

Singles & Partners

When I first went to Bible College, on the first day all the new students had an introductory talk by the principal. It was a welcome to the college and also some dos and don'ts and some good things to do and some things that might be unhelpful. About three-quarters of the way through this talk the principal came out with the line that female pigeons can ovulate by looking at themselves in a mirror. None of us really knew if this was true, but it seemed a weird thing to say. One effect it did have was to wake everyone up and the point that he went on to make was that in the feathered bird world that pairing happens very easily and when one pair happens then it springs up all over the place. It can be the same in college. One couple get together and then it proliferates and many couple spring up when they see this happening.

We live in a society where singleness is seen as being unusually, seen as being unnatural even. This morning we are going to look at a series of questions in the area of singleness and partners. What does the Bible say? What does Jesus say? Let us hear now from Sue Hartley about the journey she has made and is still making on the question **Is Singleness And Celibacy Biblical?**

Sue Hartley. Sue has been assisting Rev. Andy Rider the Rector of Christ Church, Spitalfields in his pastoral ministry among church members and parishioners as curate. She sought, along with one of the lay leaders, to facilitate the prayer life and the healing ministry of the church. Sue is moving to St Paul's Church, Hainault and her licensing will be in March.

At Spring Harvest, about 25 years ago that I went to a seminar on singleness. The room was packed full of single women. The first question the leader asked us was, "Is there anyone here who enjoys being single? I think I was the only person who raised my hand. In my early professional life, I was keen on finding a husband. After a 3 year courtship with a friend at church, I nearly got engaged, but God clearly guided me that he had plans for my future that would have been incompatible with a long term relationship with this man. A few years after that (1986), when I was still working a doctor in Wales but sensing that God might soon be changing my direction, I went to a YWAM training week. One of the leaders had a word for me, which in general terms spoke of a new calling to Christian service; and the theme of celibacy was clear throughout it. Over the past 10 years, this vocation had been confirmed in a number of ways and I now feel sure that this is God's will for me for the rest of my life.

From Sue Hartley

*In Matthew 19, Jesus teaches his disciples that one of the ways of life to which people can be called in the service of his kingdom is that of celibacy: the renunciation of marriage. But to many people, even church people, celibacy is often regarded as irrelevant and unnatural. Some see it as an avoidance of commitment and intimacy, or simply, the fate of the unlucky! But from earliest times, celibacy has been recognised by the Church as an authentic Christian vocation. And in every age, there have always been some who have responded to the call of God in this way. The pendulum has swung backwards and forwards throughout church history on the value of celibacy. At one time it was seen as a superior spiritual state to marriage. However the Reformers reversed this, teaching that marriage is a far better context for growing in holiness than celibacy could ever be. But the truth is that both marriage and celibacy are both **gifts** of God and need the grace of God to be lived to the full. Both Jesus and Paul gave singleness a status equal in value to marriage, and Jesus himself lived a celibate life which was fully human and fully whole and he expressed His sexuality in close and healthy friendships with both men and women.*

*What does celibacy actually mean? Paul suggests, in 1 Cor. 7:6 that celibacy, like marriage, is a gift of God. It's a gift of God **to** the person and then **through** the person for the church. It is for the sake of the kingdom of God. A celibate life is characterised by the gift of oneself to the Lord and his*

church, exclusive of other primary life commitments. It usually has a secondary purpose, such as overseas mission or a ministry of intercession. The life cannot be lived in one's own strength; and like any other expression of the Christian life, it can only be lived by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. That means that it is a personal vocation from God which has to be discerned and then responded to. It can't be imposed or made a requirement for something else. For those who are called to this life, personal fulfilment is largely found in a life of prayer.

*The **witness** of a celibate life can be powerful. It will challenge people to consider how a man who lived and died 2000 years ago can command such total devotion that marriage is willingly foregone. It also speaks of the all-sufficiency of God who is able to fulfil the deepest needs of the human heart. It is a witness in a society where loneliness is so rife. It shows that loneliness can be transformed by the presence of God. It is a counter-cultural sign in a world obsessed with sex. It is a clear witness to the truth that sexual relations are not essential to a healthy, fulfilled and balanced life. Sexuality is a lot more than the physical act. Sex is just **one** way of expressing love. Although the desire for sex doesn't need to be met, the need for love **DOES**. Celibate people are no less sexual beings than others; but their sexuality is expressed in experiencing and showing God's love in their relationships. A healthy celibate life is committed to people as well as to God. A celibate person is free to love all: they can develop creative friendships of love and service, without being exclusive, with many people over long periods of time.*

Celibacy is also a sign of God's future kingdom where 'people will neither marry be given in marriage'. The fact that God gives some people the grace to live that way while still on earth, is a sign to the rest of the church and to the world of the temporality of the things of this life. Celibate people can remind the rest of us to keep our focus on eternal things.

