

Session 8 – The Single Woman and the Role of Women in the Church (I Timothy 5:3 – 16; Titus 2:3 – 5; I Corinthians 7:8 - 24)

“An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband.” I Corinthians 7:34

- I. The church and the single woman.
 - A. Some may find it surprising how much the scriptures emphasize the single woman in her role in the church (I Timothy 5:3 – 16, I Corinthians 7:8 – 24).
 - 1. Many women who played a prominent role in the New Testament were apparently single (e.g. Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and Dorcas [probably])
 - 2. Single women have always played a critical role in the work of the church (from the widows of Timothy through many single women noted for their spirituality during the Middle Ages [such as Teresa of Avila] to many single women in the church today who are looked to for leadership and guidance by other women).
 - B. The importance of the single woman escapes us primarily because of our focus upon the nuclear family (which in the church is a relatively recent phenomena).
- II. Analysis of Passages Relating to Single Women in the Church.
 - A. I Timothy 5:3 – 16 and the “widows”.
 - 1. The passage addresses the problem of the vulnerability of widows and the issue of enrollment.
 - 2. The “true widow” or the “real widow” is probably a widow in need who has no one to help her. (see v. 5:16)
 - 3. Honor (proper recognition) of these women is to come in the form of respect, considerate treatment and financial assistance, for they have undergone an extreme test of their faith. If, on the other hand, she copes with her loss by focusing on wealth and a self-indulgent lifestyle (v. 6) then she is spiritually dead.
 - 4. The provision of assistance, however, is first to come from the family. (v. 7, 8) In fact, one of the major reasons for Paul’s discussion is to clarify for the church which widows should be supported from church funds.
 - 5. In vs. 9 and 10, the probable best reading is that the enrollment is not for financial assistance, but rather for some type of service which requires experience and trustworthiness. (Perhaps a role of women who taught the younger women as indicated in Titus 2:3 – 5.) Enrollment clearly is related to some type of service rendered by these women (the word suggests enrollment for a purpose).

6. The enrolled widows were widows (probably in need) who were over 60 (and who probably would not remarry), who were committed to service (v. 10). The characteristics suggest that she was independently a person known for her service (and not just as a mother). The emphasis, however appears to be upon the commitment required for Christian service and the difficulty in maintaining that commitment. True widows (those who qualify for financial assistance) should not necessarily be equated with enrolled widows (those singled out for service).
7. Exclusion of the younger widows from enrollment (vs. 11 – 13) probably relates to problems with enrollment previously (v. 15).
8. A key point, frequently overlooked, is that single women (in this case older widows) may be uniquely qualified to render service to the church.

B. Titus 2:3 – 5 and the teaching younger women.

1. This passage is not addressed specifically to widows, but given that it is addressed to older women, it can reasonably be included here.
2. Once again, the setting of this passage is advice of Paul to Titus regarding a series of pastoral problems which had arisen among the local churches of Crete. The specific problem was that the congregations were not properly organized to resist the inroads made by unorthodox teachers who were ruining “whole households” (v. 1:11).
3. The advice regarding women is set in a section of the letter providing advice to various groups (older men, young men, slaves).
4. The contrast between reverent and slanderous (v. 3) is key. Reverent suggests the demeanor of those who handle holy things in a holy way and slanderers suggest the devil.
5. The older women are to teach what is good (probably by verbal teaching as well as practical example), especially about responsibilities at home. Perhaps Paul is saying that domestic virtues depend for transmission from one generation to the next upon adequate communication and instruction from mother to daughter.
6. The controversy regarding this passage is the translation of the Greek word *oikouros* which is rendered “keepers at home” in the KJV and “busy at home” in the NIV. Some have suggested that this means women are to “stay at home” and therefore their work is at home. “Workers at home” or “domestic” is probably a better rendering.

C. I Corinthians 7:8 – 24

1. Paul is responding to specific questions forwarded to him by the Corinthians in Chapter 7. The context of the passage probably derives from questions related to the proper use of liberty in Christ, specifically questions regarding behaviors of “super-spiritual” Christians who had used their freedom in Christ such that they had defiled their bodies and souls (vs. 6:12, 13, 19, 20).

