

# A Biblical-Theological Perspective on Singleness

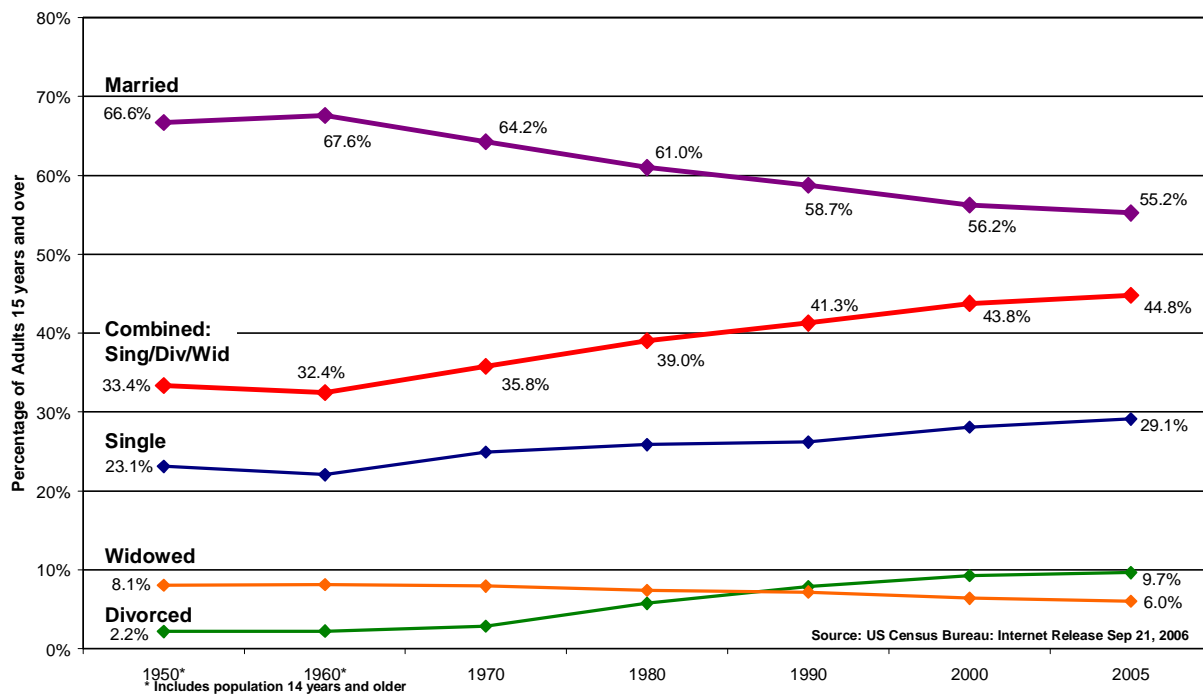
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## 1. Introduction

Among many demographic challenges facing the Church of the twenty-first century is the significant increase in the percentage of single adults that constitute most Western societies. In the United States for example, census figures indicate that in 1960, 67.6% of the adult population (14 years and older) were classified as married, 22.0% were classified as single, 8.1% as widowed, and 2.3% as divorced.<sup>1</sup> By 2005 according to the same report, 55.2% of the adult population (15 years and older) were classified as married, 29.1% as single, 6.0% as widowed, and 9.7% as divorced.

**Marital Status Trend: United States**



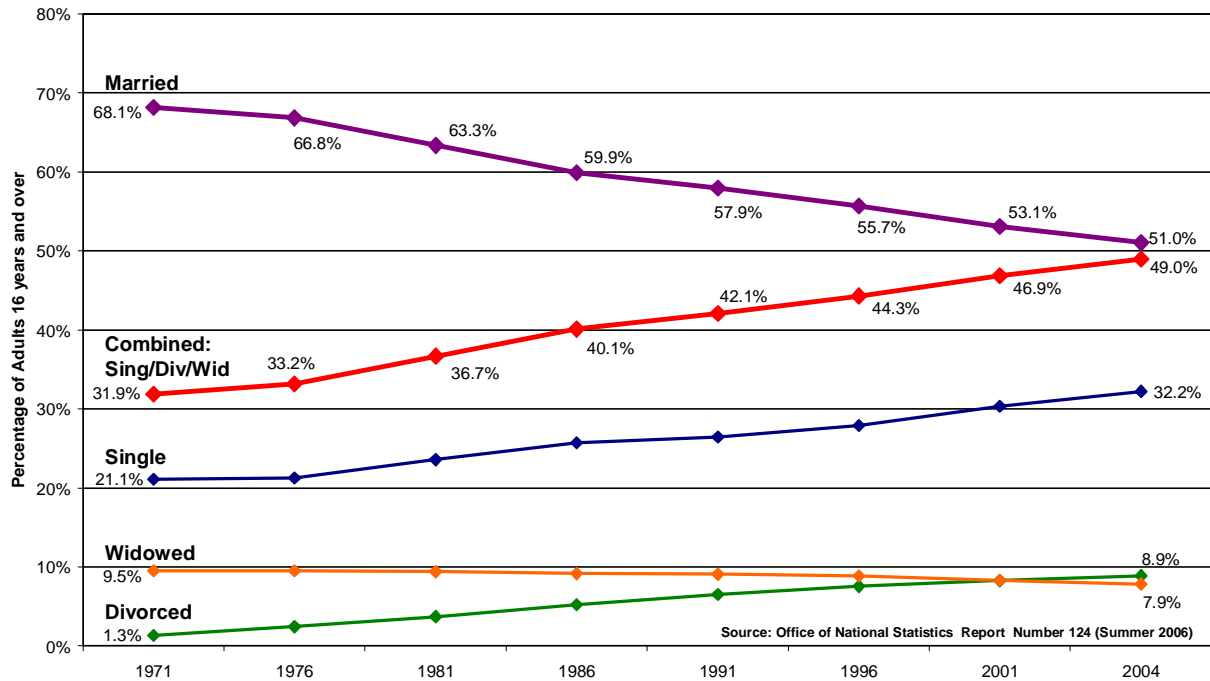
In the England and Wales the same trend is even more pronounced. In 1971, 68.1% of the adult population (16 years and older) were classified as married, 21.1% were classified as single, 9.5% as widowed, and only 1.3% as divorced.<sup>2</sup> By 2004 only 51.0% of the adult population (16 years and older) were classified as married, 32.2% as single, 7.9% as widowed, and 8.9% as divorced. In less than thirty-five years, only a little more than one generation, the married population in the United Kingdom has

