

Exposition and Application of Paul's Theology of Singlehood in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-40

[Joint Meeting of the Metro North and South Pastoral Conference, November 18, 1991]

by E. Allen Sorum

One of our congregation's elders asked to meet with me over breakfast to discuss a ministry concern. I assumed that this meeting would be just another casual and comfortable brainstorming session over spicy sausage and a gallon of coffee. But that morning's heat didn't come from a pork patty. It came from a close brother who wanted me to understand that he felt excluded from the close fellowship of our congregation. Why did he feel excluded? Because he was single.

His agenda took me by surprise because he was such an active member and a respected leader. He proceeded with a list of reasons to support his feelings. He pointed out that almost all my sermon illustrations came from the context of home and family, wife and children. He quoted a long list of bulletin announcements that invited "all families." He pointed out the many Bible study topics for husbands and wives, mothers and fathers and family concerns. He wondered why we had never offered a Bible study that would address some of his concerns and questions as a single man. Although he liked to cook, and a lot of people knew that he liked to cook, he had never been assigned a dish for one of our fellowship gatherings. He wasn't mad. It is not his nature to complain. He did wonder how many other members of our church felt the same way he did and wondered what we could do about the situation.

As I drove away from the restaurant, I recalled a dozen other examples that would support this elder's assertion that our single members were not sufficiently acknowledged or considered in our congregation's ministry. Later that same afternoon, Alfons Woldt called to ask if I would serve on a study committee that would research the needs and opportunities for singles ministry in our synod's parishes. An odd coincidence?

As a member of that committee, I was assigned the task of writing a theology of singlehood. That theology was used as a Bible study for our singles at Garden Homes. The singles study committee then asked for a revision of this course for broader use. This committee also asked every pastoral conference in our synod to present topics that would address some of the needs and concerns which our single WELS brothers and sisters had brought to our study committee. It came as no surprise when our agenda committee asked me to present a paper on the requested topic. Hence: An Exposition and Application of Paul's Theology of Singlehood in 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-40.

Exposition

1 Corinthians 7:1-9 Marriage and Singlehood in General

Verse 1: *Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry* (καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεισθαι)

The Corinthian Christians had apparently asked Paul two questions regarding marriage. The first question, which Paul takes up here, sought Paul's opinion about marriage in general. Later on at verse 25, Paul will address a more specific question about whether virgins should marry.

The Holy Spirit through Paul begins by teaching the general principle that singlehood is an honorable estate before God. The Greek word translated "good" means "whole, well-balanced, excellent in its nature and characteristics and therefore well-adapted to accomplish its purpose." The Greek also brings this word to a forward position in the sentence to strengthen the emphasis on the goodness of singlehood.

Verses 2-6: (2) *But since there is so much immorality* (πορνείας), *each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.* (3) *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.* (4) *The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.* (5) *Do not deprive each other except by*

mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (6) I say this as a concession, not as a command.

This is not a study on the purposes or responsibilities of marriage, but Paul does state here that one reason to marry is to avoid sexual immorality. The Greek word for immorality is plural suggesting that Paul is referring to any and every kind of sexual sin. Once again, the position of this phrase adds emphasis to Paul's point that one might marry to avoid sexual sins.

The powerful temptations to sin sexually and the Corinthians' "lack of self-control" may be attributed to the circumstances of their time. The ancient city of Corinth was known throughout the civilized world as the mecca for sexual depravity. Pagan temples employed the services of male and female prostitutes (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16) so the "faithful" could demonstrate their devotion to idols. Corinthian daddies would take their sons up to the acropolis and have a drink at the patio bar in the temple courts until it was their turn to "worship." Out of this atmosphere, the gospel called people to repentance and faith. Because of this atmosphere, Paul's call for sexual fidelity among married couples and sexual purity among singles was especially urgent. Corinthian Christians needed constant encouragement not to return to their old way of life.

Paul's concession is in regard to a married couple's agreement to abstain from sexual relations for the sake of prayer. This odd concession was again related to the circumstances of the time, an example perhaps of the influence on the church by the Greek pagan asceticism that existed along side of the hedonism. Paul was not promoting asceticism. Paul was not trying to persuade married couples to abstain from physical relations. He had just explained in the previous verses that they had an obligation to each other. Nor does Paul desire to persuade all single people to forsake marriage and the physical intimacy of marriage. Paul states his mind and a key principle in his theology of singlehood In the next verse.

