

# 5. DEVELOPING A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF SINGLENES

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## **Introduction**

Since 1970 the Western world has experienced a precipitous drop in the proportion of married adults. In the UK in 1970 more than two-thirds of eligible adults were married. This has declined to less than 50% today, and is projected to continue to decline to about 42% within the next twenty years.<sup>[1]</sup> Some but not all of this is attributed to an increased acceptance and occurrence of cohabitation. It is also the result of greater delay in first marriage and a decline in the number of people who choose to be in a committed relationship at all. To put the shift in perspective, consider that, of those born in 1931, 51% of men and 75% of women were married by age 25, compared with less than 6% of men and 12% of women born in 1985.<sup>[2]</sup> This pronounced shift has created in most Western nations a marriage-minority culture,<sup>[3]</sup> and has brought with it a range of lifestyle complexities including a marked increase in divorce, cohabitation, gay/lesbian relationships and gender dysphoria. Effective engagement with this demographic shift and its accompanying lifestyle complexities merits a response grounded in a solid biblical theology of singleness based in turn on careful exegesis of the relevant biblical texts. First Corinthians 7 is the most extended discussion of singleness and marriage in the New Testament. Yet given its highly contextualized discussion it presents numerous exegetical challenges.

Just as sound exegesis is necessary for sound theology, so too, sound theology is necessary for sound exegesis. This paper is a case study of how an exegetical problem may spur broader biblical-theological reflection as a means of aiding its resolution. The net result is a more robust theological understanding of singleness as a whole, which provides insight for more effectively engaging with contemporary challenges.

## **The exegetical problem**

The problem in this case concerns the strange assertion that launches Paul's discussion on marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7:1, 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' (NASB). The statement comes as first among a series of apparent responses to questions which the Corinthians have raised in a previous letter. Ascetically-minded Patristic exegetes generally took the statement as Paul's response to ascetic concerns raised by the Corinthians, although they disagree over whether the issue was primarily sexual relations or marriage, whether they were motivated by maturity or naivety, and whether the ascetic concern came from the Corinthians or external false teachers. John Chrysostom, for example, writes of Paul:

He introduces also the discourse concerning virginity: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman.' 'For if,' says he, 'you enquire what is the excellent and greatly superior course, it is better not to have any connection whatever with a woman: but if you ask what is safe and helpful to your own infirmity, be connected by marriage.'<sup>[4]</sup>

By contrast, most modern exegetes think that Paul is quoting ascetically-minded Corinthians before proceeding to offer his reservations on their excessive ascetic ideals. They read the text as saying: ‘Now concerning the things about which you wrote, namely: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” . . .’ In this case the statement represents a Corinthian perspective that Paul proceeds to correct.

There is a related point of disagreement over whether the essential issue raised by the Corinthians concerns marriage itself or sexual relations within marriage. How we navigate these two points substantially colours how we read the chapter as a whole. On the one hand, if it is Paul’s pronouncement affirming the celibate state, it reinforces his emphasis on the legitimacy of a celibate calling, which he then proceeds to qualify. On the other hand, if it represents the view of ascetic Corinthians advocating sexual abstinence within marriage, then it sets the stage for Paul’s subsequent effort to mitigate a peculiar Corinthian predilection for ‘celibate marriage’ and to uphold more traditional views of marriage and sexual relations within it.

The recent consensus is that the statement reflects the Corinthians advocating abstinence within marriage.<sup>[5]</sup> The most compelling arguments for this are: (a) the vocabulary of ‘touch’ (*haptō*) connotes sexual contact and rarely occurs in reference to marriage; (b) the statement stands directly against Paul’s Jewish heritage which regarded marriage as a covenantal blessing; (c) the statement nearly contradicts Genesis 2:18 ‘it is not good for the man to be alone’ (NASB), of which Paul was surely aware; and (d) there is no corroborating evidence to suggest that Paul was ascetically oriented. In short it seems most unlikely a statement that could be attributed to Paul. One recent commentator states:

