

DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY MAGAZINE

# KINDRED SPIRIT

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# Sing and THE CHURCH



Dallas Theological Seminary's mission is to glorify God by equipping godly servant-leaders for the proclamation of his Word and the building up of the body of Christ worldwide.

## KINDRED SPIRIT®

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT

*Dr. Mark L. Bailey*

## No-Pendulum Zone

**O**f every three students on our Dallas campus, one is single. Single people comprise a growing group in our world, and consequently in our churches. By some counts, those who are widowed, divorced, and never married actually outnumber the married among us as we gather for worship.



Yet today's church can feel like an unfriendly place for these brothers and sisters in Christ. Our laser-like focus on the ideal family unit can shape the perception of others into feeling "they have no need of me"—or perhaps "they want me—but only if I get a spouse." Not everyone wants to marry; some believe God would have them not to marry; but many do wish to marry—as evidenced by the fact that online dating is the third highest income-generator on the Internet. While marriage may be hurting or waning in the census numbers, romance is still certainly popular.

Longings to be married, when added to external pressure to "tie the knot," can make for a miserable existence. And the church should address this stress, not inadvertently increase it. The church needs God's wisdom!

God's ideal is not for every person to be married. Consider Hosea, whom God told to wed a prostitute, Gomer—whom he knew would later leave Hosea for other men—to illustrate God's one-sided love for Israel. Or Ezekiel, whom God told not to mourn when his wife died, which pictured Israel's hardness of heart (Ezek. 24:17). Or especially Jesus Christ. The description of him in Isaiah evoked the curiosity of an Ethiopian eunuch when he read, "Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth" (Acts 8:33, citing Isaiah 53:8). Perhaps the eunuch identified with this One who left no biological legacy. Add to the list Miriam; Anna; John the Baptist; Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany; and Paul. All of these were single or single again, as far as we know. And all are presented to us in the pages of Scripture as believers desiring to walk with God.

Marriage is not superior; nor is singleness. And Christian truth and love beckon us to remember this. There's a danger in putting forth the idea that singleness is the sole ideal, just as there is danger in saying the same of marriage. Whether single or married, we are one family and equally valued members of one body in Christ. Parallel to the differing spiritual gifts God has given us for the good of the Body (1 Cor. 12:21–27), each person is also a gift God gives to every other person. We all belong. And we need each other.

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*"Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

—Mark 3:35



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### Profile of DTS professor Dr. Abraham Kuruvilla

By Kelley Mathews

DTS professor Dr. Abraham Kuruvilla, who is also a practicing dermatologist, describes himself as single by choice, single for life, single unto Christ, and single in community. Kuruvilla, whose book, *Privilege the Text*, was named *Preaching* magazine's book of the year in 2013, writes, "I probably have an advantage of more time and undistracted focus to concentrate on ministry—whether thinking, reflecting, writing, teaching, researching, or preaching."

## 8 | How the Church Can Encourage Singles

By Carly Isaac Graham

Having experienced church from the perspective of a single person, DTS graduate Carly Graham recalls, "I spent my twenties wishing to be married. And during that time, I struggled to find my place at church with its sometimes overwhelming focus on marriage and family." She offers suggestions for integrating single people into the community.

## 12 | The Covenant of Singleness: The Bible and Church History

By Dr. J. Scott Horrell

Theology professor Dr. J. Scott Horrell takes a look at what the Bible and church history say about singleness. He writes, "A believer's singleness in service to the triune God can be every bit as covenantal as the oath between a Christian husband and wife. The importance of both single and marital covenants before God begs reiteration in our world today."

### Also in this issue:

The Church and Singles: Some Advice

They Were Single Too: A Sampling of 8 Bible Characters

Singled Out: 5 Things Single People Need from the Church

### Kindred Spirit Online [www.dts.edu/ks](http://www.dts.edu/ks)

Article: Compelling Love: The Christian and Same-Sex Attraction,  
by counseling professor Dr. Gary Barnes

Article: Joseph or Judah? Waiting on God for Satisfaction,  
by alumnus Dr. Wayne Stiles

Excerpt: Chapter one of *God With Us*, by theology professor Dr. Glenn Kreider

Article: Lifting Up Christ While Lifting Weights: A Profile of Weightlifter  
Spencer Arnold, by media intern Ashley Scarbrough with  
Dr. Sandra Glahn

Excerpt: From *How to Read the Bible Like a Seminary Professor*,  
by academic dean Dr. Mark Yarbrough



# A Singular Focus: Choosing to Be Celibate Profile of DTS professor Dr. Abraham

**I**t is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." At first glance, DTS's well-read professor Abe Kuruvilla, MD, PhD, seems to fit this opening line to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. But all is not as it seems, for while Dr. Kuruvilla may embody the first part of the description, he is most definitely not "in want of a wife." The homiletics professor, instead, practices what he calls *ecclesiological singleness*—

singleness for the sake of Christ and his church.

