

Introduction

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:20–21)

What comes to your mind when you hear such phrases as “marriage and family” or “family values”? Of course, your answer will depend on your background and experience. For people in the West, they are often associated with such words as “Christianity” or “church,” or perhaps “traditional” and “conservative.” The link between Christianity and family (understood to mean heterosexual marriage and children) has become a defining feature of the church of late Christendom.

The starting point of this book is the turbulent shifts taking place in Western societies and their structures: an exponential rise in single living and alternative family structures, the redefinition of marriage, and the ease and frequency of divorce. Going hand-in-hand with the loss of “traditional” family ways, some perceive these to be a direct threat to the future and the wellbeing of society as we know it. A considerable proportion of Christians also view them as a direct threat to the future and wellbeing of the church.

Yet back when Christianity was very young, its cultural home—the Roman world—was also very concerned with the demise of the traditional family ways which, similarly, were seen as the very basis of the good society. The culprits accused of destroying family and Roman society were none other than the Christians. One of the defining features of their movement was its allegiance to a different kind of a family called the church—something that shocked Jews and gentiles alike. For these early followers of Jesus of Nazareth, such ordering of values was all part of their commitment to a new reality which they referred to as the kingdom of God. Moreover, the radical

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pronouncements of their leader had challenged the assumption of marriage as the norm and bearing children as an essential aspect of a life well lived. This was a profoundly different understanding of what counted as a good life, and one that clashed with the normative customs of the time.

How did it happen, then, that today's Christianity is so often associated with fixating on marriage and the nuclear family in a way that stands in contrast to the world portrayed in the New Testament? This book seeks to explore this question. I invite the readers to follow the changes in the practice of marriage and singleness, from those early days of the Christian movement to the current cultural climate which by and large still insists that a romantic partner and children are non-negotiable ingredients of a good life—or, in today's parlance, "happiness." I suggest that this vision of what counts as a happy life has been Christianized and developed into a very popular Christian "happiness package." In fact, Christians seem to hold to it stronger than secular society does, pouring a lot of effort into defending and advocating for the centrality of marriage and the nuclear family to the life and future of the church, as well as that of society at large.

Yet such an understanding of happiness, with its focus on the nuclear family, is at odds with both the New Testament's and early Christians' insistence that, for the followers of Jesus, their primary community was to be the new creation called the church. In that light, rather than a cause for alarm, today's surge in the number of single people is actually an opportunity for the church to reconsider both singleness and marriage as distinctly Christian ways of living. However, such reconsideration requires churches to be genuine *communities* which cultivate a more biblical approach to gaining and retaining happiness.

What This Book Is About: Initial Definitions

"What is your book about?" That's a common question for an author working on a project. I had no problems answering it when I was asked in English: my title was clear enough and apparently interesting enough, and I could usually count on a lively conversation to follow. Things were different, however, whenever I was visiting my native country, Lithuania, and was asked this question in Lithuanian. My answer would be much less short and crisp. The problem? The most common word for "singleness" in Lithuanian (and Russian, and in a number of other languages) is the same word that is used for "loneliness." As we shall see shortly, even in languages which do not have a straightforward linguistic link between singleness and loneliness, the assumption of such a connection still lingers. The "colloquial way of thinking seems to rest on the

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premise that unless you have a romantic partner, you don't have anyone—you are alone and unattached.”¹

So what is, or counts as, *singleness*? For the purposes of this book, the term will refer to the experience of people who consider themselves (and are likely considered by others) to be single. Their singleness may be joyfully chosen, resented, or somewhere in between. They may or may not have children or belong to nuclear families of their own. They may or may not have been married before. They may or may not be dating or in some kind of an intimate relationship. However, in their everyday conversations, and in their own self-identification, they would think of themselves as single persons—or at least more single than coupled.² (In church life, there is also the phenomenon of “church singleness,” where, although the person is coupled, they are on their own when it comes to any church-related activities.)

