

The Challenges Singles Face in the Church of God

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I think if we were to try to characterize or describe the culture of the Church of God (I'm not referring to any organization, I mean the Church of God in general), if we try to sum up or characterize our culture, I think it would be fair to say that we have a very family focused culture. If you look at the sermon topics that are often done, you see multiple part sermon series done or the programs that the Church of God organizations tend to put on to help their members, you tend to see a family focus to it. By that I mean you often see multiple part sermon series on the subject of marriage, how husbands and wives can get along better with each other and have more effective marriages. Rick recently did a series on marriage just a few weeks ago. You'll tend to see multiple part series of sermons on child rearing and parenting and how families can get along and work more effectively with each other. You'll often see the larger organizations that will have seminars on marriage and child rearing to help their members.

I'm not in any way criticizing that. It's a very good thing that churches do that. But I'm saying that if you notice, there is that kind of focus to the types of culture that we have in the Church of God in trying to help members to grow.

As a result, there is a demographic throughout the Church of God that oftentimes it feels like their needs don't get addressed that often. You don't seem to hear much in the way of sermons specifically addressing these and as a result, they oftentimes tend to feel like maybe their needs aren't as important or they're not addressed as often. Sometimes they may feel that they are not even understood or appreciated.

I am referring to the needs of singles in the Church of God. It's not all that often that you hear sermons specifically dedicated towards singles in the Church of God; as again our focus tends to be marriage, child rearing and family and things of that nature. This is understandably so if you look at our demographics. The larger population is composed of marriages and families. So it's understandable why that is a focus.

As a result, oftentimes those that are single in the Church of God can kind of feel left out as their needs are not really appreciated, understood or addressed.

So what I would like to do today is focus a sermon specifically towards singles in the Church of God. If you would like a title for this sermon, it is

The Challenges Singles Face in the Church of God

As I mentioned, our culture seems to be focused on families, marriage and child rearing, and those are good things. I'm not in any way putting that down. But as a result, singles can feel like, "Well, I don't really fit into this culture and a lot of this doesn't really address my needs. My needs are not often talked about or addressed as to the unique needs of singles."

In fact, there is a group that I have come to know in the last few years that refers to themselves as "singles in the middle." They often feel like they are in "no man's land." Here's what I mean by that. If church organizations tend to focus much on the needs of singles, it tends to be basically one of two groups. The largest tends to be on younger singles; your twenty-something crowd all the way to the mid-thirties crowd. Again, if you look at it from a demographic standpoint, it is understandable why there is a focus on that, because if you look at that age group, the majority of people in their twenties tend to be single. As they advance into late twenties and early thirties, you find more and more people pair off and go from the singles demographic into the married and family demographic. That's kind of a normal pattern of life.

Church of God organizations, if they focus on singles, tend to be in that group or they focus on those of retirement age. These are individuals who have become single because their spouses died. So you tend to have these two ends.

However, there is a group from about the age of 35 up until around retirement age. That's kind of what they call "in the middle." This is the group that I've come to know in the last few years that call themselves "singles in the middle." This is a term I had never heard of until it actually applied to me. Often this group can feel like their needs are not really understood or appreciated. As I heard one person sum it up, and I think there is a good deal of truth to this; she said, "One of the reasons that this is the case is because the majority of the ministry in the Church of God all attended Ambassador College. They met their wives there, they got married and they have been married for decades ever since. The only time they experienced being single was in their twenties. Not only has it been decades since they experienced being single, they have never experienced being single later in life." I feel there is a great deal of truth to that because frankly before 5-1/2 years ago, that was my story. I went to Ambassador College, met my wife there, was married until 5-1/2 years ago when she died of cancer and I found myself single at the age of forty. I first heard the term, "singles in the middle" when I actually was one. Prior to that, I didn't really understand or appreciate some of the unique needs of this group.

What I'd like to do today is focus the sermon more towards singles in the Church of God. What we're going to do is cover two different aspects.

To start off with, I'm going to focus this more towards educating those of you who are married. We will address some of the unique issues of singles and how you can better understand their needs and your interactions with them.

Then we're going to switch gears and focus more on singles themselves and the issues that they face.

In preparing this sermon, I didn't just draw on my own experiences over the last 5-1/2 years or even individuals who reached out to me to counsel about single related issues during that timeframe. What I also did in preparing for this sermon is I went onto an online forum on the internet that specifically focuses on singles in the Church of God. I posted a question to elicit feedback from singles throughout Church of God organizations in general. I basically asked, "What would you like for married members in the Church of God to better understand about the issues and challenges you face as a single in the Church of God?" I explained that I'm asking this question because I am working on a sermon and that I was looking for their ideas and feedback as to what I should address.

One of the things I'm going to do is read through a number of comments that people gave me as far as feedback. You'll understand a bit later why I'm making a big deal of this particular point. I just want to state for the record as I am reading individuals' comments verbatim, in every case I private messaged these individuals and asked for their permission to share that. It will make sense in a minute as to why I'm making a big deal out of that. I just wanted to state that for the record.