After earning his MD and while pursuing a medical PhD about twenty years ago in Houston, Kuruvilla embarked on a serious study of Scripture, under the influence of his DTS-trained pastor and the radio ministries of DTS alumni. Along the way he enrolled at DTS. His growing number of opportunities to preach factored in to his thoughts on remaining unmarried. "I pursued singleness because of my passion for studying and teaching Scripture without distraction, as well as a recognition that I had the gift of celibacy. My decision to remain single," he said, "came as a progressive, gradual process,

made with much prayer and consulting with friends."

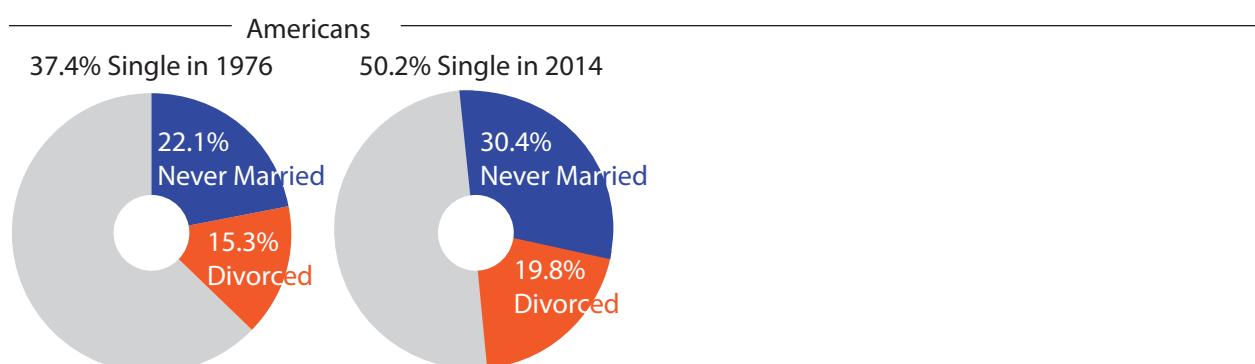
## A Spiritual Discipline

Ecclesiological singleness, as Kuruvilla defines it, involves four pillars that define and describe Kuruvilla's vocation to serve the Lord as a single man:

**1. Single by choice.** Remaining single has been a conscious choice, originally made while in his mid-twenties. Unlike others who may be seeking a spouse and/or are single only due to divorce or the death of a spouse, Kuruvilla remains unmarried on purpose, in line with his spiritual gifting of celibacy, considering it his calling.

**2. Single for life.** Just as marriage is meant to be a lifelong union, so Kuruvilla considers his singleness "for life," opting to close the "door" in order to maintain a singular focus upon ministry.

**3. Single unto Christ.** Purposeful singleness has given Kuruvilla the freedom to expand his scholarly training, to accept a variety of preaching and teaching offers, and to explore the theology of celibacy from personal experience. Dr. Victor Anderson, his Pastoral Ministries department chairman, illustrates this reality: "Abe uses his singleness to focus more of his energies on scholarship and ministry. He holds three doctoral degrees, has a clinical practice



# for Christ

## Kuruvilla





### **ABE KURUVILLA, MD**

In addition to his full schedule as a DTS homiletics professor, Dr. Abe Kuruvilla also serves the general public through an active dermatology practice. He first came to the US to pursue a PhD in Immunology, having already earned his MD at the University of Kerala, India. After his ThM at DTS, he completed a PhD at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Kuruvilla studied at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, and interned at Texas Children's Hospital, Houston, in pediatrics, before taking his residency in dermatology. Those studies took him to Boston University, and he is currently a Fellow of the American Academy of Dermatology. Conveniently enough, he offices at nearby Baylor University Medical Center, a five-minute walk from the DTS campus, and ten minutes from his home.

