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A Match Made in Heaven: How Singles and the Church Can Live Happily Ever After

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A Match Made in Heaven: How Singles and the Church Can Live Happily Ever After

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chapter one

An Unlikely Pair

Sunday, again. Sigh. With barely enough energy to go through the motions, I got ready for another morning of “churching,” a weekly event I already hated with a holy passion after only a few weeks in town.

I had recently moved away from the church that had marked my attendance records since the day I’d entered its nursery. Teacher Joan from the “2s and 3s” department and Teacher Sally from the “4s and 5s” still gave me hugs in the hall. Dellamae, the former church secretary who had brightened my childhood with her candy jar, often stopped to squeeze my arm and see how things were going. Everyone knew me. And everyone loved me (and, of course, they are all reading these words). I belonged there. I found reasons to be there when there really weren’t any reasons. Every time I walked in the doors, I knew I was home. It was my Family.

Singles already have a nagging sense that they don't fit in the church, and my visiting experiences didn't do anything to alleviate that feeling.

Just a few weeks removed from those familiar surroundings, Sunday had plummeted from the highlight of my week to the worst day in my week. Every time I walked in the doors of an unfamiliar church, I was nobody. No one rushed to greet me. No one gave me hugs. No one had a clue how many people just a few hours away loved me. And worse yet, no one seemed to care.

I knew that finding a church home would be the worst part of relocating, and I was (for once) sorry to be right. My weekly Sunday morning ritual included a lot of “self-talk,” psyching myself up for what was sure to be difficult and disappointing—as it is for all newcomers. It was, however, made more difficult by the fact that I had to do it alone. I had no one to help me think through my impressions. I had no one to laugh with me about the sadly funny visitor moments. I had no one to absorb my frustrations. I had no one to encourage me to keep going.

Singles already have a nagging sense that they don’t fit in the church, and my visiting experiences didn’t do anything to alleviate that feeling. As I sat alone in Sunday School classes—those smaller group settings that, according to every piece of church literature I read, encourage interaction and relationship building—I watched lots of people who genuinely enjoyed each other’s company, but seemingly had no desire to enjoy mine. Weekly, as person after person walked past my chair, I wondered if I had unknowingly worn my invisible outfit. When I went to singles classes, I either felt like an invader in someone else’s territory or I felt the once-over look of those who were *definitely* there for relationship building—with strings and rings attached. When I went to classes not specifically for singles, I put thoughts in the minds of the people who didn’t talk to me: “Why is she alone?” “Who is she?” “Look at that outfit. No wonder she’s alone.” “Is she divorced?” “Maybe her husband isn’t a Christian. Poor thing.”

I wanted to stand up on my metal folding chair and shout, “I’m a perfectly normal human being who just happens to be single. Is that all right with you?!” (Of course, had I done this, I would have utterly disproved my statement . . .) Instead, I bit my lip (and my tongue) and fought the tears. I sat alone drinking bad church coffee because somehow it felt better to have something in my hand since people weren’t shaking it.

As I write this, I’ve joined a church in my new town. It’s filled with wonderful people and numerous opportunities for service. I’m grateful. It’s characterized by solid Bible teaching and a forward vision. I’m thankful. But, I’d be lying if I said I *really* feel like I belong there as a

single. Oh, I know they want me—at least the few people I’ve gotten to know. And I know they appreciate me—at least the ones who know me. And I know they don’t want me to go anywhere else. But sometimes I still feel stuck outside, trying to find an unlocked door to get in to where the real Family is.

I know it takes awhile to fit into a new church, and I expect with time, things will only get better for me and my new church. They will understand me better as a single, and I will understand them better as a church family. But I’m concerned about those barriers that take so long to dismantle, because too many singles—members of the fastest growing household type in America—won’t stick around to see it happen.¹

During those especially difficult first six months in my new church, it often seemed as if no one would have cared if I had called it quits. I didn’t, however, because I believe in the Church. I am convinced the Church is God’s instrument to reach a lost world. I stuck it out because I was determined to find my place in another local extension of Christ’s body. A less convinced and committed single wouldn’t have bothered. There are many less painful ways to spend a string of Sundays.

