



MISSION

ISSUE 1 2021

# CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

## HAPPILY EVER AFTER



I think we should see other people.

### LOVE AND SINGLENESS

**Q&A: JOHN MARK COMER**

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



## GOOD CHALLENGE

Dear Jonathan  
 Congratulations on the latest edition – *Outsiders*. Especially appreciated the inclusion of the last piece on the queer community. Unfortunately, I fear that others may not welcome that reminder that some are not welcome.

**Robert Draycott (Rev)**

that some Christians “are anti LGBTQ people”, rather than merely anti sin. No Christian can be anti-people. A Christian has an obligation to love his neighbour as himself, but that does not include loving his lifestyle.

In Issue 3 there was an article entitled *God is not in control*. This is simply heretical. We are also disturbed by the sentiment that “I don’t like the sound of God who lets so much cr\*p happen” and perplexed by the idea that “this need (for your God) to be in control” is unique to “blond-haired ego-driven western leaders”, which sounds racist as well as foolish. We are horrified that this article was written by a minister.

In view of these concerns, can you give us a firm assurance that these articles are not representative of a shift in theology and moral outlook? Perhaps their inclusion was merely the result of poor editorial management. After all, we all make mistakes.

**Rev Dr Phil Cox, John Griffith M Th, Alan Hart**  
 Stubbington Baptist Church

## GOD’S PRONOUNS

Dear ‘*Catalyst*’  
 On reading Marg Hardcastle’s article in this quarter’s *Catalyst*, I find myself once again wondering how I can continue to encourage my church to support BMS, when those who produce one of our quarterly publications find it appropriate to publish an article in which God is referred to more than once as ‘She’. As a supporter of same-sex marriage, it may be that Marg feels it appropriate for people to choose their preferred personal pronouns; I personally do not believe we have any such mandate to do so on God’s behalf.

Please note that I have read that “The views and opinions expressed by contributors in print and online are not necessarily those of BMS World Mission”. Such a disclaimer affords me no comfort whatsoever.

Yours, in the Master’s service,  
**Kenneth Ross**  
 Pastor-teacher, New Prestwick Baptist Church, Ayr, Scotland

## MISSING MEN

Hi!  
 Great issue (as always), but I can’t help thinking that we are so intent on following the world’s agenda, all the groups that the world says are key at the moment, that we could be missing what is actually happening on the ground, in the Kingdom of God.

I asked a friend why they had stopped going to church. Their email reply really surprised me. They said, [among other things edited for length] “Even animals and trees get more interest in church circles than me.”

Interesting, because on reflection, the one thing we are missing in my church are working men.

I can’t help wondering when there was last an edition of *Catalyst* that focused on reaching this half of the world’s population (okay maybe I missed it?).

The implications are profound. When women come to faith, they may bring their children. When men come to faith, they are far more likely to bring their families. From a strategic point of view, we ignore men at our peril.

Yay! to what you have said in this issue. We need to hear it, but there could just be a danger that the enemy wants us to retune our fiddles, whilst Rome is burning down. Yes, we need to be aware of minority groups, but the Great Commission was to go into the whole world – the *ethnos* – everyone, not just the ones our society tries to use as a stick to beat us with. Who are we worried about being irrelevant to – our society or God?

**Rev Peter Cook**  
 Hanham Baptist Church

## THEOLOGICAL SNEEZES

Guys,  
 Great issue [3 2020] of themed, pungent articles. Caused a few theological sneezes – we can take it! Thinking outside the box as precursor to living outside, too.

Thanks,  
**Charles Rutter**

## KEEP IT UP

Hi  
 Just wanted to say thank you for the latest [2 2020] edition of *Catalyst* magazine. Interesting articles and a great editorial piece!

It’s so important that we are listening to the voices of outsiders – and not just those who are on the margins of church, but those who are really outside the Church.

So, at the risk of sounding patronising, keep up the good work!

Thanks again  
**Rev Rob Trickey**  
 Oasis Church, Bath

## POOR EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT AND HERESY

Dear sirs  
 We are very concerned by two articles that you’ve published recently.

In Issue 2 2020 of *Mission Catalyst*, there was an article entitled *The queer community is a gift, and you’re missing out*. This is radically opposed to biblical teaching. As well as rejecting the main thrust of that article, we have a number of specific criticisms, including the use of the phrase “a hell of a lot”, and the assumption



**WYETH FAN**

Hello Jonathan  
Thank you so much for your editorship of *Catalyst*. I meant to write and thank you for last month's cover picture on Issue 2 2020. I am a big fan of Andrew Wyeth and the cover picture, together with your article, has inspired me to cobble together a short talk to give to a future (hopefully) church group called Food for Thought.

I look forward to your next cover picture.

**David Ploss**

Westbury Baptist Church, Bristol

**LETTER FROM THE EDITOR**

Dear friends of *Catalyst*

The last few issues of *Catalyst* have produced some strong reactions (a few of which, in edited form, are included here). I thank you for your responses and I am glad that, in an age where the ubiquitous call to 'disagree well' can too often mean not disagreeing at all, many readers have taken the time to argue passionately for truth. I apologise if you felt that we went too far. That is always the danger in a publication whose aim is to deepen and broaden thinking in the Church, and always a danger when we include opinions that are not our own.

To be clear: the presence of an opinion you or I disagree with in this magazine does not imply it has been endorsed by BMS World Mission. It also does not mean that BMS views it with suspicion.

To be honest, some of the content that made you angry made me angry too. But as a Christian, I do not believe I have a right not to be angered by my sisters and brothers. And I do have a right to speak out and disagree. As a Baptist, I believe we all have the privilege of discerning the truth and the will of God not in an ideological enclave or echo chamber but in the rough and tumble of diverse wisdoms among the body of believers. We simply cannot all be right. But we can all be alright with each other. I hope we are. If we are to engage in the mission of the mind and witness to our Risen Saviour, we will need thick skins, gentle hearts and sensitive ears – or we will not be heard.

None of that, of course, means that I always get it right with this magazine. Unconscious bias, the availability of contributors and the pressures of other

**IF WE LOVE MARRIAGE SO MUCH, WHY DON'T WE MARRY IT?**



**M**arriage made me scared of death. Which is, I think you'll agree, a downside to an otherwise lovely institution. I went from being a confident 'to die is gain' Evangelical to a maudlin romantic who held a desire to see Jesus in uneasy tension with how much he was going to miss his wife when eventually one of them died.

