

## Single Parents and the Church

In a culture characterized by disintegration of the family, churches are a strong fortress for the defense of healthy nuclear (two-parent) families. Also, churches are increasingly aware that single adults are a wonderful resource for the ministry and vitality of the church. In between two-parent families and single adults, however, lies a big gap. Into this gap fall single parents and their children. That gap—one of the greatest challenges facing the church in America—has several dimensions.

**Identity.** A single parent wrestles every day with a basic identity problem. Am I a single person who has parenting responsibilities? Or am I a parent who basically lives in a single person's world? It's tough to be both all the time.

Many of the single parents I know seek their fellowship in our singles ministry, but find it challenging to flow in the spontaneous social realm of other singles. Singles often have very little understanding of the pressures of parenting, and may prefer to not even deal with children in their world of singleness.

Other single parents seek identity with two-parent families in a parents' world. This can provide a great environment of security and training for the children...but then the couples go home, and instantly the singleness of single parenting once again fills the void.

**Values.** Single parents are single for a variety of reasons, some of which are more "acceptable" than others. The widowed mother is a hero; the divorced father may not be. A never-married single mother may be honored for refusing an abortion, yet sense the ongoing doubts of others about her virtue. Many of us value stay-at-home parenting and decry daycare, but what is a single parent to do when he or she must work outside the home in order to provide? We talk about the need to train children with godly diligence and consistency, yet single parents must often raise their children within a complicated and competing system of authorities and influences—often including the other birth parent, grandparents, counselors, courts, attorneys, schools, media, peers, and social service agencies! Perhaps most challenging, a single parent often lives with the constant awareness that his or her greatest human joy, that wonderful child, is inextricably linked to personal shame, pain, failure, or loss of vast proportions.

**Finances.** A friend of mine is trying to build a new church. When starting a church, one of your prayers is that God would bring in a foundation of families who will provide stability and a financial base for the ministry. Right off the bat, my friend had a problem. His church is in an urban area, and he began getting an influx of single parents responding to the hope held out in the gospel. So, rather than a church filled with financial contributors, he was pastoring folks who not only needed particular care as single parents, but who also had overwhelming financial needs. This challenge is not confined to urban communities. Single-parent families typically have constant, legitimate material needs, needs that aren't solved just by a bag of groceries or a check.

**Vision.** Single parents live with the dilemma of trying to provide for their children both materially and relationally. They also live daily in the fear of failing in both areas. Fatigue and the ongoing task of raising a child without the support of a spouse can keep personal vision and faith locked into the stifling confines of day-to-day living.

Every future decision—vocation, education, ministry, where to live—is defined by the challenges of being a single parent. Even the potential for marriage takes on a unique twist. A single mom must look at any potential husband and evaluate whether he could also be a more-or-less instant father (and this, she recognizes, is a chilling prospect for many single men). Also, any single parent beginning to build a relationship with a possible future spouse must exercise the added care of assuring that his or her child does not begin to bond with this possible “new Mom/Dad” until there is some degree of certainty that wedding bells will, in fact, ring.

## **The Call to the Church**

As we acknowledge the various dimensions of the single-parent gap, let us also recognize that God in his wisdom has provided an ideal place for single-parent families. It is the local church: a community of faith, the family of God.

The biblical equivalent of single parents are the widows and orphans of ancient times. In the Old Testament, God’s people Israel were called to both provide for the widowed and fatherless and uphold their just cause (Dt 24; Ps 82:3). In the book of Acts, one of the first issues facing the new church was how to provide for widows and their children (Ac 6).

We who are the members of local churches need to welcome single parents and their children into our midst as fellow recipients of the mercy of God. Without creating unhelpful dependencies, we need to be willing to see their needs as legitimate and worthy of our long-term attention. We also must be prepared to stand with them in the legal system, the government-assistance system, and perhaps most importantly, in our own little social systems. We need to bend our way of doing things to include them and their children, and help them find their practical place in the church family.

## **The Call to the Single Parent**

Another beautiful aspect of God’s plan for the single parent is that, along with his provision, God issues a call. It is a call to trust and a call to act. Paul writes to Timothy concerning how to care for the single parents in his church:

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help (1Ti 5:3-5).

