

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Celibacy

by J.K. McKee posted 27 October, 2015 www.messianicapologetics.net

I am very concerned about the wide number of Messianic men and women I see in their twenties and thirties (and even forties) who are unmarried. What are they going to do if they are unable to find a spouse?

On the whole, today's Messianic people—with various roots in both Judaism and evangelical Protestant Christianity—do not know what to do with the wide number of young men and women in their twenties, thirties, and forties who are unmarried **often for legitimate reasons beyond their control**. Many, for whatever reason, will either subconsciously or even consciously, conflate spiritual maturity and marital status—meaning that the ideal spiritual setting for someone is being married with several children. When a young man or woman approaches his or her late twenties unmarried, then it is often thought that such an individual is probably spiritually deficient, and likely also selfish and self-serving.

In a relatively new and small faith community such as the Messianic movement, we should recognize that with our size being what it is, that it will be difficult for many young men and women to find a suitable spouse—at least for an elongated season. Rather than eschewing such people as being spiritually immature or unfit for service within the Kingdom of God, a review of the legitimate and blessed Biblical option of **celibacy**, should be in order.

When reviewing a selection of theological resources, it is true that many of the Bible examiners of the past half-century have not known what to do with celibate singleness. The short *IDB* entry only says, “Celibacy is unknown in the Bible, with the possible exception of Paul” (I Cor. 7:8).¹ *ABD* is somewhat better, as it has the more neutral, “Votive abstention from marriage and sexual relations—unknown unless alluded to in Matt 19:12.”²

Within the Jewish theological tradition, it can be easily seen how celibate singleness has been something greatly frowned upon. A dictum in the Talmud records, “Said R. Hanilai, ‘Any man who has no wife lives without joy, blessing, goodness:’ Joy: ‘and you shall rejoice, you and your house’ (Deu. 14:26). Blessing: ‘to cause a blessing to rest on your house’ (Eze. 44:30). Goodness: ‘it is not good that man should be alone’ (Gen. 2:18)” (b.*Yevamot* 62b).³ Obviously, these statements reflect certain interpretations of Tanach passages, which imply that a person (particularly a male) who lives without a spouse is probably unhappy and likely personally incomplete. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* notably has an entry on “Celibacy,” recording the historical Jewish view of not only the married state being ideal for all people, but also the views of how unmarried persons were not permitted to serve in various leadership capacities within the community:

“The idea that a person ought not to marry is entirely foreign to Judaism. The opening phrase in the major code of matrimonial law leaves no doubt as to the obligation to marry and raise children: ‘Every man is obliged to marry in order to fulfill the duty of procreation, and whoever is not engaged in propagating the race is accounted as if he shed blood, diminishing the divine image and causing his presence to depart from Israel’ (*Shulhan ‘Arukh, Even ha-‘Ezer* 1.1). Only one exception to this rule is recognized by the

¹ “Celibacy,” in *IDB*, 1:546.

² “Celibacy,” in *ABD*, 1:879.

³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-

Talmud, and that is the case of an individual such as Ben ‘Azzai whose ‘soul was bound up with the Torah and is constantly occupied with it’ (Maimonides, *Laws of Marriage* 15.3). Not only is matrimony regarded as the ideal state of existence, but an unmarried person is debarred from high religious and judicial office. Both high priests and judges in capital cases must be married, and single men are, in principle, unfit to act as synagogue readers (*Yoma’* 1.1; *San.* 36b; *Shulhan ‘Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 53.9). No Jewish moralist has ever encouraged celibacy, and in this respect, there is a marked difference between Jewish values and those of Christianity.”⁴

It is safe to say that many of the sentiments recorded above, match much of the thinking of a wide number of people within today’s broad Messianic movement: unmarried people are deficient when compared to married people.