I'd like to break some of this down into categories and cover some of the issues that they brought up and would like me to share with married members in the Church of God. Understand as I go through some of this, I'm going to talk about certain behaviors and how they affected individuals who are single in the Church of God. I realize oftentimes when these behaviors take place no one is intending to be offensive. No one is intending to be problematic. Oftentimes these are done out of good intentions and in a desire to help and be friendly. I realize the heart is oftentimes pure in doing this. I want to cover how these actions can affect people so we can basically see it through a different pair of eyes.

The first area I would like to cover is what I will title boundary invasion and judgment. What I am referring to is there can often be a phenomenon with singles in the Church of God that their personal life, their single status, their dating and relationship life can sometimes be looked at by other members or even entire congregations as if that part of their life is in the public domain. I'll explain that particular reference and why I use that terminology in a moment. If material is in the public domain, that means everybody has access to it, and it's free game. There are no legal restrictions here. Often that can tend to happen. I realize that can be as a result of people who are concerned about an individual and care about this person and want to see them find someone and get married. I realize the heart can be pure, but just understand how this can affect an individual. The kind of behavior I am talking about is that sometimes singles in the church are on the receiving end of others who self-appoint themselves to be matchmaker. I don't mean privately talking to someone and suggesting to them in a private conversation with a close personal friend, "You might want to consider this individual." I'm talking about behavior where you walk up to them at services, and it's a

casual friend and they are in a public conversation and they say, "Hey, well you're single, and you ought to consider dating so and so." They are put on the spot in public. Or they walk up to them and there are two singles talking to each other and, "Hey, you two are single and available. You two ought to get together!" Or someone directly quizzes them about their dating life, their efforts to find a mate, or even putting them on trial and saying, "Why are you still single?" As if it is something they need to defend or justify. I received a number of comments on this type of behavior. I'm going to quote a few of them, but I got way more comments than I'm going to read today.

Let me just read through a number of comments that people gave me.

James, I've been there too. You're going along, thriving and serving and all of a sudden your single status is brought up as if it is anyone's business. I can't tell you how many times an inappropriate person has been recommended to me. It would be nice if those who aren't even close friends would leave the topic alone. I do have one recently married friend who tries to set me up, but she is wonderfully subtle and discreet, so it is not awkward. I guess my ideas would be (a) it's a very personal topic; and (b) it's a very personal topic.

What she is emphasizing here is the personal nature of this. What I find in dealing with this behavior and the feedback I have received, I think the individuals who have perpetrated this behavior don't intend to be offensive. Perhaps it's been decades since they were single and experienced the vulnerability of the emotions and other things that can be associated with this and they don't relate. They haven't thought about what this is like on the receiving end. Again, I don't think people are trying to be offensive in that regard.

Just to share a couple more comments, these are separate individuals and I am leaving names and other details out.

I've encountered two particular issues that have annoyed me over the years.

First is the attitude of: 'You're in the church, he's in the church, and you should get married.' I would imply that perhaps I wasn't interested in the man and the other person would just respond quizzically, 'But you're both in the church!' Obviously all of us here are searching for a like-minded mate, but that's not the only issue that will foster compatibility and a lasting, loving marriage.

Second: Being asked why I am not married. Over the years I've had several people, upon meeting me and getting to know me, kindly complement me on many things. Then they abruptly ask, "Why aren't you married?" How do you answer that question? The only answer I could ever give was that I had to assume that God has a plan for me and it was

that I would continue to be single. Sometimes that seemed to satisfy people. Other times they went on to ask a series of additional questions, because clearly something must be wrong with me if I wasn't married."

I've seen this a number of times where basically it's like, "What's wrong with you that you are not married?" The person is sort of put on trial as if that is something they need to defend and as if the person asking this has the right to interrogate them.

What I'm going to encourage you to think about is from the perspective or point of view of the context of a copyright law. I'm sure all of you living in today's society at some point have come across legal disclaimers in regards to copyright laws. Maybe you rented your movie from Netflix and you popped in the DVD and you're waiting for the movie and a legal disclaimer comes onto the screen before the movie starts. Perhaps concerning music or books, but at some point you have seen a legal disclaimer for a copyright law. It goes something like this: "The following content is the sole legal property of XYZ Company, therefore, any copying, or otherwise use of this material can only be done with the express written permission of XYZ Company."

I'm going to encourage you to think of the private lives of other people in this context. It is copyrighted material. It is not in the public domain. There is not open access to it.

Again, what can often happen, and I realize this can come out of good intentions and the desire to care for someone, but in today's Church of God congregations and some of the larger organizations, your average size of a group is probably about thirty people. I got that directly from an elder that is a good friend who is in one of the largest organizations today. He said that is the average size of a congregation. So you're often talking about one or two people in the group who are single. The majority of the people are married. Well, this individual then has someone who visits them. Maybe there is a dating relationship going on, and everybody would like to see this person find someone and get married. They tend to focus on it like their private life is now in the public domain, and everyone has the right to inquire about it. This may be an issue that this person hasn't even figured out themselves yet. When a relationship first starts, these people are getting to know each other and they don't know themselves where this is going. They are in the process of figuring that out. You don't want to be putting people on the spot and butting into this. Look at this from the standpoint of a copyright law that you have no legal right to. To intrude upon it not only is violating the law, it's risking getting you into an ugly lawsuit. If you think of it in that context, that makes this entire problem go away. You can think of it in terms of boundary invasion.

