

# Single in the Church: Eunuchs in the Kingdom

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There are multiple reasons why some do not marry. Many who are single are deeply fulfilled human beings and have no overwhelming desire to change their single state. Some, of course, would like to marry, but it just hasn't happened... "the right person hasn't come along... [yet]". Others are happy to invest their lives in other ways, and choose not to, or neglect to invest, in relationships that might lead to marriage. The onset of a mid-life crisis sometimes causes such singles to panic and reassess. Others are single by deliberate decision, believing that God is able to use them with great effectiveness without the responsibilities that marriage and family involves. But reasons for singleness are not always as benign. There are some whom one might describe as lacking both the social and sexual self-confidence to form a deeply committed relationship with another person. Others remain single because they were sexually abused as children, and have been so profoundly damaged that they cannot face either the physical or the psychological intimacy that marriage entails. And some have singleness thrust upon them by virtue of the fact that their sexual orientation is not directed to the opposite sex, but to their own. Marriage for such is simply not an honest option. Singleness, then, can be both a blessing and a burden, both a means of traveling light through life or a weight that wearies.

What does the Church have to say to singles? In 1994 the Presbyterian Church in Canada, of which I am a minister, adopted a Statement on Human Sexuality which argued that, in faithfulness to Jesus Christ speaking in the Scriptures, Christian marriage is 'central to God's intention for human sexuality... Scripture treats all other contexts for sexual intercourse, as departures from God's created order'. This conclusion, still the teaching of most Christian denominations, but which many in the churches hotly debate, expresses traditional Christian teaching that calls on believers to live faithfully within marriage, or be sexually abstinent outside of it. Controversial as that teaching now is in North America's mainline denominations, such a stance is presupposed by the ordination vows of my denomination. Accordingly, those becoming ministers of Word and Sacrament and those becoming elders are

asked at their ordination: ‘Do you promise in the strength and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to conduct yourself in your private and public life as becomes his gospel’. The 1994 Statement went on to say—

In calling single people to abstinence from sexual intercourse, the church community needs to provide pastoral support for single people in times of loneliness, yearning for relationship, and when they experience rejection. Recognizing both the needs and the gifts of single people, the Church must promote and express in its programmes and fellowship, patterns of relationship that are inclusive of singles.

God has so created us that we humans need one another. Social intercourse is necessary for all. Sexual intercourse, however, is not. Life can be full and abundant for the single, both homosexual and heterosexual, without sexual intercourse, despite the dictates of current society. Sexuality, which is inherent to us all, can be expressed in other ways than by genital activity—in friendship, in affection, in touch and in belonging....The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, while relatively easy to write, is less easy to embody in church life. Some who are single, have not experienced the welcome, nurture, love or support of the church. On the contrary, single Christians experience their singleness as something that many in the church query, and their friendships as something that many in the church suspect. As a result, singles, particularly those in positions of leadership in the Church, not only willingly forego a sexual relationship out of obedience to their understanding of Scripture and ordination vows, but sacrifice close personal relationships with others of either sex, out of fear of reproach. In other words, uneasiness about singleness in the church creates not only unnecessary difficulties in the personal lives of singles, but interferes with the ability of single church leaders to pastor with appropriate care. Subject to suspicion and emotional isolation, it is not a surprise to discover that loneliness and depression among single people are epidemic. Single, never-married individuals have a suicide rate twice that of those who are married with children.<sup>2</sup>

Reflection on singleness is rare in the church, or at least in the Protestant church. A recent edition of the widely-read magazine *Christianity Today* (June 11, 2001) gave front page coverage to the issue of singleness, and sixteen pages within. The issue, however, was framed largely in terms of singleness understood as a pre-marriage state. The articles dealt with the changing rules for courtship, the dangers of premarital sex, different ways of providing programming for singles in congregations, and pointers towards apparently successful Internet sites where Christian singles might find a potential spouse! Sadly, there was an almost total absence of theological reflection offered on singleness as a status that may be permanent. In this article I seek to address not pre-marriage singleness, nor post-marriage singleness, but no-marriage singleness—a discussion that the church avoids. This was noted in one of the *Christianity Today* articles which quoted the following from the book *Singles at the Crossroads*.