Kuruvilla relishes his split life. "Being involved in a 'secular' job, particularly one that deals with the suffering of people," he said, "keeps me in touch with the real world, and removes me, with some frequency, from the ivory tower of academia and deposits me into the nitty-gritty of life. That is an essential experience for a preacher."

in dermatology, and teaches preaching at DTS. He's a voracious reader. It is not unusual to see him carrying an armload of books to his car. When he exercises at the local fitness center, it is normally on a stationary bike so

he can keep reading while he pedals."

#### **4. Single in community.**

Kuruvilla purposefully seeks community among friends, colleagues, and fellow church members. While he admits to being careful with his interactions with women, maintaining "strict accountability with a trusted few," he consistently lives his life with people. "He has never voiced a word of frustration or disappointment about being single," Anderson said. "He has embraced—not tolerated—singleness fully, never muttering about feelings of loneliness or lack of companionship. I have seen his great contentment in his singleness, even when he is the only single at an event, like dinner at my house." Kuruvilla enjoys a close relationship with his only sibling, the brother who led him to the Lord forty years ago, and spends most holidays with him and his family.

#### **Abstinence or Celibacy?**

When speaking on the subject of celibacy, Kuruvilla cites Matthew 19, in which Jesus acknowledges that there are "those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (19:12). "Celibacy is a gift—it is not for everyone. There is a 'givenness' to it. And, of course, if it is your gift, there is a vibrancy to this choice that energizes you. I would not want to give up my gift of celibacy for anything."

Kuruvilla carves a fine distinction between abstinence and celibacy. He writes, "Abstinence is a response to outside circumstances, whereas celibacy is inner-driven, a response to a calling." Celibacy, Kuruvilla added, could be described as "purpose-driven abstinence." He feels such sacrifice should not be understood as all negative. A person makes such sacrifices for the body of Christ in order to engage all his or her time, abilities, and resources for the church.

When a radio interviewer asked Kuruvilla to explain the reasoning behind his status, the professor pointed to the words of the apostle Paul: "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. 7:32–34).

#### **Celibate in Ministry Leadership**

Kuruvilla believes that his singleness has enhanced his ministry. "I probably have an

Dr. Kuruvilla discussed the issue of singleness with Dr. Darrell Bock during a taping of The Table podcast. Go to [www.dts.edu/thetable](http://www.dts.edu/thetable) to listen.



advantage of more time and undistracted focus to concentrate on ministry, whether thinking, reflecting, writing, teaching, researching, or preaching," he said. In addition to serving his Houston church in the past as a teaching elder and more recently leading several Dallas churches as an interim preacher, Kuruvilla has also steered the Evangelical Homiletics Society as president, vice president, and board member; and he currently serves as book review editor for *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society*. Kuruvilla does hope to educate seminary students—future church leaders—to better recognize and value the single people within their ministries. "While I have noted a naiveté in churches regarding singles, it has not directly affected me," he said. "But churches can do more to showcase celibates, whether in sermons or in extending pastoral opportunities to them. Both singleness and marriage are equally valid platforms for ministry and leadership."

### Celibacy as a Spiritual Discipline

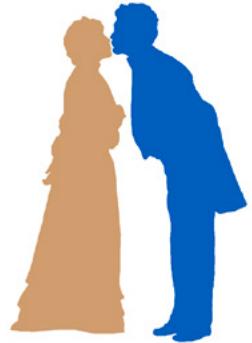
"Like any spiritual discipline, celibacy takes work," Kuruvilla

said. He likens it to fasting, solitude, silence, and other active disciplines. "Over a period of time I've learned my own weaknesses, and I've made my own buffers against those. I don't do anything in ministry that is not in some way connected with my primary focus on preaching."

To those who are single, he says, "Let your life speak. Let it shine and be an example of what single people can do. Don't whine, and don't settle for marginalization. You are no less a disciple of Christ than your married colleagues."

To both the married and the single, he says, "Marriage is not an eternal state, not the best thing or greatest good in eternity. Marriage and celibacy are both gifts. Which is yours? Pursue it."

*Kelley Mathews (ThM, 2000), whose concentration was Media Arts and Ministry, has more than fifteen years' publishing experience as an editor, writer, and book reviewer. She has coauthored several resources for women in ministry with DTS professor Dr. Sue Edwards.*



Average age at first marriage

Men: 28.9 years

Women: 26.9 years



For every **89** unmarried men ages 18+, there are **100** unmarried women.



Men are more likely than women to have never been married.