



Q & A

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The Meaning of Singleness *Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church*

May 9, 2023 | \$35, 328 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0485-2

Danielle (Dani) Treweek (PhD, St Mark's National Theological Centre and Charles Sturt University) is the founding director of the Single Minded Ministry and an adjunct teacher at Moore Theological College, Sydney. She also serves as both the Diocesan Research Officer and a member of the Archbishop's Doctrine Commission within the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Australia.

Retrieving a Theology of Singleness

Your book begins by examining the place of singleness in both society at large and the church in particular. What do you think is the most common misconception about singleness?

Danielle Treweek: Sadly, singleness really *is* the subject of a lot of misconceptions in both of those spheres. But what I find particularly concerning and disappointing is just how many of society's misconceptions about singleness are echoed in the contemporary evangelical church. On that topic, there is a lot to explore (four chapters worth, in fact!), but if I were to boil it down to *the* most common misconception, I think it would be that both society and the church see singleness as a state of "lacking." Lacking in love. Lacking in sexual fulfilment. Lacking in relational intimacy. Lacking in purpose. Lacking in possibility. Lacking in belonging. Lacking in authentic self-realization. Both spheres typically define and characterize singleness by what it isn't, rather than by what it is. Or, to put it another way, singleness is primarily thought to be the absence of good, rather than a good in and of itself.

In the book, you offer a robust retrieval of singleness—exegetical, historical, and theological. What did you discover that was the most surprising or encouraging during that process?

Treweek: When I started my exercise of retrieval, I already had a broad understanding of the general landscape of singleness throughout church history. However, I soon found myself surrounded by a diverse cloud of witnesses who challenged me with insights about singleness in the Christian life and community that I had simply not ever encountered before. That was enormously encouraging, exciting, and energizing! But, if I'm being honest, there were times when I also found myself a bit saddened and bewildered by it too. Why was all of this new to me? How had I *not* encountered so many of these profound insights before? What could possibly explain or justify the contemporary evangelical church having forgotten our own amazingly rich theological, exegetical, and pastoral inheritance in this regard? It was really a double-edged surprise.

You also cast an eschatological vision of singleness. What do you mean by that, and why is that good news for the church?

Treweek: As evangelical Christians, we are generally eager to emphasize the eschatological significance of earthly marriage—namely as the "mysterious" foreshadowing of the heavenly marriage between Christ and the church (Eph 5:32). And that's a good thing! But it turns out that our own Christian ancestors were just as eager (if not more so) to emphasize the eschatological significance of earthly singleness. Rather than seeing it as a life of lacking, they understood it to be a life of profound eschatological possibility. You'll need to read the book to find out all the different ways they perceived that to be true! But in summary, those who came before us honored singleness as a life situation that intrinsically called God's people to remember we live in this creation as those who are already citizens of the next.

How has your experience as a single person informed your ministry?

Treweek: While my own singleness has obviously been important for the trajectory and shape of my work, I think it has actually been *other* single Christians who have most deeply informed my ministry in this regard. Walking in tandem with them; rejoicing when they rejoice; grieving as they have grieved; praying with and for them; empathizing in our shared disappointments;



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working through feelings of isolation; serving alongside them; exhorting them to keep trusting Jesus; and having them do the same for me. Ultimately, it's been *their* singleness that has most significantly informed *my* ministry.

What is your hope for those who pick up and read your book?

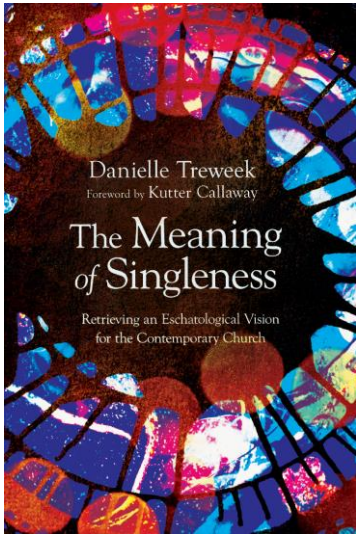
Treweek: One of my hopes is that those who read *The Meaning of Singleness* might be better equipped to love, respect, and value the single members of their church communities. And, of course, I hope it will encourage unmarried Christians (whether they be never-married, divorced, or widowed) to delight more and more in the intrinsic goodness of their singleness. But I also pray that those who read this book might better understand the vitally important and God-glorifying role singles have to play in the church's understanding of her own unique identity. I hope my book might help us all to better realize it's not simply that single Christians need the church, but it's the church who really and truly needs single Christians.