The average Christian bookstore has more than a hundred titles on marriage and another hundred about parenting, children, and family issues. In contrast, these stores stock only about a dozen books on singleness. Half of these are geared for ‘single-again’ divorcees or widows. Of the remainder, most are about ‘how to find the right one’....Instead of dealing with problems that singles might face, these books seem to think that singleness is the problem. They instruct the reader on how to bide one’s time until the right person comes along. In other words, they imply that the solution to the problem of singleness is to get married.<sup>3</sup>

Why is singleness so often posed as a problem to be addressed? Why is the church uncomfortable with singleness? Let me attempt a brief response. In the Old Testament, marriage was considered a moral duty, thereby fulfilling the divine command to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. ‘Rabbis,’ writes Max Thurian in *Marriage and Celibacy*, ‘were all married, and considered marriage as an absolute duty. Marriage therefore was not simply an honourable vocation, but the only vocation. Marriage was not a choice, but a religious obligation.’<sup>4</sup>

This traditional Jewish pattern of thinking and acting was challenged by Jesus in Matthew 19:12. Confronted by a question from the Pharisees about the legitimacy of divorce, Jesus, quoting Genesis 2:24, confirms the indissolubility of the ‘one flesh’ union that is marriage: ‘So they are no longer two, but one

flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ (Matt. 19:6 NRSV) Jesus’ disciples react to the rigor of that response by suggesting that it might be ‘better not to marry at all!’ Jesus responds to the disciples by making their implausible suggestion plausible and proposes that there is indeed an alternative to marriage. Jesus said: ‘For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matt. 19:12 NRSV).

It was a shocking statement. Why so? In Jewish society, eunuchs, as physically damaged people, were banned from Israel’s worshipping community. They were simply seen as unfit. But Jesus says here that eunuchs, whether in the literal sense of the word, or in the metaphorical sense of the word, whether because of how they were born, or because of the damaging and traumatic impact of life, or because they have voluntarily chosen not to marry, are able to live out honourable vocations in the kingdom of heaven. The Catholic Study Bible’s translation of Matthew 19:12 brings out Jesus’ meaning very helpfully: ‘Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.’

Jesus’ list is not quite as long as the one with which I opened this article, but the parallelism is suggestive. What is Jesus saying here? Some are single by choice. Undoubtedly some singles choose singleness for very selfish reasons, but others, says Jesus, do so for ‘kingdom’ reasons, choosing to sacrifice the joys of marriage and family in order to be free to engage in working for ‘the kingdom of heaven’. Some are single because they have been damaged, says Jesus. How compassionate that ought to sound to those singles who are physically and mentally disabled, or physically deformed, or to those singles traumatized by abuse, or overlooked, to all indeed who have concluded that marriage is neither possible nor probable. And some, says Jesus, are single because of the way they were born. Surely that can include those singles who experience their homosexual orientation as a condition which they did not choose but with which they believe they were born. Jesus’ teaching here is an inclusive and liberating word of gospel. For what he offers is a gracious and welcoming embrace for those who are either voluntarily or involuntarily single. As Dale Bruner notes in his Matthew commentary: ‘Jesus dignified

marriage; now he has dignified single life. Jesus sees both as gifts from God.<sup>5</sup> In confirmation of Jesus' compassion for, and embrace of those whom Judaism treated as religious castoffs, the Book of Acts later records the conversion and baptism story of an Ethiopian eunuch.

There is something entirely new here in the teaching of Jesus that I believe the church has largely ignored. In Jesus' new order, the status of marriage changes and the status of singleness changes with it. In providing an honourable place for singles in the kingdom of God, Jesus relativizes marriage, so that marriage in the New Testament is neither obligatory, nor singleness shameful. Accordingly, Jesus, Paul, and many early church leaders remained single. Their singleness, as with others' marriages, was understood as a perfectly legitimate way to live out the Christian life.