And I’m concerned that even if singles do tough it out, the barriers might not really come down after all. If the church is going to minister to “the most unchurched population in America and one of the greatest mission fields in the world,” it is going to have to figure out how singles fit in the Family.² And if singles are going to find a home in the church, they are going to have to learn what it means to be part of a family.

A Compatibility Test

Why does this tension exist between the church and the single? What causes such an awkward relationship—or no relationship at all? No one is going to suggest (I hope) that it’s because singles don’t belong in the church. We all know that the church is supposed to indiscriminately open her arms to everyone—regardless of race, economic status, or social position—and everyone who is in Christ should find full membership and genuine fellowship within the church community.

We also all know that this has been among the church's greatest struggles throughout her two thousand year existence.

Neither will anyone suggest (again, I hope) that the church lacks the resources to meet some of the unique needs of singles. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by Jesus Christ Himself, the church has everything she needs for the life and godliness of her members. Nothing is outside the reaches of the saving grace of God. Yet again, many of us recognize that the church has drifted dangerously close to the cultural sirens of psychotherapy, professional counseling, and self-help programs—and has taken in some damaging water along the way.

Three Strikes and Someone's Out

I'd like to suggest three reasons behind the not-quite-right relationship between singles and the church—three reasons that they look, for all the world, to be an unlikely pair with dismal prospects for the future. The first is an indictment against the church, while the second focuses the blame on singles. The third is a shared responsibility.

Today's evangelical community is so consumed with preserving and enhancing the traditional family that an accurate understanding of that other family, the Family of God, is virtually impossible.

The first reason is what Mary Jo Weaver calls “family idolatry,”³ a misappropriated understanding of the biological family, especially in relation to the Christian community. Today's evangelical community is so consumed with preserving and enhancing the traditional family that an accurate understanding of that *other* family, the Family of God, is virtually impossible. Such an intense family focus has resulted in the denigration and dishonoring of singleness.⁴ Singles have no choice but to believe they are not valued *just as they are*. In spite of stammering assurances to the contrary, singles aren't fooled. They *don't* be-

long. The stark truth is that the percentage of singles in the church (36%) doesn't match the percentage of singles in society (47%), because the real focus of most churches is the nuclear family.⁵

A second reason for the difficult dynamics between singles and the church is the consumer attitude we all bring to church. Enough finger walking through the Yellow Pages can deliver almost anything we want fixed exactly the way we like it. We know what we want, and we want it now. If one establishment can't come through for us, we'll go somewhere else without a backward glance. Why should church be any different? We expect satisfaction—instantly, of course—and if one church can't produce, we'll almost flippantly find another. A combination of this culturally engrained mentality and the “no strings attached” lifestyle of the single adult has bred a generation of singles who come and go as they please, with minimal commitment and an overriding sense that the church exists to meet their needs. With expectations like this, it's impossible for the church to measure up.

A final reason for the awkward relationship is an inadequate theology of singleness. Marriage is accepted as the norm for Christians, yet Jesus never married and Paul speaks of the single life in glowing terms. Still we have unconsciously bought into the belief that being single means being miserable—at least moderately—and leading a second-class life. We pat singles' hands and offer encouraging words that singleness—whether by choice, change, or chance⁶—is okay, but most of us don't really believe it. We say we think singleness is great, but truthfully speaking, most people conclude that marriage is better. However, according to the New Testament, both marriage and singleness—regardless of its varied circumstances—are *equally* valuable ways to serve God.

Better and Worse?

A misunderstanding of truly biblical teaching on marriage, family, singleness, and the church results in ideas like the one espoused by the editor of a conservative Baptist newsletter in response to a concerned reader who asked why none of the churches in the

newsletter's directory advertised singles ministries. "It seems the independent Baptists couldn't care less about singles," challenged the single reader. The editor responded, "While recognizing fully the need for a strong position on the sanctity of marriage and the scriptural truth of monogamy, it is also time that we must reach out to people even if they have a lot of baggage from their past lives. Scriptural standards should be observed in this area, as in everything else. A singles ministry . . . should be a spiritual, scriptural ministry of the church, finding people as they are and leading them to where God says they should be."⁷ Reading between these lines, I surmised what the editor (and lots of others in the evangelical community) thinks about the life of a single and the role of the church as it related to single adults: first, singleness is abnormal for Christians; second, if I am single, I must have a lot of baggage; third, the church's mission is to get me married.

