

Ecclesiological Singleness¹

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“That which we shall be, you have already begun to be.”
Cyprian of Carthage (200–285 C.E.)
to the first Christian virgins³

In 2016, in the US, there were about 115 million adults 18 years and older who were single—never married, married but separated, widowed, and divorced—making up about half of all US adults in that age group.⁴

2016 Statistics for US Singles (in 1000s)

	TOTAL (%)	MALES (%)	FEMALES (%)
Total 18 and older	244,544 (100.0)	118,350 (100.0)	126,194 (100.0)
Total single	115,780 (47.3)	53,915 (45.6)	61,866 (49.0)
<i>Never married</i>	70,218 (28.7)	37,592 (31.8)	32,627 (25.9)
<i>Separated</i>	5,212 (2.1)	2,169 (1.8)	3,043 (2.4)
<i>Widowed</i>	14,839 (6.1)	3,462 (2.9)	11,377 (9.0)
<i>Divorced</i>	25,511 (10.4)	10,692 (9.0)	14,819 (11.7)

This makes it vital for any Christian organization or ministry to comprehend the issue of what it means to be single *and* Christian. This essay, however, will focus not so much on the question of singleness until marriage, or between marriages, or even after marriage (when one decides to remain single thenceforth), but rather on what it means to be a lifelong single apart from the possibility of marriage. While most works on this subject see singleness as a problem to be countered, an oppression to be overcome, a burden to be relieved, and an agony to be suffered,

¹ This is an expanded version of my chapter, “Celibacy and the Gospel,” in *Sexual Ethics: A Christian Perspective* (eds. Sandra Glahn and D. Gary Barnes; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2020 [forthcoming]).

² Full disclosure: I come to Scripture as a conservative Protestant Christian, an Indian-American with no formal political affiliation, who is at home both in Asia, Europe, and N. America, is heterosexual in orientation but celibate in practice for the cause of Christ, and is a professor, a preacher, and a physician. I am often asked how I came to be a celibate, recognizing my gift. As with most gifts, the acknowledgment of this is also best ascertained prayerfully by gauging one’s head, heart, and hands. *Head*: personality, degree of contentment, what God has made one, the fingerprints of God in one’s life; *heart*: passion laid upon one’s heart by God, whether one is “burning” (1 Cor 7:9); and *hands*: fruit of ministry while exercising the gift. And, no doubt, the wisdom and opinion of those whom one trusts, and by whom one is loved, must also be given significant weight in the determination of one’s gift.

³ *On the Dress of Virgins* 22.

⁴ Data are from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/families/cps-2016.html>. The 2010 Census showed a total US population of 308,745,538 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>) and, in 2016, the population was estimated to be 325,000,000 (<https://www.census.gov/popclock/>) (all webpages were retrieved on 1 September 2019).

I am taking a different tack. I'd like to emphasize three core elements of celibacy that, strikingly enough, parallel the three core elements of the Christian gospel.

Celibacy and Abstinence

First some definitions. Singleness is the state of being unmarried (or separated if still married), and it comes in a variety of types. *Practical* singleness denotes one's unmarried state simply as part of the course of life—before marriage, in between marriages, or after marriage. *Vocational* singleness is the result of consumption by a career, that leaves no time (or interest) for courtship and marriage.⁵ *Ideological* singleness sees the institution of marriage as outdated and oppressive.⁶ *Biological* singleness may be the consequence of a physical or emotional disability that prevents marriage.⁷ However, in this essay, I'd like to focus on *ecclesiological* singleness, singleness for the church—a Christian form of committed singleness. I define ecclesiological singleness with four parameters: it is by choice (unforced and deliberate), it is for life (not a temporary measure or state), it is unto Christ (in order to serve him and his Body, the Church), and it is in community (not living in isolation, but fully entrenched in the corporate fellowship of Christians). While the other forms of singleness say nothing about the sexually active/inactive state of the single, only this ecclesiological variety of singleness demands abstinence from sex, for an orthodox biblical Christianity does not permit extramarital sexual activity. So, again, ecclesiological singleness is by choice, for life, unto Christ, and in community.

