

ABSTRACT

PATRISTIC AND CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL VISIONS OF THE CELIBATE LIFE

Bringing together Patristic and contemporary Evangelical visions of celibacy, this dissertation seeks to discover and develop an inter-denominational and historically-grounded understanding of committed abstinent singleness. Academic, applied and reflective methods are employed to uncover a way of life that goes beyond mere abstinence to holistically and positively support the lives of unmarried Christians today.

The first section consists of an academic essay with a detailed comparison of late fourth century treatises by Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom and contemporary books by Laura A. Smit, Annemarie S. Kidder, Barry Danylak and Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field. Similarities and differences are discovered between the Patristic understanding of 'virginity' and the contemporary discussion of 'singleness' or 'celibacy' through the categories of calling, commitment and sexuality.

The applied second section consists of sample chapters from a proposed devotional book, which uses excerpts from various Patristic texts and offers pastoral reflections grouped in themes of calling, prayer, service, holiness, community and integration. The goal of this book is to provide access to the wealth of Patristic material while giving an opportunity for readers to reflect on their own life and explore what a life of celibacy might mean for them.

The final section consists of a reflection on the process of writing the devotional, along with other analysis of inter-denominational understandings of celibacy, the contemporary confusion over the use of terminology, and the format and discipline of writing devotional literature.

Conclusions centre around the importance of developing an understanding of a celibate *way of life* and how historical models, specifically here Patristic, can help Evangelical discussions move beyond focusing on abstinence. This concentration on a way of life can give genuine support to unmarried Christians, whether they eventually make a commitment to celibacy or not.

EXTRACT
FROM
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Note: Due to the three-part structure of this dissertation, the following includes material from the academic section (part 1), a sample book chapter from the applied section (part 2) and final conclusions from the reflective essay (part 3).

Conclusions from Part 1

Within the wide area of Patristic and Evangelical writings, our study has focused on understanding calling, commitment and sexuality within the visions of virginity and celibacy/singleness held out by seven authors.¹ Though these authors are separated into two groups divided by sixteen hundred years, there are some surprisingly similar themes.

The meanings of marriage and non-marriage have varied greatly and although the image of Christ as the Bridegroom of the virgin is not used in Evangelical circles, the language of the Church as the Bride and the opportunity for each Christian to personally receive Christ is understood soteriologically in the Evangelical church. This may, in fact, be one of the main reasons Evangelicals avoid Bridegroom language in speaking of celibacy, because they see an intimate relationship with Christ as the calling of all people, not just celibates. Likewise the ascetic disciplines described by the Patristic writers are understood by Evangelicals to be disciplines for all Christians. What they do share is seeing celibacy as an opportunity to look differently at the cultural messages around us.

¹ These are three 4th century treatises and four 21st century Evangelical books:
John Chrysostom's *On Virginity*
Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*
Ambrose of Milan's *Concerning Virgins*
Barry Danylak's 2010 *Redeeming Singleness; How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life*.
Laura A. Smit's 2005 *Loves Me, Loves Me Not; the Ethics of Unrequited Love*.
Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field's 2009 *Singled Out; Why Celibacy Must be Reinvented in Today's Church*.
Annemarie S. Kidder's 2003 *Women Celibacy and the Church; Toward a Theology of the Single Life*.

Being without a partner and children can sometimes make one an outsider. This outsider status, however, can also give one the opportunity to speak and act prophetically; to witness, by living a different way, to eschatologically-based priorities and reliance upon God's care and presence. All writers develop the idea of the prophetic quality of virgins/celibates who in some senses live like angels and speak to the trajectory of history leading us toward the eternal life with Christ. This is a powerful image that rearranges our concerns, away from the false priorities of the world and the idolisation of the nuclear family, toward the true spiritual priorities of the Kingdom of God and our place in the Church family.