Max Thurian notes that the change of status that both marriage and singleness undergo in the teaching of Jesus accounts for the disappearance of the Old Testament pattern of genealogical lists from the New Testament, (other than those of Jesus himself in Matthew 1 and Luke 3). Why? Because belonging to the people of God, since Jesus, is not constituted according to the flesh or by physical lineage, and is not dependant on marriage and physical procreation. To be a child of God, in the New Testament, is to be born of the Spirit. Hence human genealogy no longer carries the same theological weight.<sup>6</sup> Not only do the genealogical lists disappear; they are, I suggest, replaced by texts like Romans 16, where Paul provides a list of the women and men, the free and the slaves, the married and the single, who constitute his new family of brothers and sisters in Christ, indeed providing a biblical definition of family. The church of the New Testament grows by witness to the stranger rather than through biology, and the nature of the family has been changed as those who were once strangers enter the family of God and become my brothers and sisters.<sup>7</sup> It is this change of status of marriage and singleness that clarifies Jesus' seemingly dismissive remarks about his biological family in Matthew 12:46-50:

Someone told [Jesus], 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside.'....Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' Pointing to 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.'

In the early church, both marriage and singleness were honourable options for believers. Neither held moral superiority over the other, though in a notoriously difficult passage in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul, so aware of the eschatological tension set up by the coming parousia of Christ when the kingdom of God will come in fullness, presses the practical and missional advantages of singleness over against marriage. Stanley Hauerwas, perhaps with a little exaggeration, puts it like this—

I think that we cannot overlook the fact that one of the few clear differences between Christianity and Judaism is the former's entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers. I cannot take the time to try to defend this exegetically and historically; however, I think it cannot be disputed that Paul and Jesus both tend to say that some people will choose not to get married because of a specific religious mission. Moreover, they seem to imply that this is a good thing.<sup>8</sup>

What is clear in the New Testament is that neither marriage nor singleness is ultimate (Mark 12:25). They are part of, as Paul puts it, 'the present form of this world [that] is passing away' (1 Cor. 7:31 NRSV). For Jesus, and for Paul, the kingdom of God, the new creation, has broken into history; the new age has begun. This is what comes first for all believers. The kingdom of God is the goal to which we move, and the mission we serve in our marriages and our singleness. Both marriage and singleness are legitimate, but both are penultimate. Accordingly, Jesus is free to remain single in order to better fulfill his mission. But at the same time, Jesus confirms that marriage is part of God's creation order, and performs his very first miracle while attending the wedding of friends (John 2:1ff).

In the following centuries however, this New Testament balance was lost, as celibacy and virginity came to be treated as purer than marriage. In reaction to the often depraved sexual standards of Graeco-Roman society, the church made a false ideal of virginity, writes Max Thurian, and began to disparage marriage as a sort of necessary evil in the task of procreation.<sup>9</sup> Compared to the disparaging attacks on marriage by some of the early church fathers (the famous biblical commentator of the fourth century, Jerome, once wrote: 'I praise marriage and wedlock, but only because they beget celibates'),<sup>10</sup> Augustine provided a more positive rationale. But even with the great Bishop

of Hippo, marital intercourse, though lawful, inevitably involved lust, and thus remained a less spiritual vocation than celibate singleness. James Nelson concludes: 'Martyrdom was the highest goal of Christian aspiration, virginity and celibacy came next on the ladder, whilst the lowest rung was occupied by the state of marriage.'<sup>11</sup>

With the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the suspicious attitude of the church towards marriage changed dramatically. Protesting forcefully against the obligatory vows of celibacy imposed on the medieval priesthood and religious orders, the Reformers asserted that marriage and singleness are equally godly vocations. Calvin, in his typically careful and cautious exegesis, acknowledges in his comments on I Corinthians 7 that Paul is alive to the practical advantages, if not the spiritual superiority, of singleness. But Calvin, believing 'that the life of a single person is often much more miserable than that of a married person', gives great attention to delineating a doctrine of marriage understood as vocation against what he considered Catholic contempt for marriage, all the while assuming that singleness, while legitimate, is a choice which only a few will make.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, we can conclude that the Protestant tradition, following the Reformers, reacting to the Roman Catholic championing of celibacy, became champions of marriage. Protestants, notes Richard B. Hays, came to regard the unmarried state 'as aberrant and unhealthy'. The result has been that the equal dignity given by the New Testament to marriage and singleness has been lost in the church in both Catholic and Protestant traditions.<sup>13</sup> Ethicist Stanley Hauerwas complains of the 'familization of Christianity since the Reformation...By that I mean the presumption that the first way of life among Christians is marriage and family'.<sup>14</sup>