On his own authority, Paul could not have advocated celibacy for everyone, for he would be contradicting God’s utterance: ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ (Gen. 2:18). Then Paul would be against procreation (Gen. 1:28), God’s covenant blessings from generation to generation (Gen. 17:7), and the growth of the church.<sup>[6]</sup>

But the alternative, that the statement reflects the Corinthians’ perspective, is also not without difficulties. A wide number of contemporary influences have been proposed to explain the Corinthians’ marriage-denigrating asceticism, including Gnostic dualism, Jewish sectarian movements, Sophia worship, Cynic or Stoic philosophy, Isis or other Egyptian cults, and medical practitioners. But none has proved compelling.

Textual evidence for an ascetic movement in Corinth is also scant. In 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to their sexual struggles in four different ways in chapter 7 alone (vv. 2, 5, 9a, 9b); in 5:1–13 he castigates them for allowing a type of immorality (*porneia*) ‘that is not tolerated even among pagans’ (5:1 <sup>ESV</sup>); in 6:9–10 he lists four types of sexual sinners who will not inherit the kingdom of God; in 6:15 he emphatically condemns the culturally acceptable use of prostitutes (‘May it never be!’ <sup>NASB</sup>), before exhorting his readers to ‘flee immorality’ (6:18 <sup>NASB</sup>); and in 10:1–13 he further condemns sexual immorality, implicitly relating it to cultic feasting in pagan temples.<sup>[7]</sup> Paul warns of further discipline for those still unrepentant of immorality (*porneia*) in 2 Corinthians 12:21. There is also a later reference in 1 Clement upbraiding the Corinthians for ‘impure embraces’ along with ‘detestable lusts’ and ‘abominable adultery’.<sup>[8]</sup> Nor do the Corinthians exhibit typical corroborating signs of

asceticism. They appear socially integrated, having dinner-parties with their non-Christian associates (1 Cor. 10:27), and boast of their right to eat anything in good conscience. Their mantra appears to be that ‘all things are lawful’ (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23 <sup>NASB</sup>). Their claims, boasts and behaviour show anything but an ascetic disposition toward sexual renunciation.

Perhaps the most viable interpretation is that this asceticism was not representative of the whole church, but rather of a group of pneumatic enthusiasts – perhaps, as Gordon Fee has proposed, a group of women espousing a brand of over-realized eschatology with roots in Hellenistic dualism.<sup>9</sup> But evidence in 1 Corinthians for such a group of women is meagre. The statement ‘it is good for a man not to touch a woman’ (7:1 <sup>NASB</sup>) is male-oriented, and hardly reads like a female mantra, while Paul’s direct address to men in 7:28 strongly suggests that he is responding to men, not women. Nor do we have substantive indication that those Paul addresses in chapter 7 are suddenly a different group from those he upbraids for going to prostitutes in chapter 6. In addition, the advice he gives in chapter 7 fits poorly with the idea that 7:1b represents an ascetic viewpoint propagated by eschatologically-minded Corinthian women. Neither his qualification that the divorced wife should remain unmarried or become reconciled to her husband (7:11) nor his eschatological argument promoting singleness (7:29–31) makes logical sense if the *problem* lies in ascetic women abandoning their husbands to fulfil a new eschatological existence.

So we need to revisit the possibility that the statement in 7:1b is that of Paul, not of the Corinthians. In support of this, Paul repeats ‘it is good’ language later in the chapter: ‘*it is good* for them [the unmarried and widows] if they remain even as I’ (7:8 <sup>NASB</sup>, emphasis added); and ‘I think then that *this is good* in view of the present distress, that *it is good* for a man to remain as he is’ (7:26 <sup>NASB</sup>, emphasis added). All three uses begin new sections of the discourse, and all three give variants of a common theme: it is good for the unmarried to remain so. At the same time, there is no doubt that Paul was well aware of the language of Genesis 2:18, that it was ‘*not good* for the man to be alone’ (<sup>NASB</sup>, emphasis added). In fact, just five verses earlier he directly quotes from Genesis 2:24 that ‘the two [they] shall become one flesh’ (1 Cor. 6:16 <sup>NASB</sup>).