The Tanach or Old Testament includes a number of examples of those who were celibate their whole lives, such as Nazirite vows taken for life (Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17). The Prophet Jeremiah was specifically called by God to be unmarried and childless (Jeremiah 16:1-2).⁵ The Jewish philosopher Philo expressed the opinion that upon being made leader of Israel, that Moses did not have sexual relations with his wife, in order to be fully committed to service:

“But, in the first place, before assuming that office, it was necessary for him to purify not only his soul but also his body, so that it should be connected with and defiled by no passion, but should be pure from everything which is of a mortal nature, from all meat and drink, and from all connection with women. And this last thing, indeed, he had despised for a long time, and almost from the first moment that he began to prophesy and to feel a divine inspiration, thinking that it was proper that he should at all times be ready to give his whole attention to the commands of God” (*Life of Moses* 2.68-69).⁶

It probably goes too far to suggest that Adam and Eve were celibate only until their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and that they only had sexual relations to produce children. This is a view stated in the Pseudepigrapha: “And Adam named his wife Eve. They had no son until the first jubilee but after this he knew her” (*Jubilees* 3:34-35).⁷

Christianity has been more favorable than not, to heterosexual men and women choosing—or as may be required by life circumstances—to be celibate. Varied views in the emerging Christianity of the Second-Fourth Centuries C.E. were quite favorable to celibacy,⁸ often as a means for men and women to live a life almost completely dedicated to God’s service. Historically, this has manifested in Roman Catholic priests and nuns making vows of celibacy before being consecrated to their respective offices, but also with the idea predominating much Christian thought that sexual intercourse is only intended for procreation and not for the legitimate pleasure of a husband and wife. The Protestant Christian tradition has rightfully made corrections to much of this, as Protestant ministers today are indeed permitted to marry, and sexual intercourse is rightly viewed as involving more than just procreation. “The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century vigorously rejected enforced celibacy of the clergy in favor

⁴ Daniel Sinclair, “Celibacy,” in R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widoger, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 151.

⁵ “The word of the LORD also came to me saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for yourself nor have sons or daughters in this place’” (Jeremiah 16:1-2).

⁶ Philo Judaeus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 497.

⁷ O.S. Wintermute, trans., “Jubilees,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), pp 60-61.

⁸ David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp 88-90.

of a return to apostolic freedom” (*Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*).⁹ Yet, while appropriate corrections have been made by Protestantism to Catholic error, the issue of celibate singleness for individuals at large—and most especially clergy—is not one often approached with a great deal of fairness or maturity, with single people not tending to be treated with full acceptance and equity by their married peers.

There are certainly perspective issues to be weighed from verses like Genesis 1:28 and 2:18. The first commands, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). With God having made man and woman (Genesis 1:26-27), this is properly interpreted as being a general direction to humankind in general, that they might reproduce via children, and subdue Planet Earth. This is not a specific direction to *all* men and women to have children, especially as there are men who are impotent and women who are barren. The second statement, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18), indeed involves how Adam, the first man, needed a mate in Eve, the first woman. The statement “It is not good for the man to be alone” can be commonly interpreted as a general statement regarding all people, although contextually it involves the loneliness of Adam as the sole human being on Planet Earth requiring another human for companionship. It should go without saying that in the Twenty-First Century, on a planet of over seven billion people, that no man or woman has any reason to feel “alone.”

Within the Torah, it is witnessed that Levitical priests could not have crushed testicles (Leviticus 21:20-21), and that those males who were castrated could not enter into the Tabernacle (Deuteronomy 23:1). While sometimes approached from the perspective of God frowning on the unmarried and childless, castration was something commonly practiced by various Ancient Near Eastern cults, hence possibly making eunuchs entering into God’s Tabernacle a way of introducing paganism. Castration of a male’s sexual organs is quantitatively different than a man or woman choosing to be unmarried or living a single and celibate life because of circumstances. It cannot go overlooked, though, how in the future eschaton eunuchs are among the formerly disfranchised persons who are welcome into God’s House (Isaiah 56:3-5).¹⁰ Surely if those who had their sexual organs removed can be welcome, then single men and women who are committed to a life of abstinence should be even more welcome.

Generally speaking, evangelical theologians have approached the issue of celibate singleness as being something widely or greatly frowned upon in the period of the Tanach or Old Testament, but something more permitted and allowable in the period of the Apostolic Writings or New Testament. As the entry for “Celibacy” in *ISBE* records,

“It OT times marriage was almost universal and celibacy was considered abnormal. For the Israelites as well as other ancient peoples the propagation of the family name was of supreme importance, and thus the desire for sons was the dominant factor...In the NT we find a somewhat different attitude toward marriage from the general stance of the OT...Here we find notable examples of celibacy: John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, and Jesus Himself.”¹¹

One of the most perplexing words of Yeshua the Messiah, expounding upon all of the possible avenues of what it could mean to be a “eunuch,”¹² is seen in Matthew 19:12: “For there

⁹ Donald G. Davis, “Celibacy,” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp 112-113.