Conversely, my usage of the word *marriage* will at times be used interchangeably with “coupledom,” and may include any committed, long-term, exclusive, intimate, and presumably sexual relationship between two people, whether that is religiously or legally sanctioned or not. Of course, from a Christian perspective there is something deeply significant about marriage understood as a sacrament, a covenant, or a faithful union of two people before God and God's community—and this will be discussed at appropriate junctures. As we shall see, marriage has changed significantly from the way it was practiced in the Old Testament, to what it meant in the New Testament and early Christian world, to the kind of marriage we think of today. Thinking about marriage theologically is important, especially in today's climate of tensions over such issues as cohabitation, same-sex relationships, or serial monogamy resulting from divorce (although the latter has been largely accepted in many Christian communities by now). However, this book will not delve deeply into the theological significance of the Christian wedding and its lifetime implications. Rather, it will be concerned with actual experiences and perceptions of coupledom, particularly from the perspective of those who want to follow Jesus.

Finally, a word on the definition of *family*—another highly cultural term. Sometimes it helps to consider it in relation to another concept—that of a household, which tends to be understood more functionally, whereas family

1. DePaulo, *Marriage vs. Single Life*, loc. 523.

2. DePaulo, a social scientist, suggests three different ways of defining singleness: legal singleness (one's marital status in the eyes of the law); social singleness (which is how others see the person's relationship status); and personal singleness (the person's own self-description). Although the three may overlap, there are variations, such as with social singleness involving a relationship that is either disregarded by or hidden from others. *Marriage vs. Single Life*, loc. 254–66.

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often carries symbolic and ideological overtones.³ Beyond this general observation, however, family is impossible to describe outside of a specific context. The following chapters will reflect how much the shape and the functions of the family have changed, from extended family and household structures in the world of the Bible to the nuclear family forms of today. And, of course, it is still changing, much to the great anxiety of those who see themselves as defenders of “traditional” family. My focus, however, will be the experience of family in relation to singleness, marriage, and the commitment to what for Jesus clearly was to be the primary community or family of his followers—the church.

What This Book Is Not About

A modest volume such as this one cannot cover everything, especially given the many facets and perspectives that could be employed in exploring singleness, marriage, and family. Inevitably, I had to choose what to focus on, which interpretative lenses to use, and what kinds of questions or aspects of singleness and marriage may need to be left behind.

I have already mentioned that this book is not focused on the theology of marriage as such: there are plenty of other volumes devoted to this topic.⁴ The primary interest of this book is the everyday theology which undergirds the way we live as singletons, married couples, or those somewhere in between. I look at these from a broadly Christian perspective, although, not surprisingly for this book series, my particular affinity is with tradition which follows in the footsteps of the Radical Reformation and has the task of the continuous transformation of the intentional community of disciples at its very core. My earlier, academic work on singleness⁵ has been focused on this church tradition, although experience and research into other church traditions suggest that they face similar challenges, especially for those single not by a calling, but by life circumstances or a choice based on other than religious grounds.

Much of what I have to say pertains to the cultures which can be increasingly described as “post-Christian.” And as post-Christendom is a Western phenomenon, this means that we will have to skip over non-Western contemporary cultures, fascinating as they are. Life in other parts of the world has been, and continues to be, shaped by some other significant factors which

3. Moxnes, “What Is Family?” 17.

4. See, for instance, McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*; Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*; Noble et al., *Marriage, Family and Relationships*.

5. Andronovienè, *Transforming the Struggles*.

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fall beyond the scope of this work. I do hope, however, that readers from the Majority World may also find this book helpful as they wrestle with the significance of singleness in cultures which typically put the utmost value on extended family and clan allegiance.⁶

Similarly, I will not delve into questions about the role of the church in public issues such as marriage law, important as they may be both for the life of Christian communities and societies as a whole. Other writings explore these questions in detail, although contexts continue to vary greatly.⁷ My own perspective, steeped in the Anabaptist tradition, would prefer the severing of the link between church and state when it comes to performing legally binding marriage ceremonies, but readers holding to different positions (or, even more likely, living in different realities) will hopefully see the logic behind this book's focus on two primary ways of organizing personal life which are broadly termed *marriage* and *singleness*—regardless of legal definitions or theological perspectives.