If the Protestant tradition has generally failed to create theological space for singleness, I want to propose that the twentieth century's Freudian psychological tradition has complicated the social space for singleness. Sigmund Freud likened the human mind to an iceberg. Only one tenth of an iceberg is visible above the water; the greater part remains hidden below the water. So it is, he argued, with the human mind. What we are conscious of as humans is only a little part of us. There lies hidden in us a vast domain of unconsciousness where are to be found, 'the urges, the passions, the repressed ideas and feelings...a great underworld of vital, unseen forces that exercise an imperious control over the conscious thoughts and deeds of individuals'.<sup>15</sup>

Deep in that ‘underworld’, Freud located powerful sexual lusts and cravings that impact everything we humans are and do, including our relationships. His impact on the twentieth century has been profound. Hall and Lindzey write—

Freud set forth a revelation about human nature that sent shock waves through the hopeful, idealistic intellectual milieu of neo-Hegelian Europe and the haughty arrogance of the English Victorians. He broke with the romantic conception of human nature...by exploring the depths of the human psyche.<sup>16</sup>

According to Freud, and this I think has been accepted broadly in twentieth-century Western thought, sexuality is not merely a peripheral issue, but of central importance in understanding human motivation, affecting behaviours which had once been considered entirely non-sexual.<sup>17</sup>

How does this impact singleness? As popularly interpreted, Freud’s thinking meant that there was a sexual element to all relationships, including friendship. Friendship was no longer the innocent camaraderie of pals or even soul-mates, but inevitably the locus of various hidden or overt sexual desires. That has affected the way in which both singles and married negotiate friendships and surely helps to explain today’s widely held view that the number and quality of friendships in North American society is low, especially among men. C. S. Lewis in his classic 1952 book *The Four Loves*, complains of this very thing. He admires the value that the ancients like Plato and Cicero placed on the importance and beauty of friendship, and contrasts this with a modern disdain for mere friendship as ‘something that fills up the chinks of one’s time’.<sup>18</sup> The disdain, writes Lewis, can be traced to those who ‘cannot conceive of Friendship as a substantive love but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros’. Lewis’s complaint is that the idea of deep and genuine friendships was being killed off by the insistence that friendships are ‘really’ sexual, whether acknowledged or not.<sup>19</sup>

This impacts single people particularly. For what singles need and depend on in order to be truly human is this very thing that our culture suspects, friendship. Without denying the conclusion that we are all sexual beings and express our sexual natures in and through all types of relationships, it cannot be denied that the Freudian psychological tradition has helped create a social



climate which makes friendship for all of us more complex. This creates stress for Christian singles who depend on crumbs of necessary intimacy that come via friendship, in the absence of sexual relationships. But the message that singles receive in our culture is this; if our natures are sexually-driven and that sexual drive is not expressed physically, then celibate singles are at best repressed, and at worst psychologically ill. The sexual revolution of the 1960's, with its prevalent assumption that everyone has the right to sexual experience, including the validity of non-heterosexual experience, springs from this climate. It is hardly surprising then, that friendships have become ever more difficult and singleness more and more suspect. Worse yet, suspicion about singleness lies embedded in the contemporary church.

In reaction to the liberated sexual mores of the 1960's, the conservative wing of the North American church has sprung to the defence of the 'one flesh' exclusivity of marriage. However, the result has been to treat marriage as so normative for Christians that we end up reverting to a pre-Christian, Jewish pattern of marriage as almost obligatory, with the New Testament material that points to a shift in the way that family, marriage and singleness connect to the kingdom of God being ignored. In contrast, the more liberal wing of the church has sought to accommodate the culture by modifying traditional Christian sexual ethics in the direction of personal sexual freedom. In both cases, whether in its liberal or conservative wings, has not the church swallowed the culturally entrenched notion that sexual expression is so central to our self-definition and so necessary for personal wholeness that singles who are celibate must either have something wrong with them or stand in need of sexual liberation? In the conservative view, this would be achieved through marriage, and in the liberal view, it would be achieved through a blessing of individual freedom to be sexually active, in a responsible, non-exploitive way as one desires, with, or without benefit of clergy.