¹⁰ Consult the entry for Isaiah 56:1-8 in the *Messianic Sabbath Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

¹¹ Celibacy,” in *ISBE*, 1:627.

¹² Grk. noun *eunouchos* (εὐνοῦχος); “a castrated male person, *eunuch*,” “a human male who, without a physical operation, is by nature incapable of begetting children, *impotent male*,” and “a human male who abstains fr. marriage, without being impotent, *a celibate*” (*BDAG*, 409).

are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are *also* eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept *this*, let him accept *it*." Many of those who would be regarded as eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven, are not those who actually had their sexual organs altered or removed, but instead those who would be committed to a life of celibate singleness. As such, *Lattimore* offers a unique and appreciable rendering of Matthew 19:12: "For there are sexless men who have been so from their mother's womb, and there are sexless men who have been made sexless by other men, and there are sexless men who have made themselves sexless for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let him who can accept, accept."

The most significant instruction regarding celibate singleness, surrounds the Apostle Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 7:7-9**. For sure, a figure like Paul considered heterosexual marriage between one man and one woman to be a God-ordained and God-blessed state (1 Corinthians 9:5), and hardly some sort of sin (1 Corinthians 7:28). What is confronted in 1 Timothy 4:1-4 about a prohibition to marry, was rooted within an inappropriate asceticism, where eating meat and having sexual relations were connected to a false teaching which advocated that the resurrection had taken place (2 Timothy 2:18).¹³ Contrary to this, the celibacy spoken of by the Apostle Paul, per his own ministry, was something very different for the sake "of the present distress" (1 Corinthians 7:26)—an indication that while celibate singleness is a "gift" (1 Corinthians 7:7), it is often forced upon men and women because of life circumstances:

"Yet I would that all people were even as I myself am. However, each 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 if they abide even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Corinthians 7:7-9, PME).

A most pronounced example of what many consider to be celibacy, involves the 144,000 sealed servants from the Twelve Tribes of Israel, as Revelation 14:4 states, "These are the ones who have not been defiled with women, for they have kept themselves chaste. These *are* the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb." The clause *parthenoi gar eisin* (παρθένοι γάρ εἰσιν) is more specifically, "for they are virgins" (ESV), taken by Brown and Comfort to indeed be, "celibates for they are."¹⁴ Of course, there is some possible maneuvering regarding the males among the 144,000¹⁵ and the requirement that they not be defiled with females—as an indication that such individuals never fell prey to sexual sin, and per the chance that they might be married, they were virgins at the time. The operative statement is being "defiled with women," whereas proper sexuality between a man and a woman within the context of marriage is not something defiling per Hebrews 13:4: "Marriage *is to be held* in honor among all, and the *marriage bed is to be undefiled*; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge." Still, there is a high probability that the considerable majority of the 144,000 will be celibate and single—a likely consequence of avoiding the perversions present in the years leading up to the Messiah's return.

Even with celibate singleness a state which is held in Holy Scripture to be one of high regard, alongside of heterosexual monogamy, many of today's evangelical Christian *complementarian* theologians greatly frown on it. Noting some of the views on 1 Timothy 3:2 (which this writer believes is situation-specific to Timothy in Ephesus, and not universal for all

¹³ Consult the author's commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁴ Brown and Comfort, 886.

¹⁵ While controversial for certain, the author is of the personal opinion that there will be various females among the 144,000 sealed from the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

times and places) in their book *God's Design for Man and Woman*, and how the overseer was to be “the husband of one wife,” Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret E. Köstenberger have to concede, although certainly begrudgingly,

“...Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 acknowledges the gift of celibacy and notes that it enables a believer who chooses to remain unmarried to serve in a more unencumbered manner than those who must fulfill their marital and familial obligations. For this and other reasons, it's highly unlikely that Paul, by stipulating that candidates for the office of elder be *mias gynaikos andra* [μίας γυναικὸς ἄνδρα], seeks to exclude unmarried men from serving in this capacity. It's an indication of the implausibility of this interpretation that very few interpreters actually take this view today. Single men are therefore potentially to serve as church leaders.”¹⁶

While complementarians are well known for their discrimination (in spite of Biblical examples) against women for serving as leaders and teachers within the Body of Messiah—in the Köstenbergers saying that “Single men are therefore **potentially** to serve as church leaders” (emphasis mine), complementarians tend to likewise be discriminatory (in spite of Biblical examples—including Yeshua the Messiah) against single men serving as teachers and leaders in the Body of Messiah.