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Table MS-1, Internet Release May 25, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Office of National Statistics, *Population Trends*, Report No. 124 (Summer 2006): Table 1.5.

declined from a majority of over two-thirds to only slightly greater than half. And this has occurred despite a simultaneous influx of new immigrants from culturally conservative regions of the world.

**Marital Status Trend: England and Wales**



But while single adults constitute an increasing percentage of the population as a whole, a recent study by George Barna suggests they are significantly under-represented in nearly every facet of church life.<sup>3</sup> While 51% of married adult Americans attend regular church services, only 35% of single adult Americans similarly attend.<sup>4</sup> Though 23% of married adults additionally attend a Sunday School class, only 15% of single adults attend.<sup>5</sup> Although singles would expect to have more discretionary leisure time, only 18% regularly volunteer at their church, versus 29% of their married counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Single adults are also less financially committed to their respective churches giving 65% less in financial contributions than their married counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, they were 50% less likely to be serving in leadership capacities within the church.<sup>8</sup> The trend is the same in every category. Single people are 30-50% less involved in the life of the church than their married counterparts.

<sup>3</sup> George Barna, *Singlefocus – Understanding Single Adults*, (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Barna, 89.

<sup>5</sup> Barna, 89.

<sup>6</sup> Barna, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Barna, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Barna, 92.

Beyond demographic realities, the church is now facing a number of significant theological challenges concerning singleness. Homosexual advocacy groups attempt to integrate homosexual lifestyles into the mainstream as normal and appropriate, challenging the church theologically to consider “alternate” lifestyles. Increasing divorce rates continue to mount pressure upon the limits of Biblical divorce. Lawsuits over sexually inappropriate behaviour within the Roman Catholic Church have once again opened the question of the legitimacy of clerical celibacy. The decline of marriage overall once again calls into question the place and necessity of marriage within the Church. To what degree do the Scriptures call all Christians to marriage? Conversely, what place and purpose do single people serve within the Body of Christ? What theological distinctions address their unique situation? The present essay attempts a biblical-theological approach in reflecting upon the subject. The attempt herein is to move beyond a synchronic examination of relevant texts toward a fuller appreciation of the unfolding theological development on the subject that occurs in the Old and New Testaments as part of the advancing storyline of the biblical text.

The biblical storyline describes the unfolding of God’s redemptive hope to all humanity through Christ. In Christ a new community is being built, a community of male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, married and single. The New Testament description of singleness as a calling and charisma affirms a message of hope and inclusion for those who are single. The message in no way denigrates marriage, but rather, affirms that life together in the body of Christ needs and benefits from *both* single and married people. It is the storyline of the biblical text that explains why this is the case. Thus a biblical theology of singleness must begin where the text begins, in Genesis with Adam and the patriarchs.

## **2. Genesis and Abraham**

The opening chapters of Genesis provide the foundations of certain relationships which are then developed and refined throughout the remainder of the Biblical account. First and foremost is the relationship between *blessing* and *offspring*. This relationship is explicitly established very early in the creation account when God creates the birds and the sea creatures, on the fifth day of creation. “And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth (Gen 1:22).’”<sup>9</sup> The first imperative of creation is the command of *procreation* and the immediate context of the divine commandment is divine *blessing*. Genesis 1:28 uses the same language for man and woman. They are commanded not only to multiply and fill the earth but also to subdue it and have dominion over it. The imperatives again immediately follow the blessing of God upon them. The

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<sup>9</sup> Biblical citations are from the ESV except where otherwise noted.

same imperatives are reiterated a second and third in Gen 9:1 and 9:7 in the context of God's re-creation mandate to Noah after the flood (cf. Gen 8:17).

The second foundation laid, in the final episode of the creation account (Gen 2:18-25), is the institution of marriage. The primary ground which Genesis offers for basis of marriage is companionship. It is "not good that the man should be alone (2:18)" and the woman thus is a "helper fit" for him. While procreation is an imperative given to the first humans and Noah in the direct context of God's blessing, marriage is depicted as provision of God for humanity's benefit.

The central drama of the Genesis account is the blessing of God to Abraham and the establishment of his covenant with him. This occurs over a series of episodes including Abraham's call (Gen 12:1-9), the granting of the land (Gen 13:14-17), the promise of a son with the establishment of a covenant (Gen 15:1-21), the giving of circumcision (Gen 17:1-14), the promise of a son reiterated (Gen 18:1-15), and the confirmation of the covenant in the testing of Abraham (Gen 22:15-19). God's covenantal blessing to Abraham includes a series of the following elements:

1. Making Abraham into a great nation (Gen 12:2);
2. Giving Abraham a new name (Gen 17:4), and making Abraham's name great so that he will be a blessing (Gen 12:2);
3. Blessing all the families of the earth through Abraham (Gen 12:3) and through his offspring (Gen 22:18);
4. Giving him and his descendants the land of Canaan (Gen 13:15; 15:7, 18-21; 17:8);
5. Multiplying his offspring (Gen 17:2) to be as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen 13:16), the stars of the sky (Gen 15:5; 22:17), and the sand of the seashore (Gen 22:17);
6. God providing himself as Abraham's shield (Gen 15:1);
7. Making Abraham father of many nations (Gen 17:4);
8. Having kings come from his descendents (Gen 17:6);
9. Giving his offspring possession of the gate of their enemies (Gen 22:17).