Verse 7: I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift (χάρισμα) from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Paul's wish is not that all singles remain single. That's not what he meant when he wished that all people were like him. Paul's wish was that all people a) had the spiritual gift of celibacy and b) that all people would exercise that gift by remaining single.

Paul acknowledged that God had given him the gift which allowed him the self-control to volunteer for a celibate lifestyle and to be content in that lifestyle. As the Greek word indicates and as Paul will explain further in chapter twelve of this letter, this is a spiritual gift bestowed by grace to certain individual believers. Paul doesn't elevate the gift of celibacy above the other gifts that the Spirit grants. One gift is not better than the other; every Christian has his or hers. These gifts are given as the Spirit determines and for the common good. But it is clear that Paul cherishes his gift of celibacy because he has seen its great value to the kingdom of God. He will develop this point further in later verses.

Verses 8-9: (8) Now to the unmarried (ἀγάμος) and the widows I say: It is good (καλὰ) for them to stay unmarried, as I am. (9) But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Paul's word for unmarried (ἀγάμος) is a generic classification for anybody who either has never been married or who was once married but has been divorced (cf. verse 11). Paul repeats that singlehood is wholesome, good in its nature and therefore, well-adapted to carry out its purpose. But singlehood is not a universally preferable lifestyle. Paul's wish is that everyone a) had the gift of celibacy and b) would then exercise that gift by remaining single. If a single person is not able to glue that undivided service to Christ and his church because of these distracting passions, singlehood—in this person's case—is no longer well-adapted to accomplish its purpose.

Paul's point is not that burning, uncontrollable passion is a God-pleasing motivation for marriage. His point is that the God-pleasing purposes of singlehood are not accomplished if one's energy and attention are consumed by lust. Paul's concern was for the consciences of his brothers and sisters in Corinth. If they wanted to marry, they should marry, lest passion consume their spiritual life or lust set them up for a devastating fall. Married life is honorable. Single life is honorable. Each has its place in the family of God and for the service of

God. Obviously, Paul prefers and is an advocate for the single life for the sake of the kingdom of God. He doesn't pretend to be an advocate for the married life for the sake of the kingdom of God. There was and is enough of them.

Verses 25-40 The Marriage of Virgins In Particular

Verse 25: *Now about virgins (παρθένων): I have no command from the Lord, but I give a Judgment (γνώμη) as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.*

Now Paul addresses the second question raised by the Corinthians specifically concerning virgins. On this subject, Paul cannot point back to something Jesus had already stated, as he did in verse 10. Nor does he offer a command which Jesus might have handed down from the Father's right hand. Rather, Paul offers a Judgment (γνώμη = a "view" or an "opinion") as a graciously forgiven sinner and as an apostle who speaks with the authority of Christ and by the guidance of the Spirit (cf. verse 40).

Who are the virgins of whom Paul speaks? The first meaning of the Greek word means, "a virgin, that is, a marriageable maiden." But the New Testament also uses this word in Revelation 14:4 to refer to men who did not defile themselves with women, that is, men who did not participate in sexual immorality. The context of these verses would seem to prefer a generic translation of virgin: "any person, male or female, who had not yet married."

Although the NIV translates the second half of verse 28, "If a virgin marries, she has not sinned," the Greek verb (οὐχ ἥμαρτεν) obviously doesn't indicate gender nor does Paul give us a pronoun that would indicate gender. Though it cannot be stated categorically, the phrase in verse 27, "Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife." would give the reader the inclination to interpret "virgin" generically, referring to both female as well as male. Paul states at the end of verse 28, "Those who marry will face many troubles." So what is Paul's judgment for people who have never been married?