To make this a little more personal, I'm going to create a graphic picture for you. Let me put this in the context that would mean more I think, to people who have been married for many years.

When I was attending Ambassador College, I took a class entitled "Pastoral Counseling." It covered counseling from the point of view of if you became an elder or minister and you are counseling church members. As you can imagine, we had an

extensive session on marriage counseling. In covering this, the professor made a big point; he said that there are two areas that you need to completely steer away from. They are very personal and you have no business ever intruding in this unless they have said they want to counsel about these particular subjects. What he was referring to was a couple's finances and their sex life. He said that these are very personal areas that you have no business butting into whatsoever, unless they have said that they want to talk about it.

Picture yourself in this scenario. You are at services and a casual acquaintance (not a close personal friend) comes up to you in a public setting and begins asking probing questions about your finances and sex life. How do you feel on the receiving end of that conversation? I'm willing to bet that the way that would affect you is it would be very awkward and you would feel embarrassed. You would feel that it is invasive and intrusive into your life. In the back of your mind you are wondering, "What on earth makes this person think this is okay, that this is acceptable behavior and they have the right to do this to me?" You're just thinking of how to end this exchange.

From the comments I got from a number of single people describing the situations they have been put in, as one person said, "I have multiple horror stories I could tell you in this regard." That's almost a direct quote. They felt very similar. The way it affected them was as if you were standing there and someone comes up and starts inquiring about your finances and your sex life in public as if they had the right to do this.

Again, if you just think of this in terms of a copyright law; unless they have given you express written permission to go there, you don't have that right. That simply avoids this whole situation and the whole issue of offense goes away.

Next I'd like to address the issue of loneliness. A lot of this is just being aware of the needs of other people, and later I'll address areas you can utilize to help in this regard.

Just to understand where people are coming from, I'd like to read another quote that I received.

Before I was married, I had a void in my heart for a companion of the opposite gender. I think that God puts into us humans a void to be filled by Him and also a void to be filled by a partner of the opposite gender. While I was married, I forgot and didn't even think about singles being lonely. Singles appear happy and content at church. Now that I am widowed and single and living alone, I can feel what it is like to be single again. Some have a greater need than others, but relationships are what God meant for us to have. I think that if a married person were asked, even in a difficult marriage, how would you feel if your spouse died next week and you had no possibilities of remarriage for the rest of your life? Think about the loneliness. If they spent some time away from each other, they would renew their interest and realize a bit of loneliness after a while. Tell them this is what singles have to live with year in, year out.

So why am I covering this? I want to encourage you to simply be aware of our normal behavior as human beings and how we interact with other people. We tend to naturally want to spend time and connect with those who we feel are very similar to us. There's nothing wrong with that. That is a very normal part of life. If congregations are large enough, you'll have the young parents with small children. Who are they going to want to hang around with? They want to be with other young parents with small children. The kids play with each other and they relate to what is going on in each other's lives. They just connect.

Older and retired couples will gravitate to other older retired couples who like to share pictures of the grandchildren and grandchildren stories. They relate to each other's lives. It's a natural thing we do as human beings.

In today's Church of God environment with the average number of congregations being about thirty people, you have to think of it in terms of that being one or two single people that are there. Sometimes they can be kind of the odd man out or the fifth wheel, as the one comment I'm going to read in a moment. That person doesn't always fit in. As a result, oftentimes they tend to be overlooked, even in simple behaviors of being asked out to dinner or to someone's home and being included in social interaction.

With that in mind, let me read a couple more comments.

I've had experiences in the church, at the Feast and visiting in other congregations where I was not welcomed, noticed or invited out for lunch even on a holy day. I don't mean by a man, but by anyone. People in the church need to learn social skills and to branch out from their comfortable groups that they normally socialize with.

It's a normal thing for us to seek out people that we feel relate to our lives and are in similar places with us. What I'm saying is that we can also be aware of the person who may not be exactly in our situation, to make sure we are friendly and hospitable to them as well, so they don't feel isolated.

Here is another comment to this regard:

The fifth wheel issue is ever present. Often a married couple appears to feel that they have nothing in common with the single ones. If the single person is their brother or sister, shouldn't they have as much to talk about and discuss the life that all are called to, physically and spiritually? More interaction is desired by many, especially as congregations are much smaller now and opportunities are less for all. Often the perspective is that the singles can take care of themselves, but singles need their married brothers and sisters looking out for them as well. Not hovering, but so often this group is ignored while the needs of the sixty year old widow are considered.

