

Danielle Treweek

## **The Meaning of Singleness: Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church**

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Danielle Treweek seeks to “equip [Christians and Christian leaders] to look with fresh eyes at the intelligibility of God’s purpose for singleness” (p. 1). Unmarried individuals in the church must find both *purpose* (theological foundations for finding meaning *as they are* [i.e., unmarried] in Christ) and *place* (theologically informed contexts for functioning as they are in the body of Christ). If unmarried Christians have purpose and place as they are, and if purpose and place are in harmony, they can be healthy, contributing members in the life of the church without ever being married.

Too often, the church’s basic attitude toward the issue of singleness is simply that “one is either married (or about to be married) or one is single.” (p. 36). Treweek shows that the meaning of “singleness” is itself complex and varied. Individuals in any of the following relationships can be lumped together under the heading “single”: unmarried people who are not seeking relationships; those in long-term monogamous but unmarried relationships; “hookups”, which involve serial recreational sex with little or no relationship beyond the physical; civil unions; cohabitations; “friends with benefits”; people involved in same-sex relationships; polyamorous relationships; open relationships; long distance or online-only relationships; and so on. The common, simple formulation “married or single” is insufficient. Treweek seeks to explain the purpose and place of singleness within the body of Christ and to suggest new norms for today’s Christian communities. She organizes her argument into four steps.

In the first step, chapters 1-2, she explores “the context of singleness” by surveying Western views of singleness in society and the church since the mid-1400s (early modernity). She shows that, rather than building or maintaining a Christian theology of singleness, the Church’s view has mostly followed societal views. This is a break from the early church, whose views on marriage and singleness were profoundly countercultural. The first chapter, “Singleness in Society,” is a *tour de force*. Treweek here surveys the relationship between (secular) social definitions of family (and marriage), how those definitions changed over the past five hundred years, and how views of singleness changed. The material she shares is always illuminating and sometimes stunning.

For example, more than 20% of the adults in the UK from 1575-1700 were unmarried. Single women were a particularly significant part of society during

this period, making important contributions to their communities. The rise of English nationalism ca. 1700 was accompanied by a desire for higher birth rates, part of which was expressed in calumny against unmarried people, especially women. Governments went so far as to discuss levying taxes against unmarried people and holding public “bride auctions.”

In Europe, before the Industrial Revolution, *family* was understood in terms of extended households, including relatives and servants and other attached persons beyond father, mother, and children. Families were public-facing entities, enterprises, operating in commerce and community. However, with the Industrial Revolution, the center of economic action moved from the family to the factory. The emphasis on family dynamics shifted from utility and compatibility to affectionate relationships. After the Industrial Revolution, families became inward-facing instead of public-facing. The separation between *men’s work* and *women’s work* hardened.

In early North America, men greatly outnumbered women. Single women were thought to cause instability simply by being “unattached.” In the colonial South, two models of womanhood developed. The “cult of true womanhood” emphasized domesticity. The “cult of single blessedness” emphasized self-sacrifice for the benefit of others.

Similarly, in the early twentieth century, there was great concern in both the USA and Western Europe over the large numbers of single women. Following WWI, there were two million “‘surplus’ English women [and]... 500,000 war widows” in Germany. After WWII, governments felt the need to “entice women to vacate war-time jobs to create employment for returning soldiers.”

In the protestant church over the same period (chapter 2), Treweek shows, Christian teaching regarding singleness parroted the thinking of secular society. By following secular culture, and sometimes baptizing it wholesale, the church developed robust theologies of marriage and family with only the shallowest theology of singleness. Again, it was not thus in the early church.

While Luther “redeemed” sex in the Reformation, teaching that it was not inherently dirty, he also taught that sexual lust was irresistible. Therefore singleness was only for the chosen few. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian teaching responded to social upheaval through the “nostalgic adulation” of an imagined past. Christian teachers, while idealizing the nuclear family and making it the chief goal of the individual Christian life, did not recognize the degree to which their nuclear family was itself a product of secular social trends of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or how much it differed from the understanding of “family” that was near universal only a few hundred years before.

In the second step, chapters 3-4, Treweek surveys current Christian teaching regarding singleness to explore the ways that today’s churches view singleness and the place of single people within the church. Does singleness have a value for the

Christian life? And how can single people belong in the Christian community as they are?

