consider the verb to mean physical touch, sexual union, or ignition of flames.\textsuperscript{13} The expression is a popular euphemism for sexual intercourse in the Old Testament (see LXX - Ge 20:6; Prov 6:29). It seems best to translate ἀπτεοθαι \textit{to have sexual relations (with a woman)}. What is more, Paul is about to go on to talk about physical marital duty (v.3), sharing of bodies (v.4), abstaining from sex and self-control (v.5). Therefore, there’s a strong argument that here in v.1 the conversation is about a physical, sexual relationship.

Why might some Corinthians have an opinion that it is “good” not to have sex? These Corinthians may be implying celibacy for all - married and unmarried. In v.1 the Greek uses the general term ἄνθρωπος (man) instead of the specific expression ἄνδρα (husband). Also, Paul uses an \textit{indefinite} noun γυνή, woman. Perhaps there were some “celibate” Corinthian believers who saw immorality running rampant in the city (and in their own church), so they concluded: \textit{It’s morally better (καλόν) for anyone and everyone to remain celibate}. Maybe they saw any sexual intercourse as synonymous with Temple prostitution. In the following verses (7:2-11) Paul balances this extreme viewpoint with a focus on the proper way to understand God’s institution.

\textsuperscript{10} Some rabbis of his day even commonly taught that marriage was man’s obligation. The idea that Paul may once have been married cannot be completely thrown out. Kistemaker, 209. “In order to be ordained a rabbi, the Law required that the candidate be married; and if Paul was ordained, it follows that he must have been married.” Eduardo Arens, “Was St. Paul Married?” BibToday66 (1973): 1191. See also Talmud, Yebamoth 63a; Kiddushin 29b.

\textsuperscript{11} Some even go so far as to make it interrogative: “Is it advisable for a man not to marry?” (International Standard Version).


2) διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας ἐκαστος τὴν ζαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἐχέτω καὶ ἐκάστη τὸν ίδιον ἄνδρα ἐχέτω.

Translation: But because of fornication after fornication each one (of you husbands) should continue (in the sexual relationship) with (your) own wife, and each one (of you wives) should continue (in the sexual relationship) with your own husband.

But because of fornication after fornication. Paul begins his answer to the Corinthians with an adversee δὲ, but, qualifying the celibate slogan in the previous verse. He literally says because of fornications. The plural πορνείας highlights the well-known sexual sins in Corinth.14 Perhaps the celibate Corinthians recognized the problem too, and now were over-correcting. But Paul takes a more practical approach to the issue. He agrees that fornication is running rampant in Corinth, but he also knew that uttering a slogan wouldn’t curb sin. Adding another law wouldn’t change hearts. Fornication after fornication would be corrected by teaching God’s view of marriage and sex.

Each one...should continue (lit. “have”) with (your) own wife...(your) own husband. Paul answers the Corinthian celibates’ slogan with a parallel thought of his own. Celibates: it is good for a man not to touch a woman. Paul: let each man have his own wife. The verb ἔχετω, to have, is a euphemism for sex. Paul uses the same word about the incensuous man in 5:1, “a man has the wife of his father.” So now in 7:2 Paul is saying that each man should have his own wife sexually and each wife should have her own husband.15

With these words Paul is helping the Corinthians develop a full appreciation for the physical marriage-bond that their Creator and Savior intended from the beginning.16 Paul is saying, “Embrace your wife! Embrace your husband! Show the pagan world, where there is fornication after fornication, that true sexual happiness finds its fulfillment in a life-long committed relationship between husband and wife.”

Discussion. In these verses (3-7) Paul is speaking to the entire congregation. He is about to have a very candid conversation about sex in marriage with both unmarried and married alike. Why is this good form for pastors today? Where is the right forum? How do you educate?

---

14 Strabo reports c.4 BC: The temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it employed more than a thousand hetairas whom both men and women had given to the goddess. Many people visited the town on account of them, and thus these hetairas contributed to the riches of the town: for the ship captains frivolously spent their money there, hence the saying: ‘The voyage to Corinth is not for every man’. The Geography of Strabo, Vol.4, Loeb Classical Library Ed., 1927. VIII,6,20. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/8F*.html. Accessed online: 4/22/14
15 Hurd, Origin of 1 Corinthians, p.162
16 Matthew 19:8 Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”
Discussion. The celibate Corinthians may have thought too little of the gifts of the married state. How could married couples give this impression today? What impression does this give unmarried people?

3) τῇ γυναικὶ ὁ ἀνήρ τὴν ὀφειλήν ἀποδιδότω, ὀμοίως δὲ καὶ ἡ γυνὴ τῷ ἀνδρί.

Translation: The husband owes his wife his (conjugal) duty, and likewise the wife her husband.

The noun ὀφειλή, duty, is derived from the verb ὀφείλω, I owe. Louw-Nida: “that which ought to be done as a matter of duty or social obligation - ‘what one should do, duty.’” The present, active, imperative ἀποδιδότω is a compound verb from the preposition ἀπὸ (back) and the verb δίδωμι (I give). Since the context of v.3 is a physical relationship, Paul is saying: “The husband’s first responsibility in sex is to give back to his wife. Likewise the wife is to give back to her husband.” The goal in a godly sex-life is not personal preference or self-indulgent pleasure. Rather, it’s accommodating the other partner.

This has application for unmarried and married alike. The Christian life is self-sacrificing, not self-centered. Believers have a duty to imitate Christ’s humility toward others (Philippians 2). And the same goes for sex within marriage. A Christ-centered sex life is self-sacrificing, not self-indulgent.

How can self-indulgence destroy sex in marriage today?

Consider the multi-billion pornography industry. According to an August 2006 report, 50% of Christian men and 20% of Christian women (married or unmarried) in the U.S. are addicted to porn. Let’s say a husband has a relationship with pixels or with a photograph online. It demands nothing of him. A flesh and blood human being demands an emotional response. The pixels do not. And they will never be in communication, conversation, or relationship with him. No big deal, right?