What would move Paul to make a seemingly ascetic assertion that in its very language stands in direct conflict with the Genesis creation story? The answer may well lie in how Paul interprets what happens between the Genesis account and his first-century response to the Corinthians. And it is here that a full-canon, diachronic biblical theology on marriage and singleness may shed insight on Paul’s perspective, especially as it relates to an equally central biblical-theological thread, the provision of offspring as the vehicle of God’s blessing.

## Theological background

### Genesis

The importance of offspring is impossible to miss in the Genesis account. ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ is, after all, the first commandment of the Old Testament, given initially to birds and sea creatures on the fifth day of creation (Gen. 1:22 <sup>NASB</sup>), and then reiterated to humans on the sixth day (Gen. 1:28). It is given twice again to Noah and his family after the flood (Gen. 9:1,

7). Beyond the first humans and the ‘new Adam’ of Noah after the flood, the only other individual directly commanded to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ is Jacob (Gen. 35:11 <sup>NASB</sup>), the physical father of the Israelite nation who has twelve sons from four different women. In each case the command is associated directly with blessing, explicitly in the first two instances and implicitly in the third.

The Hebrew word for ‘seed’ or ‘offspring’ (*zera‘*) appears in Genesis 3:15 in the first messianic reference, as part of God’s judgment on the serpent: ‘I will put enmity between . . . your *offspring* and her *offspring*; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel’ (ESV, emphasis added). In Genesis 4 it appears again as a possible messianic reference, illuminating a marked contrast in the birth accounts of Cain and Seth. On the birth of Cain in Genesis 4:1, Eve says, ‘I have produced a man with the help of the LORD’ (ESV). But after Cain kills Abel, Eve gives birth to Seth in Genesis 4:25 and says, ‘God has appointed for me another *offspring* instead of Abel’ (ESV, emphasis added).<sup>[10]</sup> Eve credits the birth of Cain to her own human initiative, but the birth of Seth she credits to divine provision. In the birth account of Seth, ‘offspring’ is modified by ‘another’, which as in English can be taken as ‘another’ in sequence or ‘another’ in kind. One Hebrew tradition regarded ‘another seed’ to mean ‘a seed from another source or parentage’,<sup>[11]</sup> hinting that the Messiah would share in non-Jewish ancestry (i.e. through Ruth the Moabitess).<sup>[12]</sup> But the text here does not specify the nature of the other kind of birth that the Messiah represents.

The central drama of the book of Genesis, the call of Abraham and the establishment of the covenant, again points to the central importance of offspring. The promises of the covenant (established in several episodes) fall into three categories: (a) God will bless Abraham with exceedingly numerous offspring, including a great nation, kings, and many nations. (b) God will give Abraham and his descendants a tract of land occupied by Canaanite nations, with victory over them. (c) God will make Abraham’s name great, and he himself will be Abraham’s reward. All these promises depend on Abraham having a physical son and heir. Hence the story soon gravitates toward the human–divine drama of how God will provide a son, since Abraham’s wife Sarah was barren. Like Eve’s descriptions of Cain’s birth versus Seth’s, Abraham and Sarah have two sons – one through the human contrivance and the other through divine provision. And it was Abraham’s response of faith in trusting God to provide a child that Paul later recognized as the faith credited to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:3).