Verses 26-28a: (26) *Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. (27) Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. (28a) But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned (καὶ εἰάν γήμη ἡ παρθένος, οὐχ ἥμαρτεν = no pronoun that would require a feminine subject).*

Paul now makes an application to his general principle stated in verse 1: "It is good for a man not to marry." Paul's application is directed to the Corinthians who were facing the crisis of living in a society that was aggressively anti-Christian, anti-family and immoral. The pagan's step from gross sexual sins to persecuting or even murdering Christians is not that high of a reach. Paul had experienced intense persecutions and attacks on his life and ultimately was martyred for preaching Christ. One concern he did not have to bear was the fear of leaving a family behind to fend for themselves. Paul wanted to spare these virgins such heartache and distress. The history of the early church bore out the legitimacy of Paul's fear.

But we would be naive to think that such intense pressures and attacks from a pagan society could be limited to the first century or to one geographic location. In view of the present crisis in any number of anti-Christian societies, including our own, Paul's application is as valid today as it was when he first offered it. Accuse me of having a small faith, and I accept your rebuke, but when I have to leave town overnight, I am distressed over the safety of my family in our home. We had one day school parent that called the school every morning to make sure her two sons made it off the bus into the school. Teens have told me that they hate summer because they feel imprisoned in their homes, afraid of the violence outside. We have all seen the influence of the detestable streets destroy children and adults alike who had at one time manifested a sincere Christian faith. It's just plain scary these days trying to raise a Christian family because of our own society's present crisis. Paul's next application to his "better-not-to-marry" principle has an even broader appeal.

Verse 28b: *But those who marry will face many troubles in this life (τῇ σαρκί), and I want to spare you this.*

"In this life" (literally: "In the flesh") does not allow such a careful restriction to place, time and circumstances. Paul states as fact that anyone who marries will bring many troubles (θλίψις = "pressing

together” or “pressure”) upon their heart, mind, body and soul. One’s moral strength or relationship with Christ is not determined by either marriage or singlehood. Paul has stated that repeatedly. But the one who marries exchanges the personal freedom of singlehood for the sexual freedom of marriage. Paul has a high regard for the freedom and personal benefits of remaining single. He wants to spare his fellow believers who might have the gift of celibacy from stress upon their whole being that comes with raising and supporting a family. He especially wants to provide a counter balance to the societal Influence to “hurry up and get married and be normal.” Remember what Jesus said in his prophecy of Jerusalem’s destruction at the hands of the Romans: “How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers” (Matthew 24:19). All such persecutions are harbingers of the last and greatest persecution to come just before the end of this age. Paul picks up on this theme in the very next verse.

Verses 29-31: (29) *what I mean, brothers, is that the time* (ὁ καιρὸς = “a fixed, definite time” or “a season”) *is short* (a perfect passive participle = “has been contracted, shortened”). *From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; (30) those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; (31) those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

Paul’s principle that it is better not to marry is based on his conviction that he was living in the last days. Single-minded devotion to the Lord, who would soon but unexpectedly return, was a familiar encouragement to all the congregations which received letters from Paul. Paul’s most fervent prayer was that all who had heard and believed the gospel would live their lives with one eye on the sky.

Paul’s principle is really this: God seeks from every one of his children an undivided devotion, single-minded faithfulness and a clear understanding of the one thing needful no matter what our marital or economic status. Certainly we Christians have been granted rich blessings to enjoy in this life. These blessings include such things as married life, children, material wealth. But if any of these blessings from God become our god, then neither the faith of our spouse nor the exercise of singlehood can rescue us from the coming wrath.

How foolish to make something that “is passing away” into a god! Marriage is a temporary estate. Jesus revealed that there will be no marriage in heaven (Matthew 22:30). So a single person’s ultimate concern must not become the pursuit of a spouse. If a single person walks, lives and breathes to find a marriage partner, this devotion and energy is misguided to say the best. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well,” Jesus promises (Matthew 6:33). Jesus alone deserves our undivided attention and focus. He alone can rescue us on our last day or on The Last Day. And if Jesus receives this devotion from single-and-sorry-about-it Christians, Jesus will grant a marriage partner in his time and if it is in accord with his will.

Verses 32-35: (32) *I would like you to be free from concern* (θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀμερίμνους = “not to be drawn in different directions”). *An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. (33) But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—(34) and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. (35) I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

Perhaps Paul knew that some single folks in Corinth were wasting their time and talents in unflagging pursuit of a marriage partner. Perhaps the prevalent attitude then, as it seems to be now, was that something was wrong with people who didn’t marry. Paul now addresses the weakness in this attitude by fine tuning his application made above, “don’t become engrossed in things that are passing away.”

