

HOW CAN WE EXPECT SOME PEOPLE TO REMAIN SINGLE?

Singleness has an image problem, both inside and outside the Church – but it can be especially daunting for Christians who believe that singleness entails celibacy. In our culture, the idea that someone could live their entire life without sex is regarded as preposterous, even dangerous. Inside the Church, especially the evangelical world, many single Christians feel that the Church regards marriage as ‘normal’ and therefore feel marginalised and not supported – how many churches run a ‘Living Well as a Single Person’ course alongside the myriad courses for married couples and parents? (This is not the same as a ‘relationships’ or ‘dating’ course – these are good, but can add to the impression that the goal of singleness is to stop being single and get married.)

And yet many of our most respected and admired Christian leaders now and in the past have lived without sex and marriage. Although the New Testament has a very positive view of marriage and sex which is affirming of bodily life (against some in its context who regarded the material world as unspiritual), they are not needed in order to live a completely fulfilling life. As far as we can tell from the biblical evidence, Jesus was not married (and therefore never had sex), and he taught that there would be no marriage in the new creation, yet we obviously believe that Jesus lived the most truly human, fulfilled life that is possible. This was even more radical in a 1st century context than it is now. Similarly, at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he was unmarried and committed to remaining so (some scholars speculate that he had been married previously). He is clear that marriage is good, and that sex should be part of marriage (1 Corinthians 7:2–5). Yet he regards singleness as better and wishes that everyone else could be single like him (v7). The reason Paul gives for this is that single people can devote themselves more fully to ‘the Lord’s affairs’ (vv32–35). His conclusion is therefore: ‘he who marries ... does right, but he who does not marry ... does better’ (v38).

Conclusion: singleness – like marriage – can be a hard road to walk. Being single requires that we live a celibate life. But it is not second best. The Church needs to invest intentionally in singleness as a challenging but fulfilling way of life, just as it offers a great deal of support for marriage.

RESOURCES:

Ed Shaw on [‘How can you live life without sex?’](#)

A good introduction to the history and theology is Kathryn Wehr,

[Singleness and the Early Church](#) (Grove, 2012).

See also:

How can the church support single people seeking to live a godly life?