I'm better now. But part of the reason I was so conflicted was, I think, because much of our church culture is confused about romantic partnership. After all, we're the group seemingly obsessed with nuclear units while worshipping the single Saviour who spoke dismissively of family. There's a dissonance there. And that's not the only problem. First we say (or say by our actions) that only married life is worth living. Then we tell people to only have relationships with Christians, while our demographics doom many, by definition, to a life without a partner.

The recent publication of Papal Encyclical Fratelli Tutti, with its affirmation of friendship as a Christian foundation, is timely in an era defined by terrible loneliness. We hope this issue (though not quite that weighty) is timely and helpful, too.

From what single people in church really think, to how demographics are affecting attitudes to love and marriage, there's plenty to inform. And we also have several perspectives on romantic love, divorce and friendship – all of which we hope you will find challenging, interesting and inspiring.

Plus, we have an interview with John Mark Comer! In an issue all about the subject, what's not to love?!

**Jonathan Langley**

Editor  
Mission Catalyst

**Tell us what you think about *Mission Catalyst!***

**Take our survey:**  
[www.bit.ly/YourCatalyst21](http://www.bit.ly/YourCatalyst21)

**CATALYST**  
Reader survey

BMS work (not to mention my own shortcomings as an editor and a thinker) will lead to mistakes. I commit to listening to feedback (all of it, not just yours) if you can commit with us to let iron sharpen iron and to let the Lord burn away the tares in his time, letting only the wheat of truth survive to the end. In the meantime, let us bear with one another and our often perplexing opinions. And let us work together to make this as good a magazine as it can be.

With this in mind, I invite you to participate in **our first *Mission Catalyst* survey**. Make your thoughts known! Tell us what you like! Shout at the Editor! We want to understand what you value about this publication. What direction we might take it in. What we get wrong. And how to make it better. Visit [www.bit.ly/YourCatalyst21](http://www.bit.ly/YourCatalyst21) to tell us what you think.

**Jonathan Langley**

Didcot



*John Mark Comer is the pastor for teaching and vision at Bridgetown Church in Portland. He is also the author of The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry, My Name is Hope, Garden City, God has a Name, and Loveology – a theology of love to help you navigate the confusing waters of modern relationships.*

Q&A

# JOHN MARK COMER

## *SINGLENES, SEX AND THE BIBLE – AND WHAT WE’RE REALLY SEARCHING FOR.*

**How can the Church do singleness better?**

Well I think the nice thing is we have a wealth of resources to draw on from our tradition, from the writings of the New Testament, from the life of Jesus, who was

single and never had sex, from the life of Paul. The ironic thing about the emphasis on marriage, in not all but a lot of the Western Church, is that most of the great saints all down through Church history

were single!

I think there’s just a goldmine there of wisdom and best practices. You’re not going to learn from Paul how to date in modern day secular internet urban

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culture. And I think he would chuckle at the question. But you are going to learn a theology of singleness, and a theology of sex, and a theology of human relationships and the need for love and acceptance and intimacy, that could give you a frame.

For the first time in my country ever in its history you have more single people than married people. And that is a tectonic shift in the culture. So I think that the older stereotype of the Church's focus on marriage, that will change, without any virtue or intentionality.

**Any top tips for people in the Christian dating world (especially British people who can be very awkward...)?**

[Laughs] Oh, find a way to bring arranged marriage back, or something. You can actually make a strong case that arranged marriage is coming back through online dating apps.

Just don't do it alone. Do it in community with other followers of Jesus. It's so crucial that as you process and you make decisions, that you move towards the family of God and with the family of God. That you stay tight and close and connected at a relational level.

**I'm 30 years old, and I feel awkward to ask you a question about sex, which might be partly because I am British, but I also partly think it's because I've grown up in the Church...**

It's OK. I'm 40 years old, and I've been married for almost 20 years. I feel awkward to answer any question about singleness. I'm clearly not the expert...

**It seems like there's a disconnect in the Church's teaching about sex. If it's discussed, it's in very narrow black and white parameters. More often than not, it doesn't seem to recognise that single people in their 20s, 30s, 40s have a sexuality. Can single adults be Christians and embrace their sexuality without shame?**

First off you need to start with a theology of what is a human being and what is human sexuality. At a theological level, human sexuality is built into your body as a good thing that was created by God himself – God thought up sexuality, not Freud, not Hollywood, not Madison Avenue. God thought it up, so it's good, and it's wired into our bodies as, most theologians would argue, a drive for communion and creativity. Communion just meaning for a depth of intimacy

as personified in that beautiful line in Genesis, 'The man and his wife were naked and they felt no shame.' That's the ultimate expression of intimacy, when you are naked both literally and emotionally with another person.

And ever since sin entered the picture, we've been naked and full of shame. And so there's this ache in us for a kind of relationship where we can be completely open physically but more importantly emotionally and spiritually and who we actually are with no spin.

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*“ God thought up sexuality – not Freud, not Hollywood, not Madison Avenue ”*

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So there's this innate drive in us to be naked and unashamed for communion, but more than that, for creativity – not just to commune with another person, but to make more life, to give yourself away. It's trinitarian love, and this is why God must be a Trinity, because without three there cannot be love. God must be a relationship. And whenever there's two in a relationship that love can be narcissistic. Much of romantic love is just projected narcissism. It's just 'I love you because of how you make me feel'. And until love becomes trinitarian, love has not become altruistic.

... Scholars argue that what we call the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, 'go and make disciples of all nations' [is a] re-saying of the cultural mandate of Genesis, 'be fruitful and multiply'. You can fulfil that desire and that call of God in you to be fruitful and multiply through discipleship. So there are other ways to tap into that impulse that God put in us to fill the world up with more life.

**Is there one biblical view of sex and of relationships?**

I mean there's no like Karma Sutra manual in the Bible...

**[Laughs] Oh yeah, I didn't mean like literally physically how to have sex...**

There's no dating manual, obviously dating is a modern, western, urban construct, based on entertainment culture. But there is very clear scriptural teaching about marriage and sexuality and God's vision for where and how sexuality is to thrive. And there are deep

and rich principles that you can draw from the library of Scripture, and often they counterbalance and add to each other in beautiful ways. Song of Songs is unbelievable in its celebration of romantic love and human sexuality. And yet when you put that in the context of the Old Testament stories about marriage, which are brutally realistic and dispel the Hollywood kind of thing, there's a beautiful tension that arises when you hold those together. That high exalted romantic poetic image in the Song of

Songs, with the honest storytelling of the Old Testament, with the clear teaching of the New Testament on how human sexuality is designed by God for a man and a woman in a covenant for life. You really start to emerge with the mosaic of a worldview that you can live into.