This angelic life is full of potential for robust action. Celibates are compared to angels, not because angels are disembodied, but because they have an inner unity. Their entire beings are in unity with God's purposes, and they are wholly at His disposal.² In Isaiah 56:5, the eunuch is promised an eternal name-place within the Lord's house but it is *not* a memorial plaque in a mausoleum; it is more like a seat at King Arthur's Round Table. Danylak helpfully links Isaiah 56:5 to Christ's promise of 'preparing a place' in John 14:2.³ Evangelicals sometimes have vague ideas of this 'preparing', as if Christ were going ahead of us to merely pick out furniture and bedding. Instead, we should long for Christ to choose a place in the King's throne room from which we may honour Him, be privy to His plans and be called into service.

Having this kind of commitment excludes other loyalties. What would the Church be like if unmarried people saw how their situation freed them? Availability to Christ's call takes first priority and all other things would fall in behind that: jobs, locations, home ownership, possessions, investments, image and fashion, hobbies and holidays, etc. As the Evangelical writers point out, a commitment to celibacy offers a particular freedom from being obsessed about finding Mr. or Ms. Right. Even for those who choose not to make a celibate commitment, considering it can help them think through which cultural messages they will follow and which they will reject.

² P. 52, Henderson, Verna E.F. 1996. "Gender, Generation and Virginitly in Cappadocian Theology." *Journal of Theological Studies*. 47.1. April 1996. P. 38-68.

³ p.106, Danylak, Barry. 2010. *Redeeming Singleness; How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

The Patristic advice to find an instructor is also important. For Evangelicals this will probably not mean joining a religious community, but it should mean seeking out living examples of celibates who can mentor them. Whose life would we like to emulate? Who can be our spiritual companions? Few of us are called to live as long-term hermits, yet more and more singles live alone. Solitude can have great spiritual benefits, but without purpose or discipline it can lead merely to loneliness. Those considering celibacy should prayerfully weigh the options of living alone, living with family or living in community and choose living arrangements based upon spiritual values, and not, for instance, on the prestige and financial 'wisdom' of homeownership.

The final area of sexuality brought out the very useful question of whether sexuality is an appetite or an identity. Kidder helpfully encourages integration of sexuality into the whole person, which is in keeping with the modern psychological understanding of personhood. The Patristic understanding of the sexual appetite can help us see that we need not be controlled by it. Sexual desire is not something to be repressed, but to be recognised and dealt with in healthy ways. By calling into question the assumption that sex is an uncontrollable force, all authors help put it into perspective, both outside and within marriage. Chastity requires self-discipline, which is useful in all stages and areas of life.

Epilogue: The Two Languages

One of the most striking features of the Patristic vision is the unabashed preference for virginity over the married state. This sounds very foreign today in a culture that, though declining in marriages, is nonetheless obsessed with coupling and sexual freedom. Within the Evangelical church many defensively support marriage while unmarried people often feel shamed or ignored by those seeking to promote 'family values.' Are these defenders simply doing the reverse of what Gregory, Chrysostom and Ambrose are doing? Is it possible to affirm celibacy without putting down marriage, and affirm marriage without putting down celibacy? Smit, Kidder, Danylak and Colón and Field hold the tension well between two good things.

It may help to think of marriage and celibacy as different languages. People who are bilingual or multi-lingual often say they prefer each language

for different reasons. One language feels nice on the tongue or ensures that certain jokes make sense, while another expresses certain ideas more precisely or unlocks a culture's history.

The same could be said of marriage and celibacy. We can affirm marriage because it is a symbol of Christ and the Church, it fills a fundamental human need for community and partnership between men and women, it makes new life possible and causes those in it to grow into the image of Christ. At the same time we can also affirm celibacy because it prophetically witnesses to the primacy of each person's relationship with God, it symbolises the angelic call of single-minded devotion to and service for Christ, and also helps those in it to grow into the image of Christ.

Learning how to understand oneself within a community, culture and the Church is one of the great challenges of adulthood in any age, but the social changes of the recent past have made this a particularly perplexing time for single people. Study of Christian history can remind us that our own culture does not have the final say on all matters - that many Christians have gone before us and may have come to surprisingly different conclusions.