Ecclesiological singleness is a countercultural response from the inside to a personal calling. By “calling,” I mean the recognition of a gift, an appreciation of its “givenness.” Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 7:7: “Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each has his own gift from God, one this way, and another that way.”⁸ Thus, both marriage and ecclesiological singleness are gifts. Both need a divinely ordained giftedness to maintain their respective states faithfully unto God, the gift-giver. As Stanley Grenz noted: “An individual can never be celibate in a de facto manner, that is, simply because he or she is not yet married or was previously married. Rather, the celibate person has chosen the single life as the best option for the fulfillment of a personal calling.”⁹ And in a discussion with his disciples, where Jesus labeled remarriage after divorce (for reasons other than immorality) as adultery, they responded that if that were the case, “it is better not to marry.” To which Jesus observed: “Not all can accept this statement, but those to whom it has been given” (Matt 19:9–11).¹⁰ And, as with all the gifts of

⁵ If one is married, such separated “singleness,” whether because of vocational demands or because of as-yet irreconcilable differences between the partners, is best labeled *virtual* singleness.

⁶ A maxim often attributed to the feminist Gloria Steinem goes: “A woman needs a man as much as a fish needs a bicycle.” However, she confessed, in a letter to *Time*, that the utterance was not original with her (<https://time.com/36046/gloria-steinem-8-funny-quotes-80-birthday/>; retrieved 1 September 2019).

⁷ Also, homosexuals in many countries are not permitted to marry one another, putting them into this category of biological singleness.

⁸ All translations of Scripture are my own.

⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 197.

¹⁰ From an entirely subjective basis, I would bet—if I were a betting man, that is!—that there are more people to whom the gift of ecclesiological singleness has been given than we realize or acknowledge. In fact, I suspect there are more people with that gift who end up being married (because that's the default cultural pathway), than the other way around—people with the gift of marriage remaining single. Luther would disagree: “Such persons [celibates] are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God.” Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage, 1522” (trans. Walther I. Brandt), in *Luther's Works: Volume 45: The Christian in Society II* (ed. Walther

God, this one, too, is given for “the common good” to the Church (1 Cor 12:7), that the Body of Christ might be served (1 Pet 4:10). Hence, celibacy of this sort is rightly ecclesiological.

Because of this “givenness,” because ecclesiological singleness is a gift, I make another distinction: celibacy is not merely abstinence. Although celibacy is nowadays defined as the renunciation of sexual activity for a lengthy period of time (= abstinence), such a usage is a twentieth-century development. In fact, “celibacy” comes from the Latin *caelebs*, “alone” or “unmarried”/“single.” My preference is to retain celibacy as a synonym for singleness (in particular, for ecclesiological singleness), and to use “abstinence” simply to refer to the relinquishment of sexual activity by singles or even by marrieds (for a lifetime or otherwise). Thus, abstinence is a response on the outside to a circumstance of some sort, resulting in the renunciation of sex. On the other hand, celibacy is a response from the inside to a calling and gifting, and it goes beyond just the giving up of sex.¹¹ Most of the early church fathers recognized celibacy as having a transcendent aim. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa argued that celibacy defined simply from mere physical praxis held no value: celibacy was more than just abstinence.

[Celibacy] is not a single achievement, ending in the subjugation of the body, but that in intention it reaches to and pervades everything that is, or is considered, a right condition of the soul. That soul indeed which in virginity cleaves to the true Bridegroom will not remove herself merely from all bodily defilement; she will make that abstention only the beginning of her purity, and will carry this security from failure equally into everything else upon her path.¹²

The philosopher Max Scheler declared that “Christian asceticism ... had as its goal not the suppression of the natural drives or even their extermination, but only power and control over them and their complete integration with soul and spirit [spiritualization]. It is positive, not negative, asceticism—and essentially aimed at the liberation of the highest powers of personality from the inhibitory automatism of the lower drives.”¹³ Indeed!

In a world besotted with sex, the church, unfortunately has lost its way. She, too, has fallen into the trap of conceiving of this drive and its fulfillment as one of the greatest goods and ends of mankind. The evangelical wing of Christendom gives scant regard to sexual abstinence in marriage, forget celibacy and singleness. This, despite the biblical and historical emphases on this singular course of life.

Ecclesiological Singleness and the Gospel

In the following section, I aim to show how ecclesiological singleness reflects the Christian gospel in three distinct ways: in self-sacrifice, in God-dependence, and in eternity-focus.

I. Brandt; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 21 [17–50]. Two years later, Luther, now even more skeptical about the gift of celibacy, would write that not even one in “many thousands” had that gift (see below).

¹¹ See Gabrielle Brown, *The New Celibacy: A Journey to Love, Intimacy, and Good Health in a New Age* (rev. ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 1. This is, of course, not to make Christian celibates (who are by definition abstinent) asexual, for sexuality relates to ontology (who a person is) rather than to ethology (what a person does).

