

A SINGLE PERSON'S IDENTITY

I would like to talk this evening about living as a single adult in the church--the body of Christ, the family of God. I'll speak from the Word and from my experience. And even though the subject will probably touch directly only a limited segment of the church, the principles should apply to us all.

In the last few years, I have noticed a problem in my own personal life as a single person. The problem is that I live with a pressure toward marriage, because marriage is supposed to be the only way a person can be mature. We have had a lot of fantastic teaching here at PBC, and a great deal of Christian literature is available, about the fact that marriage is an example of the Lord's love for the church, and about what marriage does for two people in causing them to be mature in Christ. Through taking their masks off and coming to know one another they can learn many deep lessons.

But I have also noticed that it is possible to make such a strong statement on this subject that an imbalance is produced. I have even heard people make statements such as, "It's impossible to be a mature Christian without being married." This kind of thinking produces problems for those of us who are single. I have noticed that the suggestion creeps into the back of my mind that I am incomplete, in a "holding pattern", flying around trying to find the airport, so that I can get my feet on the ground and start living. This kind of thinking keeps me from living now to be what God has called me to be. It can be very subtle. It comes up even in the way I live around the house and the way I keep things in my room. I keep thinking, "When..."--"When I have my own place..." or "When I have someone with me...then I'll do this or that."

On top of that, there are all those dear, loving, well-meaning married couples who think everybody ought to be like they are, and who seek to push us together, you know--"Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match..." That's not much help, either! So there is a tension which has been produced in this situation, and I think there are probably many people who feel it.

What I would like to do is to turn to the Scriptures and very quickly go through some passages in which both Jesus and Paul say something about being single. We'll turn first to Matthew 19, beginning in verse 3. Jesus is being tested by the Pharisees. As often, they are trying to trap him:

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all? And He answered them and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh"? Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They [the Pharisees] said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?" [In other words, "Why did Moses allow divorce, then, if this is true?"] He [Jesus] said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been this way."

The law had to be altered because of the depravity of man and the brokenness of his relationships. But God's intention was never for marriage to be that way at all. The two become one, and you cannot separate two who have become one. This is

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teaching on marriage and divorce, but Jesus' disciples force him into another subject (verse 9):

"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

The disciples respond to this heavy statement:

The disciples said to him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry!"

They were beginning to realize the seriousness Jesus placed on the marriage relationship. And they said, "Wow! If that's the way it is, it's better not even to fool around with it, it's better not even to get married." Notice Jesus' very interesting reply--he does not disagree. He says,

"Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given."

What he is saying here is that to some people singleness is a gift. Have you ever thought of viewing your singleness as a gift from God? That is the way Jesus views it. I am not suggesting that your singleness is necessarily permanent, but I am talking about where you are right now. You can view your singleness, at this point, as a gift from God. You might want to move on. There is a little more about that in the next verse...but we don't have time for it. It is a good passage for you to study at home. But I did want you to see that Jesus called singleness a gift.

Now let's turn to 1 Corinthians 7. This is an interesting chapter in this connection. In verse 7, Paul says.

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them that they remain [single] even as I.

Paul uses that same word, "gift". "Each man has his gift from God." He calls singleness a gift. The state in which you are living now, if you are single, is a gift from the Lord. I asked myself, "Why is this a gift?" I read further in the chapter and Paul answered the question for me in verses 32 through 35:

But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I say, for your benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

Paul is speaking very positively here. He elevates the state of singleness to the point where a person can give his undivided devotion to the Lord, can be totally set aside to please him, with no conflicts of interest. Because, let's face it, marriage entails more responsibilities, more dealing with the world, and more financial complications. Please don't misunderstand me; Paul is not speaking against marriage here at all. He is

speaking positively, and is encouraging the single person to realize the blessings and advantages of his singleness.

This truth has begun to set me free to realize that God has called me to live now. He hasn't called me to live four years from now. I don't know what is going to be happening four years from now. I have no idea. He wants me to realize my full potential as a man right now, to be thankful about where I am, and to enjoy it to the fullest. I have a strange feeling that the single person who is always wishing he were married will probably get married, discover all that is involved, and wish he were single again! He will ask himself, "Why didn't I use that time for the Lord when I didn't have so many other obligations? Why didn't I give myself totally to him when I was single?" So I encourage those of you who are single, to praise God about your state, and to devote yourself fully to him, and to realize the full potential which God has called you to live right now.

