

Missionary Singles Issues: Is Singleness OK?

In *By Ones & by Twos* Jeannie Lockerbie Stephenson reveals how she was once told that she had “done more in this area than any other single person.” She thought that meant that no other one person had accomplished as much as she had. Later she found out that the speaker meant that no other unmarried person had done as much—implying that married people do more than unmarried ones!

Here are some questions that unmarried missionaries have been asked either by other missionaries or by nationals in cultures where marriage is expected.

- Are you gay? (implying homosexuality)
- Why aren't you married? (implying that people of that age would be married unless something was wrong)
- Are you dating? (implying that if two unmarried people are doing something together, it must be more than just friendship)
- When do you plan to marry? (implying that everyone should marry)

Is there something wrong with unmarried missionaries? Are they immoral or inferior in some way? Here are some thoughts to consider.

Jesus

Although Jesus was not a missionary in the usual sense of taking the Good News from one culture to another here on earth, he certainly crossed cultures to create that Good News which missionaries proclaim today. Philippians 2 notes that Christ Jesus left his

heavenly home and came to live here as a man in an earthly culture among human beings.

Having never married, Jesus was a single, and he did nothing immoral or inferior. If our Lord lived all his life as a single, there is certainly nothing wrong with that.

Paul

The Apostle Paul was the most famous and influential missionary in the Bible. In Acts he spent three terms of cross-cultural service and largely defined the movement in his discussions with those at headquarters in Jerusalem. Paul also wrote many letters to national churches and their pastors in various places. These letters are now books of the New Testament and are still influential 2000 years later.

Paul was single. When one of the national churches asked questions about marriage, Paul said that he wished everyone was single like he was (1 Corinthians 7:7). A couple of sentences later he told the unmarried that it was good for them to stay single as he was (1 Corinthians 7:8).

Paul, a successful and influential missionary, lived as a single and encouraged others to do the same. He did nothing immoral or inferior but was a shining example of cross-cultural work.

The Bible on Singleness

Both Jesus and Paul not only were single but also had something to say about singleness.

Jesus had been speaking to large crowds and healing people when some Pharisees asked Jesus a question about divorce. After Jesus answered the question, the disciples said that if what Jesus said was

true, it would be better not to marry at all. (Matthew 19:10)

Jesus replied that only some people could accept this. He then elaborated that there were three reasons people did not marry.

- Some people are born without the capacity or desire for marriage.
- Other people are castrated and no longer have the capacity for marital relations.
- Still others do not marry because of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus concluded by saying, “The one who can accept this should accept it” (Matthew 19:12). His answer implied that choosing not to marry to serve God better was not only acceptable but also pleasing to God.

Paul wrote extensively about singleness and marriage in response to questions from the church at Corinth. Here is what he said about remaining single in 1 Corinthians 7.

- It is good not to marry (v. 1).
- It is good for the unmarried and those whose spouses have died to stay unmarried (v. 8).
- If you are unmarried, do not look for a spouse (because of the crisis at the time people should not change marital status) (vv. 26-27).
- An unmarried man is more concerned about the Lord's affairs, about how he can please God (v. 32)
- An unmarried woman is also more concerned about the Lord's affairs, so she can be devoted to God both physically and spiritually (v. 34).
- The man who made up his mind, was not compelled, had control over his will, and has decided not to marry does the right thing (v. 38).

- The man who marries does right, but the man who does not marry does even better (v. 38).
- The woman whose husband dies is free to remarry a believer, but Paul believes she will be happier if she does not remarry (v. 39-40).

In contrast, here is what Paul said about getting married (rather than remaining single).

- Since there is so much immorality both men and women should marry to have their own spouses (v. 2).
- If people can't control themselves, it is better to marry than to burn with passion (v. 9).
- People who marry will face many problems and Paul wanted to spare them from those problems (v. 28).
- A married man is more concerned about worldly affairs, how he can please his wife, and this divides his interests (v. 33).
- A married woman is also more concerned about worldly affairs, how she can please her husband (v. 34).
- If a man believes he is acting improperly toward his fiancé who is getting older, it is good for him to marry her (v. 36).

Jesus talked about people not marrying because of the kingdom of heaven. Paul's elaboration on what Jesus said makes it clear that singleness is not inferior to marriage. In fact, it is very pleasing to God.

Roman Catholic Single Missionaries

For many centuries primarily single priests and nuns of the Roman Catholic Church spread the Good News about Jesus Christ around the world. These people had made vows to remain celibate, did quite literally what Jesus said, “They renounced

marriage for the Kingdom of God” (Matthew 10:19). They remained single for the rest of their lives while they served as missionaries. They were not forbidden to marry, but they voluntarily chose to remain single so that they could better serve God.

The majority of these missionaries were single men serving in a variety of orders around the world for centuries. One of the most well known is St. Francis of Assisi who founded the Franciscan Order, and thousands of Franciscans have served nearly everywhere for the last 800 years.

Of course, there have also been single women who served as missionaries. Probably the most widely known one is Mother Teresa of Calcutta who was born in Albania and founded Missionaries of Charity in India. She was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1979.

Protestant Single Missionaries

After the Reformation, unlike the Roman Catholics, Protestant missionaries have been primarily married individuals. Furthermore, women have been the majority among those who are single. Single male missionaries are sometimes hard to find.

Probably the most well-known single Protestant male missionary was David Brainerd. Born in Connecticut, Brainerd was a missionary to the Delaware Indians in New Jersey until his death in 1747, 30 years before the USA became an independent nation. A well-known preacher, Jonathan Edwards, wrote an account of the life of David Brainerd which influenced missionaries such as William Carey (father of modern missions) and Adoniram Judson. Edwards’ book has never gone out of print and is currently available not only in print but in digital format online free of charge or at a small price for E-readers such as Kindle or Nook.

Single Protestant female missionaries are relatively easy to find. Born in London at the beginning of the 20th century, Gladys Alyward strongly felt that God had called her to be a missionary to China. When turned down by the China Inland Mission, she spent all she had to get passage to China where she was revered among the people for her service. Although she was disappointed in the liberties taken in making the movie, she became well-known while still alive when her story was portrayed in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*.

About a quarter of Protestant evangelical missionaries are single, and the vast majority of these are women. Although many married men serve as long-term missionaries, very few single men do. They may serve for a year or two, but they do not stay long enough to learn the language and culture of the people and develop personal relationships in which they disciple nationals.

Conclusion

Single missionaries have been and are extremely important. Imagine the world without the apostle Paul, without the priests and nuns of nearly 2000 years. Without single missionaries there would be far fewer Christians in the world today! Imagine losing a quarter of our current missionary force. Far fewer people would hear the Good News in the future.

Final note: During the latter part of the 20th century with the advent of airline transportation, short-term missionary trips or service ranging from a week or two to a year or two became popular. Single males are often found among these missionaries, but after their short-term of service, they typically leave the missionary force, but more single females return for further service.

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