In much of contemporary evangelical Christianity, real problems erupt in church settings, when it is believed *not so subtly* how the young family of a husband and wife in their mid-to-late thirties, with their two or three small children **is more godly and spiritual** than the celibate single man or woman in his or her mid-to-late thirties—when it is known that the husband and/or wife was once involved in promiscuity and other high sins prior to marriage. Such a single man or single woman, in contrast, may indeed be a person who has been committed to sexual purity since being a teenager. Such persons who are unmarried are often unmarried because of life circumstances, beyond those of the economics of marriage, their education, or their jobs. Such persons who are unmarried are often unmarried because a potential husband or wife has not entered into their lives, **and they have no other Biblical option but to be celibate.**

There are various leaders and teachers within today's Messianic movement, who will admit to having had many sexual liaisons prior to marriage (as well as other sins, such as drug addiction). And, for whatever reason or reasons, because they are married now, they are perceived as somehow being more spiritual and mature than the unmarried man or woman striving to maintain sexual purity, often in a celibacy forced upon them by life circumstances. Sadly, our faith community can very much fall into the complementarian error of believing that the married state is superior, rather than co-equal, to celibate singleness.

The marriage option is not always available for young people in the Body of Messiah, in the early Twenty-First Century. This especially involves young men or young women who are a part of the Messianic movement, who if going to be married, should indeed have a husband or wife with compatible beliefs and values. While some might say that such young men and young women need to “pray harder” for a spouse to arrive into their lives—what if God has other plans for these people, and at the very least, that an elongated season of celibate singleness awaits them? What legitimate service can such young men and young women offer to the Body of Messiah—specifically for contributing to aspects of our theology and spirituality that those who have immediately preceded us were unable to do, because of marital responsibilities?

There is little doubting that as the return of Israel's Messiah draws nearer, that there are going to be *more* and not less, young men and young women in today's Messianic movement,

¹⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Margaret E. Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 220.

who will need to be committed to a life of celibate singleness. **Much of this is lamentably because of the sexual sins and perversions which are on the increase in society.** And, as obvious as it may be: celibate singleness is *the only legitimate alternative* to heterosexual monogamy. (Homosexual marriage is no option!) What surely does need to be changed—especially as there is a slowly emergent Messianic *egalitarianism* on the rise—is for people in our faith community to begin to see heterosexual monogamy and celibate singleness as co-equal and mutually blessed by God. *Single people can serve and lead God’s people the same as married people.* Darlene Fozard Weaver correctly directs in the *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, “Celibacy challenges social hierarchies grounded on marriage and kinship. It permits more egalitarian and inclusive access to religious distinction and leadership. Celibacy points to the transformation of human relations in the kingdom of God (Matt 23:30 pars.)”¹⁷ Yeshua Himself did issue the difficult word,

“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection” (Luke 20:34-36, TNIV).

There will be those, as the age to come draws near, who will not marry, and be similar to those who participate in the resurrection of the dead. The needs of the Body of Messiah as the Lord’s return draws closer, are going to be very stressful and significant. With more Messianic young men and young women going to probably be single and celibate, our faith community at large has the responsibility not to dismiss them as being an inconvenience we do not quite know what to do with, **but rather to embrace them as being faithful to the Biblical ethos of maintaining sexual purity and holiness.** They need to be encouraged to rechannel the energies that others have used to be a spouse and parent, into the interests of the Kingdom of God and salvation history.

