

**So, What About the Singles?: How Church Ministry Leaders Can Better Foster  
Community with Their Early Adult Singles Population**

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## **Introduction**

As a single woman who has attended numerous churches throughout my early adulthood, I observed a concerning lack of programs catered towards early adult single individuals approximately aged between 20 and 39. While many churches offer ministry programs for young couples and college students, early adult singles often fall through the cracks. In my research, I aim to explore the question of how ministry leaders in the church can effectively engage in faithful ministry among this demographic. Through my personal experience and research, it is evident that many single individuals within the church feel overlooked and neglected. However, it is crucial to recognize that this group is a vital part of the church community, and they have unique gifts to offer. In this paper, I will delve into the current context of single people in the United States, followed by their position within the church. I will then explore theological perspectives and viewpoints shared by early adult singles and suggest practices that ministry leaders can implement to better serve and disciple this population.

## **Part One: Context**

When seeking to discern ways of faithful ministry with the early adult singles population, it is important to understand their experiences and outlooks. We will look at this both broadly through current statistics about the early adult singles population in the United States, and more specifically by hearing how the early adult singles population is experiencing church.

*Early Adult Singles in the United States*

It is commonly known that a greater number of people in their early adulthood are single today compared to previous generations. To put our current reality into perspective, the Pew Research Center reported in August of 2020 that among men, those ages 18-30 are reportedly the population with the most single people at 51% and women in this age group are at a lower percentage of 32% being single which is topped only by females in the range of 65+.<sup>1</sup> The statistics of those single and living alone as early and middle-aged adults has risen from 29% in 1990 to 38% in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

These realities, however are not due to a lack of desire for significant relationships. The Pew Research Center also reports that a “majority of singles in the 18-29 and 30-49 age groups are interested in a relationship or dates” with both at around 60% of this population counting themselves as someone “looking” to be in a relationship.<sup>3</sup> Meeting a partner online is now as common as meeting via friends or family, at 28% and 27% of all connections, respectively. This percentage is likely to continue to grow as the internet becomes increasingly ubiquitous in social activity with people using not only online dating, but also more engaging in more social interaction on various social media sites or conversation forums and this becoming a common way to meet new people and forge new relationships of any sort.<sup>4</sup> Yet for those not among the “looking” percentage, it is reported that they claim either to “have more important priorities,” to “enjoy being single,” are “too busy,” or “feel like no one would be interested.”<sup>5</sup> Among both singles who desire a relationship and those who do not, about half between the ages of 18 to 29

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Brown, “A Profile of Single Americans”, *Pew Research Center*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/a-profile-of-single-americans/>, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Fry and Kim Parker, “Rising Share of U.S. Adults Are Living Without a Spouse or Partner.” *Pew Research Center*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/>.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, “Profile of Single Americans”, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, “Profile of Single Americans”, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, “Profile of Single Americans”, 1.

say they face a lot or at least some pressure from their family to be in a relationship.<sup>6</sup> This often brings a feeling to the early adult population of missing out or feeling as if they are not doing life the “right way.”

A complexity that Christina Hitchcock, author of *The Significance of Singleness*, believes plays into the lack of committed relationships in the early adult population is the fact that with the growth of individualism — a mindset that emphasizes each person’s individuality and believes each person to be self-reliant and ultimately independent from all others — our understanding of sexuality and relationships has changed. Hitchcock explains, “The realist assumes that the way things are is essentially the way things should be and therefore accepts the precept that sexual activity should be determined by what each individual feels is good for him – or herself.”<sup>7</sup> She explains that individualism can cause issues when commitment to another is only dependent on the emotions and satisfaction of ourselves. Herbert Anderson and Freda Gardner in their book *Living Alone* add that there is another negative understanding of sexual activity in American culture that affects those who have not been in a committed relationship and believe in celibacy until they are married, saying, “At the heart of America’s fear of celibacy...is the belief that if we do not engage in sexual activity, we are not really grown-ups; in fact, we may not even be fully human.”<sup>8</sup> Hitchcock offers some theological commentary on this cultural issue, explaining, “Our modern fear of celibacy is rooted in the same temptation faced by our first parents. We want to know on our own, to act independently of any other authority, as God does, and in doing so we believe we will become fully human.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brown, “Profile of Single Americans”, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness: A Theological Vision for the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Anderson and Freda Gardner, *Living Alone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 17.