Paul is speaking to the virgin, although his counsel is the same for the widowed and divorced as we have already seen. The basic principle is that married life makes it more difficult to give Jesus that single-minded devotion so urgent in these last days. He had already made this application in verses 26 to 28, but chooses to repeat the rationale again and with this additional explanation, that a married person has to be concerned about

his or her family as well as his or her Lord. The single person can spend more time in Bible study and Christian service to others, focusing on the urgency of feeding souls, his and others, rather than the mouths of family members.

Paul is very careful to avoid elevating his judgment to a new law that would stand in opposition to God's high regard and purposes for marriage. He gave his judgment for the good of unmarried people in Corinth. He didn't want to restrict their freedom. He did want them to be free of the heavy responsibilities and distractions of married life in pressing times.

Paul recognized what a valuable resource single people were to the kingdom of God. Once freed from the attitude, "I can't be happy or whole until I'm married," single people can accomplish tremendous things for God and his people. Singles don't have to fulfill the commitment to disciple a spouse and children. They may not have quite the time restrictions that family life imposes. They enjoy far more flexibility in terms of how to serve, when to serve, how long to serve and whom to serve. Paul had gladly chosen the personal freedoms he enjoyed as an unmarried servant of the Lord above the sexual freedoms that married servants enjoyed. Had Paul married, he may have still been considered the greatest missionary and church planter. But how would his mother-in-law have rated his nurturing and support of her daughter and grandchildren who would have been left alone in Tarsus for years at a time? Paul wanted others to experience the joy singlehood brings when one carries out the purpose God has in mind for singles, namely, undivided devotion to the Lord.

Verses 36-38: (36) *If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. (37) But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. (38) So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.*

The question here is are we talking about a possible future husband who is trying to decide whether or not he should marry his fiancée or are we talking about a father who is trying to decide whether or not he should make some kind of arrangements to glue his daughter away in marriage. If you translate this section as the NIV does, you place Paul in opposition to Martin Luther's, "*Consensus facit Matrimonium.*" For this reason, and perhaps due to the culture and marriage practices of the time, the Greek and an alternative and literal translation is offered below.

36 Εἰ δὲ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει ἐὰν ἤ ὑπέρασμος, οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι, ὃ θέλει ποιεῖτω· οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει· γαμείτωσαν. 37 ὃς δὲ ἔστηκεν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἐδραῖος, μὴ ἔχων ἀναγκήν, ἐξουσίαν δὲ ἔχει περὶ τοῦ ἰδίου θελήματος, καὶ τοῦτο κέκρικεν ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ καρδίᾳ, τηρεῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον, καλῶς ποιήσει· 38 ὥστε καὶ ὁ γαμίζων τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον καλῶς ποιεῖ, καὶ ὁ μὴ γαμίζων κρεῖσσον ποιήσει.

Verses 36-38: (36) *Now if anyone deems that he is acting in an unbecoming fashion (disgracefully or shamefully) upon his virgin if she is beyond the bloom of life, and if it ought to be thus, let him do what he wants. He isn't sinning. Let them marry. (37) But he who stands firm in his heart, not under compulsion, and has authority concerning his own will, and has decided this in his own heart to keep his own virgin, he will do well. (38) So then, both he who gives his own virgin in marriage does well, and he who does not give (his own virgin) in marriage will do better.*

Paul has carefully explained throughout the verses above why one who chooses not to marry "does even better" than one who does. When Jesus returns, no one will be received into the glory of the new and incorruptible age on the basis of their marital status. Neither has the person who remained single throughout life accomplished a good work or spirituality more pleasing to Jesus than one who "broke down" and got married.

Verse 39: *A Woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord* (μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ).

“But he must belong to the Lord,” is an interpretation rather than a translation. A literal translation is, “She is free to marry whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” “Only in the Lord” does need to be interpreted. But to interpret this phrase to mean that a widow can only marry another Christian takes Paul’s point one step farther down the road than he intended.