It has been a great encouragement to me to discover that there are Christian men who have not married and yet who are very mature leaders in the community. One man who is very dear to me is Lyle Hillegas, president of Westmont College. Lyle is a single man, and God has called him to that, at least for now. And Lyle is a responsible, gifted man of God. That fact has helped satisfy my own desire to find "models" whom I can emulate in patterning my own Christian life. Sometimes all the models we see are married people, and we say, "Where do I fit?" But God has models for single people. You can find them everywhere. And they are serving the Lord. The reason they are good examples is that they have begun to learn truly to give themselves to the Lord, and to enjoy where they are. Paul says, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

I have been talking up to this point about how a single person should view himself in the body of Christ. I am going to turn a corner now, and talk about relationships between single adults in the body of Christ. As I grew up in the church, I occasionally heard young men speaking about bachelorhood only half-jokingly in terms like "Celibates for Christ" and "Bachelors till the Rapture!" You might have assumed from what I have said so far that I am suggesting that asserting yourself as a single person and realizing God's full potential for your life somehow means avoiding people of the opposite sex or setting yourself aside.

Art Hoppe, a humorous columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, wrote an article proposing "Celebrate Liberation" in an effort to counteract all the other "liberation" movements--Women's Lib and Gay Lib. He called this movement "Mono Lib". His classic example is the guy who walks out of the bar alone, puts on his hat, and asks himself, "My place or mine?"

That is not at all what I have in mind! As a matter of fact, what the Lord is beginning to show me, in my new-found freedom, is that he wants to drive me into relationships, to put me in them, and through them to teach me and enable me to grow. He wants me to minister as a brother in Christ and to get to know my sisters.

I think that a great deal of our tension, not only in our own self-image as single people but also in our relationships with members of the opposite sex, has arisen because, deep down inside, what we are pursuing is the state of marriage. We have gotten this goal into our heads, and we are working toward it. And because the married state is so exalted and is supposed to be where maturity lies, we start thinking, "Gee, when is this going to happen to me? Where is my marriage partner?"

We have gone to classes and have heard teaching on the subject.

so we devise our blueprint for the perfect marriage partner. Then we go running around with our list of the characteristics (speaking from a brother's point of view, now) that we want in a girl and hold everybody up to it. We start to get to know a sister, and...check, check, check! We have spiritual items that we look for, and the flesh usually throws in a few, too...be realistic!

You know what happens then. We get down to item seven or eight on the list and she doesn't measure up. So we say, "Goodbye. She's not the one, let's try another one." Because we are pursuing this idealized conception of marriage, we have preconceived ideas of what that is all about. This causes all kinds of frustrated reflections and comparisons.

What I really want to share with you tonight, the idea closest to my heart, is that I have discovered what God wants us to pursue is not marriage, but love, and that marriage is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. The end is love. Marriage is the servant of love. If we are pursuing marriage, we are pursuing the wrong thing. Love starts to become subservient to marriage. We start making up our own ideas of what love is, and we don't allow the Lord to show us and teach us what love actually is through the relationships he gives us. "Pursue love, not marriage." This is such a simple principle, but it has set me free in the past few months in my relationships with my Christian sisters.

Pursuing love immediately does all sorts of wonderful things! It alleviates all the questioning, "Is this the one?" because that is not so important at this point. We are learning how to minister, how to build up one another, how to be friends. We have had such great teaching on this subject in recent weeks. Dave Roper's message last week on the friendship of Jonathan and David is beautiful. And I was so excited this morning to hear Dave speaking on David and Abigail because it was so perfectly in tune with what I wanted to say tonight about how the sisters can turn and minister to the brothers. You see, when we are free to pursue loving one another in the Lord, we are free from all the tensions, pressures, and hassles of trying to find a mate.

I need to tell you what I mean by "pursuing love". The standard of love must always be that expressed in I Corinthians 13. As far as I am concerned, no other definition of love is worth spending much time on. In verses 4 through 7 there is a checklist of eight characteristics of true love. Check and see if you truly understand what love is. This passage stands in tremendous contrast to the "love" of the world, the common, ordinary usage of that word, the "love" we hear of today in songs and movies. Listen to the words here: "Love is patient. Love is kind. It is not jealous. Love does not brag. It is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly, does not seek its own [it is not possessive]. It is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." That is the love we're talking about. It is a giving love. It is a fruit of the Spirit of God. It is impossible to have apart from Jesus Christ alive in your life. It is the life of God lived out through you to enfold other people.