Until the husband starts dealing with the guilt. His secret grows more complex. His life turns inward. He begins to withdrawal from his emotional partner. He has shared his body with an internet browser. The consequences trickle into his sex life: “If only my wife knew, she wouldn't sleep in the same bed as me. She would leave me or she wouldn't love me.” Beyond this, a

---

17 Louw-Nida, 71.24.
2004 government study proved that pornography raises expectations of one’s partner to unbelievably high levels and inhibits performance.19 His body, which was once his wife’s, now belongs also to a digital prostitute. How can he in good conscience express his sexuality freely and innocently with his wife? What if she ever found out? His self-indulgent desire could damage their emotional, spiritual, and physical relationship. Pornography is damaging to both single and married people. But how much more damaging in a marriage?

Notice the parallelism in vv.2-3: Let each man have his own wife/each woman have her own husband (v.2); Let the husband fulfill his marital duty to his wife/similarly the wife to her husband (v.3) The strong language, fulfill and duty, reinforces the sacrificial responsibilities that come with marriage.

4) ἡ γυνὴ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἔξουσιαζει ἀλλὰ ὁ ἄνηρ, ὡμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ ἄνηρ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἔξουσιαζει ἀλλὰ ἡ γυνὴ.

Translation: The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband (does). Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife (does).

Here Paul chooses the verb ἔξουσιαζει, to have power. He uses it passively in 6:12, to be mastered by. The noun that is derived from this verb is ἔξουσία, which denotes a state of control over something or somebody.20 Later Paul discusses authority and leadership between man and woman.21 But this is an incredible thought: in sex the husband does not have authority over his own body. She does! Neither does the wife have authority over her own body. He does. Each partner has authority over the body of his or her spouse. They are complete equals in sexuality.

Imagine a celibate Corinthian husband who made the decision to withhold sex from his wife on the grounds that sex was not good (v.1). It seems that his wife owes it to him to respect his moral opinion as the head of the woman. But his judgment about sex and marriage would be wrong. Withholding your body would be the most selfish and least Christ-centered thing to do.

---

19 “I have also seen in my clinical experience that pornography damages the sexual performance of the viewers...Having spent so much time in unnatural sexual experiences with paper, celluloid and cyberspace, they seem to find it difficult to have sex with a real human being. Pornography is raising their expectation and demand for types and amounts of sexual experiences; at the same time it is reducing their ability to experience sex.” Dr. MaryAnne Layden, Judith Reisman, Jeffrey Sanitover, Mary Anne Layden, and James B. Weaver, “Hearing on the brain science behind pornography addiction and the effects of addiction on families and communities,” Hearing to U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation, Nov. 18, 2004. http://www.ccv.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Judith_Reisman_Senate_Testimony-2004.11.18.pdf. Accessed April 24, 2014.

20 BDAG, p.352.
21 1 Co 11:3; see also Eph. 5:23
When God instituted marriage he created a level playing field sexually. *That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

If husband and wife serve each other equally in a physical relationship, then the focus turns outside themselves. A believing wife cannot keep withholding her body from her husband, because she’s never “in the mood”. She forfeited authority over her own body when she made her marriage vows. The same is true for a believing husband. He cannot withhold his body from his wife just because “he’s angry with her”. He forfeited authority over his own body when he made his marriage vows.

This has application for unmarried too. A Christian married person has forfeited his body to Christ and their spouse. The unmarried have not forfeited their body to Christ alone. They have not made a marriage vow to another sinner who more often than not doesn’t meet them on every level emotionally, spiritually, and physically. They don’t have to make a concession with their body to someone they’re frustrated with in the moment, or “not in the mood”, or “angry.” When husband and wife hurt each other psychologically their sex life can suffer. Or reversely when their sex life suffers it can soon turn psychological. Through it all they remain under one another’s authority: two sinners.

Not so with the unmarried. Their body belongs to the One who never fails or frustrates. Sure, there will be disappointment in their single state: they fight Satan to reserve their bodies for Christ and their future spouse. There could be deep and real intimate needs not being met by another human being. But, in a sense their bodies are more free in Christ than the married body. The unmarried do not depend on a sexual rush (that may or may not happen) that will determine how the other person living in their house will respect or love them back. Their “performance” does not determine how satisfied or not they feel about themselves at the end of the day. In theory when their body belongs to no one other than Christ, their relationship with him - and with Christian other brothers and sisters - is volumized. Whereas the married person is often preoccupied about meeting their partner physically: “Am I a sufficient for him? Do I fulfill her?” The unmarried person is preoccupied with Christ’s promise: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* (2 Co 12:9)

**Discussion.** Do you believe husband and wife have equal authority in their sex life? How can a husband abuse his headship role if he does not understand this?

---

22 Ge 2:24; see also Mt 19:5,Mk 10:7
23 1 Co 6:19-20; 7:4
24 “This means that single people within a strong Christian community can experience much of the unique enrichment of cross-gender within a family, particularly the sibling relationships between brothers and sisters.” Keller, 228.
**Discussion.** Society today over-glorifies sex. Paul lived in a similar culture. How does he give us a reality check about sex and its expectations in v.3-4?
5 μὴ ἀποστερέετε ἀλλήλους, εἰ μὴ τι ἐν ἑκ συμφώνῳ πρὸς καίρον, ἵνα σχολάσητε τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό ἦτε, ἵνα μὴ πειράζῃ ὑμᾶς ὁ σατανᾶς διὰ τὴν ἀκρασίαν ὑμῶν.

Translation: Do not rob each other, except perhaps by an agreement for a fixed period of time, in order that you can give time to prayer, and in order that you may be with one another again, so that Satan may not tempt you on account of your lack of self-control.

The second person present imperative, ἀποστερεῖτε, means 1. to cause another to suffer loss by taking away through illicit means, rob, steal, despoil, defraud; 2. to prevent someone from having the benefit of something, deprive. In Mark 10:17 Jesus lists the command do not defraud (μὴ ἀποστερήσῃς) along with crimes of murder, adultery, theft, false testimony, and dishonor. Earlier in this letter Paul uses ἀποστερέω twice when condemning lawsuits among believers. First to cheat (v.7), then to do wrong (v.8). In 1 Timothy 6:5 the word refers to robbing one of the truth. James 5:4 condemns the injustice of wages withheld from laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud (ἀπεστερημένος) (ESV).