¹² *On Virginity* 14, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, (ed. Philip Schaff; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 5:360.

¹³ *Vom Umsturz der Werte: Der Abhandlungen und Aufsätze zweite durchgesehene Auflage: Vol. 1* (Leipzig: Der Neue Geist, 1919), 181 (my translation).

Ecclesiological Singleness and Self-Sacrifice

As Pope John Paul II said, “[Celibacy] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” is characterized by “successive self-sacrifices”—“a conscious and voluntary renouncement of that [marital] union and all that is connected to it.”¹⁴ Such sacrifices include those of family life and legacy, and sex and companionship, with the concurrent sacrifice of time and abilities, and energy and resources, that is, instead, directed for the church.

And, of course, the gospel, in its broadest sense, is also characterized by self-sacrifice, as Jesus exhorted: “If anyone wishes to follow after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34). So here is the first way in which ecclesiological singleness reflects the gospel (in its broadest sense): both are characterized by self-sacrifice. Ecclesiological singleness as self-sacrifice reflects the gospel.

On the other hand, the world cannot conceive of giving up sex, which is viewed as a biological imperative that cannot—nay, should not!—be resisted. At an International AIDS Conference in Bangkok in 2004, Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D–CA) declared: “In an age where 5 million people are newly infected each year and women and girls too often do not have the choice to abstain, an abstinence-until-marriage program is not only irresponsible, it’s really inhumane.” Andy Rooney agreed: “The fact is, sex isn’t something a person can decide to have or promise not to have They might as well have ordered church bells not to ring when struck.”¹⁵ Bad enough, the world says, to be single and die alone. But to die without ever having had sex? How tragic! Unfortunately, Christians are not exempt from such attitudes either. In fact, Luther echoed Rooney’s sentiments half a millennium ago: “The person who wants to prevent [the conception of children] and keep nature from doing what it wants to do and must do is simply preventing nature from being nature, fire from burning, water from wetting, and man from eating, drinking, or sleeping.”¹⁶ More recently, when asked if celibacy was a realistic alternative to marriage, Tim LaHaye replied, “I really don’t think so. It is an idealistic and unnatural standard.” He opined that celibacy may be in the will of God for those with lower sex drives!¹⁷

¹⁴ John Paul II, *The Redemption of the Body and Sacramentality of Marriage (Theology of the Body)* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 198–199 (available at https://d2wldr9tsuuj1b.cloudfront.net/2232/documents/2016/9/theology_of_the_body.pdf; retrieved 1 September 2019).

¹⁵ Lee’s remarks were reported in the *Chicago Tribune* (13 July 2004), http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-07-13/news/0407140098_1_condoms-abstinence-until-marriage-international-aids-conference (retrieved 1 September 2019). Andy Rooney, “Those Rotten Apples,” *60 Minutes*, CBS, 31 March 2002 (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/those-rotten-apples>; retrieved 1 September 2019). Both Lee’s and Rooney’s comments were cited in Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 23. Colón and Field also give the example of the 2002 movie *40 Days and 40 Nights*, in which the protagonist Matt (Josh Hartnett) attempts to give up sex for Lent. Upon hearing of which, Matt’s roommate responds: “You can’t do it. ... I’m just saying no man can do it. It goes against nature. ... It goes against science. Do you want to be the man who goes against science? This isn’t normal” (ibid., 25). I am grateful to Colón and Field for their perceptive tome, which has pointed me to many primary sources.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, “Against the Spiritual Estate of the Pope and the Bishops Falsely so Called, 1522,” in *Luther’s Works: Volume 39: Church and Ministry I* (trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 297.

¹⁷ *Sex and the Single Christian: Candid Conversations* (ed. Barry Colman; Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1985), 109.

But sex is *not* a biological imperative as are eating and drinking. Sex is a drive that does not necessarily have to be satisfied—not having sex does not kill one. On the other hand, if they were absolute essentials and integral to holistic humanity, both sex and marriage would have persisted into the eternal state. But they do not, as Jesus averred: “For when they arise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in the heavens” (Mark 12:25). Marriage is not an eternal institution, and that in itself tells us that marriage is not the *summum bonum*, the greatest good, of the Christian life.