I would like to talk now about two practical areas concerning the pursuit of love in relationships between mature single adults. These are two principles which come out of my own experience and are certainly backed up by the Word. The first is acceptance. That is, instead of coming to a person with my preconceived ideas of what I want to make this person into, or what I hope this person already is, I come as a viewer, a receiver. This person is to be accepted by me because she (or he) is accepted by the Lord. The Lord loves this person, and died for this person, and I am to accept the fact. I am to stand back and allow myself to be ministered to, to be blessed and encouraged by this person, to accept her for the person she is, not what I want her to be. I then just sit back and

discover what is there.

This is a fantastic, exciting way to relate to people! If we view the people we meet in life as a discovery, then we don't put bonds on them, we don't force them to conform to our preconceptions. We can accept them and learn and grow from them, and from what they give to us. God accepted us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). He didn't place any behavioral criteria on us. He accepted us in our filth. Now, are we going to place more restrictive standards upon anyone else? The Lord says, "As I accept you, so you accept your brothers."

In this pursuit of love, acceptance is what helps us to be able to take our masks off. This is the quiet, slow process of revealing myself to another person. It may be difficult, even painful, very painful. But it is rich and deep and fulfilling. Have you ever had the experience of revealing yourself to another person and having that person start to open himself to you in a free relationship of acceptance? You don't have to wait until marriage to experience that. You can start right now. We should be relating to all Christians in that way--brothers with brothers, brothers with sisters, sisters with sisters--in a discovery relationship of being unveiled before one another. We really need to help each other take our masks off, and acceptance is the key to that.

The other principle is commitment. This is a quality which I really sense is very much missed in our brother-sister relationships. What has happened is that a lot of us have come to use the brother-sister relationship basically as a cop-out from responsibility. The way I see it, it is actually a taking on of responsibility for a brother to get to know a sister or a sister to get to know a brother. I am speaking primarily to the brothers now, because I've talked to a lot of them about this, and I've talked to some sisters, too, who have been deeply hurt--too many who have been deeply hurt. In fact, one of my motivations for being here tonight is that I have talked to so many sisters who have been in relationships which have started to open, in which they have started to reveal themselves to each other, they have started to spend some time together--and then the weirdness has set in.

By "weirdness" I mean the pressure which results from the prospect of marriage raising disquieting inner questions like, "Is this the one? Is this "That Relationship?"--yet without our communicating our feelings and questions to the other person. This "weirdness" starts to creep in, both people get uptight, and the guy splits! The sister has opened and bared her heart, but the brother has turned and left her. This has happened many times because "Well, (pat, pat) this is just a good brother-sister relationship, right?" We use that, sometimes, as a cop-out from the responsibility involved in truly getting to know another.

I have begun to see that there is really no back door in any relationship. Once you start a relationship, in the kingdom of God, even if it starts to get difficult, you have a responsibility to work that difficulty out with each other--you pray, you talk, you seek the Lord's mind as to what is happening. You are not to run in fear, because in God's book there is no back door to relationships. You are to close the door behind you and to move forward. The definitions of the relationship may change, but the Lord is striving for us all to become one in Him, and any move counter to that oneness is a move against the Lord's will. He desires oneness.

Perhaps I can share just one personal experience which will help to show you what I mean. In recent months I have gotten to know a sister whom I met in South Africa. We met again in Redlands, California, when I was teaching there last winter, and we got to know each other in a very free relationship. I realized that she had been "burned" in relationships before, and she was very

cautious about showing anything of her deep inner feelings and desires. But I noticed that as we got to know each other she began to trust me more, and she began to reveal more of her life to me. It was mutual, and we began to encourage one another and to open up toward each other.

And then the weirdness came! This was before I learned these things. As a matter of fact, this relationship was one of the factors which helped teach me. The weirdness came, we had a good talk, and we took a step back. We said, "Hey, we're really not sure where we're going. Neither of us is thinking about marriage right now, so let's not keep heading there. Just 'brother-sister', right? Right!"