The preference for virginity found in the works of Chrysostom, Gregory, and Ambrose has a good shock value that catches today's readers off-guard. Evangelicals may not be brought wholly over to their side, but it may help correct some of the distortions maintained on the other extreme. This in turn may help single people value their own state and find their place within their community, their church and even their own skin. For some it may also awaken a desire for a commitment to celibacy. The Church could use many more such celibates. In an age where half the adult population is unmarried, perhaps God has allowed—or even *called*—a growing number of singles to commit to such a life of continence, service and eschatological witness.

Sample from Part II: The Devotional Book

Section 1: The Call

Chapter 2: Fly to Virginitv as into an Impregnable Fortress

Background

Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) was probably a widower when he wrote his treatise, *On Virginitv*. He expresses regret at not having chosen virginitv from the first and he gives dramatic details about the risks of married life and having children, leading many scholars to suggest that his wife died in childbirth. Gregory's inspiration likely comes from his brother, Basil the Great, and sister, Macrina, who both founded monastic communities.

Gregory sees abstinence as just the first step toward 'inner virginitv,' a virtuous life set on what is eternal, not on what is temporary. Gregory says that married people are also capable of such virginitv (which is more generous than some of his contemporaries), although celibates seem to have the greatest chance of obtaining this inner virginitv, since their lifestyle frees them from many of society's expectations and pressures.

But do we see celibacy that way, or can we begin to? Gregory's description below of those who get entangled with the world is remarkably familiar, but his remedy may surprise us: 'to fly to virginitv as into an impregnable fortress.'

Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginitv*, Chapter 9⁴

Custom is indeed in everything hard to resist. It possesses an enormous power of attracting and seducing the soul. In the cases where a man has got into a fixed state of sentiment, a certain imagination of the good is created in him by this habit; and nothing is so naturally vile but it may come to be thought both desirable and laudable, once it has got into the fashion...We have known those who have shown themselves to be in love with chastity all

⁴ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm>

through the early years of puberty; but in taking the pleasures which men think legitimate and allowable they make them the starting-point of an impure life, and when once they have admitted these temptations, all the forces of their feeling are turned in that direction...

It would be well then, we take it, for the weaker brethren to fly to virginity as into an impregnable fortress, rather than to descend into the career of life's consequences and invite temptations to do their worst upon them, entangling themselves in those things which through the lusts of the flesh war against the law of our mind; it would be well for them to consider that herein they risk not broad acres, or wealth, or any other of this life's prizes, but the hope which has been their guide. It is impossible that one who has turned to the world and feels its anxieties, and engages his heart in the wish to please men, can fulfil that first and great commandment of the Master, 'You shall love God with all your heart and with all your strength (Matthew 22:37).'

How can he fulfil that, when he divides his heart between God and the world, and exhausts the love which he owes to Him alone in human affections? 'He that is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord; but he that is married cares for the things that are of the world.' If the combat with pleasure seems wearisome, nevertheless let all take heart. Habit will not fail to produce, even in the seemingly most fretful, a feeling of pleasure through the very effort of their perseverance; and that pleasure will be of the noblest and purest kind; which the intelligent may well be enamoured of, rather than allow themselves, with aims narrowed by the lowness of their objects, to be estranged from the true greatness which goes beyond all thought.

Scripture

Read: Romans 8:1-18

Reflection

Several years ago, I made a decision to embrace winter. After living in milder climates, I moved back home to Minnesota, USA where there is snow on the ground from November to March. I hate being cold and it's easy to complain about how frozen I feel. So I made up my mind to stop complaining and to start dressing for the weather (how did I not think of this before?). I realised that shops sell the clothes that are sent to them from the manufacturers, *not* necessarily what is practical for my climate or my life. I must decide for myself what I'm going to wear- whether to try to enjoy the winter or fight against it unprepared.