I can personally vouch for some single mothers being left to fend for themselves. Some singles may need more expression of compassion or assistance on the home front. Maybe the single man, perhaps father, may not have a sewing machine and really needs help with torn jeans. Another common perception is that singles have so much more time to kick back and do nothing or so much more time to serve. Most singles don't have more time because they are doing double duty; a full-time job, household chores, arranging for doing their own car repairs, banking, taxes, raising the kids single-handed, sports, doctor's appointments and staying on top of it emotionally and/or spiritually. Single people do not necessarily have more time. Actually, they may have less time than those who are married as these things are generally split up in a marriage."

The concept I am getting at is exercising a Biblical principle that I'm sure we have all heard many times. Turn with me to James, chapter 1 and verse 27.

James 1:27. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. (NKJ)

I'm sure we have heard this verse expounded many times, and there are two particular groups referred to here, orphans and widows. They tend to be very vulnerable groups. They need more attention to be looked after. Notice when it talks about the trouble of widows, one of the major challenges that widows face is that of being alone, that of not having a companion or someone to split up daily chores and also not having companionship and the company of someone else.

Often we tend to focus on this particular issue, again in the context of the retirement-age widow. Let me tell you from personal experience that you don't have to be retirement age to be widowed. That can happen to you at age of forty or at any age. You can lose your spouse. You can be in a similar situation through divorce or never having been married because the options are limited in the Church of God environment today. There are a lot of issues where a person can be facing very similar things to what this scripture is saying, but again not necessarily fitting the typical retirement-age widow as I mentioned in the comment here. That tends to be what is focused on, not necessarily thinking that someone in their thirties or forties may be facing very similar issues in their life. We just don't tend to think of them in the same way because they are not the stereotypical retirement-age widow that we tend to focus on. The same needs can exist in someone else.

I'm not saying you have to take on all the responsibility of taking care of someone else. I'm just saying we need to be aware of what our brother's needs are; we can be hospitable and thinking about them and being our brother's keeper as the Bible tells us. That's basically what I'm encouraging you to do in this regard.

At this point I would like to switch gears and focus towards singles in the church. It's going to be more focused towards that audience.

As I mentioned before and in some of the comments I read, often the single in the Church of God can feel in our culture like they don't really fit into what is put forward in the sermons and programs and things of that nature. Sometimes that can result in a single person feeling like, "Well, maybe there is something wrong with me. Maybe I'm a second class Christian or I'm not as important to God or as valuable in His plan or in the church because I'm not married and don't have a family and don't fit into that stereotype." That is a concept that doesn't hold up at all if we look in the Bible. Some of the significant individuals that God utilized were single. I'm going to ask this question later as we look at some of them. When you look at some of these names, would you ever think of looking at one of these people and say, "Well, what's wrong with you? Why are you still single? Why aren't you married?" We're going to find some very big names in the Bible who were single individuals that God utilized and some in unique ways. We will cover that in a moment.

Turn to Jeremiah, chapter 16. I'm sure that anybody who is vaguely familiar with the Bible has heard the name Jeremiah. You know he was an Old Testament prophet. There is an entire book dedicated to his story. Did you know he was single? It's in Jeremiah 16:1.

Jeremiah 16:1. *The word of the LORD also came to me, saying,
2) "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place."
(NKJ)*

God is specifically telling Jeremiah, "It is My plan for you to be single. You're not going to get married and you're not going to have a family. You will be a major individual in the plan of God, but you will do it being single." God told him that this had to be the case.

There is a significant individual in the New Testament who was also single. It tells us that he was single by choice though. Turn to 1 Corinthians, chapter 7 and verse 7. This is the Apostle Paul writing.

1 Corinthians 7:7. *For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.
8) But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am;
9) but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (NKJ)*

He is saying here that he was single and he was single by choice. He thought that was the best status for him to be and was not seeking to change that status. Whereas in Jeremiah's case, we see God is telling him that he was going to remain single.

I'm barely scratching the surface on the major individuals in the Bible who were single. If you just look at the example of Daniel, I'll characterize this as speculation because the Bible doesn't directly say this, but according to Josephus, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were eunuchs. Again, the Bible does not specifically state that, but if you notice when Daniel is negotiating their diet, basically not having the king's delicacies, who is he negotiating with? He is negotiating with the chief of the eunuchs. Why was the chief of the eunuchs the person in charge of what they ate? Why is he negotiating with that person? Again it is speculation because the Bible does not directly state that this was the case. But if this was the case, there were other major individuals in the Bible who were single.

Also think of it like this, and this hit me like a ton of bricks when I was preparing this sermon. I have never considered this up to this point. As I mentioned, often the single person can be looked at as not as significant in the plan of God because, what's wrong with them that they're single? Our focus often is on marriage and children and things of that nature. Think about the New Testament when it talks about marriage. One of the major things covered probably a half dozen times throughout the New Testament is the roles that God defined for husbands and the roles for wives. God obviously felt that was a very important subject. When you think about our go-to chapters on the subject of marriage, what are they? They are Ephesians 5, Colossians 3 and often 1 Corinthians 13. Who wrote them? The single apostle wrote them. It was a single guy who wrote the go-to chapters on marriage. That was kind of ironic when you think about it. Certainly scholars debate as to whether Paul was married previously in his life. I tend to think that he was, but the Bible doesn't specifically tell us. I found that scholars will argue that subject on both sides of the fence. So again, I'm not taking a hard dogmatic stance on it. We know absolutely that when he was writing his epistles, he was a single guy. He tells us that. He even said that this was the desired state to be. I find it ironic the attitude that you can't be utilized as much in the church if you're not married. The guy who wrote the handbook on marriage in the Bible was the single apostle. That was an ironic realization that hit me as I was putting together this sermon.