Paul’s thought might be more closely captured by this: “She is free to marry anyone she wishes, but (let her make her choice) in the *fear* of the Lord.” In other words, she chooses whether to marry and whom to marry keeping in mind that her primary devotion belongs to her Redeemer. In light of this primary devotion, she may well choose to marry another Christian, but would Paul impose upon another’s Christian freedom with such a command?

Verse 40: *In my Judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

This verse deserves notice, for Paul reminds his hearers, the Corinthians of the first century and us in the twentieth, that he speaks, “Not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Corinthians 2:13). So how shall we serve and advise our spiritual brothers and sisters who are not married? Shall we oppress them with our cultural assumptions about the importance of marriage or shall we free them with the truth of God’s Word to make the right choice regarding marriage for the right reason?

Paul’s discourse on singlehood offers at least three advantages for every unmarried Christian to consider seriously. They can be summarized thus:

1. Single persons can have more time to pursue the affairs of the Lord: Bible study and Christian service to others. (verses 32 and 35);
2. Single persons may experience less distress in an anti-Christian and anti-family pagan society (verse 26);
3. Single persons may enjoy greater personal freedom or, from a different perspective, fewer personal problems (verse 28).

Application of Paul’s Principles #1: We All Stand Single Before the Lord

Some of us might think that because God has blessed us with a spouse and children, we have “made it;” we’ve accomplished a significant aspect of the American Dream. Since we are secure and stable in our relationships with family members, we must also be secure in our relationship with God. Since my spouse has a strong faith in Jesus, and since my children all go to a Christian day school, I must be pleasing to God and acceptable in his sight.

On the other hand, we may be so stressed and overwhelmed with the affairs of house and home, spouse and children, mortgage and car payments, that we have no energy to pursue a close relationship with God through his Word. We direct ourselves and our flock to Paul’s encouragement in 1 Corinthians 7:29,31, “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” In a Bible study on marital status, we include God’s reminder that my spouse’s faith won’t help me on the day I stand before the Lord. We all stand single before God.

This Bible study gives pastors the opportunity to challenge single members to remember that their most vital relationship, that relationship that determines their hope, peace, joy, contentment, happiness, prosperity, life, meaning and purpose is with God in Christ Jesus. No spouse and no amount of children can give the things we really need in life or satisfy the inner longings of our soul. It is misguided to say the least to lose our soul pursuing a marital status that will pass away when Jesus returns this life. Obtaining a spouse and family is not our primary objective in life.

I became convinced that this was the key application after the very first time I taught Paul’s principles on singles issues to members of our congregation. One young lady came up to me after that first session and

said, “Pastor, I’m glad I came tonight. But to tell you the truth, on my way over here I thought, ‘Now what can Pastor Sorum teach me about Black men?’” Many of the participants were surprised by Paul’s agenda in 1 Corinthians 7. But all felt that his emphasis on the fact that we all stand single before the Lord was the most appropriate and, from their perspective as singles, the most sensitive starting point.

Here are a few discussion questions that help emphasize the fact that we all stand single before the Lord:

1. How does reconciliation with God and forgiveness of sins, which Jesus achieved for all the world, become our very own?
2. What bearing does our family status have on our justification before God?
3. What bearing might our family status have on how we become convinced that we are Justified before God?
4. What is our highest purpose in life? How do we find out what that purpose is and when we have achieved it?

#2: Communicate the Fact that Singlehood is an Honorable Estate

There are two attitudes in our society—unscriptural attitudes—that place a great pressure on our single brothers and sisters. The most prevalent attitude is that a single person is something less than successful or whole or normal until they get married. Their parents want to know, “When are you going to find a nice young man and settle down?” The people at church offer sympathy and condolence to the 28 year old moving-past-the-bloom single member with, “Would you like to meet my niece from New Berlin?” Co-workers and colleagues further oppress single Christians with comments that might make them feel insecure or embarrassed about their marital status.

The other attitude is more common among younger people: “Stay single so you can have more time for yourself, so you can spend all your money on yourself, and so you can play the field for yourself.” Demographers tell us that very soon single households will be in the majority. Why? Because singlehood allows more personal freedom, choices, opportunities and pleasure. Since society has no qualms about breaking the Sixth Commandment, what better scenario could one hope for than the personal freedoms of singlehood but all the sexual freedoms of marriage without committing to one partner? If our single Christian members are steeped in this attitude on a daily basis, it would be foolish to think that they aren’t be affected by it.