I think as far as how you actually have healthy sexual relationships within marriage, and how you can be a healthy single person when there isn't an outlet for your sexuality that has God's blessing on it (in a very physical literal sense) those are questions that I think we just need to talk about in community. And there is so much wisdom and best practice. Human beings have been living for thousands of years, it's a very long time, there are lots of really smart and wise people inside and outside of the Christian tradition who have really great things to say about what healthy sexuality looks like. And so I think the Scripture gives us 'This is what sex is, this is what it's for, and these are the boundaries for it to receive God's blessing', and then we're left to explore God's world and search God's wisdom and talk and help each other as we navigate inside those boundaries.

And again, all of this for followers of Jesus comes back to just trust. You have to trust somebody's mental maps, you know what I mean? To follow Jesus is to say: I'm going to trust Jesus' mental maps. Even when they are at dissonance with what I feel, I'm going to just trust that Jesus knows better than I do. And that's why it's faith. Cause you're trusting in his vision. Even over your own.

Lina Toth

Assistant Principal and Lecturer in Practical Theology at Scottish Baptist College, author, speaker and former Academic Dean at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam. Lina is the author of *Transforming the Struggles of Tamars: Single Women and Baptist Communities*, and *Singleness and Marriage after Christendom: Being and Doing Family* (which is due to be published in 2021). Long time Catalyst followers will also know her as Lina Andronoviene.

# HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

## Singleness, romance, and following Jesus

*THE CHURCH SEEMS TO HAVE BOUGHT INTO THE NOTION THAT ROMANTIC LOVE IS THE ONLY PATH TO A TRULY GOOD LIFE. THIS IS NEITHER BIBLICAL NOR REALISTIC.*

**W**e live in the shadow of a great paradox. On the one hand, our culture is obsessed with the pursuit

of happiness and the idea that there are as many ways to be happy as there are people. Yet on the other hand, one source of happiness towers high above all other possible pathways to a happy life: falling in love and being romantically fulfilled (ideally, for one's lifetime, though reality suggests that romance often lasts much shorter). Unless you have 'loved', the message runs, you have hardly lived; and even an unhappy or sad romance story is better than none.

We might think that as Christians, we know this is not quite true: the most important thing in the lives of the followers of Jesus should be knowing the love of God and living according to our calling. Whether it includes romance or not, this is what a truly fulfilling life is. No doubt we would all agree with this statement in principle.

Yet if we look at how we *actually* feel and think about this, it is quite obvious that we have been greatly impacted by the notion that a romantic partner and children are non-negotiable ingredients of the good life. This notion has been successfully Christianised and developed into a Christian 'happiness package': you give your life to God, then God sends you the one you should marry, and then you 'live happily ever after'.

How did we end up with such ideas? It is often assumed that humans have always been guided by the idea of the power of romance. But that is not that case. If we want to find an obvious culprit, we can

“ Jesus suggested that the Kingdom of God trivialises marital status ”

blame the Victorian age. As the Industrial Revolution altered the shape of work and home life, marriage and family became increasingly centred around the concepts of romantic love and individual choice, rather than seen in the context of one's livelihood and wider community life. Gradually it developed into a powerful ideology under the shadow of which we continue to live even today.

Of course, the Victorian passion for romance did not spring out of nowhere, but rather enthusiastically embraced and amplified some earlier ideas. One of them was the medieval motif of courtly love. Immortalised in the literary fashion of chivalric romance, this love followed a particular script: a knight performing mighty deeds for the sake of his noble lady – typically the wife of his superior – adoring her, defending her honour, and proving his love through deeds of valour. (Notably, no sexual fulfilment was involved, and certainly no 'living happily ever after'). In the Victorian age, such earlier scripts of romance exploded in a new kind of literature: the romantic novel. Consumed widely and eagerly, these books established a new kind of narrative of love, in which romance was both inescapable and particular to just those two people: 'they were meant for each other' and they 'fell' in love. Although its style has changed significantly since the Victorian era, ideas cemented in the romantic novel continue to thrive and govern our

perceptions of human love.

Yet another idea that became an integral part of our thinking about love is an ancient Greek story found in Plato's *Symposium*. Human beings, it explains, have been split into two by the gods, and have been searching for their missing half ever since. The Victorian romantic novel took up this tale with enthusiasm, establishing it as a permanent feature of our modern cultural imagination: love is to be the cure for the wound of separation that we all carry. Thus we speak of a spouse as 'one's other half', and people search for their 'soulmate' destined just for them – so persistently that this search becomes a duty: unless they find their 'true love,' they will have failed. The idea of the passionate search for one's missing half is also easily found in today's churches, particularly in the implicit notion that one should marry 'the one' (and only) person destined for them.

Is it a surprise, then, that a life of singleness seems to be such an anomaly? Unless it is consciously chosen by someone who feels called to the monastic way of life or a kind of a mission work which would make family life difficult, life without an experience of romantic love is just not recognised as an equally happy and meaningful way of living.

What is especially interesting is that such views are held in a world in which single people are the fastest-growing demographic group, often making up





*Popular and literary culture have a lot to answer for in terms of our expectations of love.*

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*“ The romantic novel continues to govern our perceptions of human love ”*

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more than half of the adult population. (In the Church, however, the proportion of single people tends to be smaller than in society-at-large – which by itself should give us plenty of food for thought.) Even those who are quite happily single can expect their choice to be regularly questioned by well-meaning others, who may suggest to them various dating options and even urge them ‘not to wait too long’. This is before we even get to the situation of those who long to experience romantic love, but for whom it is simply not happening: the one who is supposed to be chosen for them by God is just not appearing in their life.

I do believe that the growing number of single people in our midst today is issuing us with an urgent call to return to the fuller vision of a deeply happy

and truly fulfilled life offered by Jesus and embodied in the lives of his early followers. You will remember that Jesus clearly named his primary family “those who hear God’s word and put it into practice” (Luke 8: 21, NRSV). His new community, the Church, was to be the principal network for a meaningful and fulfilling life for all, whether married or single. Romance certainly did not play the kind of role that it does today, but there were other strong incentives to be married. Jesus shocked his contemporaries by suggesting that the reality of the Kingdom of God trivialises marital status, just as it does social standing, cultural norms, or gender roles. All of these fade away in the brightness and the beauty of life in God’s Kingdom.