2. This passage is addressed to both men and women and the thrust of the passage does not significantly discriminate between the instructions given to men and women. The passage is addressed to both the single and the married. We will concentrate on the instructions to single women, but we should recognize that in no way does Paul condemn marriage.
3. Few can challenge the thrust of Paul's specific instructions to the Corinthians who were widowed or virgins; namely, if they were in the state of being single, they should strive to remain that way. (v. 8).
4. Paul's general instruction is that freedom in Christ permits one to refrain from certain states and behaviors which may hinder one's full participation in the work of the Lord. Notice the use of the word good [or *kalos* in Greek] in 7:1, 8 and 26. This word does not mean morally good but rather denotes a commendable attitude of restraint in one's behavior. Paul is therefore not commanding the Corinthians but rather encouraging them to a preferred state.
5. Many commentators suggest that Paul was speaking specifically regarding the difficult times Christians faced and therefore felt that the single state was more appropriate for the battle Christians must wage in a world where the Christian would be persecuted (vs. 26 – 31).
6. Others suggest that Paul is responding to the "super-spiritual aesthetics" in Corinth (who may have identified with Paul's single state) and that, though, he agrees that the single state is preferred, he does not recommend it generally and fully expects that most Christians will marry (vs. 2, 9).
7. Paul's instructions to singles (and for our purposes single woman) are:
 - a. The usual state is one of marriage and faithfulness in marriage (v. 2). Within the married state, sexual intercourse should not be limited, except by mutual consent (vs. 3 – 5).
 - b. To Paul, however, the single state is preferred. (vs. 1, 6, 7).
 - c. To strive, if one is an unmarried widow or virgin, to remain in the unmarried state (vs. 1, 7, 8, 40).
 - d. If one separates from one's husband, either return to him or remain in the unmarried state. (v. 11) (We cannot address in this series of lessons the Biblical injunctions regarding marriage and divorce. Nevertheless, we need to consider this verse in light of the general context of the passage, i.e. it is better to be in the single state.)
 - e. Remain in the place in life to which God has called you. (vs. 17, 20)
 - f. If one is a virgin, it is best to remain in this state due to the present crisis (of course, this is not the only reason that one may elect to remain a virgin). (vs. 25, 26) The unmarried should not look for a spouse. (vs. 27)
 - g. The unmarried woman is concerned about the Lord's affairs, the married woman about how to please her husband. (vs. 34, 35)

III. The church and the single woman.

- A. The status of and instructions to single women in the New Testament exceeds to a considerable extent the emphasis placed upon the single woman in the church today.
- B. The teachings of Paul regarding the value of being single have been under emphasized by the church for at least two reasons.
 - 1. The Protestant church during the Reformation reacted against the monastic life and therefore reacted against a life which did not value marriage and the family.
 - 2. The church has become a powerful support for the nuclear family in a society where divorce, the homosexual life style, sexual activity outside marriage and child abuse/neglect are increasingly visible.
- C. The church would do well to attend to the New Testament teachings which:
 - 1. Don't value the married state over the single state.
 - 2. Recognize and encourage the unique contributions which single women can provide to the church.
 - 3. Work to recognize and organize women so they may be of greater service to the church.
- D. Women (and men for that matter) who become divorced or widowed should not rush too quickly to regain the married state. Such women are not morally wrong if they seek to be remarried but they are encouraged to consider how they might be uniquely situated to serve the Lord while single. In other words, being single provides a freedom to women in their service to the Lord.
- E. The church has a responsibility to single women (especially widows and perhaps the divorced) who cannot care for themselves financially and who cannot rely upon their families. Families, however, have the first responsibility and the church should teach this responsibility.

References

- 1. Moore MD: The "widows" in I Tim. 5:3 – 16, in Osburn CD (ed.): Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity (Volume1). Joplin, MO, College Press, 1993 pp. 321 – 366.
- 2. Helton SN: Titus 2:5 – Must women stay at home?, Osburn CD (ed.): Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity (Volume1). Joplin, MO, College Press, 1993 pp. 367 – 376.
- 3. Lightfoot NR: The Role of Women: New Testament Perspectives. Memphis, TN, Student Association Press, 1978.
- 4. Scanzoni L, Hardesty N: All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation. Waco, TX, Word, 1974.