

A Theology of Singleness
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Introduction

According to the 2006 national census, 46% of American adults are single, but single adults are significantly “underrepresented” in evangelical churches (Colón and Field, 12-14). There are many reasons why single people attend church in smaller numbers than their married counterparts, but one reason seems to be that singles generally feel less welcome in evangelical churches than married couples, especially couples with children. Albert Hsu is more blunt: “evangelicalism’s obsessive love affair with the nuclear family leaves Christian singles in isolation” (Hsu, 118). Churches have often responded to statistics about the growing prevalence of singleness with alarm, by encouraging more young people to get married or lamenting the divorces that have left so many single again. These may be appropriate and good responses in many circumstances, but they nonetheless treat singleness as a problem to be solved. This paper seeks instead to treat singleness from a theological perspective as one faithful form of discipleship, alongside marriage, and to imagine how people who are not married play indispensable roles in the flourishing and witness of the church.

In the last century American churches have been much more adept at articulating rich theologies of marriage and family life, but have done relatively little to develop thoughtful, theological approaches to singleness. Recently several pastors and scholars, many of them evangelical, have addressed this gap, including Jana Bennett, Albert Hsu, and Christine Colón and Bonnie Field. This paper seeks to distill and build on their important work. The goal of this paper is to open up a conversation about how the church might more faithfully embrace and honor single people as fully equal and valued members and ministers of congregations.

The full, complete humanity of the single person

“Singleness” is not a monolithic state. Age matters: being single at 19 or 24 is not the same as being single at 35 or 48. Some singles have never been married; others are single again after a divorce or the death of a spouse. Some singles raise children, whether through adoption or after the death of a spouse or a divorce. Any discussion of single people and their role in the church should try to be sensitive to these differences. Perhaps most importantly, Christian discussions of singleness often focus on preparation for marriage, dating, finding a spouse, or coping until one does find a spouse. “Marriage plays such a central role in our evangelical culture that even many positive discussions of singleness eventually end up focusing on marriage” (Colón and Field, 67). For some single people, it is true that singleness feels like a period of life that is a waiting game or a temporary stage. But the Christian witness regarding the single life is much richer than this.

A person who has no spouse is a full and complete human being who bears the image of God. Although this observation should be commonplace, unmarried people often receive subtle messages in church that make them feel less than complete or whole without a “partner” or “companion” in life. Although Christian thinking tends to assign little significance to Jesus’ choice to remain single, at the very least we can remind ourselves that Jesus—who had no wife and no children, and who engaged in no sexual relations—represents the fullness of humanity, the exemplary human being. In their book *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy and Kathy Keller write, “Single adults cannot be seen as somehow less fully formed or realized human beings than married persons because Jesus Christ, a single man, was the perfect man.”

Scripture’s story: the transformation of kinship

The significance of singleness as a valued path of discipleship is grounded in Jesus’ teachings on the family. Jesus teaches very little on marriage and the family but teaches a great deal about discipleship. What he does say about the family, aside from prohibitions against divorce, tends to fall into two categories: he places the way of the cross above family life; and he re-envisioned kinship so that kinship in Christ is a stronger and more important bond than the bonds of the biological family.

Jesus warns his followers that the demands of discipleship might cause divisions within families, because loyalty to him and to the way of the cross must be placed above all other loyalties: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Matthew softens the blow a little: “Whoever loves father or mother *more* than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter *more* than me is not worthy of me...” (Matt 10:37, italics added). But the passage still makes us squirm. Of course we know that Jesus doesn’t really mean *hate*. But the starkness of the passage reminds us that the New Testament regards loyalty to Jesus as more important than anything else. It reminds us that Jesus’ “family values” are surprisingly different from any culture—even a Christian culture—that centers primarily around the family rather than around the way of the cross. This is not to devalue marriage or the family, but to note that Jesus relativizes the importance of even these good things in light of the kingdom of God and the high calling of discipleship.

The second and even more crucial thing that Jesus does in relation to marriage and family is to create an alternative model of community based on the *agape* love shared by believers, rather than on the natural love between spouses, siblings, or parents and children. In the gospels, when someone reports to Jesus that his mother and brothers are waiting to talk to him, “Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt 12:48-50). Even as he is dying on the cross, Jesus creates a new “family,” a new bond of kinship, between his own mother and his disciple John (John

19:26-27). The psalmist writes, “God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6), and Marva Dawn pleads with the church to imagine this as an image of an unmarried person being set into the new family of the church: “How have God’s people learned to love better so that we might be one of the primary families into which lonely persons are set?” (*I’m Lonely, Lord—How Long?: Meditations on the Psalms*, 172).