Note that the elements of the blessing are given largely as physical and temporal – centering around offspring, land and name (or reputation). These three elements continue to be very interrelated through the course of the Old Testament. The one striking intangible element in the list is God giving himself to Abraham as his shield. But the context of this reference (Gen 15:1) suggests that "shield" is a metaphor

for protection that God will faithfully deliver the other covenantal blessings. A further observation is that central to all the temporal elements of the blessing is the particular blessing of “offspring” (*zera*). From ‘Abraham’s offspring emerge nations and kings and blessing for the earth, to his offspring goes the inheritance of the land, and by his offspring is his great name to be propagated through the ages. Thus to the extent Abraham’s offspring survive or perish is likewise to the extent his blessing is realized or is lost. This critical dependency becomes the centerpiece of the major story line with the remainder of the account of Abraham in Genesis. Three out of four of the matriarchs in the Genesis account, Sarah (Gen 11:30), Rebekah (Gen 25:21), and Rachel (Gen 29:31) all experience initial barrenness before God intervenes on their behalf. In each generation the story reaffirms the point that the patriarchal offspring is the provision of God. The centrality of offspring in the covenantal blessing is again visible in the reaffirmation of the covenant to Isaac in Genesis 26:3-4, where the word is reiterated four times, and in the reaffirmation to Jacob in Genesis 28:13-14, where it appears three times.

### **3. Sinai and Israel**

The close connection between offspring and covenantal blessing is a theme which also continues to appear in later Old Testament covenants. It appears prominently in the stipulations of the Sinai covenant:

The LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among *you* or among your livestock. (Deut 7:12-14)

Here again is the association between offspring and blessing, but applied to the Israelite nation. And again the blessing of children features prominently among the covenantal blessings, stated first in a positive form and then a second time in a negative form. Similar language is then reiterated in the closing covenantal blessings and curses found in Deuteronomy 28 which expresses it both in blessing form (28:4) and in curse form (28:18).

The Davidic covenant expresses essential continuity with God’s covenant to Abraham with some important distinctions. God will make David a great name (2 Sam 7:9) as he also made Abraham’s name great. The promise of land, initially fulfilled in the Israelite conquest of Canaan, is now extended to embrace a larger notion of *rest*. Israel will have their “own place” where they will “be disturbed no more” (2 Sam 7:10). Likewise, the centrality of offspring again appears in the Davidic covenant:

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. (2 Sam 7:12-13)

But though the same singular form of “offspring” (*zera'*) is used in both the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants, here the term refers to a single individual rather than a collective whole. “He shall build a house” for God’s name, and God will “establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

The interplay between *offspring*, *land*, and *name* occurs frequently in the Old Testament and demonstrates both how important and how interconnected they were in Israelite society. For example:

- The connection between one’s name and one’s offspring becomes clear insofar as one’s name was perpetuated through subsequent generations who in turn remembered the name of their forefathers (Gen 48:16, Jer 11:19). Conversely, the consequences of dying childless in the covenant was not only physical death but carried the further consequence of having one’s name “blotted out of Israel (Deut 25:6)” implying a loss of identity within the living memory of the nation. Thus the provision of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10) is given so that a man who dies without a son acquires a surrogate heir through the marriage of his widow to his next of kin.
- Saul begs David to swear that he will not cut off his offspring after him, thereby destroying his name from his father’s house (1 Sam 24:21). David likewise makes a covenant with Jonathan (1 Sam 20:15) not to cut off his house that the Lord might be between their offspring forever (1 Sam 20:42). As a consequence of his oath and covenant David later takes painstaking efforts to search out any remaining descendants of Saul’s house (2 Sam 9:1) which results in his invitation to Mephibosheth to eat at his table (2 Sam 9:7). David then returns the land of Saul to Mephibosheth as part of his kindness to him (2 Sam 9:9-10) and thereby completes the restoration of Saul’s house and legacy.
- A family’s individual apportionment of land was designated as their “inheritance” (*naḥālā*). The concept of inheritance in the Old Testament also underscores the importance of offspring-blessing relationship. In contrast to the New Testament, where “inheritance” (*klēronomia*) most frequently designates transcendent salvation (Gal 3:18; Eph 1:14; Col 3:24; Heb 9:15; 1 Pet 1:4; etc.), the Old Testament term typically refers to the permanent

possession of property given to an individual family and passed on through succession to subsequent generations (e.g. Exod 32:13; Deut 4:20; 32:9; 1 Kgs 21:3; 1 Chron 28:8).<sup>10</sup> The importance of the inheritance for the family unit cannot be over-estimated. The family's individual allotment of the land represented the portion of God's provision of blessing and sustenance for their livelihood (Num 32:28; Deut 19:14). The inheritance was the place of family security, not to be confiscated by greedy oppressors (Mic 2:2). It provided cropland and grazing for physical survival (Lev 25:19) and was the means of maintaining relative economic equality through the year of Jubilee and redemption of property (Lev 25). It was also the place of burial of one's ancestors (Josh 24:30). But in all these things, the inheritance representing God's blessing was only maintainable after death insofar as it could be passed on to successive generations. Otherwise it was redistributed to others within the clan (Num 27:11; 36:1-12).

