

Hook

Church advertisement flyers clearly targeted at families show up in my neighborhood in California

It's clearly OK to try to reach families for Christ. It might even seem Scripturally justified to use this strategy, as Paul said in Acts "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your whole household" (Acts 16:31) - and "household" would seem to imply "families" getting saved.

As a 40-year-old single person, these advertisements bring out two main thoughts:

1. For myself, am I welcome there? Will my welcome have an asterisk by it? Will the church have infrastructure for people like me?
2. For my society - I live in a city with very few "households" that look like the typical family. Are they really trying to reach the community they are in?

In its singleness rate, my city is like America fast-forwarded.

A greater percentage of Americans are now single than married

The number of one-person households is growing rapidly

If we are to reach households for Christ, and our households are increasingly single-person households, this poses a real challenge to the church – to think about singleness in new ways. The flyer with the married couples is probably not off-putting to the single in their 20s who is dating an interesting person, and for whom marriage is on the horizon. They can easily read themselves into the story of the happy [future] family they see. The passage today points to singles who are other than the

I'm-super-confident-that-the-right-Christian-"One"-is-right-around-the-corner. Singles other than those who attend the "singles" groups for people in their 20s which act as a kind of dating pool.

The Bible knows about, and our society will increasingly contain, singles whose stories aren't so easy.

- § Widows
- § The divorced and abandoned
- § The divorced and abandoners
- § Those not attracted to the opposite-sex
- § Lots of Christian women who would love to be married but can't beat the odds that there are statistically way more practicing Christian women than men

To make church home and family to these people, we need to repent of our society's ways of thinking about singleness and figure out what the Bible says. We need to develop the infrastructure to use these people's gifts and talents, just as we develop infrastructure for having

babies in our church, or the elderly - it may mean some new habits, some new practices, to help people whose stories look different fit in.

The Bible's view on singleness, and the culture's distortion of it

The passage for today points us in several different directions which hold up a mirror to the twin distortions of our culture on singleness.

One set of distortions comes from the default youth culture of dating and advertisements - think typical young professional on Tinder. This appeals to our felt right to be unimpeded, to be completely independent actors.

One set of distortions is more like the "concerned" church mom. This appeals to our desire to do what is "normal" and to do what is expected of you.

Sadly both of these distortions are ultimately about the SELF, saving MY face, making MYSELF feel better, staving off MY loneliness. The Bible is clear instead that Singleness is always about the Other.

So distortion #1 -

The Bible says that singleness is a gift to serve others. The culture says that singleness is a gift to serve yourself (i.e. the Tinder model) or else a problem to be solved (Church mom).

¹⁰ His disciples said to him, "If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, **it's better not to marry.**"

¹¹ He responded, "Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given.

This is a classic "You said it, not me" move by Jesus - getting people to say something that is true, and then saying - see! You know it's true as well. By responding as he did. He agrees with them that, yes, it is better to remain unmarried. Paul reiterates this view in his letters.

¹² For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs who were made by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is **able** to accept it **should accept it.**"

The point of singleness is to serve others. Eunuchhood was a life of sacrifice, a foregoing of one's own glory to bring glory to another, a greater family. Jesus didn't have to use eunuchs as his occasion for describing singleness and the ways we find ourselves there, but he chose to see and to evaluate one of the most invisible populations of his day.

distortion #2-

Bible: It is a gift to be accepted soberly (even when unchosen) → Culture “it is a curse” OR “it is heaven on earth “

Mt 19:10

How can something be an unchosen gift? Aren't most gifts unchosen? The gift is something like being gifted 20 acres of very fertile land. The gift involves a great deal of work, but also a potential for a return which is greater than the work, if it is worked well and correctly.

distortion #3-

Bible: Singleness is the ultimate yes. → Culture “you are irresponsible/childish” OR “woohoo no responsibilities”

To steal from Eve Tushnet, it is not a culture of “no.” Why is it a gift? Why is it the desired state? Because you can say yes to more responsibilities, you can serve a wider swath of the church