Apart from the sexual dimension, Anderson and Gardner also explain a mental and emotional piece to this puzzle that shows how the world, and our relational experiences can affect our view of our identity: “Being alone is experienced as a loss of self, a feeling that no one knows or cares about your life. As a result, the dread of abandonment becomes the motivation to marry or live with others in some way.”<sup>10</sup> These points and statistics are just an overview of the reality that the early young adult population is facing and trying to live through.

### *Early Adult Singles in the Church*

Some complexity can be seen in the situation of early adult singles in the church when we consider how the church views these singles, the relationships between these singles and others in the church and how these adults personally view their singleness.

Hitchcock looks at the change in the societal view of marriage or intimate relationship and says that as the churches saw this change in the world, they felt the need to defend marriage as they believe God intended it and describes, “This evangelical defense of marriage ranges from quiet but steady attention to marriage as the foundational building block of society and the church...to book after book about marriage...”<sup>11</sup> Yet this defense of good and Godly marriage seems to have developed in many Christian communities into a need or even a prerequisite to full access to the life of the church. As Sam Allberry, author of *7 Myths about Singleness*, points out, “In the secular world, people are waiting longer and longer to marry. But in the Christian world, it is still a rite of passage, one of the signs you’ve grown up.”<sup>12</sup> And even though marriage is not a commandment or even a promise given in the Bible, it is often mistaken as one. Stories similar

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<sup>10</sup>Anderson and Gardner, *Living Alone*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 127.

to Joy Beth Smith's abound. She recalls, "at any given family gathering, I hear this phrase at least once: 'God's got such a wonderful husband in store for you. Just wait. Keep being faithful.'"<sup>13</sup> Smith also reports in conversations she has had with other singles in the church hearing often things like "'No one knows how to minister to singles. No one affirms that this phase of life is okay.'"<sup>14</sup>

The relationships that are had by this single population with non-singles in the church are also leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of singles. In their book, Anderson and Gardner point out the obvious, that there are single people that we see at church, work with, or cross paths with every day yet, "Despite this regular contact...many people who live alone still feel invisible, isolated and alone, even in the church."<sup>15</sup> Even within some of the relationships that are established as friendships, singles can often get the feeling that the mutual desire for a strong relationship is not there with their married peers when they hear comments like "You know where we are, and you're always welcome. Do not wait for us to invite you," as Allberry recalls hearing. He goes on to share that to a single person this can sound like, "We're not going to be thinking of you or pursuing you. We do not necessarily *need* you. And so, you're going to have to reach out to us if you want to come over."<sup>16</sup> It was conversations such as this and others that brought Allberry to reflect: "It made me realize that while my close friends feel essential to me, I might not necessarily feel essential to them...What they are to me, their families are to them. I exist much lower down their list of needs."<sup>17</sup> It is not only their position in others' lives that feels unnecessary at times, but as Joy Beth Smith points out "When we only see married people serving in leadership positions, offering Communion, or opening the service in prayer, that's a

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson and Gardner, *Living Alone*, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 130.

<sup>17</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 133.

problem.”<sup>18</sup> Access to such leadership roles is sometimes implicitly or explicitly limited to those who are married, fencing singles out and leading them to feel that their singleness is a form of spiritual and personal inadequacy. Smith also explains that discomfort arises when the church thinks that it is their job to “solve their singleness” as she shares experiences she has had in the church where it has made her singleness feel like a problem to fix:

When people try to pair us up, two by two, and shove us in the ark of the marrieds, it feels as though we’re being pawned off, as if we’re compromising the potential of what God has for us. Instead of being excited for our lives and willing to sit with us in our singleness, they’re anxious for this season to end.<sup>19</sup>

She elaborates on how this type of treatment to singles made her view her role in the church, saying, “it starts to feel as though your status in the church is defined by your relationship status on Facebook. Instead of asking about your job, your spiritual struggles, or even your progress in your boxing class, people inquire constantly about your love life.”<sup>20</sup> Smith acknowledges the importance of dating and marriage in the church but makes the argument that the problem lies in the overemphasis on marriage, especially in comparison to discipleship and community when talking to the church’s single population.<sup>21</sup>

This type of treatment is something that can also affect how the early adult single population views their own singleness. Smith describes the unhealthy mindset of many singles today as “we’ll find a guy and then we’ll get married and then all of our problems will be solved.”<sup>22</sup> She admits, “it’s hard for me to even separate my own personal desire of marriage from the desire my culture and the church have grown in me...It felt as though the alternatives –

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 213.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 155.

singleness and celibacy – were only for priests, nuns, and stodgy college professors.”<sup>23</sup> When these thoughts and mindsets that place marriage on a pedestal are constantly experienced by those who have grown up in the church or are now trying to invest in a Christian community, these unhealthy and potentially dangerous notions toward regarding marriage as a sign of faithfulness and Christian living become almost unavoidable.