God has uniquely equipped the individual members of His Church to fulfill particular ministries to the body and to the world. Some of us are best equipped as singles and some of us are best equipped with a spouse—and frankly, we don't always get to choose.

Thankfully, I don't believe any of these things are true. I believe that God has uniquely equipped the individual members of His Church to fulfill particular ministries to the body and to the world. Some of us are best equipped as singles and some of us are best equipped with a spouse—and frankly, we don't always get to choose. But neither, *truly neither*, is better than the other. So why does the church have an insatiable drive to see everyone married? Why do we assume God has someone for everyone? Why are singles Sunday school classes laughingly labeled "successful" when they dissolve because the majority got married? Why does the unmarried remnant have to feel like unwanted leftovers, the scraps after a season of weddings?

We have erred. A married majority of churchgoers is determinedly

marching its individual family units down the kingdom road, enjoying the camaraderie of other families and swapping life experiences, while smatterings of single people trail behind. We have erred. It's time we admit it—and figure out how to fix it.

“Tradition!”

Fiddler on the Roof is a memorable musical about the woes of Tevye, a penniless Jewish dairyman in a tiny Russian village who bears the responsibility of providing good dowries and husbands for his five daughters. The musical opens with a fiddler, balanced on a roof of course, playing his haunting melody while Tevye talks to the audience about how to maintain balance in a changing world. The secret, says the lumbering man, is tradition. Talking to his milk cow, to the gray sky, to us, to anyone who will listen, Tevye declares that it doesn't matter how tradition started. What matters is that “because of our tradition, everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”

Thus opens the story of a man whose world was rocked, shaken, and shattered in rapid succession by his three oldest daughters who dared to question “God's expectations” and then break centuries of tradition, forcing Tevye to as well. One by one, they chose their own husbands instead of meekly marrying whatever men the local matchmaker found. Such a thing was “unheard of! Absurd!” Matchmaking was the way things were done, the way things had *always* been done.

Prior to the heart-melting encounters with his first two daughters-in-love, Tzeitel and Hodel, Tevye would never have given a thought to changing tradition. After all, what good reason could there be to change the very thing that tells people who they are and what God expects them to do?

If Tevye was right about tradition, then he had a good point. Indeed, we should kick and scream against anything that threatens to change it! Only God has the right to change His expectations of us, and given the nature of His Word (unchanging) and the authority of His Word (absolute), I don't think we should anticipate any adjustments.

Some things are unchangeable because they represent what God expects as clearly defined by Scripture. The struggle comes in discerning which behaviors and beliefs are merely tradition and which ones are truly biblical.

But was Tevye right? Does tradition define who we are and what God expects us to do? I'm quite sure you're shaking your head. Of course not, you say. Tradition provides helpful ways of doing things and creates nostalgic community bonds, but it is not authoritative. (That is what you just said, isn't it?) It is not the same as the Bible, where God *does* tell us who we are and what He expects from us. The Bible alone is the standard for the believer's faith and practice.

Before the story's end, even Tevye has figured out that perhaps tradition wasn't all he thought it was. Perhaps God's expectations of his daughters were not dictated by tradition. Tevye learned, albeit reluctantly, to weigh the importance of tradition against his love for his daughters. And he changed. He slowly removed the barriers and granted his daughters their freedom.

Except for Chava, daughter number three. When Chava met a Gentile stranger on the road, the stage was set for Tevye's toughest test. Warming their hands together over a fire, father and daughter had a less than warm conversation about her romantic interests outside the Jewish faith. "The world is changing, Papa," pled Chava. "No, Chava, no," Tevye brusquely responded. "Some things do not change for us. Some things will never change." Tevye didn't explain what made some things unchangeable, but I can tell you. Marrying outside the faith was an unchangeable tenet of the Jewish faith, and Tevye had no problem drawing the line. Chava hadn't challenged tradition; she had challenged the faith.

This time Tevye was right. There *are* some things that ought never to change. However, these "unchangeables" aren't merely based on tradition—a point that *Fiddler on the Roof* leaves the viewer to interpret. Some things are unchangeable because they represent what God expects as clearly defined by Scripture. The struggle comes in discerning

which behaviors and beliefs are merely tradition and which ones are truly biblical.