Withhold sex in marriage is a fraud. In 7:5 Paul omits the direct object for the verb to deprive out of modesty, but expects the reader to complete the thought. He views intentional, extended celibacy in marriage a crime against God, a spouse, and the institution of marriage. But he gives a concession: εἰ μὴ ἄν, except perhaps. The particle ἄν lends a degree of expectancy to this part of the sentence. He lists three ground rules for celibacy in marriage. Although he allows the physical separation of a husband’s and wife’s bodies, notice the harmony between spouses in Paul’s concession:

1) Make an agreement - ἐκ συμφώνου. Paul recognizes the “symphonic” harmony of communication in marriage. A partner will not move ahead with plans until an agreement is reached between the two. Whether this is a verbal agreement, “Let’s abstain from sex,” or it’s understood from the context of a situation - a crisis that demands serious attention and prayer (cf. #3) - a couple in communication will know when sex is inapppropriate, and should return to it when the crisis or set period of time is over (cf. #2). 2) Make it a fixed time. The phrase πρὸς

---

25 Before the word prayer the Majority Text (a combination of the most widely-spread manuscripts) include νηστεία καὶ ἡ (fasting and prayer). “The addition may have been introduced by scribes who fostered asceticism. However, the words are lacking in earlier and better manuscripts.” (Kistemaker, 216)
26 BDAG: p.121
27 1 Corinthians 6:7-8
28 The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated (ἀποστερεθῆ?) Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong (ἀποστερεῖτε), and you do this to your brothers. (1 Co 6:7-8)
29 1 Tim 6:5 And constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed (ἀπεστερημένων) of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.
30 See also Ex 21:10 for similar thought: If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights.
καιρόν denotes a set period. Celibacy does not go on for an indefinite amount of time in marriage. 3) *Give time to prayer.* The subjunctive σχολάσητε, *to be empty, unoccupied,* is second plural. They do this *together.* The verb suggests dropping everything to concentrate on one thing. Often this happens in time of crisis. When a major issue arises in family life or otherwise, Paul *concedes* (v.6) that spouses are allowed to become celibate and concentrate on prayer *together.*

*In order that you may be with one another again.* When the set period of prayer has ended, married couples resume normal sexual habits. Paul says to the Corinthians celibates, “Let no one say, ‘Temporary abstinence is good, but permanent abstinence is better.’ Should this be the case, it would be advisable not to marry.”

*So that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.* The noun ἁκρασίαν, *lack of self-control,* can be derived from ἐν κράτος (ἐχων) with its implication of having power in oneself, or from ἐν κράτει (ὡν) implying a status of power. The negative is ἁκρασία, *lack of control or restraint,* referring to an undisciplined person. In the ancient intellectual world an undisciplined person was looked down upon as inferior. A belief that could have seeped into the celibate Corinthians’ view of sexuality: “Sex is a hallmark of an undisciplined person.” Paul is implying here that it’s not marriage’s first objective to curb sin, but it is a shield that can be employed against Satan’s subtleties.

**Discussion.** Consider Paul’s phrase *(Practice temporary celibacy) so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.* Some interpret this to mean Paul was asking Corinthians husbands and wives to temporarily refrain from sex during time of persecution and devote themselves to prayer. Is there application today?

32 Kistemaker, 213.
33 One wonders if this contributed to the rise of ancient extreme asceticism, which reared its head as early as Paul’s day. Self control (ἐγκράτεια) played an important role in the philosophical ethics of classical Greece and Hellenism. In view of all this, it is striking how small a part is played by the term (ἐγκράτεια) in New Testament theology. TDNT, 340. The word group is not found at all in the Gospels. This is surprising when we remember that later schools have tried to see, e.g. in John the Baptist as an Encratite ascetic. On the other hand Paul is fond of the term. He compares himself with an athlete: τὰς ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα ἐγκρατεύεται 1 C. 9.25. Also Galatians 5:23; Titus 1:8; 2 Peter 1:6; Acts 24:25.
34 Eph 5:11
6 τοῦτο δὲ λέγω κατὰ συγγνώμην οὐ κατ’ ἐπιταγήν.

Translation: But I say this as a concession, not a command.

Is Paul saying that marriage is a concession? Some might understand it that way. But if we take the δὲ as adversive (but), and the demonstrative pronoun this (τοῦτο) as qualifying the sentence it immediately follows, then Paul is fully endorsing marriage (as is his habit throughout his letters). He is also making a concession about conjugal rights. He’s saying to the Corinthian celibates, “If you think that I’m endorsing celibacy within marriage, you’re wrong. There’s a time and place for it, therefore I give permission. But I’m not commanding it.”

7 θέλω δὲ πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἶναι ὡς καὶ ἐμαυτόν· ἄλλα ἐκαστὸς ἵδιον ἔχει χάρισμα ἐκ θεοῦ, ὁ μὲν οὐτως, ὁ δὲ οὐτως.

Translation: But I wish that every person were as I am; but each person has their own gift of God - this person has this gift, that person has that one.

What does Paul mean: I wish that every human were as I am?
The first interpretation is that he is speaking about the gift of self-control. This is a good argument. V.5 speaks about ἀκρασία, the lack of self-control and reason for spouses to return from temporary celibacy. V.9 will talk about a reason to marry: the unmarried person’s lack of sexual control (ἐγκρατεύονται). The person with this gift has the ability to harness in sexual desire. They have the gift of remaining celibate. The grace of self-control.35

Some mistakenly interpret this verse to mean that Paul and other unmarried people have a lower desire for intimacy or a “take-it-or-leave-it” attitude toward spousal relationships. Is the gift of God a lowered libido then? That seems a bit offensive both to the Spirit and the unmarried adult who wrestles with real emotions and feelings. How does a pastor answer the person who asks, “I can’t understand it! Why can’t I be married?” And then asks in terror, “Do I have the gift (or the curse)?” The most helpful application for unmarried adults wondering if they have the gift is to explore what a gift is.