To cover another major issue that has become more of an issue in the last twenty years in the Church of God is the subject of dating and marrying outside the faith. I'm going to address a number of arguments I have heard on this subject or oftentimes hear it characterized before I go on any further. I've heard more and more over the last twenty years and have paid more attention to it over the last five or six years myself. It often gets addressed like this: as one person put it, "Well, that subject is an interesting philosophical discussion; this is kind of a grey area; it depends on your circumstances." In other words, it depends on how difficult it is to find someone in the church is how this subject is determined. I've heard it addressed from the point of view of: "Well, years ago that used to be a big issue and a stickler issue of how Church of God organizations handled that. Today it's not such a big issue." In other words, how the popular opinion has handled the subject or administered it is how it is viewed. Or it is addressed from this point of view: "Well, I've seen plenty of people in the church that got married and they were both baptized church members and I've seen that not work out as well. So just because you're both church members it doesn't mean that it is going to work out."

That is a true statement, but these are oftentimes ways to rationalize or address this issue, often skipping the most important question. I am of the viewpoint that if you ask the most important question and you start from there, you quickly find the subject isn't grey, it isn't debatable, and it isn't a philosophical discussion. It's pretty black and white. The Bible tends to take a very clear, consistent and dogmatic point of view on the subject.

What is this question that I'm talking about? If you stop and look at the very idea of Christianity, it is basically patterning one's life after the teachings of the Bible. It's the idea that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, His ways are higher than our ways and He understands the right way to live and we don't. So we should submit to His will. It's about His will being done and not ours and that's the underlying premise of what Christianity is about. Therefore, the question should be: What does God have to say about the subject? What is God's point of view on it and what does He tell us that we should do in regards to the subject? If you start off with that question, you very quickly get a black and white picture. Let me demonstrate that. Turn with me to Deuteronomy, chapter 7.

Deuteronomy 7:1 *"When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, 2) and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. 3) Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4) For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. (NKJ)*

Let's turn to Joshua, chapter 23. What we're going to find here is the Bible is very consistent and dogmatic on this subject.

Joshua 23:11. *Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God. 12) Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you, 13) know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you. (NKJ)*

Now turn to Nehemiah, chapter 13, and we'll start in verse 23.

Nehemiah 13:23. *In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.*

24) *And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people.*

25) *So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves.*

26) *Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin.*

27) *Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?" (NKJ)*

Turn to Malachi, chapter 2 and verse 11.

Malachi 2:11. *Judah has dealt treacherously, And an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, For Judah has profaned The LORD's holy institution which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god.*

12) *May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob The man who does this, being awake and aware, Yet who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! (NKJ)*

Now turn to the New Testament to 2 Corinthians, chapter 6 and verse 14.

2 Corinthians 6:14. *Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?*

15) *And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?*

16) *And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people."*

17) *Therefore, "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you."*

18) *"I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty." (NKJ)*

Now I'm not even beginning to scratch the surface on all the scriptures that address this subject. But what you're going to find if you ask: What does God have to say about the subject? You find a very clear and consistent and dogmatic stance on this subject. God is always against it.

Now again, He is not saying here that if you came into the church and you were called and your spouse wasn't, that you need to break up that marriage. I won't go into the time to cover all of this, but if you read through 1 Corinthians 7, Paul also says that if the

unconverted spouse is pleased to dwell with you, He is not suggesting that you break up that marriage. God calls a number of individuals who are already married when they are called. What He is saying is don't willfully put yourself in this situation, because it normally goes badly. Again, we can rationalize around it and say, "Well, I've seen a case where it worked and I've seen where two people who were church members married and it didn't work out." That is true, but again, what is the right question to ask? What does God tell us we should do on this subject? He is very clear about that one. He doesn't leave this open to debate. It is not something we can rationalize around if we are seeking His will first. It is clear and dogmatic.