1 Corinthians 7:7-9

“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 if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn *with passion.*”

This entry has been reproduced from the commentary *1 Corinthians for the Practical Messianic*

7:7 Because of various extremes that have manifested themselves in Roman Catholic history, which has required its clergy to make vows of celibacy, many evangelical Protestants—and a huge number of today’s Messianic people—have not widely appreciated Paul’s statement, “I wish that all people [*pantas anthrōpous, πάντας ἀνθρώπους*] were just like me. But each [*heksatos, ἕκαστος*] has his own gift from God, one person in this way and another in that way” (HCSB). Celibate singleness is indeed considered by the Apostle Paul to be a gift (*charisma, χάρισμα*). Various interpreters will lean toward recognizing celibacy as being a unique gift, but one that is only allotted to a few. The Biblical reality is, however, that having a proper marriage, with husband and wife in mutual service and honor to one another, is also a gift. “[E]ach has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind” (NRSV). Celibate singleness and monogamy are both co-equal.

¹⁷ Darlene Fozard Weaver, “Celibacy,” in Joel B. Green, ed. et. al., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 126.

What is discussed in vs. 7-8 is not rooted in any kind of asceticism, where abstinence from sexual intercourse is designed to bring people closer to God or things spiritual. The Essenes, for example, were widely celibate (Josephus *Wars of the Jews* 2.120), for religious reasons. What is depicted in the ministry of Paul, is instead a practical celibacy for men and women of God, where they can take the time and energy required for marriage and childrearing, and focus it toward greater levels of service for His Kingdom. It is widely recognized that the apostolic ministry of Paul in the First Century Mediterranean, would have been impossible, if he had been married with children. David Prior states, “Paul was ‘the apostle to the Gentiles’ and that unique vocation required complete freedom to move unimpeded by interpersonal considerations, let alone responsibilities for a wife and family. He was also not the easiest of people to have as a colleague; he was impatient with those who could not work at his pace or failed to come up to his high expectations.”¹⁸

It has not been customary among evangelical Protestants to regard celibate singleness as a co-equal status alongside of monogamy, but it is instead viewed to be an infrequent exception. Leon Morris thinks that Paul “regards marriage as normal, and he will later make the point that, though there are some advantages in celibacy, there is a greater completeness in marriage (11:11). Celibacy requires a special gift from God.”¹⁹ The view that a man or woman is “incomplete” until he or she marries, has been a widescale opinion present in evangelical Christianity since the 1980s for sure, and has doubtlessly affected the bulk of the Messianic movement, although it is hardly Biblical.

More even-handed positions are present among other 1 Corinthians commentators. Anthony C. Thielston is much fairer, describing some of the advantages and disadvantages of both celibate singleness and monogamy:

“[T]he parallel is not celibacy versus marriage, but the gift of a positive attitude which makes the most of the freedoms of celibacy without frustration, and the positive attitude which caringly provides the responsibilities, intimacies, love, and ‘dues’ of marriage while equally living out the gospel. Either state offers rewards or frustrations, depending on varied attitudes, varied situations, and varied gifts.”²⁰

Craig Blomberg, who would be more reflective of the customary valuing of monogamy over celibate singleness for today’s evangelical Christians, does recognize how there is no explicit mandate for one to “be married.” He also draws attention to how there are responsibilities that both have, such as the celibate actually abstaining from unmarried sexual intercourse, and the married not shirking the attention they must give to a spouse and children. He summarizes,

“Like other gifts, the gift of singleness may last only for a time. On the other hand, we may seek after the gift of marriage but not obtain it. Yet singleness and marriage are not quite the same as some of the other gifts because they also include obligations on believers that are not optional. No one, for example, may excuse premarital sex by claiming not to have the gift of celibacy! If people are unmarried, they must refrain from sexual intercourse whether they feel like it or not.”²¹

A figure like the Apostle Paul was definitely a non-conformist, in lauding his celibate singleness, as such would not be too socially expedient for most men in Second Temple Judaism. Gordon D. Fee indicates, “marriage was the rule in Judaism, both expected and at times thought

¹⁸ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 120.

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 101.

²⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp 513-514.