The word itself, χάρισμα, gift, is found 17 times in the New Testament. Three things are understood by the authors who use the term: gifts are from God,36 they’re diverse,37 and they are used in service to others.38 So, to understand the gift of God that Paul talks about in v.7 we have to ask: does celibacy fit into the description of a spiritual gift? Is control over your physical and relational emotions a blessing? Certainly. It helps tremendously in the single state. But if we understand a gift (χάρισμα) as something that builds others up, how does self-control fit the

35 Kistemaker, 215.
37 Ro 12:6;1 Co 1:7;12:4,9,28,30; 1 Pe 4:10
38 Ro 1:11; 5:15,16; 6:23;12:6,28; 1 Ti 4:14; 1 Pe 4:10
definition? True. It can help you live the unmarried life. It can help you fight Satan. But it is not serving others.

What if Paul’s gift of God was not celibacy specifically, but his single life? In his book The Meaning of Marriage, Timothy Keller points out:

“Paul is not speaking, then, of some kind of elusive, stress-free state. The ‘gift-ness’ of being single for Paul lay in the freedom it gave him to concentrate on ministry in ways that a married man could not. Paul may very well, then, have experienced what we today would call “emotional struggle” with singleness. He might have wanted to be married. He not only found an ability to live a life of service to God and others in that situation, he discovered (and capitalized on) the unique features of single life (such as time flexibility) to minister with very great effectiveness.”

With this interpretation the gift is something much more tangible - something to be greatly desired and appreciated: the unmarried vocation. I wish that all men were as I am (εἴμαι). Paul says. The present infinitive to be implies the state he currently is in: single. He thinks pretty highly of his unmarried state. His hearers - married and unmarried - should appreciate it too. But is he saying that he wishes everyone to be unmarried? No. Consider chapter 12 where he doesn’t want anyone to desire any gifts but the ones they already have. He continues but each person has (ἔχει) their own gift of God - this person has this gift, that person has that one. In 7:10-40 he will address two states that people are currently in (εἴμαι): married and unmarried. Both are gifts that the Corinthians currently have. The gifts are diverse, Spirit-given, and edifying.

Discussion. Amy is a single adult who desires to be married but is not. She has struggled to find a spouse for 6 years. She asks you, “Do I have the gift?”

1. Interpret the gift as celibacy, self-control. How do you answer her?
2. Interpret the gift as the single state. How do you answer her?
3. Which do you prefer?

8 Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις, καλὸν αὐτοῖς ἕαν μείνωσιν ὡς κἀγὼ.

Translation: But I say to the unmarried and the widows, it is good for them to remain (single) as I am.

---

38 Keller, 238.
40 In chapter 12 Paul makes clear: there are many diverse spiritual gifts, and none of them is better than another. Chapter 13 epitomizes the greatest gift believers for which the believer strives. So here Paul is not implying that the Corinthians - or anyone - should change their state in life to become like him. The phrase can be interpreted, “There is no other greater gift to have than the position God has put me in right now. I identify with you unmarried adults, and let me tell you, my position in life is the best, because God put me here. I’m going to use my singleness to enhance many lives with the gospel.”
To the unmarried. The dative, masculine, plural τοῖς ἁγάμοις comes from the negative particle (ὁ) plus the noun meaning marriage, γάμος. The term is used in v.11 referring to a divorced woman; In v.32 it refers to an unmarried man who is free from marriage concern. In v.34 it refers to an unmarried woman who is fully devoted to Christ instead of her husband. The term includes both unmarried male and female. So the first category of people Paul addresses in v.8, ἁγάμοις, are male or female who have never been married, or previously married but now unmarried.

And the widows. The second indirect object of the sentence, ταῖς χήραις, refers to a woman whose husband has died. Is Paul redundant if he uses the term widows immediately after unmarried? Not exactly. The idea of neediness is often associated with the Greek word widow. It is often joined with orphans (ὀρφανοῦς) (Mt 23:13; Mk12:40,42ff; Lk 2:37; 4:25;7:12; 18:3,5;20:47). In 1 Timothy 5:3,9 Paul asked Timothy to make special arrangements for widows over a certain age: Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need...No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband. The early church made a ministry of looking after widows. Some scholars argue that Christianity was the very first religion that held up the unmarried state as a practical way of life. “One...clear difference between Christianity and Judaism [and all other traditional religions] is the former’s entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers.”441

Although the God of the New Testament also never changed his opinion about caring for widows in the Old (See Du 27:19; 25:5-10; Mal 3:5; Je 49:11), there was undue human pressure to have a family and produce heirs - even among God’s people (e.g. Abraham, Ge 15:2-3). The pressure to marry and produce heirs almost became an idol in and of itself. God’s people began to believe that barrenness (let alone the unmarried state) was a curse. Consider Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. One could argue that the idol of marriage and family actually destroyed their family and morphed it into something (e.g. polygamy, illicit affairs) God never intended from the beginning.42 The idol of marriage and family made sense in ancient times. Without children, you vanished. No health care in old age. No hope for the future. You essentially vanished. You were considered to be living a human life that was less than realized.

The New Testament ushered in an era that ended that stigma. Not because there was a change in God’s opinion about the unmarried state. Rather, because when God came to earth he remained unmarried himself. Jesus’ human life was not less than fully realized. He was perfect. 43 He enjoyed the privilege of having a body that belonged to God alone. Everything he had was put into his Father’s service instead of the service of a spouse. His unmarried state was excellent. He had a perfect union with the heart and mind of his Father.44 He was not tied to an earthly family. His circle of friends and followers grew larger because he could nurture

41 Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 174.
42 Ge 11:30; 16:3-4; 29:31
43 He 4:15; 1 Pe 2:22
44 John 17:11
meaningful relationships with more than a spouse. He enjoyed cross-gender friendships with Mary and Martha among others (relationships that are greatly hindered in the married state).\textsuperscript{45} He was mobile. He could run to the mountains to pray.\textsuperscript{46} He championed the unmarried state in his ministry and teaching. He pointed out a widow who put her last penny, and her heart, into her Heavenly Husband’s hands.\textsuperscript{47}

So too, Jesus’ apostles, Paul, recognized the goodness of the unmarried state. In v.8 he suggests that it is good (καλὸν) for the unmarried man/woman or the destitute widow to remain in the state they were currently in. Notice another parallel response to the celibate Corinthians it is good (καλὸν) for man not to have sexual relations [v.1]) Could Paul be taking the Corinthian slogan and applying the thought it is good to each situation God has place someone in: to the married state (v. 2 - each man should have his own wife), now to the unmarried state (v.8 - it is good for them to remain in the single state as I am). Paul’s instructions are practical yet profound. In a time in history when there was tremendous social pressure to marry or remarry,\textsuperscript{48} Paul tells the Corinthians to embrace the unmarried state. It is good because God placed them there. It was a gift that their Savior himself enjoyed, and Paul too (v.7).