Now I realize it can be a frustrating subject if you're single and you want to change that status. In today's Church of God environment, this can be a trial and a challenge. Let's face it, not only over the last twenty years have the overall numbers of the Church of God dwindled, but what else has happened? There is lots and lots of fragmentation. If you look back twenty years ago, and I'm just estimating, you could probably count the number of Church of God organizations on one hand. Today it would be in the hundreds. It would be hard to quantify that. What that does to a dating pool if you are a single in the church and you're trying to find a mate of like mind, it makes it more and more challenging and fragmented and frankly more of a frustrating subject for someone to deal with. I realize the trial that this can be. Some of you out there are struggling with this particular subject and frankly you probably find yourself at times sitting in the audience and the guy who is speaking on this subject, you're thinking, "Yes, that's easy for you to say. You went to Ambassador College and met your wife there and this is a theory for you and you have never had to deal with it." Well, for starters let me say that this book is the authority. It really doesn't matter whether a person has personal credibility in that regard or not because God's word is God's word. But just for the record, I do get it. I do understand what you are facing. I do understand what it is like if you are not finding someone in the church, and you go to work one day and there are several attractive women there making it aware to you that if you wanted to pursue, they are very receptive. Or there are several nice gentlemen there and they are asking you out, and all you have to do is say "yes." All you have to do is agree.

You have to realize what is most important. Is it Thy will be done or my will be done? That is what it really comes down to. I realize that this can be a trial, but realize the underlying concept is not something that is unique to singles by any means. Every one of us as baptized members of the Church of God; when you went through baptismal counseling, what was covered? One of the things talked about was counting the cost of the commitment that you are making and what sacrifices you may have to go through to obtain the reward which is the Kingdom of God and eternal life. Wasn't it addressed that you might have to give up your life, you might have to give up family members, you might have to lose a job, suffer need and endure that to make it into God's kingdom? In fact, if you look at the terms of the contract, it isn't if, it's when. What does it say? You will be glorified with Him if you suffer as He suffered. All who want to live in Christ Jesus shall face persecution. Don't be surprised when the fiery trial which is to try you comes upon you. In other words, it's not if, it's when. That is how Godly character is developed.

Yes, while the issue for singles may be that they would like to find a mate, they would like to change that status and there are no options there. That is difficult. Realize the underlying concept here is not unique to singles. It is a requirement across the board for Christians in general that we have to put God first and we have to be willing to endure trials. Because ... what? -- through much tribulation you shall enter into the Kingdom of God. After you have endured temptation you shall receive the crown of life. If you go through the New Testament, that is all throughout it. It makes it very clear what the terms of the contract are what we signed at baptism, that we were going to be willing to endure trial and temptation and difficult situations to obtain salvation. God didn't offer us an easy, comfortable situation where if you obey God then all your problems are solved for you. It doesn't work that way. That is not how character is developed.

So realize when you're looking at this subject, we all made that commitment when we went into baptism. While this particular subject may be unique to the singles crowd, the underlying concept is not, because everyone made that commitment. Everyone has to be willing to put God first and seek His will to have salvation and to get into His kingdom. We have to be willing to put everything else aside, to sacrifice everything else necessary to obtain that reward. Again, that same concept applies to everyone.

Trials tend to come at us wherever we are most vulnerable. I was talking to a good friend several years ago, and we were talking about the subject of trials and how they come upon us. He made a surprising statement to me. I was talking about future trials and such. He looked at me and said, "I can even tell you how it will come at you." I thought that was an interesting statement. I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "Wherever you are most vulnerable." Whatever is your weak spot, the area where Satan can get at you, that is where the trials are going to come from. It's going to come by punching that button.

Well, for singles we have to remember that can be that weak spot. That can be that vulnerable area where Satan can come after and punch that weak spot. Again, it comes down to the question of, is it my will be done or is it Thy will be done? That is really what it comes down to. We just have to remember that we made a commitment at baptism that we would be willing to endure trial and suffer need, that we would be willing to give up family, father, mother, brother and sister and our jobs or even our own lives to be able to receive salvation. This is part of the very clear terms of the contract. So again, that applies to everyone across the board. It is not just something that is unique to any one group.

Another thing to remember is it is a natural human tendency for us to look in terms of trials and life in general, the old saying that "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence." What we tend to do as human beings is focus on our immediate pain and our immediate trial and think, "If God would just take away this particular trial, if He would just remove this one situation all my problems would be solved and life would be wonderful." We think, "If God would just take that away." We tend to get so focused on

what we are dealing with right now, and sometimes we can lose the bigger picture that everything in life comes with an upside and a downside. It's always a series of pluses and minuses. A good friend of mine would put it, "Life is a series of pluses and minuses. The objective in life is to have more pluses than minuses." Nobody gets the deal where it's all pluses and no minuses. That doesn't exist. That is a fantasy we all like to think about, but that doesn't exist. It is always a combination and we have to deal with whatever the issues are. Again, it's very easy for us to look at it and say, "If this one problem was taken out of my life, everything would be solved and everything would be wonderful."

As I mentioned before, I had gone onto an online forum and asked some questions for feedback. I got a variety of feedback not only on the forum, but people even private messaging me about this. One individual expressed an analogy that I just love. It totally expressed this concept that I mentioned specifically in this context. She put it like this:

Single adults and married adults in the church are sometimes like flies on a screen door. Those on the outside of the house are wishing they could get in. Those on the inside of the house, well sometimes they are wishing they could get out.