It is crucial, therefore, that we provide a third alternative—the biblical one—in our sermons and Bible classes: Singlehood is a noble estate before God. God has a special purpose for those to whom he has given the gift of celibacy and who choose to exercise that gift by remaining single. That plan isn’t selfishness. That plan is service in the kingdom of God. Single Christians have an opportunity, for all the reasons Paul described, to play a vital role in building up Christ’s church on earth. Jesus stated that same “have made themselves eunuchs (NIV footnote) because of the kingdom of God. The one who can accept this should accept it” (Matthew 19:12).

Preach that the glory of singlehood is that it allows increased freedom and opportunity to serve and I assure you that people will talk about that sermon. Some will say, “Why is he telling me to stay single when I want to get married?” But others will say, “The truth has set me free!” A sermon series or a Bible study on this topic would go a long way toward liberating our single Christian brothers and sisters from the misguided assumptions and advice of fellow church members and from the selfish attitudes and temptations of unbelieving friends.

Here are a few discussion questions that help emphasize the fact that singlehood is an honorable estate before God:

1. Why might a Christian single consider remaining single?
2. Why should every Christian single consider remaining single?
3. What disservice do well-meaning Christians do to Christ’s church and to single Christians by pressuring single Christians to get married?
4. How might we respond to singles who think that the church is only concerned about families?
5. In so far as it effects issues facing Christian singles, what is similar/dissimilar from Jesus’ and Paul’s day compared to the situation in our own society?
6. What balance or what agenda should a church consider for its singles ministries?

7. Agree or disagree: Only Paul could gladly exchange the sexual freedom of marriage for the personal freedom of singlehood.
8. How does one determine whether one has the gift of celibacy?
9. Agree or disagree: The Joys of ministry to and by a family are no greater and no less than the joys of ministry to and by a single person.

#3: Provide a Sensitive and Supportive Church Home for Christian Singles

What a sermon series or Bible study on singles issues should produce if nothing else is an increased awareness and sensitivity to the challenges facing singles. People who have never been married face challenges and suffer from insensitivity that their fellow Christians should understand. People who have become single again because of divorce or the death of a spouse and singles who also have children have their own list of challenges and hurts that their married brothers and sisters should understand. Likewise, single Christians need to understand some of the stress and challenges associated with married life. With a little bit of Bible teaching and discussion of that teaching, we can create an environment that is sensitive and supportive for all, including singles.

Here are a list of questions that need to be answered if we want to provide a sensitive and supportive church home for our Christian singles:

1. What percentage of your congregation is single? What percentage is single again because of divorce or the death of a spouse? What percentage of your congregation is single-head-of-household? These percentages could surprise you. At the beginning of this year, the communicant membership of Garden Homes was 53% single. Only 20% of the new communicants so far this year are married. We will not ease up on our emphasis on teaching the biblical roles for husband and wives but there must be also an emphasis on God's message to Christian singles. The demographics of our congregation demand it.
2. What would your singles say if they were asked to describe and evaluate your church's environment for singles? Maybe you don't have an elder that has the courage to challenge you. Invite some mature single Christians to put you in their shoes.
3. Look through bulletins from the last three months. Do the announcements suggest that your programs and activities are for families only?
4. What about your sermon illustrations and applications from the last three months? What about sermon topics? Did they take into consideration the questions and challenges of single Christians?
5. Why must married members become more sensitive to the presence of as well as the needs and questions of single members in their congregation?
6. Why must single members understand the need in today's world to apply God's Word often to the family?
7. How can a sermon series or a Bible study facilitate this kind of research in your own congregation?

#4: Tell the Truth About Divorce and the Divorced

We all know that divorce, like singlehood, is increasing in Society and in our churches. A sermon series or Bible study on family status is a perfect opportunity to teach what God has to say about divorce. Incidentally, NWP's *A Study of Marriage, Divorce, Malicious Desertion and Remarriage in the Light of God's Word* (1990) is an excellent resource for this topic.