²¹ Craig Blomberg, *NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 137.

to be commanded.”²² An admonition witnessed in the Mishnah directs, “A man should not give up having sexual relations unless he has children...The man is required to be fruitful and multiply but not the woman” (m.*Yevamot* 6:6).²³ An even more extreme view is seen in the Talmud, “Said R. Eleazar, ‘Any man who has no wife is no man: “Male and female created he them and called their name Adam” (Gen. 5:2)’” (b.*Yevamot* 63a).²⁴ Strong criticism is present against those who were not married after twenty: “Said Raba, and so did a Tannaite authority of the household of R. Ishmael: ‘Until someone is twenty years old, the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and looks forward to when a man will marry a wife. But once he reaches the age of twenty and has not married, he says, “Blast be his bones”’” (b.*Kiddushin* 29b).²⁵

One does encounter, in the Tosefta, the single rabbi who wanted to focus on his studies: “What shall I do? My soul thirsts after Torah. Let other people keep the world going” (t.*Yevamot* 8:7).²⁶ But, it was only the impotent men in the Jewish community who were believed to be exempt from marriage (m.*Niddah* 5:9).²⁷

Interestingly enough, Ben Witherington III brings out how Paul’s valuing of celibate singleness, as a co-equal status to monogamy, would run contrary to some Roman social norms as well:

“In Roman Corinth, one who advocated singleness as a better state than marriage would hardly be seen as one who was baptizing the status quo. Some emperors, especially Augustus, had done all they could to encourage Romans to marry and have many children. Augustus even put into law penalties on women who remained unmarried too long after being widowed.”²⁸

Contrary to what society may have thought, Paul viewed his celibacy as a significant gift from God, as he saw celibacy as being a useful means by which he could accomplish the maximum amount of work as possible for God’s Kingdom (v. 32). But, quite contrary to what Roman Catholicism later concluded from his words, Paul never emphasized that leaders and teachers in the Body of Messiah must be celibate. Of course, some have interpreted, wrongly, that elders and deacons must be married (cf. 1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6), when these are better taken as depicting what a family is to look like when an elder or deacon is married (not to mention how the Pastoral Epistles are rightly approached as letters regulating the circumstances in Ephesus and on Crete, and not universal circumstances for the Body of Messiah at all times).²⁹ **Marriage is not required for leadership in the Body of Messiah**, as Paul’s own life, and the example of many other First Century leaders—the foremost being Yeshua the Messiah Himself—demonstrate.

While among contemporary Christian people today, celibate singleness is viewed as being more the exception than the norm, Paul presents it as something that more people should be quite open to considering. This is not because single people are closer to God than married people, as much as it is a need for an undivided commitment to the interests of God. Yet, David E. Garland is entirely right to interject, “If remaining single is driven by selfish concerns—for

²² Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 275 fn#36.

²³ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 352.

²⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 1:713.

²⁷ “A boy twenty years old who has not produced two pubic hairs—let him bring evidence that he is twenty years old, and he is declared a eunuch” (m.*Niddah* 5:9; Neusner, *Mishnah*, 1085).

²⁸ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 174.

²⁹ For a further review, consult the author’s commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

example, to use it as a yardstick to measure one's imagined spiritual status or to gain independence from any obligations to a spouse—it no longer can be regarded as a gift."³⁰ Paul can be presented as an ideal model for celibate singleness, given the congregations he planted throughout the Mediterranean, and the body of writing he produced. While contemporary Protestantism has not too often valued celibate singleness, commentators like Richard B. Hays make some points that need to be heard more frequently:

"Most Protestant churches, historically in reaction against the Catholic imposition of mandatory clerical celibacy, have come to regard the unmarried state as aberrant and unhealthy. This tendency has been reinforced by powerful forces in popular culture that insinuate the idea that human wholeness is possible only through sexual relationships...Paul argues that for many people it is *better* to remain unmarried—not because sex is dirty or wrong, but because the single life allows Christians the freedom and flexibility to serve God without distractions."³¹

7:8 Paul issues the personal directive, "But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they abide even as I" (PME). Some have taken *tois agamois kai tais chērais* (τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις) in the direction of the first group, labeled *agamos* (ἄγαμος), to speak of male widowers.³² Perhaps more important to recognize, would be the factors in First Century history which would have pressured people to marry or remarry. As Thiselton describes, "Pressures on both men and women to remarry were imposed by four considerations: issues about acquiring property; the procreation of not less than three children; the use of marriage (or remarriage) to enhance status; and the low life-expectancy of women ('twenty to thirty years'), especially connected with instances of death in childbirth."³³ The Apostle Paul, lauding the value of celibate singleness, ran contrary to what would have been expected of many people.