Both sides are thinking that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence and they want to go in the other direction. I'm not trying to paint a negative picture of marriage, but realize sometimes for single people who have always longed to be married and have children, that can be romanticized. They feel, "If I just had that it would solve all of my problems." They don't realize they will have a different set of issues and challenges to deal with. Yes, a good marriage can be one of the greatest sources of joy and enrichment and fulfillment in your life. However, a bad marriage can be one of the sources of the most gut wrenching pain you will ever deal with in your life as well. That just comes with intimate relationships. You open up and are very vulnerable in a situation which is what is required for the two to become one. Both sides of the coin come together. It can be the greatest source of enjoyment and fulfillment in your life and the greatest source of pain. So it's an important thing to realize in that regard. Don't just look at marriage as, "Man, if I just had that, everything would be wonderful. It would be all romance and all positive." No, you would have a different set of challenges. Let's face it, everybody has their strong points and their weak points, and in relationships, there is a certain amount of just putting up with each other and enduring each other's weaknesses and foibles and failings. So don't just look at that as, "Man, if I just had a spouse, that would make everything wonderful." No, you would just have a different set of challenges.

In looking at this, am I saying that you just give up the desire to change your single status if that is something you are looking to do? No. I'm not saying that at all. In fact, I am encouraging you to have what I like to call the Genesis 2:18 conversation. That's when you go to God in prayer and quote Genesis 2:18 back to Him. Genesis 2:18, if you don't recognize that reference:

Genesis 2:18. *And the LORD God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." (NKJ)*

Let me express this to you in a conversation that I had with a good friend several years ago. The friend I'm referring to is someone who has been in the Church of God for many years and raised several children in the Church of God as well. He was sharing with me some advice he had given to his children. When his children grew up and got to be young adults to the point that they would be dating and seeking a mate in the church, they were looking at the challenge that was ahead of them because they both believed in wanting to find a mate in the church. They were like, "Man, this is a challenging pool to deal with!" My friend told them, "Go to God in prayer and remind Him that He is the one that said 'it is not good that man should be alone.'" He was basically saying to quote Genesis 2:18 back to God. He said, "Then discuss with Him what you would like in a mate. What is the criteria you feel you would be looking for? Describe in detail to Him what it is you think you want. Of course, leave it up to Him, knowing what's best for you, as to how He's going to fulfill that." He was basically saying, "Make your request be known to God."

I want to highly encourage you to do that for a couple of reasons: (1) it's not just from the aspect of fulfilling what the Bible tells us, to make our requests known to God; and (2) the other is to have a criteria to work from.

Let me put it like this; if you don't know what you are looking for, how do you know if you have found it? You don't.

Personally, I work as a corporate recruiter. In some ways you could say I'm sort of a corporate matchmaker. My hiring managers will come to me and say, "I have this opening and here is what I need." It's my job basically to try to find someone and then try to make a match to fill the opening. One of the more frustrating things that can happen in my line of work is when you're dealing with a hiring manager who cannot articulate for you what it is they want and what they are looking for. It can be a frustrating search, because you don't know exactly what it is to look for and even when you can present candidate after candidate, they can't really tell you what they want because they keep changing their mind as to what they are looking for. Again, it's a very frustrating process, because they don't know if they found what they are looking for because they are not even sure what that is.

So again, I think it's very important to develop a criteria of what it is you think you want and what you're looking for so you have a basis to work from.

Let me also say the other extreme can also be frustrating. That's the person who has a very well defined criteria and they can articulate for you very well. They just neglected to consider the concept of reality of when they were developing it. That's the person who comes to me and says, "I want this perfect individual with a stable work history with a PhD in this subject with tons of experience and all these qualifications and they are

willing to work for minimum wage for sixty hours a week, on salary and never complain. Of course, they won't be paid any overtime on salary. Also, they're going to stay in this job forever and never want to leave. I'm like, "Good luck with that." As I'd like to put it, sometimes that becomes a question of how high the pain level is. In other words, that position is going to be vacant for a long time for them to realize that their expectations are not in line with reality.

So that can be a frustrating thing, and that is something singles can do as well. In other words, they may have a criteria that is outside the realm of reality and you're never going to find that person because you forgot to include reality in the concept of developing that criteria to begin with.

I'm not suggesting you compromise your standards and try to marry someone just to be married. That is a horrible mistake. As I mentioned, marriage can be one of the greatest sources of joy and fulfillment in your life. It can also be one of the greatest sources of gut wrenching pain in a person's life. The last thing you ever want to do is just go out and get married just to be married. That tends to have a disastrous end. You want to develop a meaningful criteria in which to do that. Again, lay this before God and ask Him to guide you in the process.