As single parents find a place in God’s church, they should be cared for. This does not mean, however, that the church exists to fulfill the demands of its members (or any subset of its members). As the church cannot expect a single parent to bend fully to its ways, the single parent likewise cannot expect accommodation on every front. Instead, faith is expressed on both “sides.” Such faith is first expressed through responsible sacrifice, and then in trusting God for what remains. One single mom expresses both the tension and blessing of accepting a vital role in her local church this way:

Time is a precious commodity to a single parent, and giving so much of it in service is a definite sacrifice for my family. But I also know that it has connected us closely to our church family. When I'm involved at church, my children not only see me modeling servanthood, but they also see many other people committed to the Lord and working together for his purposes. I thank God for these opportunities he's given me to serve. It's also a lot of fun! (*People of Destiny*, July/August 1995, p. 6)

Andrew Murray once wrote: "Abide in Christ and let your child feel that to be near you is to be near Christ." Don't disqualify yourself or your child from full participation in God's agenda for your times. There is a vital role for you to play.

## **Father to All**

The overarching hope of the single parent is the Fatherhood of God. The psalmist expresses it this way,

Sing to God, sing praise to His name  
Extol Him who rides on the clouds  
His name is the Lord; rejoice before Him  
A Father to the fatherless; A defender of widows  
Is God in His holy dwelling (Ps 67:4-5)

Notice two things. God the Father has a special place in his heart for the widows and the fatherless. His great heart beats with compassion for those who are his and are going it alone. But he is the Father "in His holy dwelling." He is not only willing, but fully able in his sovereignty to meet the needs of his loved ones. How does he do it?

- He gives every one of his children a family large enough to fit in—the church.
- He answers prayer—every promise given to parents is available to the single mom or dad.
- He restores and protects. I have met so many single parents whose lives are a chaotic mess because of financial stress, poor choices, and isolation. And I have seen order and faith come to these seemingly hopeless situations as God's ways and means are embraced through faith.

But sometimes the most significant blessings from God are the smallest. One such small blessing occurred in a large conference that our church attends every year. During worship one evening, the worship leader, Bob Kauflin, sensed that the Lord wanted to minister specifically to the single parents in the gathering through a spontaneous song (not an infallible word from the Lord—only Scripture holds that place—but simply an expression of God's heart). Streams of people, men and women from across the spectrums of age and race, came forward to receive ministry. The song that emanated from that moment clearly touched the hearts of many, a number of whom began to weep with joy. For months afterward my single-parent friends were sharing with me how that immediate expression of God's specific care for them had changed their lives. The song was recorded and transcribed. I'd like to close with it as a reminder of how the God of all creation has kept a place in his heart just for single moms and dads.

You've felt so many times this isn't what I planned  
Days of loneliness, nights of pain  
You've felt so many times you'd rather have it any  
    other way  
But I'm with you right now  
And I want you to know  
That my plans are greater than you'll ever know

I am the one who's brought you to this place  
I am the one who will take you on  
You will know my strength in the heat of battle  
When there's no hand to hold on to

You will know my strength when you feel like falling  
You will know my arms around you  
For my plan for you is perfect  
I've seen every detail of your life

Yes my plan for you will never fail  
Though you've experienced so many wrongs in  
    your life  
Still, my plan for you is perfect  
And I will not let you down

For my love for you remains this day  
I will see you through all the way!  
I will see you through all the way! ■

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## **Divorce and the Redemptive Power of God**

Samantha was nervous. She sat across the desk from a man she hardly knew, ready to spill her heart. The tale she told me that day was one of regrettable decisions and sorrowful consequences. It was deeply personal, but sadly familiar to a pastor's ears.

*“Several years ago I met a guy at the gym where I worked out. He was good-looking and nice and we started dating. Eventually we moved in together. It was the logical thing to do. I wasn't a Christian at the time but I couldn't get over the awkwardness of the situation. I used to have nightmares of a surprise visit by my mother and would never be able to look the other tenants in the apartment building in the eye. I kept pressing Steve that we should get married, and I guess he finally ran out of excuses. It was an OK wedding, but the party at the reception was great.*

*“The first few months after that were fine, but we really didn't know what we were doing. We started arguing and he started staying out more with his buddies, which was fine with me. When he asked for the divorce I was hurt, but I wasn't shocked. After the divorce he went his way and I went mine, which was into counseling to find out how I had messed up my marriage. Being alone, I started thinking about God more and I eventually gave my life to Jesus at a Christian concert. I started going to a church. Everything was fine until I told them I was divorced.*

