

# A SINGLE PERSON'S IDENTITY

by John Fischer

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I have noticed a problem in my life as a single person: I have to put up with a lot of pressure to get married, because the married state is said to be the only way one can really become mature in Christ

We have a lot of good teaching here at Peninsula Bible Church about marriage being a picture of the Lord's love for the church, how marriage helps people become mature, etc. But because such strong statements are made about marriage, an imbalance is produced. I have even heard people say that it's impossible to be a mature Christian unless one is married.

This kind of thinking produces all kinds of problems for those of us who are single. The suggestion creeps into my mind that I'm incomplete, I'm in a "holding pattern," flying around trying to find the airport so I can get my feet on the ground and start living. This kind of thinking keeps me from being the man God has called me to be right now. And it can be very subtle. It comes up even in the way I live, the way I place things in my room. I keep thinking, "when I have my own place...", or "When I have someone with me, then I'll do this or that"

Also, there are all those dear, loving, well-meaning married couples who think everybody ought to be married. They try to push people together -- you know, "Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match." That's not much help either.

Let's turn to the Scriptures and learn from two passages which speak to this issue. Jesus and the apostle Paul both have something to say about the single state. In Matthew 19, verse 3, Jesus is being tested by the Pharisees:

**And some Pharisees came to him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered them and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?' Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been this way."**

The law had to be altered because of man's depravity, his broken relationships, etc. But God never planned marriage that way. He intended the two to become one, and you cannot separate two who have become one. This is God's teaching on marriage and divorce.

Jesus' disciples, however, force him into another subject (verse 9):

**"And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife' except for immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." The disciples said to him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."**

## Singleness is a Gift

The disciples were beginning to realize how seriously Jesus viewed the marriage relationship. They said, "If that's the way it is, it's better not to even get married."

Jesus does not disagree:

**"Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given."**

Jesus is saying that to some people singleness is a gift 'have you ever thought of your singleness as a gift from God? Jesus does. I am not suggesting that your singleness is necessarily permanent; I am talking about your state right now. You can view your singleness, at this point, as a gift from God

I Corinthians 7 is an interesting chapter in this context. In verse 7 Paul says,

**Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am' However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that lint I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is~good for them that they remain (single) even as I.**

Paul calls the single state a gift "Each man has his gift from God," he says. If you are single, that is a gift from the Lord.

I asked myself, Why is this a gift? Paul answered my question in verses 32 through 35 of I Corinthians 7:

**But I want you to be free from concern One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I say, for your benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.**

Paul is elevating the state of singleness. A single person can give his or her undivided devotion to the Lord, can be totally set aside to please him, with no conflicts of interest. let's face it: marriage brings with it more responsibilities, more dealing with the world, more financial complications, etc. Please don't misunderstand. Paul is not speaking against marriage here. This is the same Paul who uses marriage as an illustration of Christ's relationship to his church (see Ephesians 5). No, Paul is speaking positively here. He is encouraging single people to realize the blessings and the advantages of singleness.

This truth has begun to set me free. God has called me to live now, not four years from now. He wants me to realize my full potential as a man right now, to be thankful for that, and to enjoy it to the fullest I have a feeling that a single person who is always wishing he were married will probably get married, discover all that is involved, and wish he were single again. He will ask himself, "Why didn't I use that time, when I didn't have so many other obligations, to serve the Lord? Why didn't I give myself totally to him then?" So I encourage those of you who are single to praise God about your state, to devote yourself fully to him, and to realize the full potential to which God has called you to live right now.

It has been a great encouragement to me to discover that there are Christian people who have not married and yet are mature leaders -- Henrietta Mears, Bill Gothard, Priscilla Small, Ann Kiemal and Corrie ten Boom, for instance. Knowing this has helped satisfy my desire to find Christian models whom I can emulate. Sometimes all the models we see are married people, so we say, "Where do we fit?" But God has many models for single people. They are good examples because they have begun to learn to truly give themselves to the Lord and to enjoy their current status. Paul says, "I have learned, in whatsoever state I an, therewith to he content."

## **Pursuing Marriage**

Up to this point I have been talking about how a single person should view himself in the Body of Christ As I grew lip in the church, I occasionally heard young men speaking about bachelorhood, only half-jokingly, in terms like, "Celibates for Christ," "Bachelors Till the Rapture!" You might think from what I have said so far that as selling yourself as a single person, and realizing God's full potential for your life, somehow means

avoiding people of the opposite sex. But that is not what I have in mind at all. As a matter of fact, the Lord is beginning to show me in my new-found freedom that he wants to drive me into relationships and through them to teach me to mature. He wants me to minister as a brother in Christ and get to know my sisters.

