

Celibacy: An alternate style of life?

**Some food for thought
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Celibacy during the course of history

Old Testament view

God invented and instituted marriage as a cell and building block of human society. During Old Testament times (and until today, for religious Jews), marriage and children contributed to the fulfilment of God's commands to be fruitful and multiply. A man and a woman turned out to be useful, fruitful members of human society in fulfilling these commands. A man received recognition, confirmation and dignity by protecting and supporting his wife and children. This proved that he was capable, reliable, and could do his part in society in a responsible way. Likewise, the woman experienced respect and protection by bearing and raising children and by supporting her husband when she created a home. Through marriage, man and woman received a defined place in society, receiving recognition and protection. In view of this understanding of marriage and society, celibacy must seem an unhealthy, abnormal condition. Linked with this is the opinion that an unmarried person ultimately contributes nothing to society's preservation because he has no descendants to confirm his authority and responsibility. People had the same attitude toward childless couples. They lived at the edge of society and were pitied because their lives were obviously fruitless and meaningless in regard to God's early commands. Thus men raised God's command to law. But God himself never made marriage and family the condition for a fruitful life. Precisely in the Old Testament he appears as one who is more interested in the fear of God and in dedication than in many descendants.

He called Abraham and Sarah, a couple known to be childless. During the time of the judges he gave Deborah, a childless woman, authority to lead his people wisely. Through Isaiah he sent a message to the unfruitful and childless women that he does not despise them for that. On the contrary, he prepared for those whose lives would not continue in their children, a future of joy and of blessing.

Then God purposely called one of his prophets, Jeremiah, to celibacy. It is surely not a coincidence that just this prophet, who experienced his people's fruitlessness in his own body and life, breaks out in chapter 31 in the revelation that the day will come when God's kingdom will break fruitfully into this world. It will radically change the relationship between God and man. For people who were faithful to the law, entrenched in the view described above, God's action in such situations must have been completely incomprehensible.

Celibacy in yesterday's society

Until 30 years ago, remaining single carried a stigma in our society. If a man remained unmarried beyond a certain age, others suspected a queer personality, homosexuality, or simply a stranded existence. In any case the single man encountered a certain scepticism and unspoken questions about his integrity. Warnings were whispered to children against too much contact with such an uncle.

People pitied and to some extent still pity an unmarried woman because being single is equated with private failure. The reaction was helplessness and sometimes distance. People felt obligated to do something about the lack of fulfilment and security which was assumed or communicated.

In any case, the single status was considered only a temporary condition, not in itself worth striving for. Being unmarried was somehow considered almost offensive, or at any rate

unfruitful. Men and women who remained single after a certain age caused embarrassment and perplexity for their friends and relatives. Warm, relaxed relationships to unmarried persons were a rarity. It was secretly hoped they would soon marry or enter a cloister-like community. At any rate, people wanted to see the singles «tie the knot», be cared for.

Celibacy in today's society

Like many other things, society's attitude toward singles has also radically changed during the past years. Today's society has detached itself from most Biblical and Christian values. Duty and dedication have become relative, leading to the loss of understanding about marriage and family. The meaning of celibacy is also undergoing change. The stigma, the lack of fruit and meaning in the unmarried life, and the lack of belonging are turned into an ideal of absolute freedom, non-commitment and self-realization. What used to be disreputable or ambiguous is now the expression of an independent, free and totally uncommitted life style. Where people used to look for fulfilment and meaning in dedication to family and society, in fulfilling duties and bearing responsibility, they now look for a minimum of duty, commitments and responsibility, alongside the highest degree of satisfaction in one's own desires. Lack of ties is the ideal of today's society.

The result of this transformation is the neglect of relationships, the loss of ability to relate, and apathy toward everything which does not have to do with my personal life. On this soil an egoism is growing which causes every society and fellowship to fall apart and which ultimately destroys them.

