

SINGLE AND MARRIED

by Vicki Scheib

When I was asked to lead a single adult ministry in my church, my response was a quick and emphatic “No!” As a thirty-something woman wrestling with my own singleness, how could I muster the strength and wisdom to minister to those on a similar journey? Working with single adults would only highlight my own personal angst as my season of singleness extended longer than I anticipated.

Eventually, my “no” became a “yes.” I was hired as the director of single adult ministries at a large, nondenominational church. Over time, the ministry grew from a handful of people to hundreds of single adults in various stages and seasons of life. There were young adults and widows, divorcees, and those who were never married. There were Bible studies, support groups, car care ministries, and service projects. We loved on single parents and their children, and we cared for those with broken hearts and dismantled hopes. Although there were challenges and struggles, bit-by-bit we learned how to love one another.

However, over time, I experienced a gnawing dissatisfaction with my work. While the single adult ministry met the needs of single adults, it unintentionally solidified an existing problem: adults in the church are predominantly identified by their marital status. While my work was valuable and important, it seemed to support and enlarge the divide between single and married.

BRIDGING THE IDENTITY DIVIDE

THE DIVIDE

In today’s evangelical churches, a person’s identity is often shaped by their marital status. Marriage gives stability and honor to the social structures of the church and provides the context in which gender-defined roles can be fulfilled. Marriage is embraced as the ultimate adult relationship, so singleness becomes a status to be overcome. The elevation of marriage over singleness can make single people feel lonely, ostracized, and misunderstood.

The belief that singleness is a problem is revealed by the questions single people are sometimes asked. “Why are you still single?” or “What’s wrong that you’re not married?” or comments such as, “You must be picky” or “You must have issues.” These comments and questions reveal the assumption that any healthy adult should either

currently, or eventually be married. If not, something needs to be fixed. The questions also reveal a hierarchy between married and single adults, creating a divide within our churches.

In order to narrow the divide that develops when our adult identity is categorized by being married or single, we need a theological framework that does not segregate adults by their marital status and gender-defined roles. We need a common identity rooted in the biblical, gender-mutual image of family and friendship rather than in our marital status.

JESUS AND IDENTITY

Jesus rarely used marriage to describe the adult community in which he lived and ministered. In fact, Jesus seldom spoke of marriage in his teaching. Instead, when given the opportunity to describe relationships in the kingdom of God, he used terms that did not create hierarchy or separate individuals into the socially-categorized “have or have not’s.” Instead, he used examples of mutuality and equality. Jesus called women and men sisters and brothers; they were his family and friends.

IDENTITY AS FAMILY

Jesus first used familial terminology with his followers when responding to his mother and brothers in Matthew 12. When someone told Jesus that his family was waiting for him, Jesus responded with the question, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” (Matt. 12:48 NRSV). “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50 NRSV). Jesus named his followers as brothers and sisters,

giving them equal access to relationship with him and shared, mutual relationships with one another. Biology is not the only unifying factor of those who are family. Jesus creates a whole new understanding of family, identifying us as brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Because women and men in the body of Christ are family, we need to consider how we relate to one another. Seeing one another as sister or brother removes the tendency to objectify others by their marital status. We are no longer those who are “marriage material” or those “off the market;” those who are the recipients of another’s romantic interest and those who are not. Instead, we are sisters and brothers who choose to love and serve one another.

It is our relationship as sister and brother, not the marriage relationship, which is the eternal relationship construct. Jesus said “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:30 NRSV). Embracing one another as family does not undermine the value of marriage but instead undergirds it with a narrative that goes beyond romantic interest. Whether married or single, we are sisters and brothers to each other, affirming the mutuality of our relationships with one another.

IDENTITY AS FRIENDS

Jesus also changed the relationship paradigm between himself and his followers when he called us his friends. He transcended hierarchical barriers and even familial alignments, inviting both women and men into a relationship with him and care for one another not based on power, status, or gender, but love. Jesus not only washed his disciples’ feet, demonstrating how a leader serves, but he also identified himself as their friend. What do friends do? They lay down their lives for one another. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13 NRSV).

Paul later affirms Jesus’ paradigm shift when he instructs husbands to love their wives in Ephesians 5. No longer is marriage described as a hierarchical and unequal

relationship. Instead, Paul’s instruction for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21), and for husbands to “love their wives as Christ loves the church” (Eph. 5:25 NRSV), align his teaching with the paradigm shift that Jesus offered his followers. Mutuality and love, the essence of friendship, become the foundation of all relationships, whether married or single.

Friendship is central to all Christian relationships. As women and men who follow Jesus, we are asked to regard one another as better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). As a community of individuals, we are to adopt a posture of humility toward one another and consider what it would be like to walk in another person’s shoes, or

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“not look to your own interests but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4 NRSV). In doing so, we allow ourselves to be known in community, minimizing barriers and increasing mutual care.

By living from our common, mutual identity as family and friends, we minimize the tendency to prioritize one marital status

over another. We diminish the tendency to idolize marriage over singleness or to see singleness as a romanticized alternative to the challenges of marriage. Taking the focus off one’s marital status requires that we get to know one another as equals, no matter our gender, gifts, or marital status, and requires that we seek to understand one another and not try to “fix.” We also shift the focus from gender-defined roles to relationships defined by our mutual care for one another. By doing so, we create the kind of community where all are welcome and all belong.

While I’m no longer the director of a single adult ministry, I look back and realize that as a ministry, we had a lot to offer the church. Because none of us were married, we learned to be family to one another and we prioritized relating to one another as friends over making romantic connections. Our relationships were mutual and equal as we strived to treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. In retrospect, we modeled the kind of community that God wants the church to deeply consider: a community of women and men who give precedence to their relationships as sisters and brothers in the family of God and not gender-defined roles that can only be fulfilled in marriage. Single adults have much to offer those who are married. And, married adults have much to offer those who are single. By shifting our theological framework to our common, mutual identity as family and friends, we create equality among all adults, and enhance our unity in the body of Christ.



Vicki Scheib, DMin, received her Doctor of Ministry in leadership and spiritual formation from George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, OR. Her dissertation and ongoing research is focused on the spiritual formation and identity formation of men and women leaders. She is a founding member of *Communitas*, a spiritual formation collective based in Bozeman, MT, and a spiritual director for seminary students at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. She is single and lives in York, PA.