Paul would view marriage as being a gift, just as he would view celibacy as a gift (v. 7). Those, who commit themselves to a marriage relationship, should see that their relationship and service to God is enhanced, not that they have taken on a substantial liability. Unfortunately, history bears out myriads of examples of people who have gotten married for all the wrong reasons, many of which involve fulfilling the expectations imposed by others—not those necessarily required or expected by God and His Word. My own paternal grandfather remarried within a year of my grandmother's death (1961), because he believed that my father needed a "mother." He and this new wife were constantly at odds with one another, she was a heavy drinker, and as he was dying seventeen years later (1978) the two of them were actually in divorce proceedings.

What about Paul's personal disposition? The record of Acts 26:10³⁴ is supportive of Paul having once been a member of the Sanhedrin, the members of which most probably had to be married men (b.*Sanhedrin* 36b).³⁵ Various interpreters do think that Paul had actually been widowed, but then others have interjected that as a result of his conversion to Messiah faith, that

³⁰ David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 272.

³¹ Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), pp 132, 133.

³² Fee, 288; Hays, 118; J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:874.

³³ Thiselton, pp 515-516.

³⁴ "And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them" (Acts 26:10).

³⁵ "For it has been taught on Tannaite authority: **The eunuch and one who has never had children are [T.: suitable for judging property cases but are not suitable for judging capital cases] not to be seated on a Sanhedrin**" (b.*Sanhedrin* 36b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

Garland, 277 expresses doubt on whether this was a hard and fast rule for the First Century.

Paul's wife had left him. Then again, given Paul's superlative Jewish observance (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:6), Paul could very well have been celibate his entire life, with Jewish religious leaders recognizing how his skills as a student did not need the complications of a wife and children.

V. 8 is the first of five places in this chapter (1 Corinthians 7:8, 11, 20, 24, 40) where the verb *menō* (μένω) is employed. Virtually all modern Bibles translate this as "remain," although noted by Vine as "'to stay, abide,' is frequently rendered 'to remain,'"³⁶ and by Mounce and Mounce as mainly being "*abide, await; remain; stay; wait for.*"³⁷ AMG also notes how *menō* can be used in various contexts "to remain in something which is equivalent to remaining steadfast, persevering in it."³⁸ For any of the different circumstances in life Paul will detail, does he see these as all being permanent statuses, never to be changed? If he did, then he would never have advised for the slave to take an opportunity for freedom when made available (1 Corinthians 1:21). The older rendering of *menō* as "abide" (KJV, American Standard Version) has the advantage of representing the different statuses in ch. 7 as not being permanent and unalterable. If, during the course of Paul's own life, where the Lord directed circumstances and made it clear that He wanted him settled in a particular location, focus on some different ministry work, and have a wife and a family—then Paul would have surely have recognized his statement "It is good for them if they abide even as I" (American Standard Version) as representing his celibate singleness for an elongated season.

One does not ever see in the record of Scripture or early Christian writings, the Apostle Paul ever get married and raise a family. Paul definitely followed totally through on his word, "to those who are unmarried or widowed, I say definitely that it is a good thing to remain unattached, as I am" (Phillips New Testament). And indeed, Yeshua Himself directed His Disciples, "For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are *also* eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept *this*, let him accept *it*" (Matthew 19:12). Some people are just not supposed to be married, ever, because the needs of God's Kingdom are that pressing.

Paul will later acknowledge how there were other Apostles, like Peter, who were married, and even brought along their wives. He raised the rhetorical point, "Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" (1 Corinthians 9:5). The sterner reality is that marriage is not a right or an entitlement for God's people, but is instead a luxury and a privilege. *Not everyone gets a husband or wife or children.* Paul's word about properly abiding in a state of celibate singleness should be appreciated by many of today's sincere Believers, because in the Twenty-First Century there are many reasons for people to *not* be considering marriage. The foremost of these reasons would be the high divorce rate in the so-called Christian West, as over half of today's marriages do not succeed.

7:9 Paul did recognize that for many of his Corinthian audience, the commitment to abide celibate was not going to be possible, and so he does say, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (RSV). The verb *egkrateuomai* (ἐγκρατεύομαι) means, "**to keep one's emotions, impulses, or desires under**

³⁶ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1968), 521.

