

Biblical Anthropology

*Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion”
(Genesis 1:26 ESV)*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in
place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?
(Psalm 8:3-4 ESV)*

Singleness

March 3rd, 2024

Genesis 2:18; Matthew 19:4-12; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

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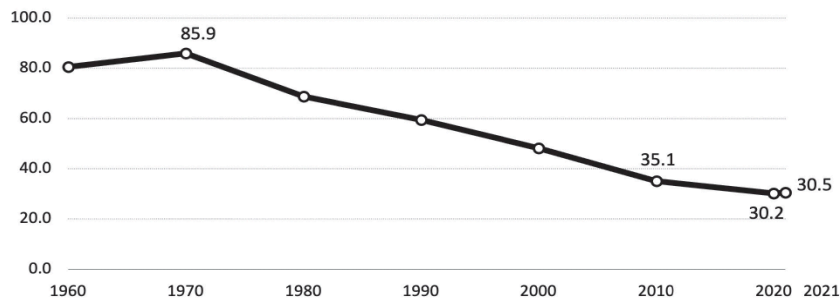
Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Genesis 2:18; that’s on page 2 in your church Bibles. We’re going to be camping out in three passages this morning as we talk about the issue of singleness. We’re going to be looking at Genesis, Jesus and Paul – in terms of what they have to say about this topic.

As we talked about a few weeks ago, the marriage rate in North America is in precipitous decline. (show slide).

FIGURE 1.4: US MARRIAGE RATE CLOSE TO ALL-TIME LOW IN 2021

Number of newly married people per 1,000 unmarried Americans aged 15 and up



Source: Institute for Family Studies, “New Census Data: Key Takeaways on Divorce, Marriage, and Fertility in the U.S.,” September 22, 2022.

Fewer people are getting married and those who are getting married are getting married later in life. (show slide)

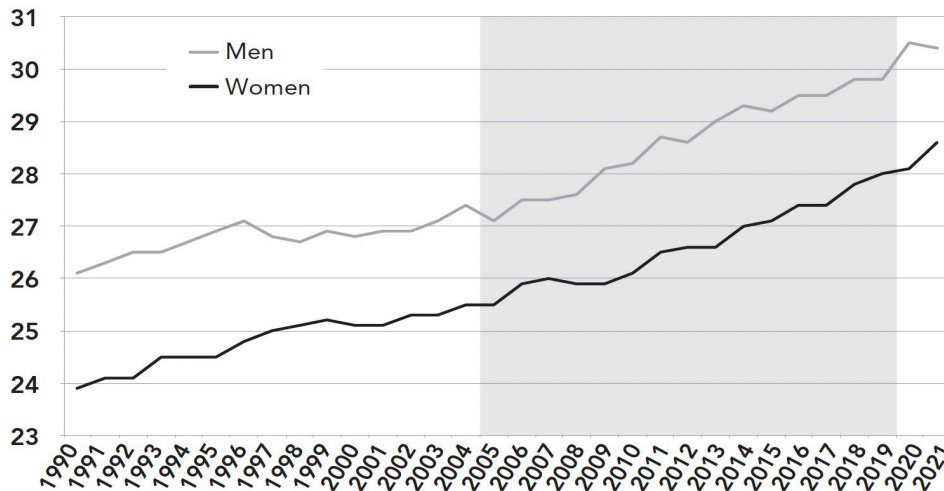


Figure 5.28: Median age at first marriage, U.S., by gender, 1990–2021

Source: Current Population Survey, U.S. Census, Historical Marital Status Tables

Notes: Millennials most 20- to 29-year-olds in shaded years.

The average age for first marriage in North America is about 31 for men and 28.5 for women.

The bottom line is, we have more single people right now, in the culture, and in the church, than we've ever had before. No matter what you think about this, this reality is literally reshaping society. It is changing the way we do childcare, it is changing the way we plan cities, it is changing the way we do health care, and it is changing the way we do church.

So how should we think about this?