So what does the church have to say to Christian singles?

1. Whether married or single, or whether singleness is voluntary or involuntary, we belong through Jesus Christ to the kingdom of God. The most fundamental identity we have as Christians is not our married state nor our single state. We have our identity as part of a 'new creation' in the Lord Jesus Christ. We belong to God, through the mercies of Christ, and enjoy a covenant status, identity, and future in Christ that Paul in Romans 8 declares as

something that no despair, disease or death can destroy. Accordingly, it appears to me that while marriage, singleness and sexuality are certainly in view in the New Testament theologically, ethically and pastorally, these issues are not central to the New Testament. And certainly Christian identity is not grounded there. The New Testament gives no encouragement to Christians searching for their identity in a community of the married, or of the single (or of white people, or black people, or of able-bodied people or disabled people). So in the Christian community we need to stop identifying ourselves or others by any one aspect of the personality. To be ‘married’ or ‘single’ is not unimportant. But it is not ultimate. Accordingly, singleness ought not to be considered a ‘problem’ in the church that demands a solution. Indeed the church needs to repent of the worldliness within it that has swallowed the assumption, as Stanley Hauerwas puts it—

that marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment that are necessary for us to be ‘whole’ people. The assumption is that there is someone right for us to marry and that if we look closely enough we will find the right person.<sup>20</sup>

Both marriage and singleness have a witness to make for the kingdom of God. As Christians we believe that the kingdom of God has come in the person of Jesus Christ. We are part of the new creation God has unleashed in the resurrection of the Son. It is already here, but not yet in fullness. Marriage witnesses to the fact that we must wait, for the kingdom is ‘not yet’, and that as we wait for the consummation of the kingdom, the orders of life, including marriage and family, continue. Singleness, which involves not just the sacrifice of sexual relationships, but the sacrifice of heirs, witnesses to the fact that the kingdom is ‘already’ here, on its way, and that, as Hauerwas helpfully adds, God’s future ‘is not guaranteed by the family, but by the church’.<sup>21</sup>

2. If singles are asked the question (and they frequently are), ‘Why aren’t you married? What’s wrong with you?’ they ought to reply, ‘Plenty,’ and add that all of us live as flawed and broken people in this world, whether married or single. ‘All fall short of the glory of God’. Though created in the image of God, according to Genesis 1, the divine image in us has been shattered by sin, whether we are single or married, male or female; and that broken image affects all relationships, causing conflict and competition, anger and abuse.

Therefore all, single and married, carry burdens known and unknown such that all of us stand in need of healing grace. Singles need to explode any fantasy that if only they were married, salvation, stability and security in life would be guaranteed. No human partner or spouse can, or was ever meant to provide, the healing and meaning of our life. Instead, our marriage or our singleness, needs to be given over to God, with the prayer that God would redeem and renew us in Jesus Christ, and use the potential for good in either state.

3. All Christians need to challenge the secular notion that sexual expression is necessary to 'who you really are'. 'Who we really are' is not established by marriage or by singleness. As Christian believers, our most fundamental source of meaning and fulfillment comes from being yoked with Christ, being disciples of Christ, being new creatures in Christ, being brothers and sisters to one another in the Body of Christ, and being witnesses for Christ in the world. The single life and the married life have their own advantages, challenges and responsibilities. But both are subsumed in a larger mission. It is when we know ourselves caught up in this great adventure, and called to a holy vocation in the kingdom of God which is so much greater than one's self, that joy, meaning and identity are found, even in the midst of ongoing needs and difficulties. We can contribute our marriage or our singleness to this great and eternal purpose.

4. The church must come to terms, not only with the Christian legitimacy of singleness, but with the need to seek ways to honour the gifts and support the needs that singles may bring to the community. Church and society, through the elaborate rituals surrounding weddings, clearly honour marriage, recognize the status of marriage, and pronounce marriage as blessed. Single people will not have any such 'big day'.<sup>22</sup> As a result, some singles experience life as fringe members, people whose status in society remains undefined. This is particularly unfortunate and offensive in the church of Jesus Christ. The church therefore must give sustained reflection to the nature of the Christian witness it gives, including the way it can model to the world a new way of being family, honouring marriage and singleness, and challenging both when they are set up as idols.