- One's name was also intimately tied to the family's inheritance. Thus as Achan is singled out in Joshua 7:16-18 as, from "the tribe of Judah", "the clan of Zerah", "son of Carmi", "son of Zabdi", so too after the land is distributed, the family's individual allotment of land is a tangible marker of their presence within the nation of Israel. Thus the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27:1-11 raise a concern that their father's name will disappear from his clan if his inheritance is forfeited. When an Israelite did sell the land or moved away from the inherited allotment the arrangement was only temporary. On the year of Jubilee, the land reverted back to its original recipients and each was to return to his own family and his original inheritance (Lev 25:1-17). Thus the Jubilee year served as a periodic corrective mechanism to sustain the tie between one's name and one's inheritance over generations.
- The relationship between offspring and inheritance reveals more clearly the severity of Ahab's sin in stealing Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21). Ahab originally wishes only to trade or buy Naboth's land (1 Kgs 21:1), which in our modern era of eminent domain or compulsory purchase would seem to be a reasonable request. But Naboth cannot imagine relinquishing his land because he recognizes it as the family inheritance. He responds to Ahab, "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers (1 Kgs 21:3)." Jezebel in utter

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<sup>10</sup> The other related term frequently alongside inheritance is "possession" (*'āḥūzzā*). God gives the whole of Canaan to Abraham as a possession. The term is often used interchangeably with inheritance (e.g. Num 27:7; Ps 2:8). But while possession is always tangible property, inheritance is broader and may refer to the entitled property, the right of entitlement (e.g. Num 32:32), or the non-tangible entitlements (e.g. Yahweh himself, Ezek 44:28).

contempt of the significance of the covenantal blessing within Israel, kills Naboth, takes his land with the implication that Naboth is not only murdered, but that his familial identity is permanently cut off and extinguished. Thus the *lex talionis*<sup>11</sup> punishment which Elijah pronounces upon Ahab is that God will “cut off” from Ahab every male in Israel, that his house and identity will likewise be extinguished (1 Kgs 21:21).

- The Psalms speak of one having many children as blessed (127:5; 128:3-6). Psalm 127:3 describes one’s children as an “inheritance” (*naḥālā*) from the Lord (Ps 127:3). Physical offspring is here equated with one’s *naḥālā*. But in this case *naḥālā* connotes more the notion of lasting legacy than entitlement. Thus most English versions translate *naḥālā* as *heritage*. Since children constitute a lasting heritage by retaining and remembering the name of their forefathers, all three concepts are actually present at once.
- The book of Ruth also relates all three concepts in a remarkable fashion. The book’s focus on Naomi’s crushing bitterness in Ruth 1:12, 13 stems from the impending reality that in having lost husband and sons she would consequently also forfeit the land. Her name with that of her deceased husband would be eternally cut off from Israel and their share of the covenantal blessing would be forever lost. The consequences of the tragedy were far more severe to Naomi than they were to Ruth who was young enough to re-marry and obtain a new identity within a new family unit. Yet the significance of Boaz’ redemptive act is far greater than a mere restoration of physical welfare for Ruth and Naomi. Boaz first redeems the land of Elimelech and thereby restores the familial inheritance, the physical marker of God’s blessing, to his family. Boaz also takes Ruth as his wife, “to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place (Ruth 4:9,10).” Boaz thus restores the inheritance and the line of offspring to Elimelech so that his name is not cut off from his people.

In all these examples a recurring theme is the centrality of offspring in maintaining the covenantal blessing for the individual Israelite. Beyond the fact that having offspring itself was a manifestation of the covenantal blessing, succession to offspring was the means by which one retained the family inheritance after death. The combination of having surviving offspring and their maintenance of the

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<sup>11</sup> Latin for “law of retaliation” or punishment in kind.



family inheritance ensured that one's name would survive beyond death. A family member's bones would find rest on the land amongst their descendants and the memory of their legacy would remain for successive generations. Conversely if an average Israelite did not have children he also stood to lose his inheritance and the memory of his name. He would be blotted out from the collective memory of the nation, jeopardizing his personal stake in the covenantal blessing.

When God raised up his covenant people Israel, the primary mechanism he used was procreation. Jacob was renamed Israel by God (Gen 35:10), and from his physical progeny God builds the Israelite nation. There were three basic classes of citizenry within ancient Israel. The "citizen" (*'ezrāh*) of the land, was one who traced his or her ancestry to the original twelve tribes. The "sojourner" (*gēr*), was one who was not a native Israelite, but for reasons of famine or political refuge (or other reasons), sought refuge within Israel as a proselyte (eventually achieving full covenantal rights within Israel). The "foreigner" (*nokrî*) was one who remained outside covenantal benefits and was separated from the people of God. Nevertheless, the Old Testament does make clear that all the nations are accountable to God (Jonah, Nahum, Obadiah, etc.) and are fully accountable to his sovereign moral authority. Israel itself was to function as a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6), ostensibly mediating for the nations such that in the latter days all the nations would seek the mountain of the Lord and the rightful worship of Yahweh (Isa 2:1-5). However there doesn't appear to be the general expectation in the Old Testament that individual Israelites, as the people of God, were to proselytize among the nations such that foreigners would also become fellow Israelites. Rather Israel was God's chosen people out of all the other peoples (Deut 7:6). The primary mechanism of their historical continuance was to be through the procreation of offspring. This was supplemented by the occasional inclusion of sojourners.

There were thus two classes of people in ancient Israel who were actually or potentially cut off from the people of God and the blessings of the covenant. There were first, foreigners who were cut off by virtue of not being of the promised offspring of Abraham in the first place; and there were second, those who were cut off because they died without offspring and thereby forfeited their legacy in their death. Thus, for an Israelite, the potential tragedy of dying as a eunuch or virgin in the Old Testament goes hand-in-hand with the tragedy of dying barren. In either case they were potentially cut off from the blessing and people of God. Jephthah's daughter exemplifies the tragedy of remaining single when she appears to weep more on account of her virginity than on account of her pending sacrificial death (Judg 11:37-38). Likewise, Jeremiah, who as a prophet was called to be single (Jer 16:1-4), laments the prospect of being killed and having his name no longer remembered when he cries out,

But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.” (Jer 11:19)

Absalom also faces the prospect of death without a son and decides instead to set up a pillar in his name for the remembrance of his name for he says, “I have no son to keep my name in remembrance. (2 Sam 18:18).” Thus to be single in the Old Testament appears not only to be exceedingly rare prior to the exile, but carries the prospect of being permanently cut off from the living memory of the nation.