Well of course, we want to begin with the Bible. We're going to start with the DESIGN that we encounter in Genesis, then we're going to look at the NEW REVELATION that we meet in the teaching of Jesus and then we'll have a look at the interpretation and application of that in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

Let's begin then with the Book of Genesis.

Genesis:

Hopefully you have your Bible open by now to Genesis 2:18. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Ok – so, as we’ve talked about already, human beings are SOCIAL CREATURES. We were created male and female. We were MADE FOR GOD and we were made FOR EACH OTHER. It is not good for the man to be alone. God made the woman to be the “corresponding part” – to be the “other half” of Adam. That phrase “helper fit for him” does not imply inferiority – in fact, as I mentioned a few Sundays ago, the most common referent for that term in the Bible is God himself. God is STRONG in ways that correspond to our NEEDS as human beings – well that is exactly what is being said about Eve. She is STRONG and CAPABLE in ways that correspond to DESIGNED DEFICIENCIES in Adam. God MADE US to COME TOGETHER. He GAVE US natural attraction to each other and natural complementarities that are intended to make us HAPPY and to result in FRUITFULNESS. The famous ethicist Oliver O’Donovan wrote that human beings are:

“clearly ordered at the biological level towards heterosexual union as the human mode of procreation. It is not possible to negotiate this fact about our common humanity; it can only be either welcomed or resented.”¹

So this is THE DESIGN. This is WHO WE ARE AS HUMAN. This is what God calls GOOD – in fact, if you know your Book of Genesis, then you know that this is what God calls VERY GOOD. Everything else in creation is called GOOD – but after the creation of the MAN and the WOMAN on the sixth day, the Bible says:

“God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” (Genesis 1:31 ESV)

¹ Oliver O’Donovan, *Transsexualism And Christian Marriage*, 6.

Marriage is not just an aspect of creation, it appears as though it is being presented as some kind of lynchpin. For us to BE who God made us to be and for us to DO what God called us to do, generally speaking, we're going to need to get married. John Hamett & Katie McCoy in their book on *Humanity* provide a decent summary of what Genesis is teaching us here, saying:

“There may be good reasons for some to remain single and for some couples to remain childless, but it seems fairly clear that marriage and procreation are two of the reasons God made us male and female, and even in a fallen world, the benefits that accrue to men, women, and children by marriage and two-parent families are undeniable.”²

That is the consistent testimony, not just in Genesis, but in the entire Old Testament. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, there is NO TRADITION of singleness in the Old Testament, or in historic Judaism as a religion. The only exception to that would be the prophet Jeremiah, whom God commanded not to marry because the city of Jerusalem was about to be besieged and destroyed. So in extreme circumstances, it might be better not to marry, but other than that, marriage is the consistent norm for all people within the Old Testament covenant community.

But, as you will know if you are a Bible reader, there is a significant change introduced as we enter into the New Testament era.

Flip forward in your Bibles to Matthew 19:4-12; that's on page 824 in your church Bibles.

Jesus:

Jesus was having a conversation with the Pharisees about divorce. The Pharisees in general had a pretty liberal approach to divorce, believing that it was fine for a man to put away his wife for a variety of reasons. They asked Jesus to weigh in and they got back far more than they bargained for. Jesus said:

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and

² John S. Hammett & Katie J. McCoy, *Humanity in Theology for the People of God* (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2023), 178.

hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:4-6 ESV)

So first of all, let’s be careful to notice that Jesus ENDORSES that which is taught in Genesis as NORMATIVE. He says:

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? (Matthew 19:4-5 ESV)

So he says, “that’s the design, that’s the pattern”. Jesus does not say: “You have heard it said, go forth and multiply, but I say to you, stay single, travel while you can, live your best life now.”

No – he endorses the Old Testament design.

In fact, so STRINGENTLY does he endorse the Old Testament design, permitting divorce only in the case of sexual immorality, that the disciples ask him who in their right mind would ever make the decision to get married. If you can never put your wife away – maybe you’d be better off staying single.