Much of the tension in our self-image as single people (and also in our relationships with members of the opposite sex) has risen because we are pursuing marriage; we have marriage on our minds and we are working toward it. Because the married state is so exalted, we are always thinking about our future marriage partner. We have attended seminars on marriage, read books about it, etc., so we devise a plan for the perfect marriage partner, then we go running around with our list of the characteristics, checking people out. But then we get down to item seven or eight on the list and he or she doesn't measure up, so we say, Goodbye. That's not the one; let's try another. Our idealized concept of marriage causes all kinds of frustrated reflections and comparisons.

I have discovered what God wants us to pursue is not marriage, but love. Marriage is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Marriage is the servant of love. If we are pursuing marriage we are pursuing the wrong thing because love then becomes subservient to marriage. We start coming up with our own ideas of what love is. We don't allow the Lord to show us and teach us, through the relationships he gives us, what love actually is. *Pursue love, not marriage.* This simple principle has set me free in the past few months in my relationships with my Christian sisters. Pursuing love immediately does all sorts of wonderful things. It does away with the "Is this the one?" question, because that is not so important at this point. You are learning how to minister, how to build one another up, how to be friends.

I need to tell you what I mean by *pursuing love*. The standard of love must always be expressed in I Corinthians 13. As far as I am concerned, no other definition of love is worth spending time on. In verses 4 through 7 of this chapter there is a checklist of eight characteristics of true love. Read this and see if you really know what true love is. This passage stands in tremendous contrast to the *love* of the world, the *love* we hear about today in songs and movies.

**Love is patient Love is kind It is not jealous, love does not brag. It is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly, does not seek its own. It is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

## Acceptance and Commitment

Let's talk now about two practical areas concerning the pursuit of love in relationships between mature single adults. Two principles which come out of my own experience are certainly backed by the Scripture. The first is *acceptance*. Rather than viewing people with my preconceived ideas of what I want to make them into -- or what I hope they already are -- I come as a viewer, a receiver. I am to accept them because the Lord accepts them. He loves them, he died for them, and I am to accept that. I am to allow myself to be ministered to by them, to be blessed and encouraged by them, to accept them the way they are.

This is a beautiful, exciting way to relate to people. If we regard people as discoveries, then we won't put bonds on them; we won't force them to conform to our preconceived ideas. We will accept them and learn from them. God accepted us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). He didn't place any behavioral criteria on us. He accepted us in our rags. Are we going to demand higher standards from others? The Lord says, "*As I accepted you, so accept your brothers.*"

In pursuing love, acceptance, the quiet, slow process of revealing yourself to another person, is what enables us to take our masks off. It may be a difficult, even painful, experience, but it is rich, deep and fulfilling. Have you ever revealed yourself to another person and then had him or her begin to open up to you in a free relationship of acceptance? You don't have to wait for marriage to experience that. You can start right now. We should be relating to all Christians in that way--brothers with brothers, brothers with sisters, sisters with sisters. We need to help each other take our masks off. Acceptance is the key to that.

The second principle is commitment. This is sadly lacking in our brother-sister relationships. Many of us use the brother-sister relationship basically as a cop-out from responsibility. The way I see it for a brother, commitment is actually a taking-on of responsibility. (I am speaking primarily to brothers, now.) I've talked to many sisters who have been deeply hurt by this cop-out thing. In fact, one factor which motivated me to do this message is that I have talked to so many sisters who have been in relationships that have started to open up, in which both parties have started to reveal themselves to each other, started to spend some time together, and then a kind of weirdness set in.

By weirdness I mean the pressure that results from the prospect of marriage raising disquieting inner questions like, Is this tile one? Is this *That Relationship?*; Yet we don't communicate our feelings and questions to the other person. This weirdness creeps in, both parties get uptight, and the brother takes off. The sister has bared her heart, but the brother has turned and walked away, thinking, this is just a good brother-sister relationship, right?" We use that excuse sometimes as a cop-out from The responsibility to truly get to know one another.

I have begun to see that there is no back door in any relationship. Once you begin a relationship in the kingdom of God, even if it starts to get difficult, you have a responsibility to work that difficulty out. You pray, you talk, you seek the Lord's mind as to what is happening. Don't run in fear; move forward. The definitions of the relationship may change, but the Lord is striving for us to become one in him. Any move counter to that oneness is a move against his will.

I would like to share one personal experience which will illustrate what I mean. In recent months I have gotten to know a sister whom I met in South Africa. Later we met again in California and we got to know each other in a very free relationship. I realized that she had been burned in earlier relationships. She was very cautious about sharing any of her deep inner feelings and desires. But as we got to know each other she trusted me more and more and began to reveal more of her life to me. It was a mutual thing; we began to encourage one another and to open up toward each other.

