

Singled out for good

By Paige Benton

Had I any vague premonition of my present plight when I was six, I would have demanded that Stephen Herbison (incontestably the catch of the second grade) put his marriage proposal into writing and have it notarized. I do want this piece to be practical, so to all you first-graders: carpe diem.

Over the past several years, I have perfected the artistry of escape regarding any singles functions--cookouts, conferences, Sunday school classes, and my personal favorite, putt-putt. My avoidance mechanism is triggered not so much by a lack of patience with such activities as it is by a lack of stomach for the pervasive attitudes. Thoreau insists that most men lead lives of quiet desperation; I insist that many singles lead lives of loud aggravation. Being immersed in singles can be like finding yourself in the midst of "The Whiners" of 1980s Saturday Night Live--it gives a whole new meaning to "pity party."

Much has been written in Christian circles about singleness. The objective is usually either to chide the married population for their misunderstanding and segregationism or to empathize with the unmarried population as they bear the cross of "Plan B" for the Christian life, bolstered only by the consolation prizes of innumerable sermons on 1 Corinthians 7 and the fact that you can cut your toenails in bed. Yet singles, like all believers, need scriptural critique and instruction seasoned by sober grace, not condolences and putt-putt accompanied with pious platitudes.

John Calvin's secret to sanctification is the interaction of the knowledge of God and knowledge of self. Singles, like all other sinners, typically dismiss the first element of the formula, and therein lies the root of all identity crises. It is not that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but that life has no tragedy like our God ignored. Every problem is a theological problem, and the habitual discontent of us singles is no exception.

Can God be any less good to me on the average Tuesday morning than he was on that monumental Friday afternoon when he hung on a cross in my place? The answer is a resounding no. God will not be less good to me tomorrow either, because God cannot be less good to me. His goodness is not the effect of his disposition but the essence of his person--not an attitude but an attribute.

I long to be married. My younger sister got married two months ago. She now has an adoring husband, a beautiful home, a whirlpool bathtub, and all-new Corningware. Is God being any less good to me than he is to her? The answer is a resounding no. God will not be less good to me because God cannot be less good to me. It is a cosmic impossibility for God to shortchange any of his children.

God can no more live in me apart from the perfect fullness of his goodness and grace than I can live in Nashville and not be white. If he fluctuated one quark in his goodness he would cease to be God.

Warped theology is at the heart of attempts to "explain" singleness: "As soon as you're satisfied with God alone, he'll bring someone special into your life"--as though God's blessings are ever earned by our contentment. "You're too picky"--as though God is frustrated by our fickle whims and needs broader parameters in which to work. "As a single you can commit yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord's work"--as though God requires emotional martyrs to do his work, of which marriage must be no part. "Before you can marry someone wonderful the Lord has to make you someone wonderful"--as though God grants marriage as a second blessing to the satisfactorily sanctified.

Accepting singleness, whether temporary or permanent, does not hinge on speculation about answers God has not given to our list of whys, but rather on celebration of the life he has given. I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me. It is a cosmic impossibility that anything could be better for me right now than being single. The psalmists confirm that I should not want, I shall not want, because no good thing will God withhold from me.

Such knowledge of God must transform subsequent knowledge of self-theological readjustment is always the catalyst for renewed self-awareness. This keeps identity right side up with nouns and modifiers in their correct place. Am I a Christian single or am I a single Christian? The discrepancy in grammatical construction may be somewhat subtle, but the difference in mindset is profound. Which word is determinative and which is descriptive?

You see, we singles are chronic amnesiacs--we forget who we are, we forget whose we are. I am a single Christian. My identity is not found in my marital status but in my redemptive status. I am one of the "haves," not one of the "have-nots."

Have you ever wondered at what age one is officially single? Perhaps a sliding scale is in order: 38 for a Wall Street tycoon; 21 for a Mississippi sorority girl; 14 for a Zulu princess; and five years older than I am for me. It is a relevant question because at some point we see ourselves as "single," and that point is a place of greater danger than despair. Singleness can be a mere euphemism for self-absorption--now is the "you time." No wife to support? No husband to pamper? Well, then, by all means join three different golf courses, get a weekly pedicure, raise emus, subscribe to People.

Singleness is never carte blanche for selfishness. A spouse is not a sufficient countermeasure for self. The gospel is the only antidote for egocentricity. Christ did not come simply to save us from our sins, he came to save us from our selves. And he most often rescues us from us through relationships, all kinds of relationships. "Are you seeing anyone special?" a young matron in my home church asked patronizingly. "Sure," I smiled. "I see you and you're special." OK, my sentiment was a little less than kind, but the message is true. To be single is not to be alone. If someone asks if you are in a relationship right now, your immediate response should be that you are in dozens. Our range of relational options is not limited to getting married or to living in the sound-proof, isolated booth of Miss America pageants. Christian growth mandates relational richness.

The only time folks talk about human covenants is in premarital counseling. How anemic. If our God is a covenantal God then all of our relationships are covenantal. The gospel is not about how much I love God (I typically love him very little); it is about how much God loves me. My relationships are not about how much friends should love me, they are about how much I get to love them. No single should ever expect relational impoverishment by virtue of being single. We should covenant to love people--to initiate, to serve, to commit.

Many of my Vanderbilt girls have been reading *Lady in Waiting*, a popular book for Christian women struggling with singleness. That's all fine and dandy, but what about a subtitle: *And Meanwhile, Lady, Get Working*. It is a cosmic impossibility for God to require less of me in my relationships than he does of the mother of four whose office is next door. Obedience knows no ages or stages.

Let's face it: singleness is not an inherently inferior state of affairs. If it were, heaven would be inferior to this world for the majority of Christians (Mom is reconciled to being unmarried in glory as long as she can be Daddy's roommate). But I want to be married. I pray to that end day. I may meet someone and walk down the aisle in the next couple of years because God is so good to me. I may never have another date and die an old maid at 93 because God is so good to me. Not my will but his be done. Until then I am claiming as my theme verse, "If any man would come after me, let him . . ."