Jesus said to them:

“Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” (Matthew 19:11-12 ESV)

Jesus says, “Yes, the biblical teaching on marriage sets a very high bar, and you will need grace to receive it. The only other option though is to become a eunuch – let the one who is able to receive the teaching about that, receive it.”

Now what in the world does Jesus mean when he talks about becoming a eunuch? A eunuch in the ancient world was usually a slave who was surgically castrated in order to serve in the King’s

household – he was castrated so that he would not represent a threat to the King’s wives or daughters. This was very common in the Persian Empire and in parts of Africa. And there are several eunuchs mentioned in the Bible – we think of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 or we think of Daniel and his three friends who were prisoners of the Babylonians and who served in the King’s court and who were eunuchs – Daniel 1:7 says:

“the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.” (Daniel 1:7 ESV)

Why did the chief of the eunuchs give Daniel and his friends new names? Because they were under his charge. They were eunuchs! And their identity from that point on would relate to their service in the king’s household.

So – is that what Jesus is talking about here? Is he saying: “You can get married, or you can undergo the same surgical experience that Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego underwent?”

Well of course, we understand that he was speaking metaphorically. The historian Kyle Harper points out that:

“There was no natural word for male virginity in Greek or Latin. . . . Christians found circumlocutions for male sexual abstinence, such as *eunouchia*.”³

To call someone a EUNUCH was simply to call them a MALE VIRGIN – but there wasn’t even a WORD in Greek or Latin at that time to describe an adult male virgin because such people did not EXIST! Everyone got married! They had sex with their wives, and if they were Romans, they had sex with their slaves, with prostitutes and with anyone else under their power. No grown men in that world lived as VIRGINS – unless they were physically handicapped in some way or unless they were eunuchs – and so Jesus takes that word and expands it. He says, “There are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men – like Daniel and his friends, and there are those who are eunuchs from birth – that is to say they were born with some kind of natural deformity – and

³ Kyle Harper, *From Shame To Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality In Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 52.

there are eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God, that is to say, that there are people who CHOOSE not to get married and who practice sexual self-control, so that they can devote themselves to service of THE KING. Let the one who can receive that teaching, receive it.”

So according to Jesus, there are THREE CATEGORIES OF SINGLENESS: there are surgical eunuchs – men like Daniel and the Ethiopian Eunuch; there are natural eunuchs – people born without the physical capacity for sex and marriage; and there are MISSIONAL EUNUCHS – people who CHOOSE singleness and celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Now notice what category he doesn't have! He has not category for “Singleness so that I can travel and have consequence free sex.”

That is NOT a thing, Old Testament or New.

But MISSIONAL SINGLENESS IS - that is a legitimate category. Jesus himself, lived his entire earthly life in that category. He was missionally celibate and single and his life proves that you can be FULLY and HAPPILY HUMAN without ever getting married and without ever having sex. That is possible. That is commendable. But it is not for everybody.

That's the new bit of information that we receive from Jesus and that information is interpreted and further applied by the Apostle Paul.

So flip a little further forward in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7:1-8; that's on page 955 in the church Bibles.

Paul:

Here Paul is responding to some questions that were sent to him in a letter from a church that he had planted. One of those questions had to be with singleness and sexuality. New believers were fascinated with the fact that Jesus was single. As I mentioned, there was NO CATEGORY for singleness in either Roman or Jewish life – so Jesus stood out like a unicorn on roller skates. And then to add to the confusion, Paul was single also – at least during the time of his ministry. It is often assumed that Paul WAS married, because again, all Jewish men were married and Paul

couldn't have been part of the Sanhedrin if he was not married – so he WAS married, but during the time of his Apostolic ministry and his church planting he was not married. There are two possible reasons for that: First of all, his wife may have died. Lots of women did die, particularly in childbirth, so that is the most likely explanation. The other possibility is that she divorced him when he became a Christian. Also possible. But we can't be sure. All we know is that Paul was SINGLE and CELIBATE and so if the two most famous people in Christianity were single and celibate, then maybe that was the inside track to holiness and glory! And so they wrote to him and they asked: Should we be celibate like you? And Paul answered them; he quotes their question back to them in verse 1 and then in verse 2 he says:

But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

6 Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 7 I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. 8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. (1 Corinthians 7:2-8 ESV)

Alright, so for the Apostle Paul MARRIAGE IS GOOD and MISSIONAL SINGLENESS IS GOOD. Both are GOOD.