With the rise of early adults that fit into the “singles” category, even if it is for various reasons, it can be clearly understood by hearing these statistics and personal experiences of singles that the way they are being viewed by and interacted with when it comes to church is not a way that is encouraging them in their faith and sense of fulfillment. Singles are often feeling invisible, isolated and alone, thinking their singleness is a problem to solve. These factors demonstrate the need for the church to address the experiences of early adult singles and show them what Bible says about and how God is at work in their singleness.

## **Part Two: A Theology of Singleness**

When the general experience of early adult singles is that the world and church are telling them marriage and sexual fulfillment are prerequisites to achieving adulthood, it is imperative to search Scripture for some clarity on these claims.

When we think about where in the Bible singleness is talked about, there are possibly very few specific passages of scripture that come to mind that can be quickly quoted about singleness. However, there are still helpful passages and people to look up to in order for us to be able to understand how God uses single people in ways unique to their situation and how some of us may be called to do so and can live in singleness faithfully. In both the Old and New

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 189.



Testaments, there were people who, in committing their life to God, stayed both single in relationship and in mindset for the sake of doing God's will and serving his people so that nothing else in their life could take priority.<sup>24</sup> This all-encompassing and unrivaled devotion to God and the Kingdom is what all disciples of Christ are called to strive for, and for some that call will be easier than others. Yet, regardless of its difficulty, the call of each person is one that God will use to ultimately bless both the individual and the community of Christ. Smith makes an eye opening and helpful point about what we overlook in biblical relationships when she explains, "As much as we know and feel that it's not good for man to be alone, we might not be an Eve with an Adam. We might be an Esther with a Mordecai. A Hannah with a Samuel. A Jesus with a John. A Paul with a Timothy."<sup>25</sup>

In this section, I will focus on two well-known and impactful biblical characters and show how their lived testimonies to Christian singleness benefitted the church before moving to proclaim the future hope into which the early adult single population of the church has the privilege of living.

### *The Single Paul*

One of the people most well-known in the Bible for his singleness is the Apostle Paul. He speaks specifically on the topic of singleness, while also living his single life in ways that we can admire and from which we would be wise to learn.

One of the most well-known passages used to uphold singleness is what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7. Here Paul is telling people in the church in Corinth that he wishes all were as he was, namely single, but says that each have their own gift from God, meaning marriage or

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<sup>24</sup> Anderson and Gardner, *Living Alone*, 39-41.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 12.

singleness. This is not Paul condemning marriage relationships, he tells his readers that marriage is the good choice for those who cannot devote themselves to singleness and celibacy, but he is also telling the church that singleness used for the purpose of more dedication to Christ and the work of the Kingdom of God is good and even, in his view, preferable for those to whom God gives the ability to resist sexual temptation. Few preachers today seem to share Paul's perspective, showing preference instead—in word and action—toward marriage. Hitchcock, as a woman who had considered the fact that God might be calling her to a life of singleness in her early adult years, explains a distinct contrast she sees between churches today, saying, “While Catholics have created a special place for the life of celibacy, Protestants have primarily ignored Paul's teaching in this chapter by stating that Paul's comments about singleness only pertain to a specific and limited time due to external factors.”<sup>26</sup> The way she understands this passage, Hitchcock believes most churches are too focused on teaching about marriage and are leaving messages about singleness out of the conversation. She believes that message should be “that singleness can, like marriage, provide a graphic picture of who God is, what God is doing, and what it means to be in relationship with God... Not all singleness creates such a picture, but Christian singleness should do so.”<sup>27</sup> Sam Allberry in his book *7 Myths about Singleness* wants to point out that Paul does talk about singleness being a *gift* from God given to some. The word “gift” that Paul uses is important when we speak about Christians who are single and how they are to take advantage of their singleness. Allberry explains the use of this word, saying, “Gifts are about building up the church rather than feeling a sense of individual, personal fulfillment. It is about serving others and not about feeling a special sense of peace.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 40.