Gregory of Nyssa offers us a similar choice. If life is like winter, the icy winds of temptation are blowing all around us. We are naturally prone to buy the flimsy coverings that the culture around us is selling. Gregory suggests that a commitment to celibacy can be a place of protection, like a warm down jacket. For those suffering from the cold, it offers safety and warmth as we make our way through the storm. Are we able to see celibacy like this? A protective fortress to which we can fly?

This protection is not an escape, but a freedom to lead a new kind of life. Henri Nouwen says that the celibate life is a vacancy for God. He writes, 'The celibate becomes a living sign of the limits of interpersonal relationships and of the centrality of the inner sanctum that no human being may violate.'⁵ We can start from this inner chamber where we meet with God and build the rest of our lives around the outside of this space.

Did you notice that Gregory suggests virginity for 'the weaker brethren?' That is because, on its own, abstinence merely keeps us from certain vices. For those unsure of where to start, it is a good place to begin, but it is not the whole journey. The true goal of inner virginity is beyond this and reaches every part of us.

⁵ Nouwen, Henri. 2001. *Clowning in Rome; Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd.

Our hearts are easily divided between our desire for a holy life and our distractions, laziness and desire to be accepted. Gregory calls us back to our higher calling. A short-term or lifetime commitment of celibacy may be a true provision from God for us. It can give us freedom from certain pressures and a fortress from which to launch our attack on all that seeks to keep us from union with Christ. Gregory encourages us to take heart. He reminds us that small acts of obedience lead to a habit of holiness. And this, as he says, will be a 'pleasure of the noblest and purest kind.'

Questions

1. Gregory writes, 'in taking the pleasures which men think legitimate and allowable they make them the starting-point of an impure life.' Are there areas in your life where you make small allowances for thoughts or behaviour that begin to lead you away from Christ?
2. How would you describe your feelings about being unmarried? Has that attitude changed over time?
3. What are some of the small acts of obedience that you can do which will lead you to a habit of holiness?
4. What would you like to pray for or about after reading this chapter?

Closing Thought

'Wherefore we would that you too should become crucified with Christ, a holy priest standing before God, a pure offering in all chastity, preparing yourself by your own holiness for God's coming; that you also may have a pure heart in which to see God, according to the promise of God, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'

-On Virginity, Chapter 24

Conclusions from Part III: The Reflection on Writing the Devotional Book

For the last three years, celibacy has been a main area of personal and academic study, but these last three months of intense work have given me

the opportunity to go further and deeper than I might ever have otherwise done. Through the academic paper and the devotional book I have seen how my study is really just a beginning in a field that is much bigger than I imagined. My original thought for the academic paper was very broad. My first thought of comparing contemporary and Patristic visions for celibacy had to be trimmed back to a comparison with three late-fourth century treatises. The devotional book also had to be shaped and pared down to fit the format. If all the important works on virginity were included, the book would grow to several volumes of Patristic material alone, much less writings beyond the sixth century.

Best of all, this dissertation has given me the chance to encounter the Patristic material in one of the ways it was intended: to be read as to challenge and inspire, to summon its readers to something big beyond themselves, to demand an answer to the call of Christ for a holy life, to live one's life *now* shaped by the hope of eternity in God's presence. These authors are so sure of the rightness of the vision they see. They earnestly believe that virginity or celibacy is the best road to holiness. They long for holiness like a far away homeland or a lush green valley on the other side of the mountains. After such works have been studied this way, who then can see them as irrelevant, or merely quaint and old-fashioned? We may not always agree with them, but we can come to respect them, "admitting that [their vision] is something we only dimly understand."⁶ And so, I pray, that this small devotional work may help more people to catch a glimpse of this vision—that they may be challenged to consider its effect in their own life, as it has challenged me in mine.

⁶ p. 166. Frederica Mathewes-Green. 2002. *Gender: Men, Women, Sex and Feminism*. Vol. 1 *Selected Writings*. Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press.