1 Cor 7:7-8

1 Cor 7:25

Acts 21:9

Singleness is less “Jesus is my boyfriend/girlfriend” and more like the maid-of-honor (the main role of the eunuch) - I'm here to help deliver His bride to Him - to prepare the Church for its coming wedding with Her Lord.

distortion #4-

Bible says: Singleness will indeed be hard → Culture “it is impossible/waste” OR “marriage is too hard”

Both lies are based on the view of avoiding the thing that is hard. The “Church Mom” feels what Jesus said about the eunuchs. This is a hard truth. It is going to be hard.

Mt 19:10

1 Cor 7:9

1 Ti 5:11

To sum the distortions

The Bible's take on singleness is different from our culture's primarily because both the Church Mom and the Tinder Dude believe a very American set of lies:

The point of life is the pursuit of happiness
The (almost only) way to true happiness is romance
You can't get romance without putting yourself out there, and working your angles

Whereas the Bible says:

The point of life is the pursuit of God's glory - putting God's nature on display
The way to glorifying God is pursuit of holiness
You can't get holiness without self-denial, self-forgetfulness, putting Christ's wife, the church ahead of you

The church sends a conflicted message, as an entity with a foot in both places

The church's conflictedness over this issue can even be seen in discussions about pastors' marital status. The Catholic takes the extreme view that only celibate/single people can serve as true leaders in the Kingdom, but the Protestants take the opposite extreme view - in a de facto way unless you are married you are suspect, and people want to "get a pastor's wife and youth group kids for free" in their deal of signing on the pastor. Without single leaders, it is hard for singles to see a future for themselves in shepherding Christ's church.

Jesus actually goes to great pains to redefine family - the link in Christ is a stronger form of belonging than the belonging through blood and even marriage:

"Your father and I have been anxious" "didn't you know I'd be in my father's house"
"Who is my mother and who are my brothers?"
"From now on there will be five in one family divided, two on three, three on two"
"Anyone who loves their father/mother, son/daughter more than me is not worthy of me"
"Woman here is your son, man here is your mother"

The church finds itself a home to people who are rebelling against and also whose identity is in the American ideal of family, which is ultimately an American idol of control (cf. family in Hispanic communities) → The church's message on singleness may reflect more its individuals' cultural perspectives rather than the Spirit's supracultural/anticultural message to the early church

Practical: What is unhelpful to singles

Talking as if marriage (and children!) are inevitable "when you ..."

Perpetuating un-Biblical "find the one" discourse

Tips on getting yourself out there

“Married couples” life groups

The church is a “family of families”

Practical: What is helpful to singles

Bring them into the messiest moments of household life (die to the idol of wanting to look like a successful spouse with well-behaved children and an orderly house)

Singles: You’ll need to be proactive about this

This may mean even inviting single people to live with you, and put them to work (I will share the story of the family that hosted me in College, and the impact it had on me!)

Need their energy and gifts - engineer that need into the life of your household and your church (make it so that things won’t work without singles’ participation)

A culture of honesty about loneliness and sexual temptation within marriage

Epilogue

There are other pathways to family/name → The overt fear of the church mom and the secret fear of the Tinder dude is “who will take care of you as you get older?”

Gal 4:27/Is 54:1, Is 56:5, Ps 68:6, Eph 3:15, 1 Pet 2:17/5:9

The Bible sees that. The heart of God in this is Jesus on the cross assigning John and Mary to be a new kind of family, unnatural in one way, yet natural enough to God to use His dying breath on it.

It is also all of our destiny to be single. The Bible is clear that people aren’t married or given in marriage in heaven. The synoptic gospels go out of their way to emphasize this in all three. (Mt 22:30, Mk 12:25, Lk 20:35) You were born single, and you will die single. You will spend all eternity single, but in some way wedded to Christ as part of his bride. Any season of singleness you have on this earth then is an incredible opportunity, not to be wasted, to try to see and serve the whole body of Christ.