\textsuperscript{45} Lk 10:38-42; Mary Magdalene Lk 8:2.
\textsuperscript{46} Lk 6:12, 9:28; Mt 14:23
\textsuperscript{47} Lk 21:1-4; Mk 12:41-44
\textsuperscript{48} Social historian Rodney Stark: “Should they be widowed, Christian women enjoyed substantial advantages. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to marry within two years. In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. The church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry.” Stark, Rodney. The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996), 104.
Discussion. In her article “Singled Out by God for Good” Paige Benton Brown lists a number of common ways that Christian churches try to “explain” singleness. Read the statement and respond. What does each sentence say about the unmarried adult desiring marriage?

1. “As soon as you’re satisfied with God alone, he’ll bring someone special into your life!”

2. “You’re too picky.”

3. “As a single you can commit yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord’s work!”

4. “Before you can marry someone wonderful, the Lord has to make you someone wonderful.”

Discussion #8. How can pastors create an atmosphere in their community where the unmarried state is not just accepted but appreciated?

9 εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν, κρείπτον γάρ ἔστιν γαμήσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι.

Translation: But if they cannot practice abstinence, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with sexual passions.

The present, middle-passive indicative ἐγκρατεύονται means to keep one’s emotions, impulses, or desires under control: control oneself, abstain. In 1 Co 9:25 Paul uses the middle aorist form, Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training (ἐγκρατεύεται). Some Talmudic rabbis and third century scholars interpreted πυροῦσθαι to burn (in hell). Maybe this was an interpretation spun off of Jesus’ teaching about gouging out one’s eye so as to preserve the body from being thrown into hell. But carry that thought over to 1 Co 7:9, It is better to marry than to burn in hell. Paul would be equating marriage with gouging out one’s eye.

50 BDAG, 274.
51 F.F. Bruce, 1 and 2 Corinthians, New Century bible series (London: Oliphants, 1971), 68.
52 Mt 5:29; Mk 9:47; Mt 5:29
The Greek has only the verb *to burn*, but similar to earlier euphemistic phrases Paul demands the reader to complete the thought *with sexual desire*. The word can be described as being on fire with flames (2 Pe 3:12; Eph 6:16), being greatly worried or burn with distress (2 Co 11:29). Or the deponent form here, *to be sexually aroused, burn inwardly with passion*. In context Paul is speaking about sex. So it makes sense to interpret τυροῦσθαι as sexual urges. Some unmarried Corinthians burned with sexual passion, τυροῦσθαι.

Although the single state is good, in fact, preferable to Paul, he could be recognizing here that the Corinthian celibates were putting unfair pressure on the unmarried. Paul knows human nature. He is saying, “If you are in an unmarried state, but losing the battle to control your sexual urges (a normal, natural emotion - see Ro 1:27), then seriously consider God's institution of marriage where those urges can be put to use in a God-pleasing way.”

If an unmarried person is burning with a natural, sexual desire, then it would be *better*, κρεῖττον, to marry. The word *better* is comparative. Paul is placing marriage over against burning. “Enter into a married state as a one-time act to avoid a state of continual desire,” he says, “If your mind and body is consumed with sexual passion, then desire a life-long, married relationship. It is better to be in a state where you can express your uncontrollable urges and avoid sin (marriage), than to be constantly in a state where your uncontrollable urges can never find fulfillment (unmarried state), therefore leading to more sin.

**Discussion.** A young, dating couple begins coming to your church. They are cohabitating. Considering Paul's thoughts in v.9 do you recommend them to marry immediately?

---

53 E.g. the euphemisms for sex in 7:2,3,5.
A running exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:25-40.

25 Now about virgins (παρθένων): I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment (γνώμην) as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

The Corinthians' first question regarding celibacy came in v.1. Now Paul addresses the another question concerning virgins: should they seek marriage in the present situation? In this instance he does not have a command from the Lord, like he did in 7:10. Rather, these are his own thoughts (γνώμην = view or opinion), although he speaks with Christ's authority and is guided by the Spirit. (v.40)

The Greek word for virgin (παρθένων) implies that this person is of marriageable age. It can also refer to a man. The context of the verse says, Concerning any male or female of marriageable age, who has not yet married.

26 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.
27 Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

Paul reinforces their current calling in life: are you married, good (καλὸν). Are you unmarried, that is good (καλὸν) too. Be content with the gift you have. But Paul also recognizes the context of the situation surrounding the Corinthians and himself. The world was extremely anti-Christian, anti-family, and immoral. Believers would suffer because of their faith, even to the point of death. Paul himself would be martyred. Imagine the distress he would feel if his family relied on his welfare. How many cities would he not have entered? How many synagogues and public places would he have avoided?

Discussion. When may a pastor advise an unmarried adult seeking marriage not to marry because of the present crisis? What if they go ahead anyway?

---

54 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)...7:10
55 Revelation 14:4
28b But those who marry will face many troubles (θλίψιν) in this life (τῇ σαρκί), and I want to spare you this.

The troubles (lit. pressing together or pressure) that come into life (lit. in the flesh) through marriage is the exchange of freedom. When at one time a single person’s body belonged to Christ alone, now they share it with another sinful human being. If someone has the gift of singleness Paul wants them to fully realize the potential for their life. In context there would also be pains of the flesh and eyes to watch your believing children or believing spouse be persecuted or worse. Jesus prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem, How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!56

Discussion. Consider (post)marriage counseling. What are the top three troubles in marriage that single people are spared of?