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The Meaning of Singleness *Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church*

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Drawing upon ancient and contemporary theologians, Dani Treweek offers biblical, historical, cultural, and theological reflections to retrieve a theology of singleness for the church today. Far from being a burden, she shows that singleness presents the church with a foretaste of the eschatological reality that awaits all of God's people.

The Character of Christian Singleness

Perhaps the most foundational thing to observe about the contemporary Christian discourse's perception of singleness' character is its assessed deficiency. That Christian singleness is generally understood to lack any sort of independent sufficiency is demonstrated in the way it is primarily defined in comparison to the alternative construct of marriage. That is, because the term "single" is usually used synonymously with the terms "unmarried" or "not married" (or perhaps in more general parlance, "unpartnered" or "not partnered"), the fundamental determining factor in describing who a single person *is*, is grounded in a description of who they are *not*. The single person is not a husband. They are not a wife. They are not half of a (married) couple. Some might perhaps suggest that this is little more than a matter of lexical pedantry. After all, it is common for us to use pairs of opposites in order to provide contextual meaning. However, the true significance of the particular relationship between these two contrasting terms is revealed in the fact that the definitional correspondence works in one direction only. Even though singleness is the original state of all human beings—a state that is later exchanged for marriage by many and even entered back into again by at least half of that number—it is simply not culturally intelligible to refer to married individuals as being "unsingle" or "not single." The fact that the single person is routinely "unmarried" while the married person is never "unsingle" evidences the sense in which singleness is primarily characterized not by what it actually is but what it actually is not.

This is well demonstrated by a 2017 article addressed to pastors in which author Sean DeMars suggests a number of various reasons why a Christian might be single. Some, he writes, "*simply haven't found a spouse yet*, some members have lost a spouse and are now widows/widowers, and some may have been divorced earlier in life and have yet to or may never remarry" ("*Folding Singles into Family in the Life of the Church*," *9Marks*). This is just one example among many in which single Christians are routinely described as those who were either once married or are not married yet. Another is found in the title of a popular 2017 book on the topic, *Not Yet Married: The Pursuit of Joy in Singleness and Dating* (Marshall Segal).

That singleness is principally defined by what it is not characterizes it as a situation of negation and deficiency. According to Sam Allberry, it "reinforces the idea that there is nothing intrinsically good about singleness, it is merely the situation of lacking what is intrinsically good in marriage" (*7 Myths about Singleness*). Such a deeply ingrained assumption about the deficiency of the unmarried life impedes the single Christian's endeavor to construct a positive personal and social identity for themselves. They are, by very definition, the *object other*.

Of course, such an observation raises an important question—what then shall we do? Ought evangelicals to stop referring to single people as being unmarried? Is the language of singleness *itself* problematic? Should fair-minded Christians seek to introduce new, less problematic language into the Christian vernacular? If so, what possible terminology could suffice, and how might we hope for it to achieve widespread understanding and acceptance? Many pundits—and most especially Christian singles—often become frustrated that there are no straightforward answers to these questions. However, even if an obvious terminological solution was to become apparent, it would not ultimately prove to be an effective solution to this quandary, for the critical issue on view is not linguistic but ideological. That is, the notion of the single person's deficiency is not grounded in the actual term "unmarried" itself. As a word, comprised of a number of letters, arranged in a particular order, the term is neutral. What is not neutral, however, is the social, psychological, political, theological, and pastoral assumptions that are embedded within the contemporary evangelical social imagination about what it means to be the opposite of married. The introduction, or reintroduction, of more palatable terms will result in little enduring gain if the underlying assumptions are simply subsumed into these new terms.

—Taken from chapter three, "The Character of Christian Singleness"



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