What, then, should we do with

romance? One suggestion that keeps reappearing is the idea that single people can imagine their own relationship with God in terms of the ‘best romance possible’. I must confess I am rather sceptical as to the usefulness of this imagery. Yes, the motif of God as a lover can be discerned in some parts of Scripture, but there are many other, and much stronger, images of the kind of a relationship God seeks with people. (And married people still seem to be getting a ‘double portion’ of romance, both human and divine.) A much better direction would be to remove romance from the throne it currently occupies, to gain a better understanding of how our prevailing perceptions of a happy life have been shaped, and to strive to support all believers – whether they are romantically involved with someone else or not – so that they can have life ‘to the full’ (John 10: 10).

Love is indeed a gift from God, and we impoverish it greatly when we focus exclusively on romantic love as if it were the only, or even the most important, expression of human love.

Mark Woods

Baptist minister and Editor at the Bible Society, author of *Does the Bible really say that?*

# FALLING IN LOVE (AGAIN?)

## WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT ROMANTIC LOVE? A MODERN INVENTION, A BIBLICAL REALITY OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?

“O tell me the truth about love,” demanded W H Auden. Well, wouldn’t we all like to know. His poem is a long, absurdist list of maybes: “Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian, Or boom like a military band?” We’re not much wiser by the end.

Every generation thinks it has invented love. Our own is particularly interested in it. Sex has always been a commodity, but now love is as well. The thrill of a match on Tinder isn’t about the honest satisfaction of physical desire: it’s the thought that ‘someone wants me’. *Love Island* offers a chance to piggy-back on other people’s romances, glossier and less painful than our own.

But is this ‘love’ something completely new? Not really. Look back in history, and it’s true that marriage has generally been transactional. Subsistence-level peasants didn’t and don’t have the luxury of decisions based on too much emotion. The richer and more fortunate might – but then, one of the ways they got rich was through profitable marriages. In the West, a woman’s lot has rarely been enviable. One doesn’t even have to go medieval: think only of the mid-Victorian girls who had all their teeth out for the benefit of prospective husbands (no more dentist’s bills).

But love – apart from purely sexual desire – has always found its way through the cracks of hierarchy, money and power. The oldest romance of all features Helen of Troy, the “face that launched a thousand ships”. And think of the Song of Solomon: “Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one’s house

for love, it would be utterly scorned” (Song of Solomon 8: 7).

And here the Bible gives us pause, because this Song is one of frank erotic desire. This is real eros – not just lust for a body, but the desire for a person. Many of us, at some point in our lives, experience that. If we’re very fortunate, that heart-stopping sweat-dripping breath-taking sleep-depriving castles-in-the-air-building fixation may even be returned, and we’re desired by the object of our desire.

That sort of thing is alarmingly powerful. Even more fortunately, it doesn’t last – or how would we get any work done? Old lovers find their passion is transformed. There’s a richness and depth in long-time loving that we’d never trade for all those steamy raptures. Not if we have any sense, that is – and we don’t, always.

So, love is not just one thing – and this is very biblical. Think of Jacob, mad for Rachel but palmed off with Leah (Genesis 29); he’s still Leah’s husband. The love story of Boaz and Ruth involves a property deal. Think of Elkanah, married to the childless Hannah (1 Samuel 1). He is endearingly clueless: she wants a child, not just a husband. David marries Abigail (1 Samuel 25) because she’s smart. Hosea marries the promiscuous Gomer as a sermon illustration. And there’s not a word of love between Mary and Joseph – but surely it was there.

So, in the pageant of Scripture, eros is a relatively minor player. There’s much more about contracts (Jacob and Leah), duty (Ruth and Boaz), faithfulness (Elkanah and Hannah), common sense

(Abigail and David) – who knows what was going on with Hosea and Gomer – and trustful kindness (Joseph and Mary). In other words, eros is acknowledged, but other things are important too.

And this is where the Bible comes up against the modern West with a thump and a crash. That dominant eros-love is wonderful, but it’s sort of unreal, too. Enjoy it if you can, the Bible seems to say; but use your head, as well. Act with integrity, wisdom, kindness and fidelity, and God will bless you. Powerful feeling doesn’t excuse you from doing the right thing. Love is not just lust, or eros-desire; it grows through commitment, understanding, shared work, shared lives – the kind of love called ‘maintenance’, as U A Fanthorpe puts it, “the sensible side of love”.

So, what is the truth about love? That it’s more subtle, less urgent, more generous, less demanding, more sensible, less wild than we think – and for all of these, vice versa?

To quote Auden again: “If I could tell you I would let you know.”





Helen Paynter

Tutor in Biblical Studies at Bristol Baptist College, founder and Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, and author of *The Bible Doesn't Tell Me So: Why you don't have to submit to domestic abuse and coercive control.*

# DIVORCE: KEY SCRIPTURES, UNLOCKED

*IT IS WRONG TO ASK ABUSE SURVIVORS TO  
STAY IN VIOLENT MARRIAGES. IT IS ALSO  
WRONG TO TREAT DIVORCE LIGHTLY.*

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2: 24, ESV).

I wonder if sometimes in our churches we regard marriage less as a padlock to which God holds the key, and rather more as a prison cell from which there is (just about) no escape. I'm thinking particularly of the way that those who've experienced domestic abuse are sometimes told that unless their partner has committed adultery, there are no legitimate grounds for divorcing them. Often quoted is the verse from Malachi 2: 16. The verse is notoriously difficult to translate, and might not even say what many people think. In my opinion the best translation is: “For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel,

and him who covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 2: 16, author's translation).

Here divorce is paired with violence as twin horrors in the sight of God. The wider burden of Malachi's words is criticism of men who were idly putting their wives aside, and thus leaving them vulnerable to harm. Employing this verse to force people to remain in an abusive relationship is wholly counter to the purpose of Malachi's words.

Of course, the other major plank of the 'no divorce unless adultery' argument is the teaching of Jesus, already mentioned above. “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries


another, commits adultery” (Matt 19: 8-9, ESV).