Perhaps most startlingly, Jesus teaches that that marriage is a feature of earth but not of heaven. At the resurrection, people will be “like the angels,” neither marrying nor being given in marriage (Mark 12:18-25). In fact, in the Christian tradition, celibacy, rather than marriage, has been thought of as a sign and foreshadowing of our eternal state in heaven (see Colón and Field, 192-4).

The apostle Paul continues this emphasis in his letters, first in his repeated use of the term “brothers [and sisters]” to describe Christians. Paul also recommends to the congregation in Corinth that it would be *better* to remain unmarried, as he himself was, in order to focus on “unhindered devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor 7:35). This is a countercultural move. Especially for women in the ancient world, marriage and heirs provided social and economic security. But the careful provisions for widows in Acts 6:1-7 reveal how much the burden of caring for one another—of providing that social and economic stability—was assumed to be the responsibility of the church (cf. Acts 4:32-35). “Singleness is now a valid option because the church will be the family and support system that these singles need to survive” (Colón and Field, 165).

Likewise, in the Old Testament, marriage was the most important guarantee of social and economic stability. Even more importantly, it guaranteed the passing down of the family name and the ongoing survival of the 12 tribes and the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, however, the central imperative is to *make disciples of all nations*, rather than to *be fruitful and multiply*. The church grows and takes in new members of its “family” primarily through baptism and conversion, not through biological reproduction or through the continuation of a particular family line. This is an incredibly important shift, for it relativizes both marriage and child-bearing in light of the church’s missionary impulse. Marriage and children are good: but they are not *ultimate* goods. As Paul shows us, in the church singleness becomes an equally valued and important way of life.

Vocation and the will of God

Because of this, the church might consider carefully how to use the language of vocation with respect to both marriage and singleness. In the Catholic Church, marriage and holy orders are both vocations – leaving people who are not married and who are not called to vocational ministry in an awkward unnamed space, without vocation. In the Protestant church, there is simply no formal community of support for those called to lifelong or temporary celibacy; but there can be more informal support systems within congregations. Unlike most vocations, singleness is seldom a choice or a calling that people deliberately embrace. It can be this, and that

is to be celebrated and supported. More often, however, single people would not choose to be or to remain single if they could find a “fitting” match as a spouse, or perhaps if their marriage had not fallen apart. What matters is *how* one chooses to live into singleness, just as one might choose to live into marriage even when the sense of vocation to that life fades.

In a recent issue of a popular Christian magazine, one essay declared confidently that marriage is the default state for all Christians. Jesus and Paul, no doubt, would both be surprised to hear this news. It is simply a myth—and one that can cause a great deal of pain for single people—that God’s will is for *all* Christians to be married. As noted above, the apostle Paul even counsels congregation members to remain single as he is. Early Christian women found empowerment and purpose in choosing celibacy over marriage (Colón and Field, 178-81). Today many Christians serve God faithfully as single people, including the great evangelical leader John Stott, who remained single his whole life.

Just as vocation might not be the most helpful category to apply to singleness, the idea of “God’s will” has some pitfalls to avoid when considering marriage and singleness. God’s will is for us to love God and love our neighbor (Matt 22:36-40); to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). The process of discernment is to discover and pursue what seem to be the most faithful ways of fulfilling those commands. A decision to enter into a marriage, or not, or to remain single, might be discerned as the best or most faithful way to honor God and love the neighbor. But without a specific, concrete decision (marry this person or not), it can be misleading to use the language of God’s will regarding marriage or singleness. To put it plainly, just because someone is single does not mean that it is God’s will for them to be single. (Finding a Christian spouse with whom to be more or less “equally yoked” has become increasingly difficult in contemporary American society.) But, it is certainly God’s will for that person to love God and neighbor as wholly as possible while he or she is single. It is always God’s will for Christians to love one another, deeply and from the heart (1 Pet 1:22); and for us to participate in the abundant life made possible by Christ (John 10:10), whether it is with a marriage or without one. The abundant life is found in Christ, not in a spouse. A spiritual director might be able to help a single person discern and navigate strong longings for marriage, and think about how those longings might fit into God’s purposes for a flourishing life. (For more on God’s will and singleness, see the helpful discussion in Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads*, chapter 4.)