Furthermore, much could be said about gender roles within marriage and the difference that gender makes in the experience of singleness—but again, this is not the focus of the present book. That said, readers will have no trouble recognizing my own stance, which is that of an egalitarian understanding of gender relations on the basis of my reading of the Christian Scriptures. I will occasionally highlight the implications of various historical developments for women—single or married—in particular, as this is an important aspect of the changes which our societies have undergone. For a much fuller picture, however, see another book in the “After Christendom” series: Fran Porter’s *Women and Men After Christendom: The Dis-Ordering of Gender Relationships*.

6. Indeed, many non-Western societies, whose version of “traditional” family is much closer to the culture of biblical times, face very serious challenges today. In such societies, life can still be organized around a version of a household the central role in which is played by a male elder. Yet change is sweeping through many of these societies too, often due to health, environmental crises, and violence. Different forms of family are emerging, including those headed by women, grandparents, or children, and in some cultures these forms live alongside the ancient tradition of polygamous structures. At the same time, especially in cities, young people are increasingly remaining single. In the African context and its traditional emphasis on ancestor veneration, singleness faces an additional challenge because single people cannot ever become ancestors—in other words, they never become part of their community’s enduring story.

7. See, for instance, Nichols, *Marriage and Divorce*; Grzymała-Busse, *Nations under God*. For a brief general overview of the church’s relationship to the state, see Murray, *Post-Christendom*.

Who This Book Is For

This particular book is for those who, in one way or another, feel the pull of Jesus and his teaching as portrayed in the Gospels. Some of you may be really frustrated by how much institutional expressions of the church have been shackled to Christendom's constructions and perhaps are able to hold only a tentative relationship with the church. If so, I recognize and share with you the same frustration. Many others interested in this series, or this particular book, are likely continuing their life in a particular Christian community, but also grapple with the tension between the vision of the kingdom of God so powerfully cast by Jesus, and the power of cultural norms, models, and practices which, though present in the church, seem to be at odds with its calling.

Of course, "the church" can mean many things: it can mean a potent institution holding tightly to political influence, or minute gatherings of believers who are marginalized and may be even persecuted by those in power, or—as often is the case in today's Western context—Christian communities of whatever denomination which feel increasingly confused in the rapidly changing world explored in the "After Christendom" series. Indeed, all these different meanings will be touched upon in this volume. At this point, however, it will suffice to say that all church traditions today face similar challenges, and so my hope is that whatever your church belonging (or whatever church you stay away from!), you will find this book helpful.

Other than that, this book is for everyone—younger or older, single, married, in a relationship or somewhere in between. My hope is that single people will be encouraged and heartened to discover how relevant the radical message of Jesus is to living as a single person, and what a gift they are, to the society and to the communities of Jesus. This book is also for married people, not only because it may help them understand how marriage has acquired its current shape, and how it became so strongly wedded to the idea of romantic bliss, but also, I hope, because they will see that singleness needs to be taken seriously if marriage is to be done better. (I may also add that one never knows when and how one's own marital status may change: if anything, singleness is the default position, and one which many of us will experience towards the end of our lives, if not before.)

A Brief Map for the Journey

Here is a brief summary of our journey ahead, which will give you an idea of what to expect from chapter to chapter, and even help you decide where you want to start first.

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Chapter 1 outlines the current state of affairs in the early twenty-first century: an exponential rise in the number of single people, the emergence of alternative family structures, and the perceived crisis of the institution of marriage and the “traditional” family model. Next we will look at the ways in which the church reacts to singleness, uncovering the common perception that marriage and the nuclear family are much more important aspects of church makeup and ministry than singleness.