Paul picks up this category from Jesus – the category of “eunuchs for the Kingdom of God” and he EMBRACES IT and he throws it out as an appeal: “Will anyone among you pray about whether or not this is God’s call on your life? Will anyone PRAY for the gift of celibacy so that he or she can live a life of LASER FOCUS and dedicated service in pursuit of the Great Commission?”

Now to be clear, Paul doesn't disparage marriage – he still holds it out as the general norm. He does that here in 1 Corinthians 7 and he does it as well in 1 Timothy 5:14; he says:

“I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.” (1 Timothy 5:14 ESV)

Marriage is GOOD, SINGLENESS is GOOD, but singleness is not for everybody; that’s Paul’s basic philosophy. He says in 1 Corinthians 7:9:

“if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” (1 Corinthians 7:9 ESV)

So you’ve got to have the gift of celibacy to live a life of MISSIONAL SINGLENESS. Trying to live a life of missional singleness without the gift of celibacy is like trying to play in the NBA as a 5 foot 10, middle age, stocky white guy. It’s probably not going to go very well. Could get messy; could be an injury. Right?

You need the gift to pursue the calling.

“But I wish there were more of us”, Paul says, “because people like that can make game changing contributions to the Kingdom of God. They can GO places married people can’t go. They can work hours that married people can’t work. They can take risks that married people should not take. So would you pray”, Paul says, “for the GIFTS REQUIRED to live a life like that.”

That’s the appeal that we find in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

Now let me see if I can distil all of what we’ve just read from Genesis, Jesus and Paul into some practical counsel and encouragement.

Practical Counsel And Encouragement:

I think the first thing we need to say is this: there are some of you in this room who really ought to get married, or at least, ought to begin moving in that direction. John Hammett and Katie McCoy again are helpful here, they note that:

“In the contemporary North American context, many who choose singleness do so for reasons quite different from those in view in the New Testament: fear of commitment, desire to maintain personal freedom, or they just haven’t found the right person. But few are exercising self-control and living a celibate lifestyle; few see it as their gift from God; few are using their singleness for undistracted devotion to the Lord. In this context the church may do well to encourage young people to seek marriage.”⁴

I think that is true – so let me take a stab at that. Brothers - young men in the room - despite what you may have heard from Andrew Tate, marriage actually is a really good idea. Brad Wilcox reports that:

“Married men ages eighteen to fifty-five are also 55 percent less likely to be living in poverty, compared to their single peers”⁵

We talked about this last week – married men work longer hours, make more money and enjoy a long list of financial efficiencies, all of which result in more financial stability over the course of their lives.

And sisters, turns out the same is true for you. Again, according to Wilcox:

“Stably married women typically have about \$357,000 in assets in their fifties, compared to \$243,000 for remarried women, \$28,000 for divorced women, and \$13,000 for never-married women.”⁶

Marriage is a GAME CHANGER, financially speaking, for women. But of course, we care about more than just money, don’t we? We want to be happy – and marriage plays a significant role in that outcome as well. Wilcox reports that:

“Having a job only boosts your odds of being happy by 50 percent. An above-average income only boosts them by 88 percent. Marriage is associated with a 151 percent increase in your odds of being happy, compared to never being married.”⁷

⁴ John S. Hammett & Katie J. McCoy, *Humanity in Theology for the People of God* (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2023), 183.

⁵ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy The Elites, Forge Strong Families, And Save Civilization* (USA: Broadside Books, 2024), 41.

⁶ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy The Elites, Forge Strong Families, And Save Civilization* (USA: Broadside Books, 2024), 43.

⁷ Brad Wilcox, *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy The Elites, Forge Strong Families, And Save Civilization* (USA: Broadside Books, 2024), 52.