Then the weirdness came! (This was before I learned these principles. As a matter of fact, this relationship was one of the things that helped teach me.) We had a good talk; we took a step back, and said, "We're really not sure where we're going. Neither of us is thinking about marriage right now, so let's not start leading in that direction. Just 'brother-sister,' right?"

Then the Lord showed me that my responsibility to her was to remain more committed than ever. If ever there was a time I was responsible to stay with her and to be communicative, it was then. The next time we got together she said, "You know, I thought I was never going to see you again." If I had left, it would have been one more time; it would have been that much more difficult for her to open up her life to someone else the next time. We both discovered that something good happened at this point. We no longer worried about marriage -- we had dealt with that. We simply began to minister to one another and to meet each other's needs. Now we have a fantastic relationship. Is this striking a chord?

I really appreciated Dave Roper's message (see DP Paper #3057) this morning on David and Abigail. I'd like to close by reinforcing Dave's major point. Abigail ministered to David as a sister in the lord, calling him to the truth, in love. These principles are not only for single people but for all brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. I have spent the last two years with Ron Ritchie learning discipleship and teaching. One of my most rewarding experiences during that time has been getting to know Anne Marie, Ron's wife. I've discovered his other half for who she is -- not Ron's wife, but the person. Anne Marie. Her friendship is a blessing to me. She has ministered to me, encouraged me, built me up as a man.

We are talking about righteous relationships and being free to have them. Begin to commit yourself to relationships. Step out in faith. It involves a tremendous risk. It's a lot easier to keep everybody at a distance. But I encourage you to pursue love, in spite of your fear, and watch God set you free.

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## Agape Love-No Strings Attached

by Lia Fuller O'Neil

Love. It's such a simple word. And such a complex emotion. Even when we desire to love in a simple, uncomplicated way, love has a way of twisting itself back on us, catching us unawares. It's not easy to keep the different kinds of love, the different kinds of relationships, in their proper contexts. Even when we desire with our whole hearts to *pursue love* it is often very difficult to keep from falling in love.

Love does not like to sit still while we neatly pigeonhole it.

There are an infinite number of ways we can love people, art, nature, and God. The lines may be fairly easy to see in some kinds of love, but the lines differentiating the love for a friend and the love for a lover are extraordinarily complex.

Sometimes our feelings fall totally on one side of the line or the other, but more often I've found the differences to be quantitative rather than qualitative. In other words, it's not the kind of love that differs so much as the degree. The deep but unromantic affection we can feel for a friend (which we may call *phileo*), can very easily be transformed into a compelling, dramatic, romantic love (*eros*) with appallingly little rhyme or reason. There doesn't seem to be a way for us to tell our hearts to switch gears, or to stop our feelings at a certain point. Our affection for a friend and our romantic love for a lover both issue from the same spring.

When someone starts discovering our spirit and heart in the pursuit of love, spends time with us, gives of himself or herself; becomes involved in our life, we sometimes can't help falling in love in the process of growing to love, even when we are pursuing love with a pure heart.

That's all right if the other person is also falling in love. But what if he isn't? What if he's still operating within the context of *phileo* love? With all our good intentions about pursuing love, what are we to do when *eros* starts to eclipse *phileo* in our hearts?

If we understand where our friend's heart is at, we probably don't even want the intense feelings of *eros* to develop, knowing that it will just make things difficult. It often makes the continuation of the friendship virtually impossible, even though we really desire to be free from the pressures of those kind of feelings and to return to the easiness and the freedom of *phileo*. But what on earth are we to do with those emotions?

Can we suppress them and get back to the easy relationship we used to have? Do we just stop seeing our friend because it's too painful? Do we weep and rage and get bitter because he or she *made us* fall in love and had no intention of following through on it? Do we just hold it all inside and try to pretend it isn't there so we don't scare him away? What do we do?

First of all, if it is true that our love is based on a quantitative rather than a qualitative foundation, to hope that we can banish *eros* in favor of *phileo* is not very realistic. Once our care has grown beyond an affection to a deeper love, how are we suddenly going to *empty out* some of that feeling unless we *lie to* ourselves? (We can do that simply by trying to make ourselves believe that we don't really care that much, or by dwelling on his or her faults and weaknesses in a way that's totally out of proportion. Needless to say, it's a very unhealthy, unloving way to solve the problem, but it's also quite common.) And the other alternative, to stop seeing each other, is certainly one way to avoid the problem, but not solve it, or grow from it' or learn whatever the lord is trying to teach either of us through it.