Celibacy in the congregation

The early church understood that a new age had dawned for the single person's relationship to God. Celibacy was accepted in the church's life as a possible, independent, and God-willed form of life. With the church's increasing institutionalization, this life form was increasingly linked with spiritual service. The celibate state was essential to the cloister or priesthood. The Roman Catholic church raised celibacy to a special condition reserved for spiritual servants, thus no longer relevant to ordinary mortals. Society altogether ceased taking celibacy into consideration, thus making the thought of it - apart from a spiritual commission - strange and offensive.

With the Reformation celibacy also lost meaning in relation to a spiritual ministry. Luther married. Celibacy had no more place in reformed thinking. The Old Testament understanding of marriage and celibacy entered the reformed church. And in the reformed churches of Europe there is an order-like movement for women only. Again it has a social-spiritual commission: the deaconesses. Thus celibacy is conceivable even in the reformed-evangelical sphere only for those in spiritual service and only within a defined framework such as an order. This has made it impossible to have a fruitful discussion of celibacy as a viable form in everyday life, in the church and in society.

Therefore many congregations are also quite helpless regarding celibacy. Many women suffer from the lack of understanding about their situation, a lack of vision for their niche in life and in God's kingdom. Many congregation leaders are unable to give help and orientation which would motivate singles to regard their status as fulfilment.

It is urgent to reconsider the New Testament's understanding of celibacy. What help is given to our congregations, who live according to God's kingdom, to experience fruitfulness both in marriage and in celibacy, in relaxed relationships?

New Testament Understanding

The bridegroom in focus

Jesus' views regarding marriage and celibacy were so radically different from his contemporaries that his disciples could not really grasp his thoughts.

«I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.» The disciples said to him, «If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.» Jesus replied, «Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.» (Matt. 19:9-12)

John the Baptist brought the message that the kingdom of heaven was breaking into this world. He did not marry, partly as a sign that this coming kingdom of God was bringing a new order. His whole life was set toward just one goal: The bridegroom is coming! His joy and the fulfilment of his life reached a climax in the statement, «the bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.» (John 3:29)

The love for the bridegroom which is visible in John the Baptist's life continues in the lives of various disciples. It shines forth again strongly in Paul's life, for example in his testimony in Phil. 3:8-10, «What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...»

Paul understood that he would experience fulfilment primarily in total alignment with the Messiah, the bridegroom. In his longing to «be found in him» we find no struggle with a lack of fulfilment, with the feeling of incompleteness in celibacy. The idea that he as an unmarried man could lack anything which would lead to fulfilled life was far from Paul's thoughts. He is so full of the experience that his status can bring him the most complete expression of life's fulness in the Messiah, that he would really like to recommend celibacy to everyone. For Paul, a former rabbi deeply rooted in Old Testament thought, this was an unusual testimony!

Life's goal

God wants each human life to ripen like a fruit until it reaches full maturity. The opening word, God's declared intention when he created man, still stands over each life, «Be fruitful and multiply». In John 15:16 Jesus takes up this command again, thus revealing a new dimension of God's original command, «I chose you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.»

The goal of every human life is lasting fruit. Each life should attain the full ripeness of a personality which pleases God and which benefits and builds up others. This kind of personality makes it possible to see and experience God's character and his kingdom. Both God's kingdom and human maturity are always revealed and manifested in relationships which express our deep consideration of others.

Where God's kingdom has dawned, where God in Jesus reveals himself to each individual person, such mature caring is possible both in marriage and in celibacy. This is unlike Old Testament conditions, where most people lived at a great distance from God and hardly experienced him personally. A relationship to him was possible only as a nation and a tribe, mediated by a priest. A life of commitment to another person was possible only in marriage. Only a few individuals such as Abraham, David and the prophets experienced God's nearness in a way which Jesus made accessible to everyone today. God restores the original

relationship he had with Adam and makes a mutual relationship possible with each individual, thus setting human maturity on totally new ground.

