

Singleness

by Dorothy Gish

In Christian circles where the nuclear family is usually accepted as the ideal, where parents begin early to pray for a good mate for their child, and where it is often implicitly taught that normal, well adjusted people get married, what can be said for the unmarried who are often considered incomplete and unfulfilled?

Who are the single?

According to a 1998 survey of the persons living in the United States 53.4 percent of those under 35 were single. Only 56 percent of the total population was married and living with their spouse. Thus, close to half of the population was single; i.e., cohabiting, widowed, divorced, separated, or never-married-all ages and personalities. Some were parents, some were not. While there is legitimate concern in the church about the divorced and those living together without marriage, perhaps the greatest stigma seems to be attached to those who never had a partner: i.e., the never married.

Why are they single?

Elva McAllaster in her delightful book *Free to be Single* lists fifty possible reasons for not entering matrimony: e.g., being responsible for the welfare of parents or lack of availability of suitable partners, etc. Others are single for more obvious reasons, such as the death of a spouse, the devastation of a failed relationship, personal handicaps or maladjustments, or fear of making a commitment.¹

What does the Bible have to say about singleness?

In I Corinthians 6:12-20 Paul discusses the sexual sins of Corinth. Then in chapter

7, after answering the question about singleness, he goes on to say that because of the perverted and promiscuous culture in which the Corinthians lived, marriage was probably a necessity for them to live pure lives. He indicates that existing marriages were not to be abandoned: "Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" (I Corinthians 7:17). He then explains (vv. 26-40) that because singleness allows freedom and effectiveness in witnessing for Christ, it is preferable for the sake of the kingdom. Thus, taken as a whole, this passage seems to affirm both marriage and singleness.

Matthew 19:1-12 reveals the disciples having difficulty accepting the high standards Christ set for marriage. When they conclude, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (v. 10), Jesus then affirms that there are those who are single for the sake of the kingdom. This passage seems to be saying that God's call to marriage with fidelity and continually increasing intimacy is just as difficult to accept as God's call to singleness. From a Christian perspective marriage and singleness are each approved by Christ and each presents its own challenge in living it out properly.

What does being single mean ?

A Christian single can live as an incomplete whole, lacking (waiting for, rejected by) a spouse, or as a complete person created in the image of God and redeemed by Christ. Using one's single status as an avenue of

service and fulfillment is facilitated by the following: .

1. Recognize that singleness is a legitimate choice.

There are many reasons why one may consciously and deliberately choose to be single. Since a Christian will choose to date and marry only one who is a Christian believer, the available possibilities may be limited. Some limit their choices by being very idealistic. A person may seek voluntarily to give oneself more wholeheartedly to Christ's service than is possible for a married person. Still others may simply prefer singleness as a mode of living. When singleness results from being divorced or widowed, one may choose to remain in that state.

2. Differentiate between loneliness and aloneness.

Loneliness is often viewed as synonymous with singleness. However, talking with people of our own and other cultures will show that aching, hurting loneliness may be just as much a part of those who have a spouse, or even several spouses, as of those who have no spouse. Loneliness is part of the human condition. However, when one is comfortable with oneself and is involved in caring relationships, being alone can result in the kind of solitude that has been favorably referred to as "solitary refinement."

3. Recognize the nature of and the need for intimacy.

Every normal, healthy human being needs both solitude and intimacy. A helpful definition of solitude is "being completely at home with oneself" while intimacy is "being completely at home with another person." For those who are married, there is presumably more intimacy, but it is harder to experience solitude. For those who are single, there is presumably more solitude, but it is harder to experience intimacy. Equating intimacy and fulfillment with sexual

activity leads to a view of singleness as lacking fulfillment and intimacy. The reality is that sexual intercourse does not guarantee intimacy—indeed, it can preclude it. Sexual experience without intimacy is anything but fulfilling. What is often mistaken as the need for sexual interaction is the need for intimacy. If the psychological need for intimacy is satisfied, the need for physiological sexual experience is lessened.

4. Develop a variety of relationships.

We all need others. Part of being a Christian is the obligation to live in belonging relationship with others. Examining what that means will help us to realize that all normal people, regardless of their marital status, need close friends of both sexes and all ages.

Indeed, people require a variety of relationships to meet their needs and to keep life meaningful and growing. Relationships close enough to smooth off some of the rough edges are essential for keeping singles from becoming smug, satisfied, and self-centered.

However, expecting and/or depending upon another person to meet all of one's needs is unrealistic and bound to fail.

5. Cultivate a proper independence.

In our society, marriage is a way of proclaiming one's adulthood. Hence, it is sometimes difficult for those who never marry to establish credibility as a responsible adult. Thus it is important for singles to have a place of their own, a sanctuary which they can decorate in ways that express their personality, where they can relax and be themselves, where they are free to entertain and share themselves with others. For the formerly married, finding the proper degree of independence can also be difficult because it is compounded by the need to establish a new identity. The hurt and pain associated with death or divorce make it easy to cling to others. Certainly, during times of emotional trauma, a person needs to find

extra support and help, but one also needs the kind of support that helps in finding and developing one's own identity.

No matter by what route one came to the single state, it is crucial to guard against becoming so independent that one neither asks for nor receives help from others. Not only is that damaging but it negates the interdependence which is to characterize members of Christ's body.

6. Celebrate the freedom singleness allows.

Singleness allows one the freedom to make commitments to low-paying Christian or public service, because only one person's living standard is affected. Single people may take advantage of service opportunities without the demand of an entire family's sacrifice because of one's desire to serve.

7. Continue to grow.

Singleness is not an interim, a waiting for life to begin. It is essential that singles continue to grow and develop. Identifying one's assets and support system facilitates the setting of realistic short-term and long-term goals. This includes identifying their main problems and developing realistic plans for addressing those problems.

Every Christian is called to live each day to the full, cherishing the time given us. Accepting the wholeness that Jesus offers makes it possible to be fulfilled and live a life of celebration, whatever one's marital status.

1. Elva McAllaster, Free to be Single.