*“I'm sorry,' they told me, 'but if you are divorced you're in sin and you can't be a member here until you get back with your husband.' Unfortunately, Steve had gotten remarried, so that wasn't a possibility. I kept visiting that church for a while, but I don't think they ever trusted me.*

*“When I started coming here I planned on not telling anybody I was divorced. I don't know what I'd do if another church rejected me. My family thinks I drove Steve away by nagging. All of my friends, I found out, were really his friends first. I don't need counseling, I need fellowship. I don't want to go back to the meat market. If I can't find a church that will accept me, I don't know where I'll turn. But I feel like I'm deceiving people to pretend I've never been married. Basically I'm sitting here between a rock and a hard place. Either I act like somebody I'm not or I let people know who I am and risk being rejected again. So here's the issue—Can God love a divorced person? Can I find a church home here?”*

I deeply respected Samantha's integrity and courage. I also realized this was a crucial moment. My response would fill the yawning gaps in her belief about the nature of God's love and forgiveness, the purpose of God's church, the authority of God's Word, and the meaning of her new life in Jesus. My response actually involved a series of discussions during the next several months, during which we worked through the challenges she faced as a divorced person trying to walk in obedience to Christ.

The following thoughts are essentially a summary of those interactions. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of all the scriptural issues regarding divorce. Godly leaders have taken different positions regarding the meaning of the relevant texts. The pastoral staff at my church has studied the issue and developed a policy on divorce and

remarriage that is scripturally sound and supported by much of the recognized scholarship. It is also open to adjustment as we confront compelling arguments that do not concur. My purpose in this appendix is not to define the status of every divorced person, but to give hope and counsel about how a person who is “single by legal decree” can find meaningful connection to God’s purpose and people.

The first thing I wanted Samantha to know was that the love of God did not find an insurmountable obstacle in the fact of divorce. Jesus held out the water of life to a Samaritan woman who had had five husbands (Jn 4:7-18). The first people who were given opportunity to respond to the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus were those who crucified him (Ac 2:29-41). Samantha shared with me the wonderful testimony of her breaking and submission to Christ following her divorce. She needed to know that she was not “damaged goods” in God’s house, or a second-class citizen in his kingdom. The sovereign God who works all things together for the good of those who love him (Ro 8:28) had put his love in her heart through the miracle of regeneration. I had the great privilege of presenting a cool drink of the mercy of God to a very thirsty refugee. She was now an adopted daughter of the King, and it was easy to welcome her into the family of our church.

With a trust of biblical acceptance established, we could begin to look at what God’s word said about her experience. She was able to begin to see the lies she had adopted from the culture. She had been told in counseling that the divorce was nobody’s fault—just the inevitable result of irreconcilable differences. Yet this didn’t relieve the nagging sense of guilt for how she got into, or managed, or exited her marriage. Self-esteem was an untrusted support (it was never there when she needed it). When she began to see that divorce is a choice exercised by people who have devalued the marriage covenant and are grappling with deeper issues of sin, she found a reason for her perpetual feelings of guilt. By discovering why God hates divorce (Mal 2:16) she was able to identify and confess for the first time the specific sins she had committed during the marriage. The crushing self-condemnation that had plagued her began to lift. Over time she found fresh grace to forgive—her ex-husband, his attorney, her family, and the church that had rejected her.

Ever since her divorce, Samantha had careened wildly between a paralyzing fear of relationships and obsessive desires for male companionship. While God had graciously spared her from further disastrous relationships, she felt vulnerable to temptation. She also felt different than other singles because she believed they were naive about what marriage was like. As she began to identify herself and her trials biblically she began to see that she was more like her never-married acquaintances than she had imagined. She was able to begin to develop friendships with other single sisters and to relate to single men at work and in the church with a new set of convictions and motivations. She began to experience fellowship and walk in biblical love.

Several months after our initial conversation, Samantha once again sat before me with a troubled expression. “God has been so good to me,” she said. “This has been the greatest season of my life. But I’ve got another question that I’m afraid to ask. I’ve started to think more and more about whether or not I will ever get married again. It has all of a sudden hit me that maybe I can’t! Maybe the Bible does not permit me to re-marry after my divorce. How can you help me figure that out?”