Note here that Jesus is doing what he so often does with the Old Testament law – extending it, but not reversing it. He is pointing forwards from the Mosaic law to the ideal that he expects his followers to strive towards. But hearts are still hard, and Jesus well knew that the Old Testament law permitted a woman to divorce her husband on the grounds of deprivation of food or clothing, or on the grounds of abandonment (Exodus 20: 11-12). It is inconceivable that the Saviour who spoke of a millstone being placed around the necks of abusers would wish to tie a spouse to that abuser for ever. It is not just adultery that breaks a marriage covenant, and sometimes divorce is simply an acknowledgment of a covenant that has been broken by abandonment, abuse or adultery.

But I wonder if sometimes we make the opposite error in our churches. While we believe in a God of resurrection, who forgives and redeems our past, we must not use this as a reason to treat marriage lightly in our churches. It is intended to be a sign of the glorious covenant between Christ and the Church. It is not a revolving door.

Jesus expects us to strain towards the ideal he sets out. We shouldn't just shrug our shoulders when a marriage fails. And we should ask hard questions of divorcees before we agree to remarry them.

Let's honour and celebrate long marriages in church, and work hard to restore those that are in trouble (except in the situation of domestic abuse). Let's preach of the importance of promise-keeping. And those who plan to marry should be solemnly warned that they are binding themselves with their words, and that God holds the key.



In Bristol where I live, as in many cities nowadays, there is a bridge whose pinnacles are festooned with padlocks. Typically, these padlocks have a pair of names written on them, and they are placed there by lovers to indicate the permanence of their affection and attachment. I have no idea whether these couples throw the key into the harbour below (I rather hope so) or whether they take it home for ease of removing the padlock later.

In the last wedding I performed, I handed the couple a small padlock and invited them to think of it as a symbol of their marriage – and to consider that the key was held by God. It's an imperfect metaphor, for all sorts of reasons, but perhaps it helps to emphasise the very serious way with which the Bible speaks of the permanence of marriage. Most particularly, of course, we would think of the words in Genesis 2 quoted by Jesus, and thus given particular status as normative.

Sarah

Host of the podcast *A Tale of Two Singles* and former mission worker in Central Asia.

## 5 THINGS

# YOUR SINGLE CHRISTIAN FRIENDS WANT YOU TO KNOW

*YOU HAVE NO IDEA*

*HOW ROUGH IT IS OUT THERE.*

It's a truth universally acknowledged that single people in the Church absolutely love it when married people ask them why they're still single. Or when well-meaning friends offer to set them up with literally any other single Christian of the opposite gender in possession of a pulse. There's nothing embarrassing about talking to a single guy in church and turning round to see a group of his married friends watching and giving him thumbs up. And we don't feel at all uncomfortable when you pray for us to find our 'other half' without asking if we want (or need) one.

Love the Church as we do, it does have a problem. Well, it has lots of problems – of course it does. It's made up of you and me, and millions of other flawed human beings. And being less insane about dating probably doesn't seem like a huge priority.

And yet. According to an April 2020 *Relevant Magazine* article, single women in their 30s and 40s are the most likely group to leave Christianity. And that is far from being the most sobering statistic (see page 13). Of all the problems the Church faces, the fact it can often be a hard environment for single people is surely an easy one to fix.

I co-host and produce a podcast about Christian singleness and dating. I'm not going to lie to you, it started off fuelled by lockdown panic and the better part of a bottle of wine. But as my co-host and I have continued, we've had emails from people thanking us for making them feel less alone, sharing their horrendous and

“ Single women in their 30s and 40s are the most likely group to leave Christianity ”

hilarious dating experiences (dinner-dates-with-guys-in-cycling-shorts-who-brought-their-mum-along hilarious), and opening our eyes to the fact that life for many single people in the Church is even more of a struggle than we thought.

So, having listened to single Christian women and men across the UK and beyond, here are five things I think singles want the Church to know.

### 1 We're not single because we're being 'too fussy'

And if we are being fussy – too right! If I ever end up getting married, I hope I'm not just the first single Christian woman my hypothetical husband found tolerable. Single people can be made to feel like they're being unjust, ungrateful or even un-Christian by 'rejecting' the few other single people they could possibly date in their churches. But the fact is, while loving someone may be a choice, it's not something you can force yourself into.

If you know your single friend wants to be in a relationship, and if you know someone who might work really well with them – by all means offer to set them up. But don't make them feel bad if they say no, or if it doesn't work out.

### 2 Being single can be really lonely

I have an amazing community of single and married friends – but that is not the case for everyone. For some people, being single is not only an involuntary state, it's a horribly lonely one. I've been shocked that people have written in to say that our podcast is helping them to feel less alone. I'm glad it is – but I'm so sad that they feel that way in the first place.

As Christians, every one of us should feel like we're part of a family. If someone doesn't, we've failed. And there are easy ways not to fail. Don't group the single people in your church with the students – most of us aren't students anymore. Don't organise all your dinner parties by pairs. Don't be afraid of inviting single people to join your family dinner. We all need community. And when single people are consistently left out, overlooked for leadership opportunities, and inadvertently pitied (scenarios that are not universal but also not unique), marriage becomes not just a much-longed-for relationship, but an inaccessible key to everything else in church life.

Jesus was single, and he had so many friends. He was invited to so many (pretty



random) parties. He hung out with marrieds and singles, poor and rich, male and female. We should be doing the same.

### 3 Christian dating is really hard right now

If you met your now-husband/wife face-to-face one day, hit it off, dated and eventually married, you do not know how lucky you are. Christian dating (particularly in the Covid-world) is the worst. To find a Christian partner, most of us will have to look online. So, Christian women who want a husband are trying to work out their compatibility based on a few blurry pictures, the fact that his faith hero is probably John Piper and that he 'likes being outside'. The dating world can be a harsh, exhausting and demoralising place. Putting yourself out there over and over

again only to be rejected – or getting your hopes up only to meet the guy/gal and have absolutely no connection – is really hard. You can't do anything about this. So be kind.

### 4 There is too much pressure

This was by far the most common answer I received when I asked our listeners: 'What would you like married Christians to know about dating?'. One woman put it like this: "Don't put so much pressure on single people, we put enough on ourselves. We're doing the best we can." Amen to that.

It's okay to date people you don't end up marrying. Some churches can be so pro marriage that they are anti dating. The pressure (intentional or unintentional) put on us to only date someone we can see ourselves marrying is so unhelpful. How

can we know if we want to marry someone without first dating them? And, if we create a culture where people can date each other without comments about 'wedding bells' being made in the first few weeks and months, maybe fewer of us would be single.