### ***The Sinai covenant***

If offspring in the Abrahamic covenant is a marker of God’s unilateral provision, in the Sinai covenant it is a marker of God’s blessing for obedience to the covenantal stipulations. This is evident in the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28, but is also prominent in the stipulations in Deuteronomy 7:12–14:

And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or among your livestock. (ESV)

Here again, physical offspring are the fundamental marker of God's covenantal blessing. God will bless them with fruitfulness in three different ways: their children, their crops and their animals. Conversely, no humans or animals will be barren – barrenness is a mark of divine disapproval of human disobedience. Covenantal blessing of abundant progeny presumes the context of marriage, and it is not surprising that we find no old covenant figures who voluntarily choose to remain unmarried. Marriage is the prerequisite of covenantal blessing.

As for Abraham, so for the individual Israelite, physical progeny was critical for retaining the family's land and for preserving its name beyond death. Hence various legal provisions such as the exception for Zelophehad's daughters (Num. 27:1–11) and the institution of levirate marriage (of a childless widow to her brother-in-law, Deut. 25:5–10) ensure the preservation of the family's land and its name. Having one's name 'blotted out of Israel' was a judgment worse than death, because it entailed not only physical death but also the lack of offspring to 'remember one's name'. Moreover, every individual Israelite was accountable to the covenant. Deuteronomy 29:20 warns that *any individual* apostate will be subject to 'every curse which is written in this book', and 'the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven' (NASB). This threat is dramatically illustrated in the account of Naomi. With the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi cries in utter despair that 'the Almighty has brought calamity upon me' (Ruth 1:21 <sup>ESV</sup>). Conversely Boaz, who serves as both kinsman-redeemer and brother-in-law, later expresses his intentions in marrying Ruth as 'to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place' (Ruth 4:10 <sup>ESV</sup>).

In the Sinai covenant, marriage and physical progeny were fundamental markers of covenantal blessing. To be unmarried in ancient Israel was to be unblessed, and implied God's judgment for disobedience. It is as a portent of judgment on the people that God calls Jeremiah not to take a wife, since children would soon die of disease, unlamented and unburied (Jer. 16:1–4). But with the prophets we also see a new phase in the anticipation of a new work of God himself. The prophet Isaiah is especially illustrative of this new phase.

## Isaiah

The term *zera'* occurs frequently in the book of Isaiah. On the one hand, it refers to the sinful nation, the physical seed of Jacob. The book's opening words pronounce judgment on the 'sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly!' (Isa. 1:4 <sup>ESV</sup>). A later lament alludes to both Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in asserting that, but for disobedience, 'your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me' (Isa. 48:19 <sup>ESV</sup>).

On the other hand, we have a most unusual reference to 'holy seed' (*zera' qōdeš*) at the end of Isaiah's commission (6:13 <sup>ESV</sup>). This concluding line gives a note of hope to the catastrophic judgment that Isaiah is commanded to prophesy. The 'holy seed' is read by most exegetes as the post-exilic remnant of the Israelite nation. One difficulty with this interpretation is that the term 'holy' is usually associated in Isaiah with the holy God of Israel, and seldom with the unregenerate people.<sup>[13]</sup> And as elsewhere, 'seed' could be taken here as singular or collective.



So it is interesting that following 6:13 there are numerous prophetic signs linked to divinely provided progeny. In 7:14 a virgin shall conceive and ‘bear a son’ (ESV), in 8:3 the prophet has children that are then described in 8:18 as ‘signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts’ (ESV), in 9:6 ‘a child is born’ (ESV), and in 11:1 ‘there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse’ (ESV). We see in Isaiah an implicit parallel with the two types of offspring in Genesis, one symbolizing human effort and the other divine provision.

The word *zera*‘ occurs again at the climax of the fourth Servant Song (Isa. 53:10): ‘when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his *offspring*’ (ESV). But what kind of offspring does the servant see here following his death? The most plausible view is that they are spiritual rather than physical.<sup>[14]</sup> Elsewhere in the Old Testament, blessing associated with *seeing* rather than *having* progeny generally refers to grandchildren or great-grandchildren rather than immediate offspring.<sup>[15]</sup> One is blessed in *having* one’s own offspring, and in *seeing* one’s offspring’s offspring. But here the servant *sees* his own offspring. Moreover, Isaiah 53:8 says of the servant, ‘as for his generation [or progeny]<sup>[16]</sup> . . . he was cut off out of the land of the living’ (ESV). The language here parallels that of being ‘blotted out’.<sup>[17]</sup> The servant has died without children or hope – yet in his death he suddenly sees his offspring.