29 What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time (ὁ καιρὸς) is short (συνεσταλμένος ἔστιν). From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; 30 those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; 31 those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away (παράγει).

The principle that Paul is trying to instill in the Corinthians is that final fulfilment is not found in marriage, but in Christ. The Greek term for the time is ὁ καιρὸς (lit. a fixed, definite time or season). The verb συνεσταλμένος ἔστιν is a perfect passive participle. He’s literally saying the time has been contracted, shortened. He could be telling the Corinthians, “We’re living in the end times! Your final fulfillment is coming when Jesus returns.” He turns the Corinthians’ eyes from human idols - marriage, family, children - earthly blessings which will eventually pass away, to the sky. Neither the married state nor the single state will rescue them from the Day of Judgment. Only Christ.

Marriage, family, children, and the single state are passing away (παράγει). What are the implications of this? First, it means that all earthly concerns still exist. The world keeps turning. We must think about earthly things. But our hope in God’s future world changes our attitudes toward earthly institutions like marriage. We should be happy over success, but not too much. We should be sad over failure, but not too much. The true joy is in Christ’s cross and the eternal heavens and earth. So we are to enjoy but not be engrossed (μὴ

56 Mk 13:17; also Mt 24:19; Mk 21:23.
καταχρώμενοι in things of this world. Jesus said there will not be marriage in heaven. So why pursue it if it could turn into a temptation that pulls you away from God?

32 I would like you to be free from concern (ἀμερίμνους). An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—34 and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

The adjective ἀμερίμνους means without worry, free from care. Paul wishes this for the virgins and single people at this time and place. He is summarizing the previous point: “Concern yourself first with the present situation. Your Savior is returning. Will you become too engrossed in worldly affairs like marriage? Will your focus be drawn in two directions too much, so that you will forget he’s returning?”

Concerned about the affairs of this world - how he can please his wife. His body is not his own (v.4). Neither is his time or attention. A husband has a family and home to maintain. Notice that Paul doesn’t get judgmental or make a new law. He simply tells the truth. His opinion for the single people of Corinth at this time was not to have heavy responsibilities of married life.

36 If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. 37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.

The translation here is ambiguous. Is Paul as talking about 1) an unmarried man who is trying to decide whether to marry a virgin (NIV11 above), or 2) a father who is trying to decide whether to marry off his daughter or not (NIV11 footnote). A literal translation: (36)

57 Mt 22:30
58 36 If anyone thinks he is not treating his daughter properly, and if she is getting along in years (or if her passions are too strong), and he feels she ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. He should let her get married. 37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no
Now if anyone thinks he is acting dishonorably (ἁσχημονεῖν) upon his virgin, if she is at her sexual prime (or ‘if his passions are strong’)⁶⁰, and if it is so, let him do what he will. He (or she) has not sinned. Let them marry. (37) But he who stands firm in his heart, not under compulsion, and has authority concerning his own will, and has decided this in his own heart to keep his own virgin, he will do well. (38) So then, both he who gives his own virgin in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.

The Greek word in v.36 to act dishonorably (ἁσχημονεῖν) could be a euphemism for sexually indecent acts.⁶¹ In v.9 Paul encouraged those who burn with sexual desire to be married if they are unable to control themselves. In v.28 he says: “If you should marry, you have not sinned.” So in context, the main point in v.36-38 is that neither the person who remained single throughout life accomplished a good work or is more spiritually pleasing to Jesus than the one who ‘broke down’ and got married. Jesus is on his way, and either state is good if you keep that in mind.

39 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.

Paul has addressed marriage, divorce, separation, virgins, and engagements. He has mentioned widows once (v.8). Now he speaks about their situation directly. But he must belong to the Lord (μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ) is an interpretation rather than translation. Literally, She is free to marry whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Taken another way, Paul’s thought could be, She is free to marry anyone she wishes, but (let her make her choice) in the fear of the Lord. Understood this way Paul is not making another law. He is giving good, pastoral advice.

**Does the Bible command that believers marry within the faith?**

Some people invoke passages like v.39 and 2 Corinthians 6:14 to confirm that the God commands believers to seek spouses of the same faith. The Old Testament prohibits Jews from marrying non-Jews. Here God seems to be telling people to marry within one’s race.

---

⁶⁰ ἐὰν τις ἂν εὐθυγράμτηται - the particle ἐὰν followed by the verb in the indicative appears to show that Paul is familiar with the situation: “if someone thinks.” Kistemaker, 254.

⁶¹ This interpretation focuses on the scensive force of ὑπὲρ, ‘exceedingly’. But another possible translation: if she is past her prime, beyond marriageable age. BDAG, 1032.

⁶² ἁσχημονεῖν refers to “unpresentable parts” (12:23). The noun form is used in Ro 1:27; Rev 16:15 to mean indecent homosexual acts.
But Moses himself married a member of another race.\textsuperscript{62} Maybe God’s concern is not about marrying outside of one’s race but outside of one’s faith. That’s sound advice.

If your partner doesn’t share your Christian faith, then he or she doesn’t truly understand you, from the inside. They won’t share your deepest core beliefs. They won’t understand why you make the decisions you make. On the other hand, a believing couple seeking marriage knows each other on the deepest level immediately.

**Discussion.** A/D. It is very narrow-minded to discourage Christians from marrying outside of their faith.

\textbf{40 In my judgment} (ἐμὴν γνώμην), \textbf{she is happier} (μακριωτέρα = comparative) \textbf{if she stays as she is}—and I think that I too have (ἐχεῖν) the Spirit of God.

Paul speaks with the confidence of apostolic authority (\textit{and I think that I too have the Spirit of God}), but gives an opinion (ἐμὴν γνώμην; see also v.25) on the matter of remarriage: The widow who finds herself in the unmarried state can enjoy a happier state than marriage. How does a pastor guide the unmarried to a correct understanding of marriage with Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 7:25-40?