#### **4. Isaiah and the Prophets**

In the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, particularly Isaiah, a turn seems to occur with respect to the subject of offspring which begins to anticipate the New Testament. The prophets themselves speak a dual message of condemnation and hope and sometimes use the language and image of offspring to communicate their message. Offspring language is used both to condemn the royal house of David and to condemn the people as whole for their failure to keep the covenant. Jeremiah condemns Coniah, the son of king Jehoiakim saying, “Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David (Jer 22:30; see also Jer 36:31).” Thus Coniah is cut off from the royal line of Judah as there is no future kingship for either him or his offspring. The book of Isaiah opens with a condemnation of the nation as God’s children who he has reared and brought up (Isa 1:2). Though they are his children, nevertheless they have rebelled against him and are thus “offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly (Isa 1:4).”<sup>12</sup> Likewise Isaiah declares that if Israel had paid attention to his commandments then their “offspring would have been like sand” and “their name would never be cut off or destroyed before me (Isa 48:18-19).”

But in Isaiah the theme of offspring emerges not merely as the focus of prophetic condemnation, but also as the focal point of prophetic hope. This image again appears dramatically in Isaiah’s vision in chapter 6 where, in the context of the condemnation of the people for their idolatry resulting in their dull hearts and minds, the vision concludes with a cryptic note of hope that amidst the fallen oak, “the holy seed (*zera*)’ is its stump (6:13).” Here amidst the utter disobedience and destruction of the people, a new holy “seed” (or “offspring”) emerges. The immediately succeeding chapters then follow with a series of reinforcing pictures of newly emerging divinely appointed offspring. In chapter 7 the sign of God’s hope of

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<sup>12</sup> See also Isa 30:1, 9; 57:4.

deliverance to Ahaz is that “the virgin<sup>13</sup> shall conceive and bear a son (Isa 7:14).” In chapter 8, Isaiah recognizes that the children that the Lord has given him are portents in Israel from the Lord (Isa 8:18). Beginning in chapter 9, Isaiah makes the hope more explicit. In the latter time God will make glorious the way of the sea (9:1), multiplying the nation and increasing its joy (9:3), “for to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:6).” Through the child will be a government without end which will uphold God’s justice and righteousness (9:7). From the stump thus will grow forth a shoot (11:1) which will bear fruit and upon which the Spirit of the Lord shall rest. He shall be the righteous judge (11:3-4) by whom all the nations will inquire (11:10) and through whom the remnant remains of all people will be recovered (11:11). Isaiah’s emerging message is clear. The hope of God to Israel rests upon a new offspring. It is in a virgin giving birth to a child – a child whom Isaiah describes as Mighty God and the righteous judge of the nations.

The theme of the “servant” (*‘ebed*) is a recurring motif in the book of Isaiah. The book depicts the nation of Israel as a servant (41:8,9; 42:19; 44:1,2,21; 45:4), but also describes an individual servant in a series of servant songs (42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), and later uses a plural form of “servants” in depicting elements of a concluding eschatological vision (54:17; 56:6; 65:8-15; 66:14). The four servant songs themselves appear to climax with the depiction of the suffering servant in 52:13-53:12, after which the term occurs eleven times but only in plural form. The critical point in the narrative occurs in 53:10 with the description of the death of the servant. Here Isaiah writes, “when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring.” These are not physical offspring, for the servant’s generation considered him “cut off from the land of the living (53:8).” Alec Motyer explains, “Those who become the servant’s beneficiaries through the reparation-offering become his children (his *offspring/seed*).”<sup>14</sup> Through the sacrificial death of the suffering servant of God emerge forth new offspring which are his seed. The idea of many offspring emerging from a single offspring provides a nice parallel to the picture of many servants emerging from the single suffering servant. What we find in some of the remaining chapters of Isaiah is not merely a new hope for the fulfilment of the Abrahamic blessings, but hints of a new paradigm of fulfilment of the Abrahamic blessings. These new blessings come not through physical offspring, but if we are to acknowledge the recurring images of Isa 6-11, they come through the Offspring, who is God.

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<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew *‘almah* can designate either “virgin” or “young woman.” The Greek LXX and the New Testament citation of the verse (Matt 1:23) use *parthenos* which is usually rendered “virgin.”

<sup>14</sup> Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 440.

It is especially striking that immediately on the heels of the climatic depiction of the suffering servant follows the song of the barren woman in chapter 54. The one who did not bear physical children and was therefore in jeopardy of being cut off from the future blessing, now sings because her children will be more than the children of her who is married! Motyer again explains:

Song symbolizes entering into a blessing provided by another's efforts. So here, the *barren woman* sings, not because she has ceased to be barren but because the Lord has acted in his Servant with the effect that his 'seed' become her *children/'sons'*. . . The contrast here is between one who has no chance of having children (being deprived of a husband's care and support . . .) and one naturally placed to be fruitful (who *has a husband*). Thus, the gathering family cannot be explained naturally as a fact (she is *barren*, she *never bore* a child, was *never in labour* and is *desolate*) and is more than can be explained naturally in extent (her children are *more than of her who has a husband*). The church, the Lord's people are created by supernatural birth.<sup>15</sup>

As Motyer suggests, the picture here is not that the barren woman rejoices in a new blessing of physical children for it is unlikely that a barren woman would ever suddenly outpace a fertile woman in bearing children. Here the view is much larger. The Lord is her husband (54:5), he is embracing her with everlasting love (54:8), and her offspring will possess the nations (54:3). Something much bigger is being described – it is the depiction of the new people of God created by spiritual birth rather than physical birth. Similar maternal images of a mother with her children also appear in the New Testament as a depiction of the church.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond the theological significance of this passage stands a message of great comfort to those who are single or childless within the church. For like the barren woman, despite the absence of physical children, they too can rejoice in the prospect of “bearing” spiritual children, whom they will raise and nurture in the good news of the gospel message. This shift is a message of great joy to those unable to experience the joy of having physical children. For in the paradigm of the new covenant, the people of God are no longer defined through physical birth but through spiritual re-birth. Those unable to experience the joy of physical children are still able to experience profound joy and satisfaction in producing spiritual children through evangelism and service to the kingdom.