It is telling that, in the chapters following the servant’s death, two unmarried and barren figures are restored – the barren woman in Isaiah 54 and the eunuch in Isaiah 56. Just three verses after the account of the servant’s death, we read of the barren woman who will have more children than a married woman and whose descendants ‘possess the nations’ (54:3 ESV). But these children are supernaturally birthed, for she has not been in labour (54:1) and is without human husband (54:5). As Alec Motyer concludes, ‘the *barren woman* sings, not because she has ceased to be barren but because the Lord has acted in his Servant with the effect that his “seed” become her *children*/“sons”’.<sup>[18]</sup> The picture is of a woman once barren who now gives birth, not to physical children but to innumerable spiritual children.<sup>[19]</sup>

Isaiah 56 gives similar hope to the eunuch, who should no longer regard himself as a ‘dry tree’, since God would give him in the temple ‘a monument and a name better than sons and daughters’ (56:5 ESV). It is a picture of restored communion and remembrance for those once considered cursed and therefore cut off from God’s people. Acts 8 records an amazing fulfilment of this passage in the Ethiopian eunuch’s encounter with Philip. It is intriguing that he was reading Isaiah 53:8 on the suffering servant not having descendants. One may wonder what his reaction was when he read of the restored eunuch only a few chapters later.

## Paul

Paul too seems aware of the distinction between the two kinds of offspring in Genesis and Isaiah. This first becomes apparent in his claim that the promises given to Abraham were fulfilled in his singular seed rather than his collective seed (Gal. 3:16). The move is theological more than grammatical – it is the unique divinely provided seed, i.e. Christ (for whom Isaac serves as a type), to whom the promises are given and through whom they are realized. Paul reroutes the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises from the multitudinous physical progeny of Abraham to the divinely provided offspring who is Christ. He can then declare that all those who are ‘of Christ’, who are offspring of Christ not physically but

spiritually, are the true offspring of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:29).

While Paul's opponents could concede that, as a Jew, Jesus was a physical descendant of Abraham and therefore Abraham's seed, they would not possibly concede that the Galatian Gentiles were also Abraham's seed. After all, the historical record was undeniable. Abraham had two sons: Isaac the father of the Jews, and Ishmael the father of the Gentiles. But only Isaac received the promises and therefore only the Jews could inherit them. Paul responds with an allegorical interpretation of the Hagar and Sarah account (Gal. 4:21–31), which is not an interpretive sleight-of-hand but a theological 'listening to the law' (as he puts it in Gal. 4:21), with an awareness of the two kinds of birth typified by Isaac and Ishmael. The fundamental difference was that Hagar bore Ishmael as a result of human contrivance, while Sarah bore Isaac as a result of divine provision. Insofar as the Jews are Abraham's physical descendants through conventional human means while the Galatian Christians are Abraham's spiritual descendants through the divinely provided offspring, i.e. Christ, it is the Galatians rather than the Jewish legalists who are the true descendants of Isaac. The text Paul then cites to confirm this is Isaiah 54:1: the barren woman now sings (Gal. 4:27). The barren woman parallels Sarah in that both women conceive children supernaturally as the result of divine provision.