Here are several advantages for every unmarried Christian to seriously consider:

1. Single persons can have more time to pursue the affairs of the Lord (v.32,35).
2. Single persons can live with less distress in an anti-Christian and anti-family pagan society (v.26).
3. Single persons may enjoy greater personal freedom or, from a different perspective, fewer personal problems (v.28).\textsuperscript{63}

**Conclusion**

In 1 Co 7 Paul approaches the single, the married, and the widowed-life the same way. He puts every life-situation in perspective: “Your first husband is Jesus. Wherever you find yourself, you’re nothing without him.” He also gives practical advice and personal suggestions. That’s why it’s valuable for pastors today. We minister to single people who forever long for marriage, but

\textsuperscript{62} Numbers 12

often feel unfulfilled in their unmarried state. We counsel single adults who believe they cannot live without marriage. We minister to single adults who believe they can do without “the hassle.”

A pastor’s job then is to put marriage in perspective with Jesus’ cross. What is the most practical way to minister to singles? “The answer is that single people cannot live their lives well as singles without a balanced, informed view of marriage. If they do not have that, they will either over-desire or under-desire marriage, and either of those ways of thinking will distort their lives.”

64 Teaching a balanced perspective about marriage and singleness under Jesus’ cross is an extremely freeing proposition. Teach the whole congregation the realities of marriage: the good and bad. It allows the single person to enjoy their singleness, and choose marriage if they wish.

---

64 Keller, 219.
Bibliography


Layden, Dr. MaryAnne, Judith Reisman, Jeffrey Sanitover, Mary Anne Layden, and James B. Weaver, “Hearing on the brain science behind pornography addiction and the effects of addiction on families and communities,” Hearing to U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation, Nov. 18, 2004.


Appendix A

The Singles Survey. April. 2014. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how do you feel about these statement:

1. I am happy in the single state.
   Agree: 37%
   Disagree: 50%
   Neutral: 12%

2. I am unhappy in the single state.
   Agree: 37%
   Disagree: 37%
   Neutral: 25%

3. I desire to be married.
   Agree: 88%
   Disagree: 0%
   Neutral: 12%

4. I desire to remain single.
   Agree: 0%
   Disagree: 88%
   Neutral: 12%

5. I understand the gift in 1 Corinthians 7.
   Agree: 38%
   Disagree: 25%
   Neutral: 38%

If so, explain the gift in your own words:

- I think that passage and the surrounding context points to Jesus saying it can be a good thing to be single. Being single gives you the opportunity to use your individual gifts and talents to honor him.
- The plan that God has for our lives. (x2)
- Being single is not something everyone is capable of. God has given avert one different abilities and talents. Being single does come as an advantage in serving the church. If a single is servant minded they are able to serve more than a married person.
• **The opportunity to examine your personal faith life and look inside yourself for who God has made you and who you can be to another person outside of anyone else’s influence.**

• **The gift is the freedom to focus solely on the work God has called you to do, whereas a married man or a father has a responsibility to his family as well.**

• **Our own talents.**

• **I wouldn’t call it a "gift" but as a single, head of home, I make all the decisions and don’t need to negotiate with anyone else.**

6. A physical relationship with the opposite sex is overwhelmingly appealing.
   
   Agree: 75%
   Disagree: 12%
   Neutral: 12%

7. When it comes to desiring a physical relationship I feel like I have good self-control.
   
   Agree: 63%
   Disagree: 25%
   Neutral: 12%

8. The single life has advantages.
   
   Agree: 50%
   Disagree: 25%
   Neutral 25%

9. I enjoy more friendship than my married friends.
   
   Agree: 37%
   Disagree: 50%
   Neutral: 12%

10. My quality of life is the same or better than my married friends.
    
    Agree: 38%
    Disagree: 38%
    Neutral: 25%

11. Sometimes it seems like the married life is too much work for what it’s worth.
    
    Agree: 12%
    Disagree: 88%

12. My church is primarily marriage and family focused.
    
    Agree: 50%
Disagree: 38%
Neutral: 12%

13. My church gives me an honest picture of marriage.
   Agree: 63%
   Neutral: 38%

14. The single life has spiritual advantages.
   Agree: 50%
   Disagree: 25%
   Neutral: 25%

If so, how does the single life have spiritual advantages?
   • Having the extra time to focus on my relationship with Christ.
   • Ability to freely work on your individual relationship with Christ with fewer distractions.
   • Ability to serve. Time for devotions.
   • The opportunity to examine your personal faith life and look inside yourself for who God has made you and who you can be to another outside of anyone else's influence.
   • More flexibility to devote time and energy to The Lord.
   • Speaking as a widow with two children, it means one less person in your immediate family that you must care for. At the same time, there is one less person to help out and to share the burdens.

15. What is the greatest joy of the single life?
   • Having the extra time to serve my church and spend time in the word.
   • Diverse friend groups.
   • My schedule is my own. This isn't enough of a benefit to out weigh the blessings of marriage.
   • Anticipation. Freedom to cultivate a variety of friendships, handle personal goals without fear of neglecting your spouse.
   • Freedom
   • Being autonomous in decision-making, having the freedom to go where you please and do what you will.
   • Not what I'd call joy, but the advantage of doing whatever I like whenever I like.
   • It forces me to rely more heavily on God and His love and provisions.

16. What is the greatest challenge of the single life?
   • Loneliness (x7)
● Even though I spend a lot of time around people and serving, I often feel alone.
● Feeling that no one cares for me.
● Fatigue and the need for help with parenting.
● Unfulfilled desire for a family.

17. How can your church better serve singles?
● Continue to advise and encourage us especially through the next sermon series.
● Singles group (x4)
● Singles activities that are focused more on social with Bible added. The different ages and reasons for singles is so diverse, it will be hard to figure this out.
● Bowling, movies, eat out, game night, grill out, wine tasting, live music, local events
● Pastor is already giving me a lot of help with my parenting challenges.
Single? Wish you weren't? Have single friends you want to "encourage?"
Read this refreshing essay by one of our upcoming WIC retreat speakers before you say (or think!) another word!

Singled Out by God for Good

Paige Benton

Had I any vague premonition of my present plight when I was six, I would have demanded that Stephen Herbison (incontestably the catch of the second grade) put his marriage proposal into writing and have it notarized.