A related problem enters the picture here because we're all so conditioned to the "love-and-marriage" syndrome. That is, that they're supposed to go together, especially in the Christian ethic where marriage is the only legitimate option beyond friendship. From there we have sometimes made the mistake of thinking that it is the only legitimate option for people who respect, care for, and love each other.

Instead of relaxing in the knowledge that it is perfectly possible for a man and a woman to have great respect for each other, to care deeply about each other and even to love each other without getting married, we get a mite over-anxious, perhaps, about the "Is this the one?" question. And that produces that "weirdness" which

results from expectations -- expectations of having the relationship lead somewhere, of being loved, of being fulfilled, of being cherished and cared for in a special way. These expectations rob a relationship of spontaneity and unselfconsciousness; they make us terribly preoccupied with ourselves and an imagined, even planned -- for -- future; they rob us of the freedom to enjoy each other with true *agape* love. And as soon as expectations start taking over our minds, the pursuit of love is doomed, because at that point we are no longer seeking the other person's total good, but seeking our own satisfaction. (I am talking here about expectations which arise out of one's own selfish desires-in spite of communication between the two and the tenor of their relationship. If one of them is lending the other on, however, or being less than honest and straightforward about his or her feelings and intentions, that is another situation entirely.)

The key to the solution of this problem lies not in our fighting the fact that we love someone, not in trying to love less in order to get back to *phileo* but in trying to love more, to get beyond *eros* to *agape*, the kind of love the lord has for us. The exciting and beautiful thing about *agape* love is finding out that you truly can love someone very deeply and yet allow him complete freedom *to* respond to you in whatever way God leads him to respond.

The goal or result of love is not always marriage. God, judging from the way he set things up in Eden, and the way he made us physically, no doubt intends most of us to be married, but that's not to say that loving friendships between men and women aren't also good and right. We don't love just one person during our lives; we love many, in varying degrees and in many ways. love is not a rein sum game in which the more we love one the less we can love others. Rather, the more we learn how to love one the more we are able to love others.

We need to *legitimize* love between men and women who don't feel the lord is leading them into marriage. (I am definitely not using *love* here to include sexual love.) We need to understand that it is all right to love a friend. Such friends often help to fill those deep needs for love and affection before we do find that one person we'd like to marry. And that's O.K. That's what we're here for -- to help each other out, to love each other as Christ loves us.

But this type of relationship demands a kind of freedom that is impossible when we are bound by expectations. It requires a love that isn't concerned with the fulfillment of our own ends. This in turn requires trusting God to fulfill those needs.

What it comes down to, then, is, first of all, how much do we really love that person? Do we love to the point that we want him to be part of our life, that we need him in order to be fulfilled and happy? Or do we love him enough that we want him to be happy, even if it means without us? Do we love him so much that we think we'll die without him? Whose interests are we seeking to serve -- his or ours? How much do we really love him? Enough to pray that God would send him the right woman to be his mate, even if it might turn out to be someone else? Enough to put concern for his happiness above our concern to have our own needs fulfilled? Isn't that what Jesus would do?

And what kind of love is it, really? Is it the love that bubbles forth from a full vessel, a vessel overflowing with the love which pours through us from the Lord? Or is it a result of our own lack of spiritual fruit, so that we look to someone else to give us love, joy, and peace, rather than looking to God? If it's that kind of love we won't be able to truly pray for our friend's complete happiness -- we'll be too concerned for our own. That kind of love is born not only of a lack within ourselves but of a lack of trust in God.

So the next concern is, how much do we trust God? Do we really trust him to supply all our needs? Do we trust his love for us and his knowledge of what the absolute best is for us, as well as for the one we love?

To the degree that we trust God and allow him to direct our lives and our relationships, we can be free from the leech of expectations and free to let the lord love that person through us. And the degree to which we yield ourselves as vessels, allowing him to fill us with his life and his love, allowing him to transform us into his likeness -- to that degree, and that degree only, will we be able to love with true *agape* love.

And if we can trust him, if we can yield, we can then pray wholeheartedly for our friend's happiness, secure in

the knowledge that God is going to fulfill all our needs (not necessarily all our wants), and we don't have to depend on a person to do it. We can say with our whole being, "I love you, and there are no strings. I just want to be around to support you in whatever way you and the Lord want me to. I want to pray for you, share your burdens and be involved in your life because I love you, but I'm not expecting anything from you. I simply and truly want to see you happy and fulfilled." That is the pursuit of agape love. That is serving rather than being served, and loving rather than being loved.



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