Now one might ask: What about Genesis 2:18, where Yahweh declared “It is not good for the man to be alone”? While this verse does commend the goodness of “man + woman,” it is not focusing on the goodness of marriage. What is “not good” is aloneness, being by oneself, separateness—the lack of community, without which, individuals are incomplete. And when there is only Adam on the scene, for community to be formed a marriage is essential. Hence, Genesis 2:18. It is to fulfill the important mandate to humanity to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28) that God instituted marriage—not an end in itself, but a means to an end, the formation of community. Of course, one does not necessarily have to be married and have a family to be part of community: ecclesiological singleness is characterized by being integrated into the community of God’s people. On that note, notice the emphasis on community in the New Testament, perhaps even over the family:

And a crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, “Behold, your mother and your brothers are seeking you outside.” And answering them, He said, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” And looking around at those sitting around Him in a circle, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers. For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33–35).

So much so, upon nearing death, Jesus handed over the care of his mother, not to his biological relatives (Mark 6:3), but to John, a beloved one among his spiritual relatives—the community of believers: “Seeing His mother and the disciple whom he loved standing [by], he said to [his] mother, ‘Woman, behold your son!’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’ And from that hour, the disciple took her into his own [household?]” (John 19:26–27). The emphasis on community is obvious. Not to mention Jesus’s statement about “hating” one’s parents, spouse, and children, if one wished to become his disciple (Luke 14:26)—certainly not an aphorism congruent with modern family values!

The New Testament indicates that the primary community for the Christian is to be the believing community, the church. And the primary bond is the covenant with God in Christ, and by extension with the covenant community. While this is to be true for all Christians regardless of marital status, the single Christian often experiences this primary bonding in a more vibrant way. For the single Christian, the church can become not only ideally and theoretically but also practically the source of highest fellowship and the focal point for the development of one’s closest relationships. Single believers readily look to their congregation to be “family” in the primary sense and discover within the church membership their deepest friends.¹⁸

In fact, for the current post-fall dispensation, the New Testament seems to be more inclined towards singleness than marriage as an ideal, as Paul confessed: “I wish that all men were even as I myself am” (1 Cor 7:7). Other biblical characters in Paul’s mold include Jeremiah (Jer 16:1),

¹⁸ Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 168. Indeed, “God settles the lonely in families” (Ps 68:6).

John the Baptist, and possibly Timothy, Luke, Barnabas, and others.¹⁹ There was also Jesus himself, of course!²⁰

In short, ecclesiological singleness reflects the gospel, firstly because at its core, it is self-sacrifice, just as with the Gospel.

Ecclesiological Singleness and God-Dependence

What is characteristic of all of the remarkable celibates, biblical, ancient, and modern, is their resonance with Jeremiah's sentiment: "Your words were found and I ate them, And Your words became for me the joy and exultation of my heart; For I am called by Your name, Yahweh, God of hosts" (Jer 15:16). This verse reminds us that, Song of Songs notwithstanding, "the key to a joyful life is found not in our family arrangements but in our relationship with God"—in utter God-dependence.²¹

And, of course, the Gospel, in its broadest sense, is also characterized by God-dependence, as Jesus asserted: "I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). So here is the second way in which ecclesiological singleness reflects the gospel: both are characterized by God-dependence. Ecclesiological singleness as God-dependence reflects the gospel.

Although union in marriage, including marital sexuality, reflects the intimacy between Christ and his Bride, the Church, marriage is only "an incomplete and 'dimly reflected' mirror of the *ultimate* intimacy our souls truly long for—a deep need for intimacy that will be fully satisfied only by *God himself* at the end of the divine love story in heaven."²² It is only in God-dependence, and not in spousal and familial arrangements, that humans will find ultimate fulfillment. "No human being can understand us fully, or give us unconditional love, or offer constant affection that enters into the core of our being and heals our deepest brokenness."²³ In other words, if you are seeking satisfaction in a human spouse, you can be sure that Hauerwas's Law will operate: "You always marry the wrong person."²⁴ One never finds the "right person"—that species doesn't exist. Or, as Erma Bombeck noted wryly, "Marriage has no guarantees. If that's what you're looking for, go live with a car battery."²⁵ Ecclesiological singleness, then, is a

¹⁹ Also, the four virgin daughters of Philip who prophesied (Acts 21:8–9). Besides Priscilla and Aquila, not many couples are specifically mentioned in the NT. Among the ancients, almost all the church fathers were celibate. One might also list Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Bernard of Clairvaux. Among moderns are John Stott, Amy Carmichael, Isaac Watts, Corrie Ten Boom, Florence Nightingale, Charles Simeon, William Cowper, Frances Havergal, Ida Scudder, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others.

²⁰ Unfortunately, the evangelical church has lost its testimony against all manner of sexual aberrations and excesses. Where can it point to its celibates to proclaim and affirm, *contra mundi*, that sex is not the be-all and end-all of human life?