Bearing one another’s burdens

Especially for those who long to share life with a spouse or to raise children, singleness can be profoundly painful. (Ronald Rolheiser even describes sleeping alone when one wishes it to be otherwise as a form of poverty, and therefore as a form of sharing in Jesus’ solidarity with the poor.) Single people are sometimes frustrated by perceptions that the single life is a carefree romp of freedom and flexibility. Yes, it can sometimes afford more freedoms than a life with a family, but

these perceived freedoms come with an emotional price (often, loneliness) and a practical cost (the significant time and energy required to run one's own household). Anyone who has been single much past the age of 25 would probably laugh at the idea that singleness exempts one from the mundane tasks of daily life, which can often be heightened by having no one to share them with.

Our culture tends to treat marrying and having children as two key markers of reaching adulthood or maturity, leaving some single adults feeling ostracized as supposedly less mature than their married peers, even though they have often learned to handle complicated finances and other household, "adult" matters on their own without help. One single person might rejoice that he feels less encumbered by possessions, more free to respond to the needs of others, more flexible in the ways he can serve the church in both time and money. But another single person may confess that she feels overwhelmed by the burden of working two jobs, vulnerable without the emotional and practical support of a spouse, and tired of having no one to care for her when she is sick.

Marriage, of course, also has its own joys and challenges, its benefits and its restrictions. So does singleness. Marriage is hard, sometimes agonizing, sometimes even lonely. Parenting is challenging and can be full of anguish. Being single can be deeply isolating and painful. *This is not a contest*. Claiming one's own status in life (whether it be married, single, or parenting) as more challenging than someone else's life stage is ultimately wounding, not edifying. The church is called to bear one another's burdens, not calculate their relative weight; and to do that we must be able to listen to one another.

Paul writes that bearing one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). The church can be one place—maybe the only place—where we are able to hear and share the joys and pains of marriage and child-raising alongside the joys and pains of being single. This means that married people and single people must not always be sequestered from one another into specific groups but will learn to share life together, spiritually and materially, in prayer and potluck. Perhaps one of the most difficult disciplines of common life in the church is to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who have joy when those two things overlap – for example, on Mothers' Day. Some churches have found ways to celebrate the joys of motherhood while at the same time mourning with those who long to be mothers and are not.

Bearing one another's burdens means more than hearing one another's stories, although that is clearly important. It also means putting into practice the truth that the church is the new household of God (Eph 2:19), by breaking past the boundaries of individual homes to share life in that larger household together as brothers and sisters. Some single people become spiritual parents or godparents, assisting overburdened biological (or adoptive) parents with the tasks of caring for children (see Hsu, 134-6). Families can be mindful of inviting singles to share meals in their homes, especially at holidays when singles can feel especially isolated. Singles might

bring food or cook with one of the family members to ease the burden of providing all the food. All it takes is a little creativity and a recognition that hospitality—whether physical or emotional—is a gift that can and should be given and received by both the married and the single.

Friendship

“God is friendship” (cf. 1 John 4:16). So writes the Benedictine monk Aelred of Rievaulx in his treatise *Spiritual Friendship*. Aelred meditated on the idea that before the Fall, the nature and destiny of humankind was friendship: friendship with one another and friendship with God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes friendship as the ultimate relationship with God and with one another (John 15:12-15). In the New Testament, the word “friend” comes from the word “love”: a friend is one who loves. Gail O’Day describes the footwashing in John 13 as “a sacrament of friendship,” a visible act of service, love, and grace. Jesus’ friendship with us makes it possible for us to be friends with one another in the same vulnerable, self-giving, generous ways. In his book *Friendship and the Moral Life*, Paul Wadell describes Christian friendships as essential to living out Christian ethics.

If we have a hard time imagining what costly fidelity, vulnerable intimacy, and self-giving love look like within a friendship, perhaps it is because we have lost a rich theology of friendship; we have reduced friendship to little more than a click on a web page. Perhaps, even worse, we have reduced intimacy itself to sexual contact. For single people and married people alike, friendships made possible by Christ’s love and modeled after his example are a counter-cultural witness to the way in which the cross breaks down barriers between people and enables new, transformed relationships. Friendships that endure through difficulty and model reconciliation and forgiveness can witness to the transforming power of God’s forgiveness.

