

SINGLES IN THE CHURCH

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Twenty-five years ago Sovereign Grace asked me to write a book for singles in their *Pursuit of Godliness* study series. The result was *The Rich Single Life*, which came out in a small wave of books on singleness in Christian publishing and actually did fairly well. A quarter century later I thought I'd dig up a copy and see how the book has aged over the years.

Overall, there wasn't too much to cringe about. I'm not sure I'd try to reach for cultural relevance by quoting Madonna now. And I came pretty hard against online dating, which seems quaint in a world where all of our relationships are now navigated to a considerable degree on social media. On the plus side, I made a strong appeal for singles to "express your unique attributes as a man or woman under Christ in this gender-blended culture."⁷⁰

But I know for a fact I had no clue what gender issues we'd be facing now. I'm most grateful that the "richness" of gospel-centeredness that drove our publishing back then is the main theme of the book.

One area I do feel like was a miss was a lack of emphasis on the church. All I say about the church is in a three-page section on personal impact under the heading, "What we are a part of is more important than the part we play." I'm scratching my head on why I didn't address the role of the church for singles more robustly in the book. Maybe a reason is that the intended audience for the book was Christian singles, and we all knew that all Christians, single or otherwise, go to church. I'm not sure how much that logic fit the reality back then, and I'm very confident it doesn't work a quarter century later.

In the 1990's, the successful church had a successful singles ministry. A successful church singles ministry was attraction-based; it was a magnet location for single Christians who were looking to belong and build relationships in a Christian context. For singles it gave purpose beyond work, connection beyond loneliness, and a potential place to find a life partner. For the church, a successful singles ministry brought a sense of life and vitality to the congregation, but also fresh troops free to serve, well-resourced potential givers, a pool of potential babysitters, and the raw material for new families in the church.

This classic singles ministry concept worked, until it didn't.

⁷⁰ Andy Farmer, *The Rich Single Life* (Gaithersburg, MD: PDI Ministries, 1998), 35.

Singles ministry as a method for gathering did produce energy in churches, connected single believers in community and healthy relationships, and percolated outreach. But the methodology was prone to flocking, where singles would tend to float around various churches looking for the new hot spot. Churches without the resources to build vibrant ministry for singles often lost their single adults to churches that did. And the system didn't serve singles all that well either.

In churches where there was segmented ministry for single adults, a sense of being an appendage to the real (as in "marriage and family") membership of the church was inescapable. The singles ministry approach also didn't facilitate smooth life transitions in the church. College-age singles graduated and found themselves wandering into groups of folks a decade or more older. Singles who got married saw their whole relational world change at the end of a honeymoon. Divorced and widowed people and single parents always struggled to fit in. The calls and needs of men and women in their mature years cannot be conflated with those just starting adult life in their twenties under the situational category of "single".

So what now for "the rich single life" in the church? First, the same biblical truths for singleness that were relevant twenty-five years ago are relevant now. God's kingdom has no classes of people (Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11). Singleness is a state of opportunity, not of purgatory (1 Cor. 7). Our identity in Christ fills every season of our lives with dignity and purpose (Eph. 2:4-10). Contentment with where I am in life is a gospel pursuit, not a function of what I have or do not have (Phil. 4:12-13). God's church is a community of saints, sinners, and sufferers (thank you Mike Emlet for this rubric), therefore we are always more alike than we are different (Eph. 4:1-6).

The Rich Single Life in the Church Today

There are some big things that have happened over the last twenty-five years that should shape how the church approaches singleness. In no particular order, here are a few.

Cultural Shift

The traditional role of marriage and family in the church is not what it used to be. Churches are no longer filling up with people raising families looking for a supportive environment. Marriages and families in the church are increasingly being shaped by ideas and commitments outside the church. The practical result in my view is that people can carry on their day-to-day business in the church as individuals, not always as covenant partners and families. This is not healthy or wise, but it has softened the wall of separation between the experience of being single and the experience of not being single.

Social Media

The uploading of huge portions of our lives into social media has created layers of virtual community and connection that were not available to singles in the previous century. The Saturday night singles gathering is no longer the place where one goes to feel a part of something.

Pocket-Sized Internet

The explosion of streaming content and hand-held entertainment options (including news feeds and podcasts) has sucked all of us into a world of escapes that we share at various levels. I may be at a party and have no idea how to relate to my single brother and his spiritual experience, but we can spend a whole night following fantasy teams, debating the quality of Marvel spin-off shows, and trading funny memes. And married and non-married people can bond with someone on the basis of common thinking on political or social issues without having to address different seasons of life.

A Way Forward

So what is a church to do for its singles in these days? A few suggestions:

- Care for your marriages and families, but preach and teach to the whole church.
- Build resilient community structures that allow all of your people to go through life situations and transitions in the blessing of long term relationships, not merely (or exclusively) season of life compatibility.
- Conscientiously provide resources and ministry for single adults in your church without treating them as if singleness is their defining life experience.
- Purpose to include single adults for opportunities to lead in the church.
- Prepare your church for the single adults who may come in through outreach. What pastor doesn't love to see Jesus-loving single disciples throw themselves into its ministry. But that isn't the only kind of single person who will come. In addition to the divorced and widowed and single parents who have become dear members of our churches over the years, there may also come unmarried cohabitating couples with children, survivors of sexual abuse or domestic violence, people who have struggled with substance abuse or mental disorders. Can we find a place for these folks as well?

God willing, the singles in the church over the next quarter century will also include refugees from the gender and sexuality chaos to which the world around us genuflects, but which has no soul and no sustaining ethos besides self-exaltation. If we can be a place where people fleeing that disastrous social experiment find the redemption and rest that only Christ offers, we may see in our churches a whole new chapter for the rich single life.