But along with a need for better teaching because of today's situation comes a need for better communication when someone in our church gets divorced. The church must assist and support her members who are considering divorce, especially if that divorce is on the grounds of malicious desertion. Both the member(s) and the church need to work together so that everyone can have a clear conscience when this divorce is filed for and granted.

Once a divorce has been made final, the church will announce that the erring Christian has been disciplined, and state how, or will announce that the member has been the victim of an unscriptural divorce or that the member pursued a divorce for reasons allowed by Scripture, depending on the circumstances. In this

way, the church removes from the “innocent” party the cloak of shame and the appearance of acting contrary to Scripture.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:31-32 that a man who divorces his wife for unscriptural reasons makes her appear to the community and to the church to be an adulteress. The church can remove that appearance by stating that this Christian was a victim. In this way, the other members of the church can support these fellow Christians instead of shunning them for sins they didn’t commit. Christians who have been victimized by an unscriptural divorce or who have pursued a divorce allowed by Scripture should be able to rely on their church to preserve their reputation. If we don’t, we are placing a heavy and unjust burden on an already hurting Christian. Let the church be a place of healing and support rather than a place where smoldering wicks get pinched.

Early in my ministry, the church elders and I had to deal with a very difficult divorce. I spent a lot of time discussing the situation with seminary profs and more experienced brothers so I felt that we handled the case properly. But we didn’t inform the church how we handled it. As a result, we had members stalking elders for the details. We had a situation where members had taken sides with one or the other person involved in the divorce. There was gossip as well as a concern that the elders and I had not handled the divorce in a Christian way. Since that time, we have informed the membership through our monthly digest of the council meeting of any divorces in progress and on what grounds those divorces were filed (without mentioning names) as well as divorces that have been granted (in which case we mention names, reasons, and end results). This practice has not only saved the church from hurt and shame, but it also has had an unexpected benefit. The last two members who have considered divorce approached me with, “(A fellow member) tells me that I must discuss my plans for a divorce with you and the elders. When can we meet?” Members who have been helped and guided and defended by our elders are now referring people to similar situations to our elders.

Consider these questions on the subject:

1. What is our attitude toward the person in our church who is divorced? How is this attitude communicated to those who are divorced? Might you sit down with a few mature members who have recently gone through a divorce to get answers to these questions?
2. Does our congregation need a policy to make some kind of report when members file for divorce? What would it be? How would it be communicated? What would its purpose be? What would it say?
3. What can our church do to prevent divorces?

#5: Tap Into the Rich Resource of Ministry From Singles

I will conclude with a report on the elder who first raised the concern that singles were not receiving appropriate attention or sensitivity at Garden Homes. He provided criticism on my “theology of singlehood” in its early stages. He organized the first small group meetings and helped recruit hosts who opened their homes for these meetings where this theology was read and discussed. He made brief reports to the council and congregation as we tried to become more sensitive to the needs of our single members. In short, he became more active in his ministry to singles as a single.

There are other singles who have been part of our efforts from the earliest stages. These are the hosts who continue to have Bible studies in their homes on a regular basis. These hosts have taken on new responsibilities beyond inviting people to come to their meetings. They have become providers of ministry and support to fellow Christians, single and married, whom they have come to know in their home meetings. These home Bible study groups have become one of few ways we can support single parents in an effective way as well as women who are suffering through a difficult marriage (because their spouse is not a Christian).

I wish I could say that all this was according to a plan. In our small and insufficient effort to provide ministry to our singles, we ended up providing an opportunity for our singles to carry out ministry. I know many people have been helped and are being helped because some of our singles have taken on a significant role in our ministry. These are quiet, humble and, in some cases, hurting Christians who have made a wonderful contribution to God’s kingdom. A couple of these people have since married but continue to provide care for and with other singles at Garden Homes.

When I look at the really active doers of ministry at Garden Homes. I am amazed at how many are single and how many hours these single folks offer to their Lord and to their church. They still catch me being insensitive or inconsistent. I was just asked during a class why I call single people by their first names and married people by their surnames. On the one hand, I was publically and appropriately embarrassed. But on the other hand, I was grateful for the fact that this single brother felt he served in an environment that respected single Christians and allowed single Christians to “educate” their married fellow Christians. Our goal is to prepare single Christians for ministry. We found that we could best do this through the singles who had received some appropriate ministry, albeit limited.