Fiddler on the . . . Steeple?

You know, of course, that Christianity has its own traditions, much like the Jewish culture has traditions. Many of our traditions are good, and they help give continuity to our faith. My church has baby dedications for parents who want to commit publicly to raising their children in the Christian faith. This can be a good thing for parents who want to make themselves accountable to the body of Christ. Other churches have catechetical programs for their children, teaching them solid truths of the Scripture in a step-by-step format. This can be a good thing for children as they learn Scriptural truths when their minds are best able to receive them. These kinds of traditions can be very positive and build believers up in the faith. Good traditions are often grounded in centuries of Christian living, demonstrating a value and appreciation of those who, long before we came on the scene, wrestled with issues in their particular cultures while figuring out how to live Christianly in an unchristian world.

Some of our traditions, however, are not as good and need some reexamination. Some are matters of practice and some of belief. For example, the traditional practice of making visitors stand up in services and introduce themselves to a gawking congregation (especially in a larger church) can be an excellent way to scare newcomers out of ever coming back. Hopefully, your church has already reexamined this tradition, found it wanting, and scribbled it off the list of things to do on a Sunday morning. Most evangelical churches have a longstanding traditional belief that we will spend forever in heaven with Jesus. But if I read my Bible right, heaven is the temporary place we will live until the creation of the *new* heaven and *new* earth, where we *will* live forever with Jesus. The traditional belief of “heaven forever” has been accepted as gospel truth for so long that it is difficult to get people to rethink it, much less change it. (Just try telling the people in the pews around you on Sunday that they won’t be living in heaven forever and

see what happens.) The more deeply ingrained a tradition is, the harder it is to change. And, obviously, if we believe a tradition is biblically based, it's even harder to change.

| *One of our most difficult tasks as Christians is keeping up with the times while holding fast to the truth.*

The danger with traditions is that we get comfortable and don't bother ourselves with thinking, or *rethinking*, about them. I understand this as well as anyone. I am a multi-task, project-oriented person who likes to get things done. Finished. Checked off the list. When a project is done, I don't like to revisit it. As a high schooler, I did quite a bit of sewing for myself, and I got a lot of wear out of the outfits that turned out well—the first time. If I made a big mistake along the way, or if a completed garment needed altering, it died a slow death, buried in a mound of others like it in a remote corner of the spare room.

This “get it done and move on” attitude has its advantages, but its disadvantages are more dangerous than a towering pile of abandoned projects. People like me don't like to *rethink* issues that have already been thought through and “figured out.” We'd like to just move on to the next task. The world, however, is always reshaping old issues, changing and reinventing them for a new generation. One of our most difficult tasks as Christians is keeping up with the times while holding fast to the truth. We must be willing to scrutinize our traditional beliefs and behaviors—even the ones we *think* are rooted in God's Word—and make sure we've not missed the mark. We must go through the ongoing struggle of discerning which traditions are valuable (or not), and which are truly unchangeable. We need to think, rethink, and rethink again.

Finding a New Roof to Balance On

Rethinking our traditional beliefs and practices related to singleness, marriage, family, and the church is critical for the future of Chris-

tianity. Some of these traditions have resulted in singles believing they don't belong in the body, a sad reality that Gilbert Bilezikian descriptively calls self-mutilation of the body of Christ: "The church sustains unfathomable damage when single adults are not accepted as full participants," because it deprives itself of the precious resources and ministry gifts that God has given singles in the church, while limiting its outreach to unsaved singles—after all, who wants to be part of a place you can't really be part of after all?⁸

Belief always affects behavior, so if anything is going to change, we'll have to be willing to examine what we believe—and why. We'll have to take a look at some long held traditions—some of which *appear* to be biblical. We'll have to examine them and see what to keep and what to discard. Some of our traditions are purely cultural, and we'll have to discern what is valuable and what is harmful. We'll have to think, and rethink, and rethink again.

I believe there is an unlikely pair, a match of unbelievable beauty, just waiting to get together. Singles and the church are perfectly suited to one another—if only someone will introduce them and create a healthy environment in which the relationship can grow.