Although it is called a gift, some in the church today think the gift of singleness compared to marriage is like the cat-themed Christmas sweater you got from your great aunt when she gave your cousin her vintage pearls. Barry Danylak in his book *Redeeming Singleness* wants to reframe why marriage and singleness are equal gifts when we viewed within a Christian perspective:

Christian marriage is a testimony of the utterly faithful and unchanging love of God for his people in a permanent covenant relationship with him. Christian singleness is a testimony to the complete sufficiency of Christ for the present age and gives visible witness to the hope of our eternal inheritance yet to come.<sup>29</sup>

Smith adds to this idea that regardless of our relationship status, the goal of the Christian life “should be the same: to honor God, in singleness and in marriage.”<sup>30</sup> This is a reminder to all Christians that, while they may see benefits to the lifestyle they have as single or married, their relationship status is not something that is meant to only affect or benefit them, but was meant for the church and, ultimately, the glory of God.

A particular reason why the gift of singleness is often not regarded as a gift, as Paul calls it, is that in the Christian moral vision, singleness calls for sexual abstinence. Sexual desire, in itself good and natural, can also be a source of challenging temptation for many Christians. This is why Paul says marriage is also good, as a covenantal commitment where two can rightly express sexual desire and experience physical intimacy. Allberry points out how this brings contrast to Christian singleness compared to worldly singleness, saying that for the secular culture, “to be single involves the former (being unmarried) but not the latter (sexual abstinence). And since marriage is often seen as a constraint in many ways, being single in a secular context

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<sup>29</sup> Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 214.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 10.

can be thought of as a positive boon.”<sup>31</sup> When this is how the surrounding culture views sexual relationships, it can be a hard sell for Christians to think Godly singleness could be a blessing. But Allberry wants to remind the single population, “The fact is, both singleness and marriage have their own particular ups and downs. The temptation for many who are single is to compare the downs of singleness with the ups of marriage.”<sup>32</sup> This is also when we must reevaluate who we know God to be. If God is good and something he gives is a gift then we must come to the conclusion that even if we do not understand how at the time, singleness is a gift. Allberry summarizes this well saying, “If we balk at the idea of singleness being a gift, it is not because God has not understood us but because we have not understood him.”<sup>33</sup>

Allberry also examines what Paul’s life has to say about another aspect of singleness: forgoing the possibility of offspring. He emphasizes the relationship Paul describes between Titus and himself in the book of Titus as Paul calls him his “true child in the common faith” (Titus 1:4). Allberry states, “This is not airy-fairy language to make Paul feel better about himself as a single. It is real. Paul had led Titus to faith in Christ...Titus was not only a fellow believer with Paul or a fellow brother in Christ. He had become, spiritually, Paul’s begotten.”<sup>34</sup> The relationship between Paul and Titus was one that, similar to a parent, meant that Paul not only helped Titus become a believer, but also continued to nurture him in the faith and help him grow in his discipleship to maturity. It is understanding relationships like this that can be of comfort and confidence for the single person that family does not end with the person you marry or the children that come from your DNA, but instead spiritual and eternal family relationships are created by sharing and guiding another in their faith. Danylak emphasizes this point as well

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<sup>31</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 30.

<sup>33</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 83.

as he explains, “We too, like Paul, are called to be spiritual parents. Not only in begetting children through the gospel but in raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord until they too are mature disciples.”<sup>35</sup>

### *Jesus: Son of God, Son of Man, and Single*

One person whose singleness is not often considered in church is the Messiah himself. God incarnate, whom the early church declared to be fully God and fully man, was single during his life on earth. Hitchcock emphasizes the importance of this is to see that Jesus, as one who reveals to us both who God is and exactly who God created humanity to be, then we must realize that singleness does not equal a lack of humanity for anyone.”<sup>36</sup> Jesus was no less “fully human” because he was unmarried and celibate. Allberry adds meaning to this as he explains in his writing, “Jesus was not calling others to a standard he was not willing to embrace himself. He was not calling singles to sexual abstinence while knowing nothing of it himself. He lived this very teaching.”<sup>37</sup> This is an understanding that we can use to instruct those struggling with these temptations but also as a deep encouragement that the one they follow is one who leads by example. This can also be used as we can guide others in the church to see the importance of their single population.