Here Treweek argues that churches tend to view singleness as “compromised and diminished.” Singleness is “deficient,” “aberrant,” and “unfulfilled;” becoming married and parenting children is the only “maturation narrative” for young Christians, and all other approaches are compromises. Christians must “endure” singleness until God provides an escape from it. Tragically, by making marriage an idol, the church has rendered deep, fulfilling friendships as something to be regarded with suspicion, and all the more as the world (and too often the church) increasingly believes that sexual expression is a necessary experience of fulfillment. “The married Christian who develops a close friendship with someone of the opposite sex is in danger of committing nothing less than ‘emotional adultery’” (p. 62). This applies not only to opposite-sex friendships. Due to cultural pressures that the church seems to have no defense against, even exceptionally close same-sex friendships are suspected of being sexual. Like the culture around it, today’s church sees sex everywhere.

In the third step, chapters 5-7, Treweek “retrieves” biblical and historical teachings regarding singleness and related issues from church history, biblical exegesis, and Christian theology: “...retrieval from the past seeks to resource the present, as it ‘responsibly looks back and faithfully moves forward,’” (p. 219, quoting Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, 275). Here, Treweek recovers a long-ignored wealth of theological consideration of singleness, especially in terms of eschatological meaning. The teaching Treweek retrieves does not limit itself to restrictions on sexual behavior, prescriptions for the amount of time (and money) singles can give to the church, etc. but instead demonstrates the theological dignity and significance that singles can have, dignity and significance which have unfortunately been lost in the modern church. The character of early Christian teaching regarding singleness and marriage is deeply eschatological. Due to that perspective, while virginity and celibacy have historically been viewed as exceptions by the church, they were viewed as positive (not negative) exceptions and an important part of how Christians understood their separateness from the society around them (which found virginity and celibacy shocking and confusing.) The central thrust of the teaching is that marriage is only for this life and does not continue into the next. Believers who are married in this life will not be married to each other in the next, because the ultimate marriage--to Christ--will have come. Treweek’s biblical exegesis follows (instead of precedes) her treatment of early church teaching. Here she attends to 1 Corinthians 7:25, but begins with and focuses on Matthew 22:23 and its parallels. Both of these passages center on eschatology: “At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage,” and “The time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not... For this world in its present form is passing away.”

In the fourth and final step, chapters 8-10, Treweek weaves together the results (“threads”) generated in the preceding sections into a “wonderfully intricate tapestry,” within which the body of Christ may see the purpose and place of single Christians. She notes that Christians in their view of family and marriage and singleness have not only followed secular views of these phenomena but have “also rebaptized many of these to be the ‘Christian way of life’” (p. 218). Among these is the insistence that married couples be “burdened by the lofty and grand expectation that they are all and everything to each other” (p. 218). Based on her biblical exegesis, Treweek recommends that Christian teachers and thinkers shift their focus from origins to *telos*; don’t just consider where we have come from, consider where we are going. The life of faithful singles can testify to what believers will do in eternity; Treweek notes the large amount of patristic commentary on Matthew 22:30, which described how unmarried believers could live “the life of angels” on earth. Because believing singles “are even now brother or sister (and not husband and wife) to all others within the church,” their lives are now “not a foreshadow of eternity but an actual--albeit partial--foretaste of it” (p. 231).

This is a strong and helpful book. The church needs both married and single, and married and single need each other in the church. Both have unique gifts strengths and opportunities. The church should recognize singleness as a calling, sometimes temporary and sometimes permanent. In particular, churches should be aware of the way that unmarried believers can point the rest of us toward the reality of the next life, where members of the bride of Christ will all relate deeply to each other as brothers and sisters (“neither marrying nor being given in marriage”) as we unite to our bridegroom. Churches should put care and attention into ministering to singles, providing them with opportunities for significant ministry and deep and Christ-glorifying friendships, and valuing and blessing them equally whether they pursue marriage or not.

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**Social Research Methods: For Students and Scholars of Theology and Religious Studies**

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Dr. Joshua Iyadurai, a lecturer and researcher from the University of Madras (Department of Christian Studies, India), is the author of an innovative textbook in the field of Methodology that offers a view of the research methods in the social sciences through their application in theology and religious studies. The