As I drove home that night, the Lord showed me something. My responsibility to that sister was more than ever to remain committed. If there ever were a time I was responsible to stay with her and to be communicative, it was then. The next time we got together, she said, "You know, I thought I was never going to see you again." If I had left, it would have been one more time, and it would have been that much more difficult for her to open up her life the next time to someone else. We both discovered together that something good happened at this point. We weren't worrying about marriage--we had erased that. We simply began to minister to one another and to pursue the meeting of each other's needs as a man and a woman. Now it is a fantastic relationship, and it is still going on! Is this striking a chord?

I so appreciated Dave's word this morning, and I'd like to close by reinforcing his major point. What Dave showed us so beautifully from the life of Abigail was that she ministered to David's life as a sister in the Lord, calling him to the truth, in love. Please realize that these principles are not only for single people, but for all brothers and sisters in the entire body of Christ. One of my greatest experiences this past year has been getting to know Ann-Marie Ritchie. I have spent the last two years with Ron Ritchie for discipleship and teaching. But in the past year I've discovered his other half for what she is--not Ron Ritchie's wife, but the person AnneMarie. Her friendship is a blessing to me! She has ministered to me, encouraged me, built me up as a man. We are talking about righteous relationships and being free to have them. And God wants us to have them.

The last thing I want to say is, if God leads you, begin to commit yourself to a special person. Step out in faith, jump in, and do it! It involves a risk, tremendous risk. It is a lot easier to keep everybody at a certain distance, and if relationships start to get weird, to split. What I encourage you to do is to pursue love, in spite of your fear, and watch God set you free. If anyone should be having relationships which are open and beautiful and righteous between men and women, it is Christians. That is what the Lord has put us here to do.

A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE (by Del Fuller)

The "pursuit of love" as John outlines it is a beautiful concept. It has freed us from so much, and taught us so much. But I have found that in such relationships a woman often has difficulty keeping different kinds of love within their proper contexts. In other words, in spite of herself, it is often very easy for a woman to fall in love while attempting to pursue love. There is a well-founded premise that love is a much more homogeneous experience for a woman than for a man. The line differentiating the love for a brother and the love for a lover is extraordinarily complex. Sometimes a woman's feelings fall totally on one side or the other, but more often I've found the difference to be simply quantitative rather than qualitative. The deep but unromantic affection a woman can feel for a man (which I'll call phileo) can

very easily be transformed into a compelling, dramatic, romantic love (which I'll call eros) with appallingly little rhyme or reason. There doesn't seem to be a way for her to tell her heart to "switch gears", or to stop her feelings at a certain point. Her affection for a brother and her romantic love for a lover both issue from the same spring. When a man starts unfolding a woman in his pursuit of love, starts discovering her spirit and her heart, spending time with her, supporting her, giving of himself, becoming involved in her life, a woman's heart sometimes can't help falling in love with him in the process of growing to love him. So here she is, faithfully following this advice, pursuing love with a pure heart rather than marriage, getting to know and care for this man, and wham!

Things are fine if he's falling in love with her, too, but what if he isn't? What if he's still operating within the context of phileo? With all her good intentions about pursuing love, what is she to do when eros starts to eclipse phileo in her heart? If she understands where her friend's heart is at, she probably doesn't even want the intense feeling of eros to develop, because it makes everything so difficult. It often makes the continuation of the friendship virtually impossible, even though she really desires to be free from the pressures of that kind of feeling and to return to the easiness and the freedom of phileo. But what on earth is she to do with those emotions?

Can she hope to suppress them and get back to the easy relationship they used to have? Does she just stop seeing him because it's too painful? Does she weep and rage and get bitter because he "made" her fall in love with him and had no intention of following through on it? Does she just hold it all inside and try to pretend it isn't there so she won't scare him away? What does she do?

First of all, in line with the theory that her love is based on a quantitative rather than a qualitative foundation, to hope that she can banish eros in favor of phileo is not very realistic. Once her care for him has grown beyond a sisterly affection to a deeper love, how is she suddenly going to "empty out" some of that feeling unless she lies to herself? (She can do this simply by trying to make herself believe that she doesn't really care for him that much, or by dwelling on all his faults and weaknesses in a way that's totally out of proportion so that she'll lose her feelings for him. Needless to say, it's a very unhealthy, unloving way to solve the problem, but it's also quite common.) And to stop seeing each other is certainly one way to avoid the problem, but not to solve it, or grow from it, or learn whatever it is that the Lord is trying to teach either of them through it.