I remember being asked by my university pastor, "when are we going to find you a husband?" It was meant kindly – but it made me feel like there was something wrong with me. I was 20. A guy we interviewed for the podcast recently told us that the pressure he felt to get married was actually the reason he didn't ask people out. We are not meant to conform to our culture – sure. But unless we're bringing back arranged marriage, people who want to get married are going to have to date. Help them to do that by chilling out a little.

### 5 Don't tell us 'it will happen'

I know you're being kind. And I know you mean it. But the reality, particularly for single Christian women who want to marry a man who believes what they do, is that it may never happen. Single Christian men are vastly outnumbered by Christian women. So don't tell us to only date Christians, and then in the same breath tell us we're great and we'll definitely meet someone. We are great – we're fearfully and wonderfully made by God. But I don't believe being married is any reflection on how lovely, beautiful, talented or godly a person is. And saying "I don't understand why you're still single" implies that there must be some hidden flaw in us that means we're not worthy to be married, just yet.

If you have single people in your church community who long to be married, listen to them, mourn with them, pray with them. But don't assume that every single person wants what you want. Some single people have no desire to be married – that's great and biblical. Let's celebrate that, too, and be community for them.

Encourage your single friends in their passions, their careers, their hobbies, their friendships, their service. Build them up. But don't try to comfort them with platitudes that aren't true.

It's a truth universally acknowledged that we can all love each other better. It's what we're called to do. Singles and marrieds. But many single people don't automatically have someone looking out for them like most married people do. You could be that person. We could be those people.

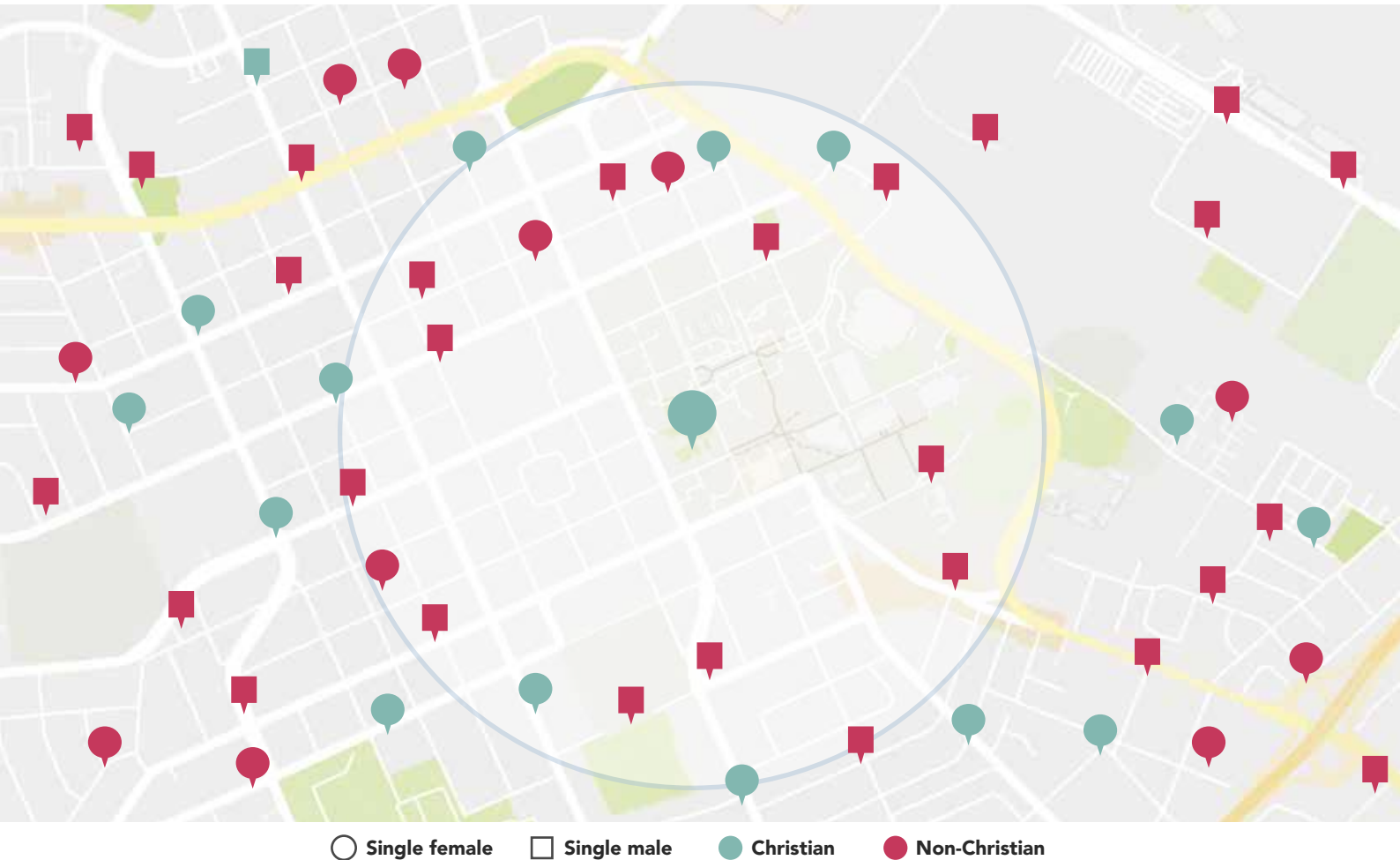
It wouldn't take much to make the Church a community where single people want to stay.



Vicky Walker

Writer, speaker and radio broadcaster, author of *Relatable: Exploring God, Love and Connection in the Age of Choice*.

# IT'S THE DEMOGRAPHICS, STUPID



*STATS IN THE CHURCH ARE SHIFTING – AS ARE ATTITUDES TO RELATIONSHIPS. UNDERSTANDING THEM WILL HELP US UNDERSTAND THE PLIGHT OF SINGLE PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH, AND HOPEFULLY AFFECT OUR TEACHING AND CULTURE.*

Among the many disruptions wrought by the pandemic, dating and relationships have been thrown into flux. Despite physical restrictions, the desire for connection is irrepressible, even if it must now begin on a screen. Dating sites – Christian and non – report huge increases in sign-ups and meaningful interactions since March. One site describes this as “a new era of digital courtship.”