Matthew 19 is a commonly referenced passage for those in the church who do speak about Jesus in reference to singleness. As Jesus gives a cut and dry answer to a question given to him by a group of Pharisees about divorce and says what was once permitted by Moses would be considered adultery, the disciples decide that marriage might not be worth the trouble. Jesus does

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<sup>35</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 25.

not necessarily disagree. Allberry shows how, in light of this passage, Christians today seem to be thinking about this backwards, “Celibacy sounds too hard, so we should make marriage more readily accessible, even redefining it so that more people can enter into it. But Jesus’ thinking seems to go in the opposite direction. Marriage can be too hard for some, so he commends celibacy.”<sup>38</sup>

Some people in the church seem to mirror the Old Testament understanding of marriage and family and that is where their theology of marriage and singleness stop. A more wholistic view of the Bible and Jesus’ impact considers how the view of marriage and singleness may have been transformed by Jesus as he fulfills all that needed to be fulfilled in the Mosaic Law and brings a New Covenant and with it a transformed view of family. We see the Cultural Mandate given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: “God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

This Cultural Mandate is then repeated in Genesis 9:1 to Noah as God makes his covenant after the flood. Just a few chapters later, in Genesis 13:16, God tells Abraham as he makes his next covenant that he will make Abraham’s offspring number as many as the dust of the earth. This idea of blessing through bloodline continues through the rest of the covenants God makes in the Old Testament. From this perspective, offspring was how the nation of Israel would come and continue to exist and be blessed as it was a part of the covenant. Many saw the ability to bear children as a blessing from God and specifically, as Danylak describes it, a “validation of obedience to the covenant stipulations.”<sup>39</sup> To have the opposite life experience of no marriage or no children was seen as a punishment from God and brought the possibility for a

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<sup>38</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 25.

<sup>39</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 62.

family to lose their bloodline and the family inheritance would then go to someone else.<sup>40</sup> When this is how families and God's covenant are viewed in the Old Testament, it is understandable that marriage seemed important and necessary, but once Jesus comes, his transforming work applies. It is not that Jesus gets rid of the Cultural Mandate or the importance of family and blessings but that he gives much deeper understanding to these concepts than before.<sup>41</sup> Instead of biological family being God's command and blessing, it is that family is to come and be created through salvation. Hitchcock explains that in Jesus, blessing is no longer through giving God's people biological children but "through giving humanity 'the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God' (John 1:12-13)."<sup>42</sup> Danylak emphasizes to his readers that this call does not command marriage and birth as the Old Testament mandate did, but instead the New Testament commands Jesus' followers to make disciples that are both baptized into the faith and invited into discipleship so that more may learn and live out what Jesus commanded, as it is written in Matthew's Great Commission.<sup>43</sup> It is, in part, through the Great Commission that the church fulfills the Cultural Mandate is called to follow today.

Jesus speaks of a new family formed in the bond of the Spirit. A family that is of even more importance than that of our biological connection. He shows this in Mark 3:33-35 as he tells those who report his mother and brother being outside that it is actually those who do the will of his Father who are his mother and brother and illustrates this familial bond again as he hangs from the cross and says to Mary, "Woman, here is your son" and to the Beloved Disciple

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<sup>40</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 46.

<sup>43</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 149.

“Here is your mother.”<sup>44</sup> These are the new primary familial relationships God commands us to create and through which he does his transforming work.

### *Resurrection Singleness*

A distinctly encouraging notion is given by Danylak when he states, “Singleness visibly heralds the coming of the new age.”<sup>45</sup> This final point of the theology of singleness comes from what Jesus says in Matthew 22:29-32 when challenged by a group of Sadducees about marriage at the resurrection. Jesus proclaims, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels in heaven.” Through Jesus’ words we understand that while the relationship of earthly marriage may not be eternal, our relationship with God through Jesus Christ is, and we are called to live a life devoted to that relationship here and now until the day we are called to our eternal home with God.

Jesus Christ’s role as the bridegroom of the church is described throughout scripture in a way that shows us the one true marriage that all earthly marriages are to point to is the eternal marriage of Christ and his bride, the church, at the resurrection.<sup>46</sup> This is the picture into which all earthly marriages are instructed to live. This is their purpose and their way of bearing witness to Christ. Yet human marriages’ service to the church is not eternal and cannot be our first devotion. We must remember, as Danylak explains, “All other material blessings of creation – whether the blessings of food, clothing shelter, monetary provisions, healthy bodies, marriage, family and even life itself – all these utterly *pale* in comparison to *the* blessing that God has given to us in Christ.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> John 19:26-27

<sup>45</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 172.

<sup>46</sup> Ephesians 5:21-27, Revelation 19:7-8 & Revelation 21:9-10

<sup>47</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 139.