Of course, cross-gender friendships have genuine risks, and they are not appropriate in all circumstances. On the other hand, some of the anxiety around non-sexual friendships between men and women arises from two fallacies: the old heresy in the church that women are inherently temptresses, and the equally false perception that single people are dangerous to marriages, as if a single person is a bundle of sexual energy that is simply looking for a target. (As statistics bear out, married people are just as prone to fall into sexual temptations with one another.) With appropriate and healthy boundaries, “spiritual” friendships between men and men, women and women, *and* between men and women, both married and single, can be one of the most life-giving practices of mutual support and *agape* love in any church.

Celibacy, sex, and intimacy

Single people are sexual beings. All human beings are created as sexual creatures, whether or not they exercise their sexuality in genital sexual expression. Sexuality points to our nature as communal beings, as people made for relationship and intimacy, and to our desire to give ourselves to others and to receive them (see

Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 168-70). In *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser writes, “In its maturity, sexuality is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor, delight, and martyrdom so that, with God, we can help bring life into the world.”

In the Covenant Church, just as married people are called to exercise fidelity in marriage, so single people are called to chastity while they are single.¹ There are incredible social pressures in 21st-century America against both of these commitments, but particularly against the practice of refraining from sexual activity while single. Everyone knew that the movie “The 40-Year-Old Virgin” was going to be a comedy. The idea that people should or can restrain their sexual desires strikes many people as wrong or even impossible. The American media contributes to this misperception with unfounded suggestions that the celibacy of priests is dangerous and can lead to the sexual abuse of children. Colón and Field offer a sustained critique of the common view in American culture that celibacy is unnatural, repressive, and even neurotic (pages 21-36), and they debunk the myth that sexual temptation simply cannot be resisted (pages 109-117).

As Lauren Winner observes, celibacy is a spiritual discipline, a deliberate Christian practice nurtured and upheld by other Christian practices and exercised within a community. Without the support of a church community, which supports singles in their discipline of chastity and which offers grace to those who fail, chastity becomes far less possible. A “just say no” policy is woefully insufficient. Chastity as a practice is not primarily about what one may and may not do on a date (although that is an important conversation for singles who are dating to have with one another). Rather, celibacy is an exercise in practicing embodiment without sex, in cultivating physical touch without sexual intimacy, and in practicing *agape* love within the bounds of friendships and other familial relationships. The celibate person learns to redirect rather than repress sexual desire. This is not easy. It takes the support of a community willing to acknowledge the challenges and support single people in their discipline, alongside married people in their discipline of fidelity.

In this way, single people witness to embodiment as sexual beings, and to intimacy in friendships, without sex. This is a powerful witness to a culture that confuses being sexual with having sex, and where sex without intimacy is far more common than intimacy without sex. This is not to say that sex is a bad thing. Thankfully, we have come a long way from the early church fathers’ deep mistrust of the sexual act in general and of women’s bodies in particular. Sex is a good gift from God – but it is not the ultimate good.

¹ The word “celibacy” is often used to describe a lifelong renunciation of sexual relations for the sake of the kingdom of God, whereas “chastity” typically refers to the practice of refraining from sex while single and practicing faithful monogamy within marriage. This distinction is especially sharp in the Catholic Church. In Protestant churches, some singles prefer to see themselves in a temporary state of celibacy, without renouncing the future possibility of marriage.

Single people who remain celibate help the church to reject the view that sex is a biological need that cannot and should not be resisted: “Celibacy reveals this to be a lie, for by placing our bodies under subjection to God, we may discipline the flesh, choosing to refrain from having sex but still living complete lives as we witness to the power of God’s love and redemption” (Colón and Field, 169).

The celibacy of singleness reminds us that *all* Christians are called to limit and discipline desire, whether they be negative desires that need to be restrained, or good desires that need to be chastened and restricted (e.g., refusing to turn the pleasure of eating food into gluttony, or the pleasure of rest into sloth).

Finally, celibacy in singleness bears witness to the way that all desire ultimately points to God. As Augustine wrote, our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. The most profound desires—the deepest human longings—can only find satisfaction in God, not through another human being.

The loves of marriage and friendship as metaphors for God’s love

No doubt most of us have heard a sermon on marriage as the metaphor for Christ’s love for the church (Eph 5:22-33) or for God’s costly fidelity to Israel. These are powerful metaphors and ought to be celebrated. But how many of us have heard a sermon on celibacy as the reflection of our future eternal life with God? Or on self-sacrificial *friendship* as the highest form of love (John 15:12-15)? Or on the chaste and hospitable friendships of singleness as virtues that display God’s character (see below)? Focusing exclusively on marriage as the *only* relationship that mirrors God’s fidelity places a heavy burden on marriage, and it places too much weight on sexual fidelity as the only measure of faithfulness. Marriages, other familial relationships (the love between parents and children, or between siblings), and non-sexual friendships that endure through challenges can all teach us profound lessons about faithfulness and forgiveness.