Chapter 2 starts with a sketch of biblical perspectives on singleness, marriage, and family in the world of the Old Testament, which provides the background for how shocking the teaching of Jesus must have seemed on these matters. While the Old Testament assumes marriage as the norm and children as an essential aspect of living well, in Jesus’ teaching we observe a radical shift towards the larger context of a new community—that of the followers of the Way of Jesus. His message was radical both in its insistence on the faithfulness-for-life required in marriage, and his even more stunning call for abstaining from marriage as a celebration of God’s Kingdom. It is his hard-to-swallow teaching that we will take as the starting point for our understanding of singleness and marriage today, however much our twenty-first-century realities differ from the ancient world of first-century Palestine.

In order to help with this task, chapter 3 broadens the picture to how families and households functioned in the Greco-Roman world in which the first Christians found themselves, and in which the New Testament writings were born. We will look at the tensions over Roman “family values,” the legislation that required Roman citizens to marry, and the disruption which Christians brought into the mix. We will survey the major New Testament passages on singleness, marriage, and household life, and see how the first churches both confronted and adapted to the societal norms of the time.

Looking at the earliest Christian literature outside of the New Testament, chapter 4 surveys the frequent hostility with which the authorities, and indeed society as a whole, treated the Christian movement for its perceived destabilization of society and its established order. The starkest example here was the spread of Christian asceticism and celibacy—a reflection of how strongly those believers yearned for the fullness of times and the arrival of God’s kingdom. As we trace the story of those early Christian centuries, we will see conflicting visions for what counted as the best life possible, but also an increasing “hierarchy of holiness” which placed virginity at the top and considered marriage as its inferior.

Chapter 5 explores how marriage and single life continued to change once Christianity emerged as the official religion of the empire. We will trace the surge of monasticism, its subsequent development, and the eventual

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enforcement of celibacy for the priests. However, we will also look at other, less-known forms of singleness of medieval Europe, such as the story of lay women's communities called the Beguines. We will then turn our attention to the development of the theology and practice of marriage and its gradual Christianization.

Chapter 6 takes us first through the changes brought on by the Reformation movements, including the Anabaptists and their desire to recapture the New Testament teaching of the church as primary family. Moving on to the impact of the Industrial Revolution, we will look at some attempts to rethink singleness, marriage, and family life, and particularly the emergence of the Victorian family model. While the twentieth century saw the Victorian family ideal shaken and battered by wars, radical social movements, the massive employment of women, effective contraception, and the sexual revolution, its appeal as a representation of a God-given order for Christians still lingers.

Chapter 7 considers the perception of romantic love and the nuclear family as essential components of a "happy" life, and explores how this idea shapes church attitudes towards marriage and singlehood. We will see that the allure of romance has undergone a significant transformation, from its medieval image of an unattainable or tragic love story, to an expectation of undying romance in marriage. We will then investigate the growing preoccupation of our societies with happiness and its related concepts, such as human flourishing, wellbeing, and a meaningful life, and the (prevalent, but contested) assumption that coupledness is the most important source of happiness and fulfillment.

Finally, chapter 8 draws together some key ideas for a "happy" Christian life in the increasingly post-Christian context. If we are to get any closer to the vision of Jesus for singleness and marriage for those who seek the kingdom of God, we face the challenge of churches (or other intentional Christian groupings) having to be real, rather than merely proclaimed, *communities*. As this is no small task in our fragmented, consumeristic culture, we will consider some changes that can be made in order to align our perceptions about singleness and marriage with what we find in the teaching of Jesus. We will consider the importance of the practice of friendship as well as some ways to address our feelings and attitudes towards sexual fulfillment. We will conclude with considering the complex nature of human happiness from a Christian perspective: the importance of creativity, the presence of adversity or suffering, and the work of meaning-making in various life circumstances.

Readers who want a quick sense of the argument will probably want to look at the first two and the last two chapters, and perhaps save the historical review of the development of singleness and marriage throughout the

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Christian centuries for a later time. Others will find a more chronological journey from the origins of our faith to the current frameworks more helpful. I have tried to do my best in minimizing technical jargon, but have provided some pointers to further readings on some of the major ideas and issues in the footnotes.