In developing that criteria let me also say that it's important to develop that criteria and make your request known to God, but don't stop there. Let me say that again... don't stop there. That is half of the equation. I've talked with a number of singles over the last few years, and they say what they want and they're appealing to God and fasting and saying, "Please give me this individual." Again, there's nothing wrong with that. I'm encouraging you to do that. But if that is all you're focused on, you're looking at half of an equation. What about the other half? The other half is you. If you look through this, the New Testament makes a very big deal out of the defined role for a husband and a defined role for a wife and how that should go. If you go into a bookstore to the relationship/self-help section, you can see volumes and volumes about relationships. Some of it's good and some of it's bad. It's a mixed bag of what you'll find there, but there are tons of things that can be addressed. One of the interesting things you'll find, in the hymn book for Christianity, God made a big point out of these and covering them like a half dozen times again and again in the Bible. Obviously He thought they were very important for the success of a marriage. My point is there is a detailed description on both sides of the equation. Don't just go to God and tell Him what you would like Him to provide for you. Make sure you are also going to Him and asking His list for what you need to be doing to prepare yourself to fulfill your side of the equation. If you are not doing that you're only focusing on half of the equation to make a successful relationship, and the situation you're likely to be putting yourself in is asking for a blessing that you are not ready to receive, because you haven't prepared yourself to be able to successfully do your side of the equation.

If you think about that there's even a worse scenario. Say that you do find someone and you do hit it off and you get married, but you haven't prepared yourself to successfully make that relationship work. Now what you've accomplished is you're a fly

that has flown to the other side of the screen door. Instead of wishing you could get in the house, you're on the inside wishing you could get out. I would suggest to you that that pain is worse. I say that from having been a therapist earlier in my career, having done marriage counseling and even as an elder now having done marriage counseling. Let me put it this way; I've had married individuals tell me as one person put it, "I'm jealous of your situation." I said, "What do you mean?" We were friends and she shared some of the frustrations of being single. They said, "Yes, you're alone, but when you come home at the end of the day and walk into the house, your stomach is not knotting dealing with the conflict that you may have when you walk in the door. Yes, you sat down and had your dinner by yourself, but you ate it in peace, and you didn't have conflict to deal with."

Again, I'm not trying to paint marriage in a negative way. I'm saying that a good marriage is a wonderful thing, and a bad marriage can be a very painful thing. Don't just look at it from the standpoint of, "Hey, if I just got married, that will solve all my problems. That's just not true. You want to make sure that you're preparing, and not just asking God for what you want but asking God to help you see what you need to be so that you can make that successful.

The other concept you want to consider, and this is a conversation I had with a single individual a couple of years ago. We were talking about this particular idea of the Genesis 2:18 conversation. This person had fasted a number of times over the subject and had been single and frustrated over this for a number of years and was hoping God would provide them with a mate. I really sympathized with that. I said to this individual, "Keep one thing in mind. Sometimes God's answer to our request is 'My grace is sufficient for you.'"

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians, chapter 12 and we'll start reading in verse 7. This was the Apostle Paul describing a situation he was dealing with in his life.

2 Corinthians 12:7. *And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.*

8) *Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*

9) *And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

10) *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NKJ)*

Notice first that Paul is referring to that basic Christian requirement that we have to be willing to endure suffering, adversity and trial, because that is fundamental to not only the requirements for salvation but the whole definition of how character is developed.

Here we have an apostle who God used very powerfully. He was kind of the hero of the New Testament. He wrote more books in the New Testament than anyone else. You might say he was the poster child for Christianity in many ways. He went to God multiple times over an issue he was facing. We have speculated over the years as to what this thorn in the flesh was. The Bible doesn't specifically tell us and it's not really important for our purposes. The point is that he appealed to God three different times, saying, "Please take this away from me. I'm not enjoying this trial. I'd really like it if you would remove this from my life." God's answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you." In other words, "It's My will that you're going to have to endure this trial and you're going to have to deal with it, but, Hey, I'm offering you salvation when this is all over, so you got a great deal. You're just not going to enjoy it right now." He is basically telling him, "You've got to put seeking God's will and the kingdom first even over your desire to end a physically painful situation." My point is again, we have to always be willing to accept that, yes, we may present our request to God and we are asking God and fasting for that and for Him to deal with a situation in our lives. Sometimes God will come back and say, "I hear you. I love you and care about you, but I need you to endure this. You're going to have to live with this particular trial."

The whole issue of dating and marrying outside the church has become an epidemic problem, especially over the last twenty years. Here is why that happens. That issue comes about when Church of God members look at this and their desire to fulfill their own physical needs is more important than following God and His will. That's how that comes about. Again, the Bible is not unclear on the subject. It is rather dogmatic on this subject. But it is a normal human weakness that we struggle with -- my will versus God's will. That applies in lots of areas of our lives. We have to realize it's a basic Christian requirement. We must put God's will first and seek that and not just fulfilling our own physical desires and wants. Again, that's just fundamental to the concept of Christianity and making it into God's kingdom.

Again, I'm not suggesting for a moment in today's Church of God environment, although it is certainly challenging, in finding a spouse if that is what you are seeking. I'm not suggesting that you give up. The Bible talks about finding a wife, well finding means someone is looking. It also seems that she was making herself available to be found. But make sure you're not making an idol out of the subject, realizing that all of us as Christians have to put God's will first in seeking that because that is what is important.

So let me just end with the words of Matthew 6:33. The important thing here is...

Matthew 6:33. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (NKJ)