Stanley Grenz proposes that, just as marriage signals something important about who God is, so also singleness can bear witness to another aspect of God’s love. His observations are worth quoting in full:

Singleness...constitutes an equally powerful imagery of yet another dimension of the divine reality as the One who loves, namely, the universal, nonexclusive, and expanding nature of the divine love... The ‘family’ formed by the love of single persons is not the product of the intimate sexual acts shared by two people, but arises spontaneously out of a dynamic of love that is open beyond exclusive boundaries. As such, the less formal bonding of singles reflects the openness of the divine love to the continual expansion of the circle of love to include within its circle those yet outside its boundaries. (Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 172)

Virtues of singleness

The relative or at least perceived freedoms of the single person can sometimes reduce single people and their gifts to the utilitarian value of their sheer availability. Evangelical theologian Rodney Clapp, for example, in an otherwise thoughtful chapter called “The Superiority of Singleness,” cites “freedom” (including the ability to relocate easily) as the central virtue of singleness. While this is true for some single people, it is simply not true for many other people who are single. For one thing, single people should be allowed and even encouraged to root themselves in communities just as deeply as families, and to invest in the network of interdependent relationships that is at the heart of all Christian flourishing. As one single Christian quipped, “If you’re free while you’re single, you’re not doing it right.”

A more interesting question from a Christian perspective is what might be the unique virtues formed in a person by singleness. It is common to say that marriage teaches forbearance, forgiveness, long-suffering love, and the ability to place another’s needs over one’s own; or to claim that having children trains one in patience and selflessness. What virtues might the life of singleness nourish?

Here are a few suggestions about what virtues the single life might nurture, with the recognition that these will obviously vary depending on circumstance (and the unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit!).

Hospitality

Different households have their own advantages and limitations about what kinds of hospitality they can practice at different stages of life. Single people can practice an “open table” form of hospitality that regularly welcomes in other singles, single parents, and those who would not regularly have company at mealtimes. Or, they can provide hospitality to busy families in the form of bringing dinner over to someone else’s household. In this way, being single affords the opportunity to nurture hospitality outside the bounds of the family, as a witness to the alternative kinships formed by life in Christ.

Disciplined desires

Many single people struggle with powerful longings for sexual intimacy, for the lifelong commitment of marriage, or for children. As noted above, although all Christians are called to discern and discipline their desires, single people are often in a unique position to learn to face their unrequited desires in a Christian way: to name them as good longings, to be gentle with themselves when these longings seem too strong to bear, and to seek to refocus their desires into desire for God and into other healthy, life-giving, creative channels.

Eschatological hope

For those singles who do not have children, life without children represents a particular Christian witness to a church that regenerates by baptism and not through bearing children. Single people trust solely in the resurrection for future life

rather than in children who can secure a kind of immortality for themselves through continuation of their genetic code. In a culture that idolizes children as “the future” of our world, singles have no such assurance. As Rodney Clapp writes, “...the single Christian ultimately *must* trust in the resurrection. The married, after all, can fall back on the passage of the family name to children, and on being remembered by children. But singles mount the high wire of faith without the net of children and their memory. If singles live on, it will be because there is a resurrection. And if they are remembered, they will be remembered by the family called church” (Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, 101).

Interdependence

Likewise, in the church children are no longer necessary for financial support in old age, since the church (at its best) cares for the vulnerable in its midst, including the widows and the elderly. Nobody who is a Christian should ever have to fear growing old alone: in the church, nobody grows old alone. Single people must learn to depend on others well before old age, with or without children. They learn to ask for help when they are sick, when they need someone to bring them to the car mechanic to pick up a car, or when they need help doing any number of mundane tasks that a spouse would usually do for their partner. Rather than something to be ashamed of, learning to depend on one another and to serve one another joyfully, without complaining, highlights the nature of the church as a *body* of interconnected parts, who need each other to flourish and to fulfill the mission of the church (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:9). In this way, people who are single can also model the kind of alternative, non-biological “families” that the church makes possible, by including in their “families” brothers and sisters bound together by Christ, rather than by marriage or biology, across different genders, races, and social classes (Gal 3:28). Of course, nuclear and extended families can model this, too, by intentionally widening the boundaries of their families to include those not related to them. This might mean sharing a household together, for a short or long while, or it might simply mean being available to each other in time, resources, and support.