Paul never mentions himself either being married or having physical progeny. Is there evidence to suggest that he sees himself in the pattern of the barren woman bearing spiritual children on behalf of the suffering servant? Just prior to the Hagar–Sarah allegory Paul describes the Galatians as 'my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth . . .' (Gal. 4:19 <sup>ESV</sup>). He tells the Corinthians, 'I became your father [begat you] in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (1 Cor. 4:15 <sup>ESV</sup>). To the Thessalonians he describes himself as both a nursing mother and a father with his children (1 Thess. 2:7, 11). To Philemon Paul appeals 'for my child, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment' (Phlm. 10 <sup>NASB</sup>). He addresses both Timothy and Titus as his 'legitimate' (*gnēsios*) child (1 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4) or simply his 'child' (2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1). Paul is a spiritual father to his converts – begetting them in Christ through the gospel.

If having physical offspring was a fundamental expression of God's blessing under the Sinai covenant, it no longer functioned in the same capacity under the new covenant. All the covenantal blessings are realized through union with Christ, as expressed in Ephesians 1:3: God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing *in Christ*. The single life thus testifies to the essence of the gospel itself. Not even the sweet blessings of marriage and family, children and grandchildren are necessary to be fully blessed in the new covenant – Christ, the offspring of God, is completely sufficient.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Resolution of the exegetical problem

Returning now to the statement of 1 Corinthians 7:1b, it is clear that Paul's theology of a singleness fully sufficient in Christ informs his counsel on the question of marriage. Paul is not affirming *universally* that it is good for a man to be alone, which would be a contradiction of Genesis, but that it is good *in some circumstances* for a man to refrain from marriage and sexual union. This is not a singleness lived alone, for Paul recognizes that in the new family of

God (in which he is father, mother and brother of his converts) life is not lived alone.

But we must also address the lexical objection raised by Gordon Fee and others.<sup>[21]</sup> If Paul's statement here is about marriage, why does he use the strange verb 'touch' (*haptō*) that seems to indicate sexual relations rather than marriage? In other words, isn't the issue really sexual relations in marriage rather than marriage itself? Perhaps the right answer is, Yes and No. First, everything in verses 8–40 has to do with marriage itself and not just sexual relations. So it is most likely that the matter addressed in verses 1–7 also concerns marriage. Graeco-Roman society tended to dissociate marriage, which had to do with social duty and responsibility, from sexual activity. What Paul must do before addressing their questions on marriage is to make clear that sexual expression as God intended belongs in marriage and only in marriage. How can Paul communicate this point, while also acknowledging a legitimate calling and life of singleness? He responds to their question concerning the necessity of marriage with a surprising choice of language: 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman.' In other words, it is good for a man not to marry if and only if he is also ready to commit himself to sexual abstinence. With such language the point could not be confused. Marriage and sexual expression are a package as God intended – neither should exist without the other. Conversely, singleness is a legitimate and good option, but only when lived with sexual abstinence.

## Conclusion

Paul's response to the Corinthians' view that 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman' is grounded in his understanding of the new covenant, the sufficiency of Christ and the new spiritual family of God.

As Western society becomes increasingly single and increasingly post-Christian, it presents a new range of challenges. A robust biblical theology of singleness provides a foundation for effectively engaging with some of these. First, it clarifies that singles are not unblessed or second class within the new covenant. In Christ alone we are all full participants in all the spiritual blessings of the kingdom of God. Having Christ alone is sufficient to be fully blessed in the new covenant, irrespective of whether God also grants wealth, property, marriage or children. Second, a theology of singleness shows us the power of the new spiritual family to supersede the biological family as the locus for intimate relationships. It reminds us that our union with Christ is corporate, as together we become the perfected bride of Christ. We will live forever neither marrying nor giving in marriage (cf. Matt. 22:30), but simply being corporately the bride of Christ. Finally, it clarifies that neither marriage nor sexual relationship is fundamentally necessary to be a complete and fully realized male or female human being. Rather, our fundamental identity is grounded in the *imago dei* as fully expressed in the incarnate Christ. Jesus Christ has fully expressed the image of God and is the basis for our identity as fully complete human beings. We can thus fully affirm with Paul in Colossians 1:28 that: 'We proclaim him admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present every person *complete in Christ*.'<sup>[22]</sup>

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