Hitchcock adds to our hope in the marriage of Christ and his bride the implications of the rest of the community of Christ as his bride, saying, “In the resurrection it will become fully apparent that we are in relationship with others *only* because we are first in relationship with Christ.”<sup>48</sup> This statement is one that the church, by embracing their single population can live into here and now. She expands this hope even more saying that “by his marriage we will all be drawn into a community that is far greater and deeper than any community we can imagine or experience now, even that of marriage.”<sup>49</sup> Singleness in light of the resurrection becomes not a useless pain to be endured in isolation but a purposeful proclamation that can be shown and shared with all believers of the hope and sufficiency that can be found in Christ alone and will be fully embraced when he comes again.

Looking at these significant people and passages, we can see that God has used both marriage and singleness to bless his people and do the work of the Kingdom. Paul and Jesus, through both actions and words, show us how God uses singleness as a gift and even lifts it up as an illustration for who the whole church is to be as a people solely dependent on their Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. Singleness, then, is not to be seen as just a waiting period or an absence, but as an opportunity and anticipation for better when it comes to the power and promises of God to his beloved.

### **Part Three: Ministering to Young Adult Singles**

After seeing the reality of where early adult Christian singles find themselves in the world and the church, but also seeing the hope of the singleness God has used as proclamation of

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<sup>48</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 21.

our eternity, there are a few things I believe can be done for ministry leaders to better foster community with and serve their early adult singles population.

### *Connect Singles with Singles*

To create intentional connection with those around us and those experiencing similar things to us is important for any human being to have in order to persevere through difficult times and thrive when possible. To have people with whom you can relate and confide brings comfort and confidence that we do not face this life alone, which is a reminder that this population needs. They are in need of others who can relate to their situation, roll their eyes at a grandmother's comment, laugh off an awkward dating story or with whom cry out to God.

Creating this group may mean asking a single person in your church who has shown the capacity for leadership if they would be willing to help lead the charge on such a community and collaborate with them and the other single church members in what they would like to see with such a group and going from there.

Some churches have programming that combines people of all ages, relationship status and life stage and therefore would not think it necessary to have a singles group for this early adult population, other churches only have a handful of early adult singles and therefore do not see enough of a need for them to have a specific group fostered by the church. While these reasons can be understood and sympathized with, I believe seeing intention put into place to support this population would be a way to show this group the necessity the church has for their community. If the first church factor rings true and you do not think this type of group would be desirable for your singles population, the next step would be, nonetheless, to ask. If you find yourself in the second situation, the next step may be collaboration. Douglas Fagerstrom, in his

book, encourages churches to do exactly this: “One difficulty we face in church life is that almost every church wants to be an entity in unto itself...But when small churches join together, any dream can be realized.”<sup>50</sup>

As a group who is not experiencing the intimacy found in marriage relationships, something this group can thrive off of is deeply rooted friendship and this is something the church should encourage. Allberry explains his personal need for this as a single adult saying, “it is a gift to have someone who knows your soul, knows the best and worst about you, yet through it all is deeply committed to you...in our world, being deeply known and deeply loved often feel like alternatives.”<sup>51</sup> The whole church should be a place that brings this type of love to reality and for the singles population specifically, creating a group where they can support each other with such love is vital.

It is also important to have groups such as this for the single population because they often have the capacity for it, unlike others who have immediate families to attend to each and every day. Many single people have some more freedom in their daily lives than do married couples and this is something that a singles ministry can use to its advantage. They have the freedom to develop a variety of relationships, freedom of time which could be used to do a variety of activities, potentially travel, or have more spontaneous outings, and these are all things that can be used to help the early adult singles population embrace their life and create a deeper community with one another as we are called and which would help in encouragement for these singles.

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<sup>50</sup> Douglas Fagerstrom, *Baker Handbook of Single Adult Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 163.

<sup>51</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 59.

## *Disciple Singles*

While it would do this group good to be in community with one another and be able to develop deep relationships of care and understanding, what is even more important is that these adults are being discipled in ways that brings them closer to God and emboldens them to live their lives of singleness with the purpose God has for them wherever they are and however God leads. Danylak puts this well when he explains, “Our lives cry out for significance, and significance comes from seeing ourselves the way God sees us – including our singleness.”<sup>52</sup> Not only must this group understand who they are as a child of God, but that where they are in life is a place where they can and must serve God in the ways he is calling them. This is having encouraging conversations about how God is our comfort and knows and loves us more than anyone else ever could, but it is also having hard conversations about the temptations of sin and the cost of our discipleship. We must encourage them to cast their eyes upon Jesus because, as Allberry reminds us, “Whatever someone might have to leave behind to follow him, he will replace, in godly kind and far greater measure.”<sup>53</sup>