Note that patience is not on this list of virtues. Patience implies that singleness is a stage of *waiting* for something to happen (i.e., marriage), making singleness a sort of batter-on-deck, temporary state that is simply the waiting-room to the goal of happy union with another single person. To think of patience as a virtue fostered by singleness is to misconstrue the nature of Christian waiting. Christian patience is not oriented toward a spouse, or children, or the next stage of life. As a *Christian* virtue, patience (steadfast endurance) is a form of waiting for the return of the Lord Jesus to wipe away all tears and usher in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The Single Pastor

There is no biblical or theological basis to the notion that a single person is somehow less equipped for ministry than a married person. (Remember Paul’s advice that people with no spouses might actually be *more* able to focus on ministry.) If we don’t trust a single person to be capable of ministering to families,

we would never hire 30-year-olds to minister to the elderly members of a congregation, and never hire a male pastor to minister to women. God pours God's gifts out through the Holy Spirit on all God's people (Acts 2); it is the gifting of God and a call to ministry that counts, not life experiences. The assumption that a church is getting less by not getting a spouse or children along with their pastor is a serious disservice to married pastors; the church always hires *one* person, whether that person is married or single, and should never expect the pastor's family to function as unpaid staff.

Churches can be sensitive to single pastors by not expecting any more or less out of them simply because they do not have a spouse. Just because they don't have a spouse or children to go home to at night does not mean that they need less vacation time or fewer evenings away from church than a married pastor. Their personal space needs to be protected just as conscientiously. Single pastors can graciously help their churches draw appropriate boundaries around their time.

The issue of a single pastor entering into a dating relationship raises important questions about boundaries and the necessarily public life of any pastor. Churches should give their single pastor the freedom to date and to pursue possible marriage just as any other single person. The single pastor should strive to model healthy dating relationships, appropriate boundaries, thoughtful discernment regarding the possibility of marriage, and the discipline of chastity before marriage. Whether they like it or not, their dating relationships are in the public view of the church just as the married pastor's spouse and children are.²

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of these meditations is not to elevate singleness to a place of undue importance. The evangelical church's current overemphasis on marriage and the nuclear family needs to be corrected and balanced, not over-corrected. Rather, the ultimate goal is the building up of the body of Christ. God's desire is for all people to flourish and to participate in the common life and ministry of the church as it serves the world and advances the gospel. This paper has sought to contribute to a theology of singleness, alongside the church's theology of marriage, that enables and empowers people who are single to fulfill those aims more fully alongside their married brothers and sisters in Christ: *for God's glory, and neighbors' good.*

² Single pastors who find themselves romantically interested in a single member of their congregation should obviously consult with their church leadership or their superintendent and proceed with caution.

Questions for further discussion:

- Is our church a place where single people are visible and actively involved? Do singles feel welcomed and valued here? Where could we do better?
- Does our church have a “theology” of singleness? If so, what is it?
- Do we use language that embraces both married and single people (i.e., avoiding the use of “family night” or “family retreat” for all-church events)?
- Does our church provide opportunities for people of different ages who are single and who are married to connect in a meaningful way – in ministry, prayer, study, etc.?
- How can our church achieve a healthy balance between celebrating and nurturing strong marriages, and strengthening and nurturing the lives of single people?
- Would our church be open to calling a single pastor? Why or why not?

Resources

Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church*

- Highly recommended. Written from an evangelical perspective. See especially their suggestions for the church, pages 223-233.

Albert Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness*

Jana Bennett, *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness*

- A more scholarly book that uses Augustine's writings on celibacy and marriage to argue for “a theology of households” rather than theologies of marriage and singleness.

Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads*, Chapter 5, “The Superiority of Singleness”

- A brief but helpful argument for singleness as a valued way of life in the church. However, Clapp assigns “freedom” to the single life and “hospitality” to families – a view with which this paper clearly disagrees.

Marva Dawn, *I'm Lonely, Lord—How Long? Meditations on the Psalms*

- Written from the perspective of someone struggling with a particularly lonely period of life as a single person.

Mary Graves, “Integrating Single Adults into the Life of the Church,” *Baker Handbook of Single Adult Ministry*, ed. Fagerstrom, 149-54.

Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, Part 3: Singleness as an Expression of Human Sexuality

Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity*

Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*

- Describes genuine friendship in Christ as an essential part of living moral lives.