Only two chapters after the barren women we find another portrayal of restoration and hope—this time for the eunuch. Isaiah 56:1-8 gives new hope to two classes of people potentially cut off from the

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<sup>15</sup> Motyer, 445.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. 1 Thess. 2:7; 2 John 1; Rev 12:1-6. cp. also Jesus in Matt. 23:37.

covenant blessing and excluded from a permanent place within the people of God: the foreigner and the eunuch. This can occur because the entry into the people of God and the basis for permanence in it is no longer a function of physical procreation, but of a new non-physical process. The foreigner, who was formerly separated from the people of God, now has the opportunity to join himself to the Lord (56:3, 6), to be one of his servants (56:6), and to have direct access to the temple (56:7). The eunuch, who because of his physical deformity was denied access to the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:1), now has access to the temple restored (56:5). The eunuch was also a dry tree (56:3) without children and therefore in danger of having his name cut off from the people of God. But now the consequences are reversed. God will provide “a monument and name better than sons and daughters (56:5).” It will be “an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (56:5).” The eunuch does not receive a permanent name through the legacy of his physical offspring, but through the eternal name that God himself provides. This was more than an inscription within the physical temple; it was a permanent name located within the eternal confines of God’s spiritual house. It is a permanence that recalls Revelation 3:5, where to the one who conquers, God will never “blot his name out” of the book of life. It is a spiritual name representative of the eunuch’s spiritual entrance and permanence within the people of God.

This passage also is a reminder for single people and those without children that the legacy they have as a member of God’s eternal house is something far superior to any physical legacy that children and offspring can provide. God himself is their portion and inheritance (Lam 3:24; Ezek 44:28). The striking correspondences that this passage has with the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 surely cannot be dismissed too readily. The eunuch, who is the first Gentile convert in the book of Acts, was both a foreigner and a eunuch. He was apparently a God-fearer who was en-route from worshipping in Jerusalem, presumably at the temple. Most ironic is that he is reading from Isaiah 53 and asking for help in its interpretation. If he did continue reading on to chapter 56, one can only speculate what his reaction would have been! Isaiah’s prophetic vision was suddenly being realized in the New Testament era.

## **5. The New Testament**

The offspring theme that emerges in Isaiah and the new covenant it represents reappear in dramatic fashion in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul in Galatians and Romans explains how the offspring theme is linked to Christ. Paul observes that when the Old Testament writes that the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring, the word “offspring” (Heb: *zera*’; Gk.: *sperma*) could be understood either a singular noun or as a collective plural (Gal 3:16). Paul argues that the term should be understood as referring not to the collective plural but rather to a particular offspring who is Christ (Gal 3:16). While

many promises are given to Abraham, the promise given repeatedly in the Genesis account to *both* Abraham and his offspring is the promise of the land (12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8) as an inheritance. Paul then observes (Gal 3:18) that the inheritance is not based on the law but on the promise, and was thus awaiting the promised offspring. Meanwhile the law, in form of the Sinai Covenant, was given as a provision for transgressions until “the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made,” namely Christ (Gal 3:19). But now that faith has come, we are in Christ sons of God through faith (Gal 3:25-26). And anyone who is in Christ is Abraham’s offspring according to the promise (Gal 3:29). Paul thus concludes that in Christ, who is the Offspring of Abraham, we too, through faith become offspring of Abraham and heirs of the promises.

Likewise Paul links the blessing of Abraham to the Offspring of Abraham. It is in Christ Jesus that the blessing of Abraham comes even to the Gentiles so that they might receive the Spirit through faith (Gal 3:14). But, conversely, this is not to imply that all Jews are true offspring of Abraham, simply by virtue of being his physical descendents (Rom 9:6). For it is not the children of the flesh who are the (true) children of God, but the children of the promise who are counted as (true) offspring (Rom 9:8). Thus Paul contends that the true offspring of Abraham are not at all those who are physical offspring, but those who are his spiritual offspring through faith in Christ. He defines the offspring who constitute the people of God to be a spiritual rather than physical entity in contrast to the physical nation of Israel in the Old Testament.

Just as the people of God in the New Testament are constituted spiritually rather than physically, so too the ultimate blessings of the true children of Abraham transcend the material and physical realm and embrace a greater eternal and spiritual reality. The eschatological goal posts have been raised from peace and rest in the promised land to the vision of an eternal new creation. Reflecting the eschatological shift, the content of the “inheritance” (*klēronomia*) embodies new meaning in the New Testament. Where in the Old Testament it refers to the allotment of physical land for a particular family, in the New Testament it primarily refers to transcendent salvation and eternal life. Thus Peter explains that God

has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Pet. 1:3-4)

This inheritance is perfect, eternal and unchanging. It is kept in heaven to be revealed at the appointed time. It is the object of our living hope. Ephesians likewise underscores that our inheritance is within the

kingdom of God (Eph 5:5), guaranteed by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:14), and for the praise of God's glory (Eph 1:14, 18). Thus our inheritance according to New Testament teaching is a transcendent spiritual reality which awaits our eternal existence in the new creation as part of the kingdom of God. It is finally this same inheritance language in Revelation 21:7-8 that distinguishes those who overcome and "inherit" (*klēronomeō*) the New Jerusalem from the unbelieving and immoral whose "portion" (*meros*)<sup>17</sup> will be the lake of fire. Likewise, the significance of maintaining one's name which was of great importance in the context of ancient Israel, in the New Testament becomes a marker of eternal life. The one who conquers will never have his name blotted out from the book of life (Rev 3:5) and they will have written upon them the name of God on their foreheads (Rev 3:12, 22:4) for they will see his face (Rev 22:4). The blessings of our eternal inheritance and our eternal name are thus spiritual realities which mark our eternal existence with him.