²¹ Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 168.

²² Doug Rosenau and Michael Todd Wilson, *Soul Virgins: Redefining Single Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 39.

²³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (New York: Image, 1979), 39–40.

²⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, "Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and 'Human Sexuality,'" *The Christian Century* 95.14 (1978): 421.

²⁵ Cited in Debra A. Scwhartz and Ralph Rivas, "Humor," in *Encyclopedia of American Journalism* (ed. Stephen L. Vaughn; New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2008), 216.

refusal to over-romanticize marriage; it is a recognition that nothing—not things, not persons, not places, not actions—can fully satisfy our deepest needs. Only God can, and it is upon him, and upon him alone, that we all—singles and marrieds—should depend. No, humans were not made with a spouse-shaped lacuna that only a wife or husband can occupy. We were made for God. As Kierkegaard reflected: “Only the married are genuine citizens in this world, the single person is an alien (which is precisely what Christianity wants the Christian to be—and what God wants the Christian to be, in order to love him). ... Consequently God wants the single state because he wants to be loved.”²⁶

Ecclesiological singleness thereby becomes a symbol of much more than abstinence from sexual activity. It is an acknowledgement that we have offered ourselves to God completely—a God-dependence that reflects the gospel. The deepest desires of our heart need to rest not in temporal relationships with a spouse, but rather in an eternal relationship with God. In dealing with the monastic life and the attendant sacrifice of self (by living under the guidance of a superior), sacrifice of family (by living as a celibate), and sacrifice of things (by living in simplicity/poverty), Aquinas calls for the celibate to be “empty for God”: *Deo vacetur*—a vacancy for God, as it were (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.130). Nouwen agrees:

Celibates live out a holy emptiness by not marrying, by not trying to build for themselves a house or a fortune, by not trying to wield as much influence as possible, and by not filling their lives with events, people, or creations for which they will be remembered. The hope is that by their “empty” lives, God will be more readily recognized as the source of all human life and activity. ... It is an openness to being loved first by God. The celibate life is bound to touch those we encounter because it is a sort of ongoing street theater constantly raising questions in people’s minds about the deeper meaning of their own existence.²⁷

So, in short, ecclesiological singleness reflects the gospel, secondly because at its core, it is God-dependence, just as is the gospel.

Ecclesiological Singleness as Eternity-Focus

Ironically, sex and death are allies. Sex is necessary because of death, in order for the human race and community to continue. So sex is, at least in this sense, an acknowledgement of death. “To procreate was in one sense to admit and allow the overarching sway of death. ... Since every person born will certainly die someday, procreation only fleetingly beats back death. By contrast, confident Christian celibacy, based on the hope of the resurrection of a then undying body, was a bold witness to the total defeat of death.”²⁸ The Christian *can* be single. One does not *have* to procreate. Because there *is* a resurrection. And the Christian *will* live eternally. Ecclesiological singleness, I submit, is, therefore, a symbol of our eternal state: it has, at its core, an eternity-focus. Piper affirmed “that the family of God grows not by propagation through sexual intercourse, but by regeneration through faith in Christ,” and “that marriage is temporary, and finally gives way to the relationship to which it was pointing all along, namely,

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers, Volume 3: L–R* (ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 142.

²⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer, and Contemplation* (New York: Image, 1979), 47, 50.

²⁸ Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 58.

Christ and the church.”²⁹ For the celibate, there is no safety net of children, whether for expectation of support, for enactment of legacy, or for the extension of memories. The celibate is *alone*—the core meaning of *caelebs*. The resurrection is the only hope for ecclesiological singles that they will live on. And the church is the only hope for ecclesiological singles, that they will be remembered.³⁰

The gospel, of course, in its broadest sense, also keenly anticipates an eternity with God. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). So here is the third way in which ecclesiological singleness reflects the gospel: both are characterized by an eternity-focus. Ecclesiological singleness, maintaining an eternity-focus, reflects the gospel.

Raniero Cantalamessa, Preacher of the Papal Household since 1980 (and so the only person permitted to preach directly to Pope), affirmed that celibacy “is not *ontologically* (that is, in itself) a *more perfect* state, but it is an *eschatologically more advanced* state, in the sense that it is more like the definitive state toward which we are all journeying.” And “by the simple fact that it [virginity/celibacy] exists, without the need for words, this form of life shows what the final condition of men and women will be: one that is destined to last forever.” Cantalamessa therefore labels the celibate state “a prophetic existence.”³¹ Lauren Winner rightly said: “Singleness prepares us for the other piece of the end of the time, the age when singleness trumps marriage. Singleness tutors us in our primary, heavenly relationship with one another: sibling in Christ.”³²

Thus, ecclesiological singleness reflects the gospel, thirdly because at its core, it has an eternity-focus, just as does the gospel.