Ministry leaders must show and speak to this population often about what it means to trust in the goodness of God and the plans that are uniquely for each of their lives. Joy Smith emphasizes the need there is for the single population to be reminded of the “sure things” that God has promised us as our comforter, our provider and the lover of our soul.<sup>54</sup> He will not leave us or forsake us, and he has a plan for each of our lives. The promises of God are what the single population should be constantly reminded of so that they can place their identity in these promises and be reminded that they were created to live into those promises completely for the

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<sup>52</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 13.

glory of their good and loving God. Smith has given this reminder for herself and others struggling with singleness: “God made us for himself, for his glory, and for communion with him. The only *person* we were made for was Jesus Christ, and to give that position to any human is to elevate a bond far higher than it can sustain itself.”<sup>55</sup> She later adds that any other role or relationship that she has is only a “tributary” and regardless of other tributaries we may have in our life, our relationship with Jesus must be first in order for us to take care of the others and for them to be life-giving, “I have to be pouring everything I am, everything I have, into growing that main river, because that’s where all the others feed from.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Being the Family of God*

A need in churches, not only for the single population, but for the entire church community, is a need of diving deeper into the community to which Christ calls us. Hitchcock explains that “The single person points to our need for true, deep, intimate, and committed friendship, the kind of friendship Jesus has with us.”<sup>57</sup> Yet this friendship is not only meant for the singles population, but for our entire community, of which singles and families should play an equal role.

Specifically, relationships between a single person and a married couple can be more of a blessing than either would have expected:

The relationship cultivated between the single adult and the couple becomes a school for learning love in all its fullness. The reality of a lived-out marriage can correct the idealistic conception of marriage or redeem the shambles left from a broken marriage or a broken family in childhood.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 164.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 197.

<sup>57</sup> Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness*, 139.

<sup>58</sup> Fagerstrom, *Baker Handbook*, 69.

While this is healthy for both parties, it is also important to note there should be true Spirit-led intentionality put into how these types of relationships are formed as these types of relationships will take a different type of balance and intention to be relationships where both parties can show care and be cared for. Allberry writes about one of the Biblical calls to this type of community:

Psalms reminds us: ‘God sets the lonely in families’ (Ps. 68:6 NIV). It’s easy to read a verse like that and think, ‘Aw. It’s so nice that God does that.’ But that fact is, it’s actually deeply challenging, because we’re the families of Psalm 68 in which God is placing the lonely.<sup>59</sup>

Now, this is not to be a couple showing pity to a single person or a single person coming just to help watch the kids, this would be two parties seeking to create intentional community that lives all parts of life together, not just the hour or two on Sunday and Wednesday nights. This could mean inviting one another over to have dinner, inviting a single friend on family vacation or maybe taking up an offer given by a single friend from your church to help pick your children of from school (the thing you see as a chore may for them be an exciting change of pace for the day). These are things that may feel strange at first but showing this type of intention are ways we can truly be the family of God.

Living into the family of God can also look like the incorporation of early adult singles into various church leadership roles and parts of worship. This might mean helping lead things like church music, Bible studies, Sunday school, small groups, or any other role in which they may have the capacity to lead. The church and the singles must know they belong and know they are to be servants of the church just like those with families. Learning about what disciples of Christ are called to and filling roles like this in the church or through service in the world should

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<sup>59</sup> Allberry, *7 Myths*, 68.

be brought to this population and the desires they have toward serving in these types of roles should be cultivated. This is a way that, not only can singles be more encouraged to take a place of service to their community, but this can also be another way in which this population can build relationships beyond other singles. Smith quotes another woman, a licensed counselor, who was a part of the singleness group discussion, she “hit at the heart of the issue: ‘Where the church is failing is they’re not addressing community and what it really means to be in community.’”<sup>60</sup>

Fostering this type of community throughout the whole church is not something only to be done for the benefit of our early adult singles but is the way of life we are called to so that the community of Christ can altogether be a community that shares and shows the great love of God.