There is an important corollary to the observation that the people of God are defined spiritually in the New Testament rather than physically. This is the further observation that the propagation of the people of God in the New Testament occurs not through physical procreation as in the Old Testament, but rather through spiritual regeneration. John 3 illustrates this point in Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born "from above" (*anōthen*) he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3)." Nicodemus, as a Pharisee surely recognized the special status he had as being born into a Jewish family. But Jesus challenges conventional Jewish assumptions. Being a member of God's true family within the kingdom of God was not a matter of being physically born into Abraham's line, but being spiritually born from God above through the Spirit. Nicodemus, who presumes Jesus to be suggesting that one must be born "again" (taking another meaning of *anōthen*) rather than born "from above", then proceeds to ask Jesus how one can re-enter the womb when one is old (John 3:4). Jesus clarifies his statement a second time by explaining that one cannot enter the kingdom unless he is born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). It is thus the Spirit's regenerating work rather than the human physical procreating work which serves as the vehicle by which God is building his people in the New Testament. But God also gives individuals opportunity to contribute to his work of building his people through gospel proclamation and kingdom service. They too serve the cause of expanding the kingdom insofar as they are about the work of making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19).

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<sup>17</sup> *Meros* is sometimes used to refer to the portion of one's inheritance (e.g. Luke 15:12).

As the kingdom of God which Jesus announces is a spiritual reality rather than an earthly realm, and the inheritance and blessings of that kingdom are spiritual rather than material, and the propagation of the people of God is a spiritual rather than physical process, it follows that the ultimate family of God is defined spiritually rather than physically. This aspect of Jesus' teaching appears in what seem to be rather radical and extreme statements by Jesus:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward 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 12:46-50)

Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:28-31)

Jesus does not seek to undermine or destroy traditional family values of house and home. But he does announce that something greater now has come—kingdom values. Kingdom values require a greater allegiance to Jesus than even to one's traditional family members (e.g. Matt 15:4-6). Kingdom values also mean that there is now a new bond of the spiritual family of God which runs deeper than even the traditional family unit. Our bond of mutuality to the family of God through Christ ultimately proves to be a greater bond than even the bond we have with our physical blood relatives.

This brings us to Jesus' teaching on marriage and singleness. Jesus' teaching on these subjects is not extensive, but what he did say appears to be quite radical in the context of his predominantly Jewish audience. Case and point is his dialogue with the Sadducees on marriage in the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40). The Sadducees raise the question of the levirate marriage teaching of Deuteronomy 25 as a challenge to the possibility of a resurrection. Of course the teaching which they reference was given in the Old Testament context in which marriage and procreation were necessary and foundational to the reception of the covenantal blessings. Jesus is thus confronted with a direct clash between the methods and means of the old covenant and those of the new kingdom which he is announcing.



Of the three accounts Luke provides the richest detail concerning marriage and singleness in Jesus' response. He responds: "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God (Luke 20:34-36)." The statement is a critical clarification. Marriage is an institution for this age and not for the age of the resurrection. Verse 26 explains why marriage is no longer necessary in the age of resurrection, "for they cannot die anymore." The implication is that marriage is primarily a provision to provide for physical procreation which is only necessary on account of the mortality of the species. Jesus' statement appears disconcertingly shocking at this point. Surely he was aware of the joy and fulfilment that marriage brings through intimacy and companionship beyond any procreative element. Yet it is apparent that in Jesus' eschatological understanding of the new creation, intimacy and companionship are restored in such a fashion that the unique provision of these things through the marital relationship is no longer required. Thus because the kingdom which Jesus is announcing is not built through physical procreation, nor is mortality present within it, marriage is no longer necessary in the kingdom of God. Nor will it be needed for sake of intimacy and companionship in the advent of the perfected order of the new creation. Thus the place and necessity of marriage radically change in the movement from the people of God in the Old Testament to the coming the kingdom of God which Jesus announces.

Jesus' other surprising teaching on marriage and singleness arises in the context of questions on divorce which Jesus' disciples raise in Matt 19:1-12. Here the Pharisees raise a question concerning the extent to which Moses allowed divorce. Rather than engage in their legal speculations, Jesus surprises them with a reiteration of the divine ideal, legitimizing divorce only on grounds of adultery. The disciples, surprised by Jesus' radically conservative answer, respond in turn with an equally radical proposal that "if such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry (Matt 19:10)." Given the critical function of marriage in the Jewish context, the disciples are clearly responding to Jesus with a response which they presume is as equally extreme as his. But Jesus surprises them again. For rather than refuting their wildly absurd idea, he instead commends it and reiterates it!

Jesus' use of the term "eunuch" (*eunouchos*) on one level seems surprising given the disdain for eunuchs within Jewish culture and their exclusion from the temple on account of their physical deformity. But on another level it provides in fact a vivid model for the point he makes. For in the ancient world, a court eunuch was one who had set aside sexual activity (either from a congenital defect or as a result of physical castration) for sake of devoted and loyal service to the king. Since the eunuch could not have

children or a dynasty of his own, he could be more trusted in his loyalty to the monarch whom he served. Likewise, without wife or family, the eunuch also had additional time for service to his king and could serve him in a completely dedicated fashion. Perhaps Jesus had the Old Testament example of Daniel in mind. While there is not conclusive Scriptural evidence that Daniel was a eunuch, there is strong circumstantial evidence that he was (2 Kgs 20:18; Dan 1:3). In any case, Daniel provides a model example of loyal and dedicated eunuch service.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus proceeds to describe three classes of eunuchs, those who are so from birth, those who have been made eunuchs by men, and those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:12). The Jewish audience of Jesus' day would have been familiar with the first two categories of eunuchs,<sup>19</sup> but the third category would have been a surprising climax. Rather than refuting the proposition that it is better to remain single than to marry, Jesus suggests that there should be some who renounce marriage and procreation for sake of devoted service to the kingdom of God. But Jesus gives two qualifications to the teaching. First, verse 11 clarifies that this teaching is not for everyone, but *only* to those to whom it is given. Jesus still affirms marriage for some. The second qualification at the end of verse 12 is an imperative. "Let the one who is able to receive this (teaching) receive it (Matt. 19:12)." This qualification is radical in the context of traditional Jewish values. For not only does he affirm the legitimacy of one remaining single for the sake of kingdom service, he commands whoever is able, to do it. Thus the church is faced with the prospect of keeping both qualifications in view. It should not ever mandate singleness upon anyone, but nor should it discourage it for any who are able to faithfully undertake it.