The path to maturity

What was already commanded in the Old Testament, even though it was impossible to attain, Jesus made possible for every person. «Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... Love your neighbour as yourself.» (Matt.22.27-29)

Within these priorities each person's life is fulfilled, regardless of his framework, regardless of whether he is married or single: first in loving God, then caring for his neighbour and for himself. In Jesus, God again establishes a relationship with man and challenges him to seek fulfilment, security, peace – everything which makes up life and is necessary for the development of personality – first of all in this relationship: «You shall love the Lord your God...»

In this context we can also understand Jesus saying, «Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.» (Matt. 10:37) This pertains not only to those with wives, husbands or children. It pertains also to those who live with the idea that they cannot achieve a fulfilled, fruitful, God-pleasing life without the possibility of marriage and physical descendants.

Attaining full maturity and fulfilment in life does not depend on our marital status, but on the way we relate to God within our status. Unmarried people who go through life begrudging that God withheld a partner from them will never break through to life's fulness, even if God fulfilled their deepest desire.

By holding fast to our desires we are demonstrating that we neither seek nor expect a fulfilling life primarily in a relationship to God. We are really saying that God is not the source of life. Then Jesus says, «...you are not worthy of me.» This is just as true for married folk. Jesus says to those who seek fulfilment primarily in the relationships with their partner and children, «...you are not worthy of me.» Even in marriage, we really attain maturity in relationships and experience fruitfulness only when Jesus is our very personal bridegroom and the true source of life.

Dealing with emotional and physical needs

I am aware of the fact that unmarried people have to continue to handle emotional and physical needs. Many singles believe that marriage automatically brings sexual and emotional fulfilment, as well as security. This is a gigantic mistake! If a marriage relationship is to be a fulfilling give and take, making a joyful and liberated life possible, much work is required on one's own as well as mutually. In marriage, it is necessary to look away from one's own needs, to invest in the partner and to be very disciplined regarding emotions, needs and desires.

Because Paul recognized the enormous investment necessary for a marriage to attain fruit and maturity, he advised, «Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.» (1.Cor.7:28) Paul makes very clear that a single person has a more carefree life. For him it is not a matter of qualification for marriage or celibacy. Each status has its own struggles, possibilities and limits. In each status God's kingdom will break through to fulness, joy, fruitfulness and quality of life.

A question of discipleship

In our day when God's kingdom has begun manifesting itself, marriage is not simply the most obvious and natural thing, as in Old Testament times. Paul's considerations indicate that in marriage nothing is automatic. For each individual it is ultimately a matter of obeying God about whether and whom to marry. If I believe that God leads me to a fulfilled life, then I also have to leave it up to him whether and whom I will marry.

Being single is not just waiting for better times in marriage. God wants to encounter us and set us free today. He wants to fulfil us and make us fruitful now. If we hold fast to our own concepts and conditions in relation to our desires and needs, whether married or single, we make it impossible for God to fulfil our lives.

Singles and families: living as a community

We want the members of our community to take their places, whether married or single. We want them to be able to rejoice in their own and others' riches. Singles and families complement each other with their different possibilities. However, singles and families don't automatically walk together. Our needs, desires and life rhythms often diverge widely. But we consciously seek ways to approach each other, to lose our fears of encountering each other, and to make our needs known to each other. This conscious living together allows the unmarried to experience a high degree of acceptance, belonging and protection from God. We have seen that it is helpful and liberating, especially for singles to live within defined structures of authority, with leaders who are willing to be responsibly involved in their lives. Especially single women experience spiritual covering which sets them free. Instruction from God's word gives singles orientation regarding their place in God's kingdom. Their status is discussed. The single women meet regularly to encourage and challenge each other. Their status is often a topic in counselling and they receive encouragement, vision and correction – just as the married folk also need. In weekly times of sharing, the singles' basic questions, their relationships to each other and to the families, and their lifestyles are discussed. It is especially important that the unmarried are respected and esteemed by the community.

With these few thoughts, we want to encourage you to discuss and think about the meaning and goal, the limits and possibilities of marriage and celibacy. Think about how the married and the unmarried can break through to a fulfilled, joyful life which is meaningful for God and man.

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