Ecclesiological Singleness and Its Freedoms

Let me pause here to outline a few of the “freedoms” of ecclesiological singleness. *Biological* freedom releases one from the societally decreed compulsion to have sex and, instead, to live limiting one’s sexual drive in the spiritual discipline of lifelong abstinence. *Provisional* freedom allows the celibate to focus on God’s total provision for one’s needs. *Sociological* freedom relieves one from the pressures of family activities and allied interests, permitting the ecclesiological single to focus on the ecclesia, the Body of Christ.³³ *Passional* freedom gives the celibate room to suffer for Christ, without putting loved ones in danger. *Emotional* freedom

²⁹ John Piper, “Single in Christ: A Name Better Than Sons and Daughters” (a sermon preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, on 29 April 2007; video available at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/single-in-christ-a-name-better-than-sons-and-daughters>; retrieved 1 September 2019), 2’43”–2’53” and 3’23”–3’29”. The entire talk is worth listening to.

³⁰ Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 101.

³¹ Raniero Cantalamessa, *Virginity: A Positive Approach to Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven* (trans. Charles Serignat; New York: Alba, 1995 [Kindle version]), part I, chap. 1, para 9 (emphases original). Cyprian’s similar affirmation of the first Christian virgins was noted in the epigram to this essay.

³² Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 147.

³³ This, of course, does not necessarily mean that celibates have more time on their hands than marrieds. When one is single, the numerous responsibilities of maintaining a household, sustaining daily life, managing one’s finances, caring for parents, and so on, cannot be shared with a partner when one is single.

enables the celibate to demonstrate inclusive (non-exclusive) love to the eternal family of God, the wider community of fellow-believers.³⁴

There is, of course, no doubt that in another sense marriage, too, pictures the gospel, particularly in its symbolic portrayal of the relationship of the Church with her Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ. It too, comes with its own corresponding set of “freedoms”: for instance, the freedom to demonstrate fidelity and exclusive love to one’s spouse; the freedom to suffer for one’s family, sacrificing self-interest; the freedom to be hospitable; the freedom to intensely disciple the next generation; and so on. All this substantiates the fact that one marital state is not any better than the other: both ecclesiological singleness and marriage are valid platforms for ministry and service to Christ and his Church. That is to say, the Church needs both the married state and the single state to fully portray the gospel. The marriage metaphor depicts God’s exclusive love for his people (reflected in the faithful love between spouses); the celibacy metaphor depicts God’s all-inclusive love that invites everyone to enjoy (reflected in the freedom celibates have to love those in the family of God). Both are essential for a complete picture of God’s love; either by itself is inadequate.³⁵

There is a surprising reference to the Suffering Servant’s “offspring” in Isaiah 53:10. Who are these Messianic “offspring”? Since Jesus was unmarried, “offspring” must refer to the Church, the body of believers, the children of God, those he died for. Interestingly enough, in the Gospels, Jesus refers to disciples as “son” (Matt 9:2/Mark 2:5), as “daughter” (Matt 9:22/Mark 5:34/Luke 8:48), and as “children” (Mark 10:24; John 13:33; 21:5). Indeed, for the one following Jesus, the abandonment of siblings, parents, and children ensures the reception (a hundred times over) of all of the above (Mark 10:29–30/Luke 19:29–30). In like fashion, Paul frequently refers to himself as the parent of the churches he planted and of individuals he mentored.³⁶ All this bespeaks a “fruitfulness of the spirit not of the body. And since human beings are spirit as well as flesh, it is also a supremely human fruitfulness.”³⁷ Thus, ecclesiological singleness is also a liberation to be fruitful, though in a different sense.

One can understand when the world with its materialism and anti-spirituality does not grasp these nuances. But I am totally at a loss when it is the church that fails to comprehend these truths.

Ecclesiological Singleness and the Church

If you ask me what the status of celibates is in the Body of Christ, my tongue-in-cheek answer would be that they are “saved, single, and second-class.”³⁸ Ever since a celibate monk, Martin,

³⁴ Also see Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, 105–111, for another list of “freedoms,” and Albert Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 83–98, for his compendium.

³⁵ Colón and Field, *Singled Out*, 168, 171, 195.