Paul describes the church as the Body of Christ which comprises many interdependent parts—differently gifted people working together for the glory of God and the building up of the church. Single people need married people and married people need singles—neither can exercise their ministry without the others. We need to respond positively to those who are being called to this way of life.

As celibacy and marriage are both gifts, neither is superior to the other and both are necessary for the building up of the Body of Christ. It is therefore for the good of the church and our own spiritual growth to live in the state for which we are gifted if we can. But if any of you have had celibacy forced upon you by bereavement, divorce or not having yet found the right partner, I don't underestimate the pain of your situation and I hope that you have understanding and compassionate friends and family. Celibacy might not be your gift, but if you seek to adopt the features of the spirituality I've been talking about: (friendship, ministry and prayer) and use the gifts you have been given to the full, this will help you make the most of your very difficult situation.

Thank you Sue for that. So singleness and celibacy is as valuable way of live and is as valued by God as is being marriage

So we continue with the set of questions we have begun with. By becoming a couple one could ask **What Problems Am I Avoiding By Seeking This Relationship?** - We have heard about the problem of loneliness, of non-acceptance in society. Recently on a Sunday evening we looked at the person of Samson. This man who was so strong, but was so weak when it came to women. He got involved with Delilah which led to his capture. Perhaps he was lonely, perhaps he wanted to look the part with a woman by his side? We do not know, but it certainly was not the best thing for him.

There also the problem of feeling unloved especially when one has come out of an unloving relationship, but we can and should find this in God and in the family. Paul writes in his first letter to the church of God at Corinth

“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26 NIV)

So if a member of a church feels unloved, then we may have to lay the blame at the door of all the church, but equally we need to join in, we cannot just sit at home mad mop expecting all to come to us, I need to get out there among the people and not hide away.

What Are My Motives? – Why am I entering into this relationship? What are my motives? As a church we follow Ephesians 1:12

“...we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.”
(Ephesians 1:12 NIV)

We do everything for the glory of God and not for ourselves. At times we have to sacrifice ourselves for and to God. Paul talks often about rejoicing in suffering and for some they may feel that they are suffering badly – this can be as a single person or as a married person, but we do need to ask ourselves – Why am I doing this? What are my motives? Are they to glorify God or to satisfy my wants?

Is This Way The Best Solution, Or Is It A Quick Fix To My Problem? – we need to be honest with ourselves. If we want to enter into a relationship, then marriage is the only Biblical route. This does prevent the quick fix, this does mean we have to think about the situation. Hebrews 13:4 says

“Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” (Hebrews 13:4 NIV)

Sadly in our culture marriage at times is far from being honoured but as Christians we at times have to be counter cultural, not being led by the culture we live in.

In the instruction to Timothy over the appointment of church officers, elders and deacons, we read for both

“Now the overseer, or sometimes translated as elder, must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,” (1 Timothy 3:2 NIV)

“A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.” (1 Timothy 3:12 NIV)

There is no thought of a common law living arrangement. And this is not just for church officers, but for all of God's people right from the beginning.

Have I prayed or asked others to pray for guidance? – This is the final question. We heard that Sue did not move into her position as single and celibate without hearing from God. People who get married should pray about it first. I can remember praying about whether it was right to go out with a girl or not. I felt God say that it was right and I ended up marrying her! However there are a couple of provisos.

1. The answer to a prayer will never, never go against what the Bible teaches. God cannot contradict himself. It is no good asking whether one should live with someone or not, because the Bible says it is wrong and so it is a non-prayer. Just as adultery is wrong and so is not a topic to pray about because God has already given his answer. We need to take care. When Sue and I were in Nottingham a minister had a young couple in membership of his church who were living together as husband and wife. He had a word with them and asked them to stop or resign their membership. He never asked them to leave the church. They said that they had prayed about the situation and that they knew that they were so much in love and that God was a God of love, so what they were doing was fine. The minister differed from this view as it broke, he felt, the purity of the marriage bed as we read in Hebrews earlier or as the Message puts it

Honour marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband. God draws a firm line against casual and illicit sex. (Hebrews 13:4 MSG)

2. Pray with an open mind. Paul prayed that a pain would be taken from him. As he says

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NIV)

Do not come and ask God for his blessing on what you propose, but on what he wants for your life. Singleness and partners in a culture that is very strong on marriage and couples. In the time of Jesus marriage was very strong and you were promised in marriage but Jesus endorsed singleness as well, but his life and by his words.

“For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven...” (Matthew 19:12 NIV)

But if we get it wrong we know that God will forgive us, but that is not a reason to enter into or stay where we know it is not right. God is always the God of more chances. That’s the God we follow, one who is always ready to forgive when we come to him in repentance.