Samantha had stumbled onto what I feel is the great unspoken question of the divorced Christian single. Like a rock lying just below the surface of the waves, the

question of whether the Bible will permit a divorced person to remarry is ready to shipwreck the dreams of many divorced Christians. We know God has a place in his plan for divorced Christians. But can that plan ever include the opportunity to marry again? All divorced Christians know it is this question that will most determine their present approach to singleness and their future vision for life in Christ.

Again, I must refrain from giving a particular position here. Our church's position on divorce encompasses this question and the methods we use to deal with it. Most churches with a high regard for Scripture will likewise have a method for approaching these issues. For purposes of this appendix, it is only important to know that the position I personally hold as a pastor is that there are a very few circumstances where divorced people are biblically free to remarry. The complicated issues that often accompany the history of any particular divorce need to be examined carefully in light of the appropriate scriptural truth. Each situation must be judged on its own merits with a view toward God's merciful forgiveness, yet in a way that honors the holiness of God's covenantal nature.

For Samantha, even to pose this question required a great step of faith. "I'd like to tell you about my divorce," she said to me, "and would ask you to judge whether or not I can biblically consider marriage as an option for my future. I am not involved in a relationship, but I don't want to begin to have feelings for someone only to find out that our relationship can never go anywhere. I trust God that he will give you wisdom and I am willing to abide by your decision."

At times like this a pastor can feel the weight of a person's future in his hands. It is a humbling burden. I began to draw out from her all the relevant information I could. At times it was difficult. Some of it involved Samantha confessing shameful things, but it was important to get to the reality of what happened. Samantha knew I would not render this decision alone, but would consult with the rest of the pastoral staff and possibly with other leaders experienced in making these types of judgements. As I studied this matter in Scripture, I was sobered by the words of the writer of Hebrews, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account" (Heb 13:17). There are few times when greater faith is placed in God's appointed leadership in his church than when a divorced person submits his or her future opportunity for marriage to a pastor. And there are few times when a pastor feels the burden of his accountability before the Lord more keenly than when a divorced person has expressed so bold a trust.

During the season we were deliberating this issue, Samantha learned a great deal about living for the glory of God. She knew she could have easily have found a church that would not raise the issue of her divorce. She also knew she still had the opportunity to disagree with whatever we decided. But she had seen the goodness and mercy of God at work in redeeming her life and her past. She had taken steps of trust and submission to God's pastoral agency for her life in a local church, and had reaped benefits beyond her greatest expectations. How could she now begin to negotiate her obedience to God's truth by avoiding the implications of his Word in the Bible? Radical faith is always identifiable, even if it appears in unlikely places. At this moment, Samantha was radiating radical faith.

After much prayer, study, and counsel, I met with Samantha to tell her our stance. It seemed clear that she had been abandoned in her marriage and that it was appropriate for her to remarry. (Please note that there are not enough details presented here to

provide the reader with the basis for our determination.) She was obviously greatly relieved by this. But I'll never forget what she told me through her tears as she left that day.

"You know, I am happy with this news, but somewhere in this process, I stopped hoping for it. For the last couple of weeks I have been content like never before. This whole issue of marriage and divorce and all that—it's no longer a struggle. God really used this waiting period to change my heart regarding singleness. Thank you for not judging me, and for giving me the truth. I am committed to the Lord's way or no way from now on." Samantha was a walking testimony to the power of God. A wandering marriage casualty had been transformed by God's love, God's truth, and God's means into a woman of radical faith.

Where is Samantha today? She is happily married to a wonderful Christian man. She is also contentedly single, serving God, and preparing herself for whenever God might bring his choice into her life. How can this be? Because Samantha's story is the story of many divorced women I have known. There are Sams as well—divorced men whose sense of failure and loss is every bit as profound.

Are you divorced? I would be less than honest if I told you that you won't encounter some significant obstacles in your pursuit of the rich single life. Don't lose heart. Find a church community that takes the needs of the divorced and the standard of truth with equal seriousness. Find what God is doing with your single brothers and sisters and give yourself to it with abandon. There is a place waiting for you in the family of the King. Find it and fill it to the glory of God. ■