According to researchers Pew, nearly half of Americans think dating has

become harder in the last ten years, something echoed in the UK as options have increased and attitudes have shifted. Christians have (slowly) embraced online dating over the last two decades, overcoming the lack of options within their own immediate communities, but there is still resistance. That God will bring a gift-wrapped spouse and perfect marriage to all who desire one is an idea that stubbornly clings, even if daters are more pragmatic.

For women in particular, this ‘wait and

hope’ approach has proved a mathematical as much as a logistical issue. Estimates place the sex difference in the Church at a ratio of two women to one man (with this likely increasing if only single people are counted). Many faithful Christian women are unlikely to meet a partner who shares their beliefs, despite this being a key desire.

Things have been changing in the wider world too. The number of single people globally is growing, for some leading to greater independence. For

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**68.78%** OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE COUPLES ARE MORE RESPECTED THAN SINGLE PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH/CHRISTIAN LIFE

**ONLY 2%** **63.98%**

SAID THEY FELT CALLED TO BE SINGLE. 40% DID NOT FEEL CALLED TO SINGLENES BUT ARE SINGLE

SAID PRESSURE TO GET MARRIED IS STRONG IN CHURCH OR CHRISTIAN CULTURE

**13%** SAID THEIR RELATIONSHIP HISTORY HAD BEEN STRAIGHTFORWARD AND HAPPY **27%** SAID THEY WOULD STAY SINGLE IF THEY DON'T MEET A CHRISTIAN PARTNER

**20%** **4%** AGREED THAT BOTH "GOD SENDS THE ONE – I DON'T NEED TO LOOK" AND "GOD CREATED SOULMATES – ONE PERFECT PERSON SOMEWHERE OUT THERE"

OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEIR CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR ACTUAL EXPERIENCES ARE DIFFERENT

BELIEVED "IF I WAS IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH A NON-CHRISTIAN I WOULD BE TREATED DIFFERENTLY AT CHURCH" **49%**

Stats from the Real Life Love survey (available in *Relatable: Exploring God, Love and Connection in the Age of Choice* by Vicky Walker)

Christians, who have traditionally venerated marriage, being single can feel more like a painful void. Researchers at Pepperdine University applied the term 'ambiguous loss' – originally describing a grief that continues because the source is physically absent but psychologically present – to the feelings associated with unwanted Christian singleness. The longed-for partner, who would not only meet emotional needs but also provide status within the Church community, is vividly present in the single person's mind.

The traditional markers of adulthood – home ownership, partnering, having children – are happening later for younger adults, particularly now the pandemic has put the brakes on the basics of education and career too. With churches navigating how to gather and maintain community

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*“ Many faithful Christian women are unlikely to meet a partner who shares their beliefs ”*

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amid changing restrictions, it is often single people who have borne the brunt of relational lack.

Once the crisis mode of the virus moves towards a tentative return to interaction, it's likely Christian singles will continue the trend of exploring outside the faith for potential partners. Once regarded as a lack of trust in God, it has emerged as a realistic approach. Women in particular may not feel compromised by

dating and marrying beyond the Church. Far from the pull away from God they had been promised would occur, some report introducing partners to God and integrating them into the Church – if the welcome is warm.

Far from the one size fits all approach of old, modern dating and relationships offer challenges and opportunities to rethink, if Christians are willing to listen and learn.

David Bennett

Speaker and author of *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus*. David is currently studying at the University of Oxford for a doctorate in Theological Ethics.

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# THE ART OF FRIENDSHIP

Living single as a sign of the coming hope

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*BOTH MARRIED AND SINGLE PEOPLE ARE NECESSARY TO WITNESS TO  
THE TRULY FUNDAMENTAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN PEOPLE: FRIENDSHIP.*

In our current moment, the western Church is undergoing a significant ascetical crisis when it comes to our desires for relationship and intimacy, especially in the vocations of singleness and marriage. In recent census data, it was found that 51 per cent of the population is now single, a massive rise from just ten years ago. More and more young people are choosing to remain single and to wait for a partner, or to form relationships outside marriage. Then, of course, comes the crisis for many in the Church who want to be married but can't be due to the lack of a suitor who shares a similar maturity in faith and is geared to be joined well before God as his servants and friends. And yet, curiously, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in secular society in terms of the role friendship can play in keeping us from loneliness.

What does the Christian faith and its long tradition have to offer us in terms of friendship and singleness? In my opinion, a remarkably beautiful and fulfilling vision. The first port of call is the vision the scriptures present for our lives, especially the art and beauty of friendship. If you do a quick survey of the main relationships through which the Kingdom of God manifests itself across the Bible, you will discover diverse friendships. Whether it's Naomi and Ruth, or King David and Jonathan, friendship is curiously elevated as an intimate place

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“Marrieds allow singles to experience, indirectly, household family life”

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that breaks open the norms of the fallen societies around it, which struggle to obey God. You will often hear however in our churches today the clichéd trope, ‘marriage is the deepest form of intimacy.’

The wrestle and suffering we go through however is that we were created, in some sense, to desire marriage. In Genesis, Eve is described both as “Ezer” and “Kenegdo” to Adam. *Ezer* can be roughly translated as ‘helper’, but it has a stronger meaning as the one who comes alongside in battle and is used to describe God’s relationship to Israel. Eve in some sense reinforces Adam, and without their sexual and other diversity, the image of God is not fully expressed in humanity. *Kenegdo* refers to a quality of fittedness and yet otherness – a kind of opposite and yet alike feeling that they experience in perceiving each other’s bodies and personalities.

However, we see in the New Testament a disruptive in-breaking where these desires can now be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God – a new family. Sexual difference and procreation are affirmed as goods in marriage, and yet they are

exceeded and relativised to no longer be necessary for a fully flourishing life or Kingdom obedience. In fact, it’s not just that singleness or celibacy is second to a better marriage – the coming of Christ spells a revelation of a mystery already inchoate in the Old Testament: friendship is the eternal destiny of the Christian. Jesus’ life is marked by friendship, and only by cosmic marriage to the Church, which is a sign of the future reality of perfect friendship. Jesus shockingly doesn’t refer to marriage as the greatest love we can have but rather, he says, “Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

The Anglican theologian and sometime Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford, Oliver O’Donovan, describes the mutual dependence of singleness and marriage on each other:

*“The New Testament Church bore witness by fostering the social conditions which could support the vocation to the single life. It conceived of marriage and singleness as vocations, each a worthy form of life, the two together compromising the whole Christian witness to the nature of affectionate*





*Real friends tell you when you appear to have a pie on your head.*



*Sharing outdoor hobbies and pastimes can be a great way to build lasting friendships.*



*We don't know what that animal in the dish is either.*

*Ruth swearing her allegiance to Naomi by Jan Victors, 1653. David and Jonathan by Cima da Conegliano 1505-1510. John and Jesus in Last Supper by Plautilla Nelli, 1658*

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## “ Singleness reminds marrieds that their marriage isn't the whole deal ”

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community. The one declared that God had vindicated the order of creation, the other pointed beyond it to its eschatological transformation... Marriage that was not marriage could not witness to the goodness of the created order, singleness that was not singleness could tell us nothing of the fulfilment for which that order was destined.”