5. Singles ought not to live lonely lives. The Genesis 2 statement made specifically about Adam, 'It is not good that the man should be alone', is surely applicable more broadly as a biblical insight into what it is to be human.

Humans were made for fellowship with the living God, and with their fellow humans. While many singles find great satisfaction in meaningful work and ministry and find a satisfying and liberating life living alone, nevertheless, humans were made for community. If, as so many theologians remind us, God is in inner essence a trinitarian community formed by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then those created in the image of that God, share that communitarian nature, respecting the uniqueness of self but also prepared to be giving of self.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, when describing the Christian life, the New Testament uses endless communitarian images—family, nation, body, vine, fellowship, and church. In this community we love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, care for one another, and teach one another. In other words, we Christians are not isolated, but connected, knit together, as Ephesians 4 puts it, like ligaments in the body. That is what the church ought to be, and ought to offer to singles who experience isolation. The psychologist Erik Erikson mirrors this teaching of Scripture when he writes of the need for healthy adults to negotiate their way from isolation to intimacy, avoiding both social exclusion on the one hand, and social and sexual promiscuity on the other.<sup>24</sup>

All will agree that loneliness kills life. But how are Christian singles to find appropriate sources of the intimacy they need? This can be difficult as singles adjust to the often short life of many friendships, given the level of human mobility in our society, as well as the fact that family and friends marry, and die. And yet singles must invest in the opportunities for friendship that do exist. Intimacy may be derived from one's sexual partner. But there are other levels of intimacy; friendships marked by mutual acceptance and understanding, vulnerability to the other person, involvement with and caring for others, and, if possible, a close familiarity with another's life so that that person knows us and we know them. This is undoubtedly hard work. But so too is marriage. Both those who are single and those who are married are tempted to use sexual intercourse as a short-cut to intimacy. Relationship building is not that easy. What the church can and needs to provide is a distinctive climate of hospitality in which all types of friendships can flourish.

Practical ways in which such Christian hospitality is worked out may mean that singles consider sharing a home with others, whether by being included in an extended married family, or by joining with other singles to create small Christian communities or 'families'. May there not be vast usefulness to the

kingdom of God of hundreds of intentional Christian singles' households, which witness to a cold, lonely world of the new community available in Jesus Christ? Might not Christian households for singles, recognized by and accountable to local congregations in a way similar to married families, be one contemporary form of the ancient Jewish and Christian patterns of hospitality? But whether living alone or in community, Christian singles have a distinctive, creative witness to give to the world, namely that faithfully following Jesus Christ is not a call to either sadness nor loneliness, but one legitimate way to discovering life in all its fullness. We have the resources to show the world what warm, meaningful, cherished friendship can be. That is one aspect of the good news that everyone needs.

Finally, what about singleness and sexuality? What are singles to do with sexual desire when marriage is not available or accessible? Our society generally laughs at the thought of sexual restraint. Film and television paint a contemporary canvas on which sexual relationships are always available in whatever form one desires. Nowhere is traditional Christian teaching so out of step with contemporary mores than with this issue of sexual expression. And nowhere is the church more pressured to accommodate. But Christians, whether married or single, need to learn how to live and love within limits. If Genesis 1 speaks of our creation as male and female in the image of God, then Genesis 2 and 3 call us to live in God's good creation, but within limits. In his book *Yearnings*, Craig Barnes delivers a scathing indictment of the myth that we can be whatever we want to be. It is a lie, he says, fuelled by the demands for individual freedom fed by North American capitalism. 'The opening chapters of Genesis clearly teach that we have been created to live in gardens in which we do not have it all', he writes.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, not every dream we have will be fulfilled. Nor does God exist to meet our every desire. And what we cannot have, writes Barnes, 'continues to be our greatest vulnerability, and the reach for forbidden fruit eternally symbolizes our reach for something more than creatures can ever have'.<sup>26</sup> We will therefore yearn, and sometimes that yearning will be about unfulfilled sexual desire, and inadequate intimacy. Some married people will yearn for a better marriage or for a different marriage, or no marriage; and some singles will yearn for any marriage. Writes Barnes, 'It is at the point of those human needs that we are best able to testify to our dependence on God.'<sup>27</sup> Christians then, are called to live within limits and find true freedom living within God's boundaries.