So it seems to me that the essence of the problem is that women are often more emotionally "vulnerable" than men in relationships where they are pursuing love; their affection can so easily turn into a deeper love, and they don't know what to do with it. (And neither do the men!)

A related problem enters the picture here because we're all so conditioned to the "love and marriage" syndrome. They're supposed to go together like a "horse and carriage", especially in the Christian world where marriage seems to be the only option we've got for people who love each other. But this then produces that "weirdness" which results from expectations--expectations of having the relationship lead somewhere, of being loved, of being fulfilled, of being protected and cherished, of being cared for in a special way...expectations which rob a relationship of spontaneity and unselfconsciousness and make us inordinately preoccupied with ourselves and an imagined, hoped for, future. These expectations rob us of the freedom to enjoy each other unselfishly, as well as the ability to love each other with truly agape love. The pursuit of love is impossible on the pony called "Expectations". It's a doomed quest, because the

moment you choose that pony you are no longer pursuing love in a relationship, no longer seeking the other person's total good, but seeking your own satisfaction.

I think the key to the solution of this problem lies not in a woman's fighting the fact that she loves a man, not in trying to love less in order to get back to phileo, but in trying to love more, to get beyond eros to agape, the kind of love the Lord has for us. The exciting and beautiful thing about agape love is finding out that you truly can love someone very deeply and yet allow them complete freedom to respond to you in whatever way God leads them to respond. The goal or result of love is not always marriage. Sometimes it's a beautiful friendship between a man and a woman. We don't love just one person during our lives; we love many, in varying degrees and in so many different ways. Love is not a zero-sum game, in which the more you love one, the less you love others. Rather, the more you learn how to love one, the more you are able to love others. We need to "legitimize" love between brothers and sisters who don't feel the Lord is leading them into marriage. We need to understand that it is all right to love a brother or a sister. But this kind of relationship demands a kind of freedom which is impossible when one is bound by expectations. It requires a love which isn't concerned with the fulfillment of its own needs, and this in turn requires trusting God to fulfill those needs.

What it comes down to, then, is, first of all, how much does she really love that man? Does she love him to the point that she wants him to be part of her life, that she needs him in order to be fulfilled and happy? Or does she love him enough that she wants him to be happy, even if it means without her?? Does she love him so much that she thinks she'll die without him? Or does she love him enough that she's willing to die for him? Whose interests is she seeking to serve, hers or his? How much does she really love him? Enough to pray that God would send him the right woman to be his mate, even if it might turn out to be someone else?? Enough to put concern for his happiness above her concern to have her own needs fulfilled? Isn't that what Jesus would do?

And what kind of love is it? Is it the "love born of lack" (the needs she has because she lacks the fruit of the Holy Spirit) and is she therefore looking to a man to give her love, joy, and peace, rather than looking to God? Or is it the love which bubbles forth from a full vessel, a vessel overflowing with the love which pours through her from the Lord? If it's the former, she won't be able truly to pray for his complete happiness--she'll be too concerned and anxious over her own. It is love born not only of a lack within herself, but a lack of trust in God.

So the next concern is, How much does she trust God? Does she really trust him to supply all her needs? Does she trust his love for her, and his knowledge of what the absolute best is for her, as well as for the one she loves? Because to the degree that she trusts God and yields her heart to him, to the degree that she chooses to be a servant and a vessel of the Lord, and to let him direct her relationships, she can be free from the leech of expectations, and free to let the Lord love that man through her. She can pray wholeheartedly for her brother's happiness, secure in the knowledge that God is going to fulfill all her needs, and that she doesn't have to depend on a man to do it. She can say with her whole being, "I love you, and there are no strings. I just want to be around to support you in whatever way you and the Lord want me to. I want to pray for you, share your burdens, and be involved in your life because I love you, but I'm not expecting anything from you; I simply and truly want to see you happy, fulfilled, and joyful." That is the pursuit of agape love. That is serving rather than being served. That is loving rather than being loved.