Surprise, surprise! Marriage is actually good for us! Generally speaking, leads to better life outcomes for men, women and children because IT ACCORDS WITH OUR DESIGN. Why would we expect anything else? God knows us and God loves us - so of course the things he tells us to do point us in the direction of happiness, wisdom, stability, health, life and prosperity. GOD is a GOOD GOD and his ways can be trusted.

So, some of you need to stop listening to the wisdom of the world and the voice of the culture – maybe some of you even need to stop listening to the voice of your parents. The truth is, one of the main reasons that Gen Z kids are delaying marriage is because their Gen X and Boomer parents are telling them to travel the world, establish yourself in your career, make lots of money – maybe live together for a while before you get married – the advice that has become standard place for Gen Z kids is a MASSIVE part of the problem. Listen, just like you should obey the government until the government tells you to do what God forbids or forbids you to do what God commands – same thing with respect to your parents. Some of you need to trust God more than you trust the advice being given to you by your parents.

For some of you the issue is that you are out there looking for your soul mate. Can I save you some time? Your soul mate does not exist. There are no perfect people and there are no perfect matches so you need to let go of this idea that there is someone out there who will give you permanent butterflies in your stomach. Listen, permanent butterflies in your stomach may actually be an indication of gastrointestinal distress. Whatever that is – and I'm not against it - I'm just saying, that is not a reliable foundation for a life-long happy marriage. Most of the happy marriages that I've encountered are based upon friendship, commitment, a desire for family and a shared faith in the Creator. You can build a fantastic life on that – and most of us should.

So, some of you should begin to pursue marriage – but I also understand that in a room like this, there may be a handful of people who want to get married and who are looking to get married, but they're running up against the numbers. I get that. If you are a 25 year old in this culture looking to get married – you're going to have trouble because most people aren't even thinking about that until they turn 30. So to you, I think I would say: EMBRACE THIS SEASON OF SINGLNESS. You can pray for two things at a time. Pray for SELF CONTROL and LASER FOCUS NOW – so that you can do Kingdom Stuff – and pray also for the Lord to send you a godly spouse and life long partner in his perfect timing.

Don't waste your singleness.

USE IT!

USE IT for the Kingdom of God!

For some of you it is going to be a precious and productive season – but for some of you it could be a lifetime calling. Like the Apostle Paul, I want you to pray about that and I understand that if you HEAR THAT CALL, we are going to need to STEP UP as a community in order to support you. Nancy Pearcey in her discussion of singleness in the history of the church says:

“Celibates made a radical commitment to the church community as their family. The challenge to today's church is to become a richly interdependent community that once again makes it possible for celibates to find their family among fellow Christians.”⁸

Because, like we read at the beginning:

“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

Brothers and sisters, if a person in here takes up the call to MISSIONAL SINGLENESS we are all going to need to UP OUR GAME. It would be UNKIND OF US to encourage a young person to embrace MISSIONAL SINGLENESS if we are not prepared to invest in robust church community. If we are going to be so wrapped up in our own families – taking 5 vacations a year, spending every moment of every day serving each other – then how in the world are we going to build the kind of community in here that can compensate for what we are asking our brothers and sisters to give up for the sake of the Kingdom?

Now, of course, I'm not telling you to ignore your family – I'm challenging you to pursue a BALANCE that will allow you to make space in your life for single, celibate people. Is there a seat at your table for them? Could they come to thanksgiving at your house? Could they be

⁸ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), 178.

Auntie or Uncle to your kids? Could they sit in on the graduation? Could they be invited to the birthday party? Could they GO with you on your summer vacation?

Because we NEED THESE THINGS in order to be human. We don't HAVE to be married – but we do have to have friends. We don't have to physically give birth to children – but we do need to spiritually parent. We need to be fruitful and to multiply in some way or another. So can WE do what WE need to do as a church so that some of our brothers and sisters could take up the call to MISSIONAL SINGLENESS for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

A few people like this in a community like ours, could set the world on fire. But it will take grace from above and support from below – O God help!

Let's pray together.