At the edge of those boundaries stands the old-fashioned, but vital notion of self-control. It is true that we are human beings, social beings, and also sexual beings. Our sexuality is not merely tangential to our humanity. It is, in fact, a gift from God. But like every other good gift that God has given, we humans can use it purposefully as God intended, or abuse the gift for selfish and destructive purposes. Our sexuality therefore needs to be disciplined or channelled constructively. Such channeling or self-control is not just an issue for singles, but for all who are seeking to obey Christ. Self-control is a vital fruit and gift of the Holy Spirit which we all need in order to live for Christ (Gal. 5:22). It is a gift which God delights to give, so that we can live our lives well and find ourselves strangely free.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Acts and Proceedings of the 120th General Assembly, 1994 (published by the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Toronto), pp. 262-7.
2. Jacob Driesen, PhD [http://www.driesen.com/features\\_associated\\_with\\_suicide.htm](http://www.driesen.com/features_associated_with_suicide.htm). See also Robert H. Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *Family Relations*, 1991, 40: pp. 97-102. Coombs concludes that married people live longer and use medical services less than the never-married. For a moving autobiographical account of a single Christian coping with depression, see Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (Image Books, Doubleday: New York, 1996).
3. Al Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads* quoted by Rob Marus, "Kissing Nonsense Goodbye," in *Christianity Today*, June 11, 2001, p. 48.
4. Max Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy*, (SCM Press, London, 1959), p. 45.
5. Dale Bruner, "Matthew Vol. 2," *The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, (Word Publishing, Dallas, 1990), p. 692.
6. Thurian, *op. cit.* p. 46f.
7. See the discussion by Mary Stuart Van Leeuwen in *Gender and Grace: Love, Work and Parenting in a Changing World* (IVP, 1990), p. 173f. She refers to the family of God as 'first family' and our biological family as 'second family'.
8. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1981), p. 174.
9. Thurian, *op. cit.*, p. 58ff.

10. James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 1978), p. 52.
11. Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
12. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. by John W. Fraser, (The St. Andrew Press: Edinburgh, 1960), p. 135ff.
13. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a commentary for teaching and preaching, (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1997), p. 132. Karl Barth wrote that the positive view of both marriage and singleness in the New Testament has been 'too lightly ignored by Protestant ethics in its glad affirmation of marriage, born of the conflict against the priestly and monastic celibacy of Rome'. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 3, part 4, p. 144 (T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1961).
14. Stanley Hauerwas, "Knowing how to go on when you do not know where you are," in *Theology Today*, Vol. 51, No. 4, January, 1995: 568.
15. Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey, *Theories of Personality*, [3rd ed.], (John Wiley and Sons: New York, 1978), p. 32.
16. Hall and Lindzey, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
17. Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
18. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Collins: Fount Paperbacks, 1977), p. 55; first published in 1960.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
20. Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 172.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
22. The current push for both church and state recognition of same-sex marriage is surely, in part, a claim by homosexuals for the sort of public affirmation that has traditionally been given to marrying heterosexuals. It is surely time for the church to begin a critique of the immense, and lavish materialism that so often accompanies the celebration of marriage. In an age when so many aspire to a wedding of 'royal' proportions, one wonders if this phenomenon is rooted not only in a culture of conspicuous consumption, both also in the secular myth of romantic and sexual partnering as the ultimate goal of life. For some insights as to how congregations might rethink singleness, and create congregations that are more friendly to singles, see Kay Collier-Slone, *Single in the Church, New ways to minister with 52% of God's People* (Alban Institute Publications, 1992).
23. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1996), pp. 167ff.
24. Hall and Lindzey, *op. cit.*, p. 98. On the pain of loneliness and the need for hospitality, see Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out, The Three Movements of the*

*Spiritual Life* (Image Books: Doubleday, NY, 1975).

25. Craig Barnes, *Yearnings* (InterVarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1991), p. 23.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 65.