I do want this piece to be practical, so to all you first-graders: CARPE DIEM.

Over the past several years I have perfected the artistry of escape regarding any singles functions—cookouts, conferences, Sunday school classes, and my personal favorite, putt-putt. My avoidance mechanism is triggered not so much by a lack of patience with such activities as it is by a lack of stomach for the pervasive attitudes. Thoreau insists that most men lead lives of quiet desperation; I insist that many singles lead lives of loud aggravation. Being immersed in singles can be like finding yourself in the midst of "The Whiners" of 1980's Saturday Night Live—it gives a whole new meaning to "pity party."

Much has been written in Christian circles about singleness. The objective is usually either to chide the married population for their misunderstanding and segregationism or to empathize with the unmarried population as they bear the cross of "Plan B" for the Christian life, bolstered only by the consolation prizes of innumerable sermons on I Corinthians 7 and the fact that you can cut your toenails in bed. Yet singles, like all believers, need scriptural critique and instruction seasoned by sober grace, not condolences and putt-putt accompanied with pious platitudes.

John Calvin’s secret to sanctification is the interaction of the knowledge of God and knowledge of self. Singles, like all other sinners, typically dismiss the first element of the formula, and therein lies the root of all identity crises. It is not that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but that life has no tragedy like our God ignored. Every problem is a theological problem, and the habitual discontent of us singles is no exception.

Can God be any less good to me on the average Tuesday morning than he was on that monumental Friday afternoon when he hung on a cross in my place?

I long to be married. My younger sister got married two months ago. She now has an adoring husband, a beautiful home, a whirlpool bathtub, and all-new Corningware. Is God being any less good to me than he is to her? The answer is a resounding NO. God will not be less good to me because God cannot be less good to me. It is a cosmic impossibility for God to shortchange any of his children. God can no more live in me apart from the perfect fullness of his goodness and grace than I can live in Nashville and not be white. If he fluctuated one quark in his goodness, he would cease to be God.

Warped theology is at the heart of attempts to "explain" singleness:

• "As soon as you’re satisfied with God alone, he’ll bring someone special into your life"—as though God’s blessings are ever earned by our contentment.

• "You’re too picky"—as though God is frustrated by our fickle whims and needs broader parameters in which to work.

• "As a single you can commit yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord’s work"—as though God requires emotional martyrs to do his work, of which marriage must be no part.

• "Before you can marry someone wonderful, the Lord has to make you someone wonderful"—as though God grants marriage as a second blessing to the satisfactorily sanctified.

I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one.
Accepting singleness, whether temporary or permanent, does not hinge on speculation about answers God has not given to our list of whys, but rather on celebration of the life he has given. I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me. It is a cosmic impossibility that anything could be better for me right now than being single. The psalmists confirm that I should not want, I shall not want, because no good thing will God withhold from me. Such knowledge of God must transform subsequent knowledge of self-theological readjustment is always the catalyst for renewed self-awareness. This keeps identity right-side-up with nouns and modifiers in their correct place. Am I a Christian single or am I a single Christian? The discrepancy in grammatical construction may be somewhat subtle, but the difference in mindset is profound. Which word is determinative and which is descriptive? You see, we singles are chronic amnesiacs—we forget who we are, we forget whose we are. I am a single Christian. My identity is not found in my marital status but in my redemptive status. I’m one of the “haves,” not one of the “have-nots.”

Have you ever wondered at what age one is officially single? Perhaps a sliding scale is in order: 38 for a Wall Street tycoon; 21 for a Mississippi sorority girl; 14 for a Zulu princess; and five years older than I am for me. It is a relevant question because at some point we see ourselves as “single,” and that point is a place of greater danger than despair. Singleness can be a mere euphemism for self-absorption—now is the “you time.” No wife to support? No husband to pamper? Well, then, by all means join three different golf courses, get a weekly pedicure, raise emus, subscribe to People.

Singleness is never carte blanche for selfishness. A spouse is not a sufficient countermeasure for self. The gospel is the only antidote for egocentricity. Christ did not come simply to save us from our sins, he came to save us from our selves. And he most often rescues us from us through relationships, all kinds of relationships. "Are you seeing anyone special?" a young matron in my home church asked patronizingly. "Sure," I smiled. "I see you and you’re special." OK, my sentiment was a little less than kind, but the message is true. To be single is not to be alone. If someone asks if you are in a relationship right now, your immediate response should be that you are in dozens. Our range of relational options is not limited to getting married or to living in the sound-proof, isolated booth of Miss America pageants. Christian growth mandates relational richness. The only time folks talk about human covenants is in premartial counseling. How anemic. If our God is a covenantal God, then all of our relationships are covenantal. The gospel is not about how much I love God (I typically love him very little); it is about how much God loves me. My relationships are not about how much friends should love me, they are about how much I get to love them. No single should ever expect relational impoverishment by virtue of being single. We should covenant to love people—to initiate, to serve, to commit.

Many of my Vanderbilt girls have been reading Lady in Waiting, a popular book for Christian women struggling with singleness. That’s all fine and dandy, but what about a subtitle: And Meanwhile, Lady, Get Working. It is a cosmic impossibility for God to require less of me in my relationships than he does of the mother of four whose office is next door. Obedience knows no ages or stages.

Let’s face it: singleness is not an inherently inferior state of affairs. If it were, heaven would be inferior to this world for the majority of Christians (Mom is reconciled to being unmarried in glory as long as she can be Daddy’s roommate). But I want to be married. I pray to that end every day. I may meet someone and walk down the aisle in the next couple of years because God is so good to me. I may never have another date and die as "single," and that point is a place of greater danger than despair. Singleness can be a mere euphemism for self-absorption—now is the "you time." No wife to support? No husband to pamper? Well, then, by all means join three different golf courses, get a weekly pedicure, raise emus, subscribe to People.

Paige Benton serves on staff of the Presbyterian Church in America’s Reformed University Fellowship at Vanderbilt University, where she also serves as a university chaplain.

Reprinted by permission, re-generation Quarterly.