### *Talk about Dating*

While some of this population may truly not be “looking” or have the desire to prioritize a romantic relationship at this time of their life, there is, as we saw earlier, a clear majority who are. This means dating must be talked about. This means talking about the funny parts, the embarrassing parts, the frustrating parts, the scary parts, the exciting parts and everything in between. There must also be conversations about how dating can and should glorify God and how one can be someone who contributes to a healthy Christian relationship. If this is a desire of members in your group, it is important to talk about and properly help them prepare to put work into. Dating should not be painted as something that is easy and natural if you find “the right one,” but instead it should be seen as a relationship that can be a blessing and used to glorify God when we learn to be in these types of relationships well. Smith gives some positives of dating

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 52.

when done in a God-honoring way: “as much as it takes from you, it gives you something too: It gives you the opportunity to learn more about yourself and your needs. It gives you the chance to show God’s love to another human being. There are all kinds of gifts that come from dating.”<sup>61</sup>

Along with even the healthiest dating habits can still come disappointment. When a date goes bad or a potential partner ends up being different than initially thought, it is easy for disappointment and discouragement to abound: “Some singles will cry, some will be depressed, others will perhaps covet their neighbor’s dating. Appreciate their pain of datelessness and so help them work through negative feelings.”<sup>62</sup>

What we can and should do much before we try to help by playing “matchmaker” is, as *The Handbook of Singles Adult Ministry* says, “Help singles give up the grand illusions. Some singles may still be searching for the perfect match! However...Some are tempted now to settle for the discount; some are motivated by desperation. Help them find the happy medium.”<sup>63</sup> While this might be joined with prayerful discernment if there is potential seen in a relationship between two members of a church, the leader of a Christian ministry might not be the person who should make it their role to play “matchmaker”. Instead, leaders should help early adults in their ministry by listening to the exciting or disappointing dating experiences they share, encourage them in their dating or singleness and help them learn to trust God’s plan for their life – with or without marriage.

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<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 167.

<sup>62</sup> Fagerstrom, *Baker Handbook*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> Fagerstrom, *Baker Handbook*, 37.



*Talk about Living (not postponing life)*

Joy Smith explains well the struggle she and many others have had while living their life as single but with the desire to marry in the mindset of, “I’ll wait until I get married, and then I’ll...”<sup>64</sup> This type of thinking is hurting the church and its single population. She says instead we must learn to “Drink deeply of this life God has given you.”<sup>65</sup> Singleness is not “just a season” to be endured until God “blesses” you with something better. Singleness is a part of life that all people live in, and all are in for as long as God sees to be good for them. Smith states how our way of thinking should be if we are living faithfully to God, describing, “Singleness is a valid life stage, one in which you can experience as much joy, spiritual growth, and fulfillment as any married person.”<sup>66</sup> This is not often how people understand their singleness, but to let a relationship status stop a person from living life because they dwell on one of the one things they do not have is limiting the ways God may use them or have them enjoy this time of their life. This is what we need to encourage our early adult singles in and what the church, as a community, should be invested in for their sake as well. This means asking questions and learning more about their work, their hobbies, their passion projects, their family and all of the other things that we know make up a life. Smith shares her desire for this saying, “At the end of the day, I want my people to want the glory of God in my life more than they want me to be married.”<sup>67</sup>

Fostering these types of communities and truly discipling early adult Christian singles are vital steps that ministry leaders can take to better serve this often-overlooked population. Creating intentional connections with others who can relate to their situation can provide

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<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 200.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 202.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, *Party of One*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Joy Beth Smith, *Party of One: Truth, Longing, and the Subtle Art of Singleness* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 11.

comfort, confidence, and a reminder that they are not alone. Additionally, discipleship that emphasizes their identity as children of God for whom he has unique plans is crucial in helping them live their lives of singleness with purpose and hope. It is through intentional work in these areas that ministry leaders can better serve their young adult singles and show them that they are an essential part of the body of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

When young adult singles look at the dating culture around them and then hear messages that tell them if they are single, they must be doing something wrong, it is no surprise that this population feels a sense of unfulfillment and pressure to just find someone for the sake of marriage and social acceptance, not for the sake of their betterment or the glory of God. But if ministry leaders and the rest of the church would come alongside the singles population and see their singleness as akin to that of Jesus or Paul, there would be much less pressure and much more purpose given to this group of disciples. By creating groups where young adult singles feel embraced and needed, this population will be better set to live into a life that may not be exactly what they imagined, but it will be even more hopeful as they learn to embrace the love of God that reaches further and deeper than any other human being's love possibly could. This will better equip them to combat the words of the world or their own thoughts that may try to tell them they are less than because of their relationship status. Through building communities where the early adult singles feel connected to each other and the rest of the church community, not only the singles, but the entire church will be able to see a deeper bond being made in a community of faith that proclaims the eternal community believers will have with each other and their Savior, Jesus Christ, for all of eternity.

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## **Appendix A: Chat AI Prompts**

“Help me make this sentence less awkward.”

“Make this paragraph sound better.”