³⁷ William D. Mounce and Robert H. Mounce, eds., *The Zondervan Greek and English Interlinear New Testament (NASB/NIV)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, 2011), 1112.

³⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 960.

control, control oneself, abstain" (BDAG),³⁹ the related noun *egkrateia* (ἐγκράτεια) appearing among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23. Paul will observe in further correspondence, "Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" (2 Corinthians 11:29).

V. 9 is commonly approached from the perspective of the young person who cannot control his or her (although more frequently his) sexual urges, and needs to be married so that sexual temptation does not lead to promiscuity. Fee offers a different vantage point, stating, "Paul is not so much offering marriage as the remedy for the sexual desire of 'enflamed youth,' which is the most common way of viewing the text, but as the proper alternative for those who are already consumed by that desire and are sinning."⁴⁰ Prior is more reflective of the frequent, evangelical Christian approach:

"He is arguing like this: the best situation (his own) is that of the unmarried person who is under no pressure to marry. The next best is the person who must physically express his sexuality and does so within marriage. The least desirable is the person who needs marriage as a means of expressing his sexuality, but is compelled (or tries very hard) to do without it."⁴¹

A reappraisal of Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7:7-9 is certainly in order. Today, given the high divorce rate among (claiming) Christian people—some of which has been caused by people feeling pressured to get married, and not enough Christian leaders emphasizing the value of celibate singleness—it is fair to say that the institution of marriage is not what it was. In various ways, marriage has become to the contemporary Body of Messiah, not unlike how the Saddusaical occupants of the Levitical priesthood, in league with the Romans, had corrupted a holy institution that God Himself had established.⁴² Contrary to popular belief, the Bible knows no such language of every man and every woman being predestined some kind of "soul mate." The Bible certainly does not teach that a man or woman is to find "fulfillment" in a spouse; a person's fulfillment is to come from God, not another mortal. There is no explicit command from God that every individual must marry.

Celibate singleness is not an estate that you will find too highly valued by today's Messianic people as it should be. In order to take Paul's words in vs. 7-9 more seriously, today's Messianic movement will need to collectively jettison errant and non-Biblical ideas where married persons are viewed as being more spiritually mature than the unmarried. We will need to recognize the Biblical reality that both the married and celibate estates are co-equal and co-blessed by the Lord. Both of them do come with their advantages and disadvantages.

There have been some consequences of evangelical, mostly complementarian Christians, placing marriage on a pedestal—which has affected a broad selection of Messianic thinking. In wanting to emphasize marriage and sex within marriage as a rightful answer to combat premarital sex and promiscuity—one group of Believers has been decidedly left in the "lurch." Probably a third of contemporary Believers in their twenties and thirties are not married, for a variety of legitimate circumstances: educational, economic, and professional. These are committed Believers who are celibate, and many do not desire marriage because of the high risk of divorce. Evangelical egalitarians have rightfully recognized that these people need not be socially eschewed, or excluded from the congregation, because of their single status—even though they can frequently feel left out precisely because of their single status.⁴³ **Messiah faith is not a faith only for the "married"; Messiah faith is for all human beings.**

³⁹ BDAG, 274.

⁴⁰ Fee, 289.

⁴¹ Prior, 121.

⁴² Consult the relevant sections of the author's commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

⁴³ Among the very few articles I have encountered on this, include the highly useful:

Both my sister and I, at two different Messianic congregations, can testify in our experience of being discriminated against for being single (2012, 2014). We were both involved in young professionals groups, which included congregational attendees in their twenties and thirties, some of whom were married, and many others who were singles. The leaders of these groups were both unmarried when coordinating events. As soon as both of these leaders got married, the focus of these groups shifted exclusively to the married couples, with the singles having to fend for themselves. Among the many different factors at work would have been a failure to not appreciate Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7:7-9.

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

Kate Wallace, "The (Single) Christian Life." *Mutuality: the voice of Christians for Biblical Equality* Autumn 2014; Vicki Scheib, "Single and Married: Bridging the Identity Divide" in *Ibid.*; Katie Driver, "That They May Be One," in *Ibid.*; Claire Bonner, "Are We Family...Or Are We?" in *Ibid.*