³⁶ 1 Cor 3:1–2; 4:15; 2 Cor 6:13; 12:14; Gal 4:19; Phil 2:2; 1 Thess 2:7, 11; 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 2 Tim 1:2; 2:1; Titus 1:4.

³⁷ Cantalamessa, *Virginity*, part I, chap. 1, para 21. As Augustine noted, celibacy is “not barren, but a fruitful mother of children—her joys—by thee, O Lord, her husband” (*Confessions* 8.11).

³⁸ From the title of an essay by Joseph Bayly, “Saved, Single, and Second-Class,” *Eternity* (March 1983), 23–26.

broke away from the Catholic Church and married a celibate nun, Katharina, Protestants have looked askance at celibacy as a way of life to serve Christ.³⁹

Just look at church bulletins. Many are full of Sunday school classes for engaged couples, married couples, married couples with preschoolers, married couples with teenagers, empty nesters, etc. And they have various activities for these families: father-daughter campouts, mother-daughter teas, father-son baseball games. . . . As any single who has ever looked for a church will confirm, the church bulletin is often the first clue whether the church will ultimately accept singles or not.⁴⁰

Evangelicals have traditionally viewed marriage as the cure for aloneness and temptation. That probably began with the Reformation, with Luther asserting that “marriage may be likened to a hospital for incurables which prevents inmates from falling into a graver sin.”⁴¹ Such thinking permeates sermons and Christian literature and, unfortunately, is the very ethos of evangelical churches! So much so, Stanley Hauerwas asserted darkly, “Just about every time Christians make a fetish of the family, you can be sure they don’t believe in God anymore.”⁴² That may be going a bit too far, but I have to agree with Rodney Clapp: “To put it strongly, there is at least one sure sign of a flawed vision of the Christian family: it denigrates and dishonors singleness.”⁴³ Luther went so far as to proclaim that what celibates do is less pleasing to God than even an out-of-wedlock birth of a child to a woman.⁴⁴ Sex, even if outside of marriage, is apparently preferable to continence in the context of celibacy!

Several years ago, the Academic Dean at the institution where I currently teach organized get-togethers for faculty and spouses in different parts of town. Those who lived in a particular area would congregate in a local faculty home for fellowship over a meal, with the Dean’s office providing the meat, and the attendees delivering the carbs and greens and the rest. The Dean’s program was called “Dinner for Eight”! Except when I, a celibate, was present, making it “Dinner for Seven [or Nine].” Clearly, the single was the oddball, the anomaly. While I’m certain there was no malice aforesight in such nomenclature, the point is that evangelical Christians generally don’t even think of the presence of singles in their midst—they are invisible: saved, single, second-class!

³⁹ I refer, of course, to Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Katharina von Bora (1499–1552).

⁴⁰ Colón and Field, *Singled Out*, 81.

⁴¹ Martin Luther, “A Sermon on The Estate of Marriage, 1519” (trans. James Atkinson) in *Luther’s Works: Volume 44: The Christian in Society I* (ed. James Atkinson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 9 [3–14]. Actually, such a bias existed way before the Reformer. An ancient Sumerian proverb from the third millennium B.C.E. goes: “He that has no wife, he that supports no son, may his misfortunes be multiplied” (cited in W. G. Lambert, “Celibacy in the World’s Oldest Proverbs,” *BASOR* 169 [1963]: 63). As well, the Talmud: “Any man who has no wife is no proper man” (*b. Yebam.* 63a).

⁴² Stanley Hauerwas, “On Bonhoeffer and John H. Yoder,” 7 November 2005, Theology Conference: Sermon on the Mount, Center for Applied Christian Ethics, Wheaton College (audio available at <http://espace.wheaton.edu/cace/audio/05SOMhauerwas.mp3>; retrieved 30 November 2017; 34’55”–35’03”).

⁴³ Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, 89.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage, 1522” (trans. Walther I. Brandt), in *Luther’s Works: Volume 45: The Christian in Society II* (ed. Walther I. Brandt; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 41.