Paul's statements about marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 corroborate well with the teaching of Jesus in the gospels. He too affirms that it is good for the unmarried to remain single (1 Cor. 7:8). His reasons seem to describe the eunuch-like dedicated service that Jesus suggests when he argues that the single person is "free from anxieties" and "anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32)." The benefits of singleness are clear. One is able to cultivate an "undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:35)" and dedicate one's energy to how he or she might please and serve him. But Paul also stipulates that the inability to control one's sexual passion is a valid (and good!) reason to marry, thus providing a category of those to whom Jesus' teaching on eunuchs is not given. Paul does not state,

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<sup>18</sup> In Daniel's case a curious question arises concerning which king he was actually serving. The story line of the book reveals that it was ultimately the Lord he was serving rather than the court of human kings.

<sup>19</sup> The rabbis recognized two types of eunuchs – those by nature and those man-made (*m. Yebam.* 8:4).

however, that sexual passion is the exclusive reason that one should marry, leaving open the possibility that Jesus had a broader category in mind of those to whom his teaching is not given.

## **6. Conclusion**

This selective walk through the biblical text will not necessarily do much to alter the demographic trajectory of Western culture. Nor will it necessarily correct the imbalance of church involvement among the non-married church population. But it does attempt to lay some foundational groundwork for conscious Biblical reflection on the purpose and place of singleness within the New Testament. To this end a few concluding observations deserve mention:

First, what this brief theological journey through the Biblical text has shown is the necessity of theologically reflecting upon singleness in light of the developing storyline of the Biblical text. The significance of singleness changes from the Old Testament context to the New Testament context in light of the intrinsic differences between the old and new covenants they largely reflect. This necessitates a diachronic rather than synchronic theological approach.

Second, at the heart of the covenantal distinction being drawn is the observation that marriage and physical children were fundamental to the blessings of the Sinai covenant in a way in which they are no longer fundamental to the blessings of the new covenant. Thus to be barren is to be deprived of God's covenantal blessing for the ancient Israelite. However with the advent of the divine offspring in Jesus Christ, the fullness of the covenantal blessing comes through Christ (Eph 1:3) for the Christian believer rather than through procreation. Thus in light of the sacrificial death of Christ, the barren woman now sings rather than mourns.

Third, in the Old Testament God is building his covenant people (Israel) primarily through the mechanism of physical procreation. In the New Testament God is building his covenant people (the Church) through the mechanism of spiritual regeneration. While the Old Testament creation mandate "Be fruitful and multiply" is never reiterated in the New Testament, the Gospel mandate to "Make disciples of all nations" is given as a charge to Jesus' earliest followers.

Fourth, singleness is affirmed rather than condemned as a status within the New Testament because it attests to the sufficiency of Christ for the reception God's covenantal blessings in the new covenant. It serves a reminder that the entrance to the people of God is through spiritual re-birth rather than physical

family membership. Likewise, the presence of both single and married people in the church together signifies the fact that the church lives between the ages. Married people are necessary because the church is still part of the current age, but single people remind it that the spiritual age has already been inaugurated in Christ and awaits imminent consummation.

Thus, when taken as a whole, the Biblical account should comfort those who are single in the church. It is a comfort because marriage and procreation no longer serve the vital function in the kingdom of God as they did in ancient Israel. In the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus' gospel message, marriage and procreation are neither the mechanism by which God builds his people, nor the necessary conduit to maintain one's place within the divine blessing. Rather marriage is an institution limited to this age which is no longer present in the age to come. Furthermore, the fundamental importance of offspring in the Old Testament points to the ultimate fulfilment in the Offspring who is Christ. He is the means and mechanism through which God is now at work building the people of God – a people who will last for eternity. Therefore the single person can rejoice in possessing a legacy and a name in the house of God which is greater than the legacy of physical children (Isa 56:5). Likewise the childless person can find legitimate joy and satisfaction in the opportunity to cultivate spiritual offspring through the nurturing work of discipleship.

But Biblical reflection on the theological significance of singleness also presents a challenge for the church. For unlike the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the primary mission of the church is not fully realized merely in possessing the land and raising healthy families. Rather, the primary mission of the church is to raise and nurture spiritual children in making disciples (Matt 28:19) to expand the kingdom of God. As such the present world is not our inheritance but we are aliens and sojourners (1 Pet 2:11) awaiting an inheritance now kept in heaven (1 Pet 1:4) in anticipation of the new creation. While the raising of children is one potential (and important!) method of making disciples who follow Christ among intentional parents, the spiritual mission itself is much larger. As a result single people have an even greater opportunity to dedicate themselves to the kingdom task than those who are distracted by the burdens of home and family. Singles thus serve as tangible reminders to the larger church of its anticipated future inheritance in the new creation, and the real mission to which it is called!

In addition, the presence and ministry of single people is vital for the Church in another sense. It is a visible reminder that the kingdom of God points to a reality which stands beyond worldly pre-occupations of marriage, family and career. The gospel message of the Kingdom of God stands for and represents something greater than all the blessings and satisfactions which the present world has to offer.

Encouraging men and women to remain single for the sake of the kingdom is a tangible way by which the Church demonstrates this truth.