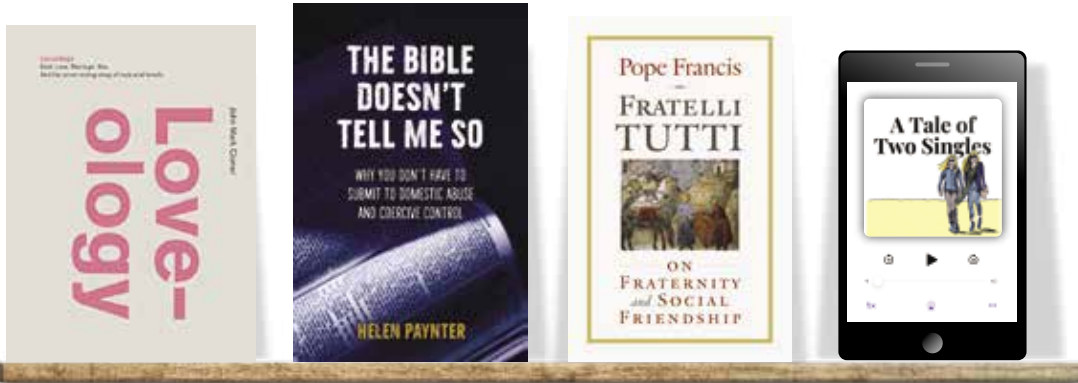
They both have different strengths

and different weaknesses. Marriage provides a kind of affective permanence but friendship allows for a greater circle of intimacy to form. Marrieds allow singles to experience, indirectly, the created goods of child-rearing and household family life. Singleness reminds marrieds that their marriage isn't the whole deal and that the Kingdom of God is broader and greater

than its demands. Singleness suffers often from the dislocation of friendship being less permanent and marriage can suffer from becoming turned in on itself, and not pointed out in love toward the world and Church. They both need each other.

What we see is that friendship is actually the substance of the reality we will experience in our renewed, resurrected bodies. Marriage will be affirmed and restored and yet pass away and be fulfilled by a greater horizon of intimacy that comes in Christ. This is incredibly good news both for the married and the single alike – that one day, you will retain the intimacy and friendship you experience through a life of faith and obedience to God. In fact, the cross-shaped friendship love that Jesus lived out and modelled to us really is going to flood the world in the Resurrection and our bodies and their desires will finally be saved from their restless search for intimacy. Friendship preaches this reality to our world, which groans for a day when we will finally be completed in love and the joy of truly being known as we are known by God in Jesus Christ. This is the art of friendship Jesus came to teach us, and that we are perfected in by the dual vocations of singleness and marriage. No-one misses out.

# SINGLENES, SEX, ROMANCE AND RELATIONSHIPS



## FURTHER, FURTHER READING

There are too many from which to choose! Love, friendship and God explored.

**THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE** Tim Keller

**A LOVER'S DISCOURSE** Roland Barthes

**THE BOY, THE MOLE, THE FOX AND THE HORSE** Charlie Mackesy

**RESURRECTION AND MORAL ORDER: An Outline of Evangelical Ethics** Oliver O'Donovan

**THE HEART OF DATING PODCAST** Kait Warman

## BOOKS

**LOVEOLOGY**  
**God. Love. Marriage. Sex.**  
**And the Never-Ending Story of Male and Female.**

*John Mark Comer*

Singles, engaged couples, newly married, and long-time married can get a lot out of Comer's look at Scripture, sexuality and relationships.

**TRANSFORMING THE STRUGGLES OF TAMARS**  
**Single Women and Baptist Communities**

*Lina Andronoviené*

Involuntary singleness is a huge challenge for women in the Church today. Essential reading for churches that wish to have a long-term future.

**RELATABLE**  
**Exploring God, Love and Connection in the Age of Choice**

*Vicky Walker*

Based on Walker's Real Life Love survey of contemporary British Christian attitudes to relationships, this is an insight into both history and the future.

**A WAR OF LOVES**  
**The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus**

*David Bennett*

David Bennett is a voluntarily celibate gay Christian who comes from a more conservative theological place than you might expect. His personal story has important insights for the full spectrum of opinion on these issues.

**THE BIBLE DOESN'T TELL ME SO**

**Why You Don't Have to Submit to Domestic Abuse and Coercive Control**

*Helen Paynter*

This book debunks the myths – perpetuated by some abusers and, unwittingly, by many churches

– which prevent women from divorcing abusive husbands.

**FRATELLI TUTTI**  
**On Fraternity and Social Friendship**

*Pope Francis*

Friendship takes centre stage in Pope Francis' latest encyclical. For him, fraternity and social friendship are key to a more just and peaceful world.

**A GRIEF OBSERVED**

*C S Lewis*

Written after his wife's tragic death, *A Grief Observed* is C S Lewis' honest reflection on the fundamental issues of life, death, and faith in the midst of loss.

**MONSIGNOR QUIXOTE**

*Graeme Greene*

We could have chosen *The Heart of the Matter*, or *The End of the Affair*, which deal with romantic love. But the later novel, about friendship, is more inspiring and instructive.

## WATCH/LISTEN

**A TALE OF TWO SINGLES**  
**Podcast**

An entertaining and thought-provoking insight to life for single Christians in 2020.

[www.soundcloud.com/ataleoftwosingles](http://www.soundcloud.com/ataleoftwosingles)

**I SURVIVED I KISSED DATING GOODBYE**  
**Documentary**

Author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* Joshua Harris re-examines his bestselling book on sex and dating 20 years on – and has changed his mind. In this documentary, he faces his critics in a soul-searching examination of the lasting cultural effects of his book, which played a key role in promoting 'purity culture'.

[www.bit.ly/31uyPU5](http://www.bit.ly/31uyPU5)

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