Luther's opinion of single men and single women is disheartening. Of the former, he said: "It is certainly a fact that he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality."⁴⁵ Of the latter, he asserted: "Though womenfolk here are ashamed to admit this, nevertheless Scripture and experience show that among many thousands is not one whom God has given grace to keep pure chastity. A woman does not have control over herself. God has created her body to be with man, to bear children and to raise them."⁴⁶ No wonder marriage trumps ecclesiological singleness in the Protestant Church.⁴⁷ Gary Thomas, while recognizing the irony of his comment that "marriage is the preferred route to becoming more like [Christ (himself celibate)]," nonetheless confesses having advised his brother: "If you want to become more like Jesus, I can't imagine any better thing to do than get married."⁴⁸ In the same vein, Albert Mohler, boldly submitted: "In heaven, is the crucible of our saint-making going to have been done through our jobs? I don't think so. The Scripture is clear that it will be done largely through our marriages."⁴⁹ It needs hardly be said that any argument making either marriage or singleness the *primary* means of God's sanctification of his children is, at best, naïve, and, at worst, reprehensible. John Piper boldly goes against this grain:

I am declaring the temporary and secondary nature of marriage and family over against the eternal and primary nature of the church. That's what I'm declaring. . . . over against the primary and eternal nature of the family of God. Hear that. This is not trivial; this is huge. And I fear that we have settled into our land and our culture and idolized the family, idolized marriage. We are here for a vapor's breath and then we are gone. What happens here is relatively minor compared to what will be after the resurrection. It's no small thing I'm saying. . . . Marriage is a temporary institution, it stands for something that lasts forever, namely, our relationship with Christ—Church and Bridegroom.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage, 1522," 17–50 (trans. Walther I. Brandt) in *Luther's Works: Volume 45: The Christian in Society II* (ed. Walther I. Brandt; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 45.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, "To Some Nuns," Letter No. 756 (6 August 1524) in *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften 21:1—Briefe Teil 1 von 1507 bis 1532* (trans. from the Latin by Johann Goerg Walch; St Louis: Concordia, 1903), 639 [638–40] (my translation from the German). Colón and Field, *Singled Out*, 110, pointed me to these utterances of Luther.

⁴⁷ Of course, the early church took it to the other extreme. Origen, it is said, emasculated himself, making himself a eunuch (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.8.1). Jerome declared that "in view of the purity of the body of Christ, all sexual intercourse is unclean" (*Against Jovinianus*, 1.20). Justin Martyr (*Apol. 1*, 29) seemed to appreciate the zeal of one young man in his Christian community that petitioned the governor for permission to be castrated into a eunuch.

⁴⁸ *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 21–22. And, Thomas, writes: Our God, who is spirit (John 4:24), can be found behind the very physical panting, sweating, and pleasurable entangling of limbs and body parts. He doesn't turn away. He wants us to run into sex, but to do so with his presence, priorities, and virtues marking our pursuit. If we experience sex in this way, we will be transformed in the marriage bed every bit as much as we are transformed on our knees" (ibid., 225). Sacramental sex! I had no idea!

⁴⁹ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Mystery of Marriage, Part 2," Talk delivered at the New Attitude Conference 2004 (audio available at <https://albertmohler.com/2004/08/01/the-mystery-of-marriage-part-2/>; retrieved 1 September 2019), 30'30"–30'43". He declares, in the same talk, "Men desperately need a wife, as protection of honor, and for protection of passion, and protection of integrity. Guys, we need that and we need in our humility to confess that we need that. Otherwise, we will sin gruesomely, without a wife, without the vows of marriage" (03'01"–03'26")!

And, he summarizes: “So I say it again to all singles in Christ who will be that way long-term: God promises you blessings in the age to come that are better—far better—than the blessings of marriage and children.”⁵⁰ Amen!

Ecclesiological singleness, like the gospel, is characterized by self-sacrifice. Ecclesiological singleness, like the gospel, is marked by God-dependence. And ecclesiological singleness, like the gospel, is typified by eternity-focus. Until the dispensation of eternity, “I have learned to be content in whatever situation I am. ... And my God will fulfill all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:11, 19). Whether we are celibate or married, we need have no doubt about God’s ability to provide: “For Yahweh God is a sun and shield; grace and glory Yahweh gives; He does not withhold good from those who walk uprightly” (Ps 84:11). Yes, “the young lions lack and hunger; But those who seek Yahweh shall not be in want of any good thing” (Ps 34:10). No, celibates will not be in want, “for your husband is your Maker, Yahweh Sabaoth is His name; And your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, called the God of all the earth” (Isa 54:5).

Therefore, I can be celibate, because it reflects the Gospel in self-sacrifice, God-dependence, and eternity-focus.

“Let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a withered tree.’
 For thus says Yahweh, “To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,
 And choose that which pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant,
 To them I will give a memorial and a name in My house and in My walls,
 And a name better than sons and daughters;
 an everlasting name I will give them which will not be cut off.”
 Isaiah 56:3–5



⁵⁰ Piper, “Single in Christ,” 20’01”–21’49” and 30’30”–30’50”.