

Why isn't
a pretty girl like you
married?

Why isn't a
pretty girl like you
MARRIED?

and other useful comments

Nancy Wilson

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To Bessie
who taught me that contentment is
a deep satisfaction with the will of God.

Elizabeth Catherine Dodds Wilson, 1919–2010

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Introduction

Years ago my husband and I were attending a church dinner where part of the program included asking all the “singles” in the church to stand. At that time there were only three, my oldest daughter and two young men. When my daughter’s turn came to be introduced, my husband said, “She’s not single. She’s a daughter!”

Ever since that evening, I have felt uncomfortable with the term *single* when referring to unmarried men and women in our church. Today our numbers have swollen, and we have many unmarried men and women of “marriageable age” as part of our growing church community. Our individualistic culture wants to label unmarried people as *singles*, but in the covenant community of God, there are no *singles*. God calls us *family*: brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers in Christ. We are each to be wonderfully connected to the other as part of a church community, where each person is needed and attached to others in her own family as well as to the broader church family.

In a healthy covenant community there will, of course, be many married couples with children of various ages; but there will also be widows, couples who do not have children, old

people, college students, and unmarried men and women. In our church it is not uncommon for us to attend several baby or wedding showers a month. It's very easy to focus on the needs of these young women who are becoming wives or mothers, and forget to look out for the needs of the widows, childless couples, elderly saints, or unmarried men and women. This is why we need to stir one another up to love and good deeds. We are to minister to one another in various ways, and if we were all the same, life would be boring indeed. Fruit is never uniform; it is scattered about, some branches more heavily laden than others. Fruit is messy, but it is delightful. The church community is much the same. An unmarried woman is just as much a part of the covenant community as the mother with ten children. And she can be just as fruitful as the mother with the large family, even if her fruit doesn't look the same. In the providence of God, each of us has a unique place among the saints.

Still, even if we adopt a new terminology and do not call unmarried women *singles*, we have to stop treating them as singles. I know it's burdensome to always be using the term *unmarried*, and it does put undue emphasis on the marital status. But I don't like referring to these women as maids or maidens either. That seems very clunky and out-of-touch. In this book I use the term *unmarried women*, but I don't think it is evil to use the word *single*. My point here is to remember they are part of the covenant community and not unconnected to the rest of us. This requires wisdom for all the church, because the women in this category have a difficult time today finding their place in the world as well as in the church community. They can feel a very real pressure and expectation to get married. Many of the saints make well-meaning (but thoughtless) comments that exert this sort of pressure. "Why isn't a pretty girl like you married?" Responding to such comments requires a gracious spirit and a liberal dose of good humor.

Another difficulty is the emphasis in the church on *family*. This is as it should be, for God designed the family as one of His great blessings to us. However, when so much of the church's good, biblical teaching revolves around being a godly wife and mother, an unmarried woman can wonder what she is supposed to be doing with her life. What is her role in the church? Does she have a purpose if she is unmarried? Is it just to look for a husband? Should she pursue a career? Unless the unmarried women are instructed carefully and encouraged regularly, they can fall prey to discontent, self-pity, or anxiety and become unfruitful members of the church. Or they can fade into the woodwork, feeling a little useless.

To make unmarried people feel like a part of the church, some churches start ministries to singles or have career groups that meet regularly for fellowship. Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing itself, unless the group is devoted to silly skits and junior high level games. But even if it is a sound group, it can become unhealthy if the only regular contact the unmarried women have with the church family is with their own peer group of "singles." These women need to be integrated into the families within the church. We are designed to fellowship with all age groups, babies to grannies, and we should not become exclusively attached to our "group." A Christian culture integrates everyone, young and old, married and unmarried, into the life of the church.

God did not design His people to live as "singles." We are to live as families even if we are not under the same roof. An unmarried woman should have a high view of marriage, but she should also have a high view of God's sovereignty in her own life. He directs our steps, He establishes our ways, and He certainly decrees when and if and to whom each woman is to be married. He does all things well. Whether a woman is called to singleness for a short time or for her whole life, she is called to be fruitful in God's kingdom. She is called to glorify and enjoy

God with her whole heart. She is called to grow in grace and faith and to be of great use to the kingdom of God. Marriage is a means, not an end. It is one of the means God uses to glorify His name among us, but it is not His only means.

All of Scripture is given to all of us. The passages in the Bible that speak to women, speak to married and unmarried alike, though points of application may differ. The unmarried woman is to rejoice in her calling before the Lord. She is to be virtuous. She must cultivate a biblical femininity, be modest and pure, and overcome the hindrances to fulfilling her feminine calling. She must love the sisters and view marriage as a good thing. And best of all, she is to walk before her Lord in humility and hope, growing in faith and love as a vital part of the covenant community.

If the Christian community quits thinking of and treating the unmarried women as *singles*, that would be a great start. But you unmarried women yourselves have to do the same thing. You have to get a new mindset about this. It certainly requires that we all have wisdom. The unmarried woman can be confused about her place in the world, in her family, and in her church community. I assume that most unmarried women want to be married. Those who have the gift of celibacy don't want to be married, so they would not be the ones to pick up a book like this one. So I want to discuss some issues that need to be addressed, even if no one else is talking about them. My desire in writing this book is to help the unmarried women in the church feel secure about who they are in Christ. And I also hope that the rest of us will grow in our understanding, so we can support, strengthen, encourage, and enjoy these unmarried saints.

CHAPTER 1

“Why Isn’t a Pretty Girl Like You Married?”

and other useful comments

No doubt we have all heard people say this or, even worse, have said it ourselves. Unmarried women, depending on how long they have been in the “still not married” category, could no doubt make an impressive list of thoughtless comments spoken to them by well-meaning people, often at social gatherings, and especially at friends’ weddings. I have heard of some pretty horrendous comments, but I have reminded the women who have been the recipients of such comments to attribute the best of motives. Most of the time people are trying to be funny, or they are trying to make conversation, and it is all they can think of to say. We really must think the best of them. Taking offense at insensitive comments only makes for bitter women. If you can quickly bring to mind a list of people who have said unkind things about your unmarried state, perhaps you need to confess some hard feelings and bitterness. Let it go.

If we are going to talk about unmarried women living in community with lots of married people, we have to be determined from the outset that we must get along. And we must even do better than that: we must love one another and be

quick to forgive. I suggest that you accept the fact that people, even dear, sweet, Christian people, can say and do atrocious things. And if they weren't saying stupid things that hurt your feelings about being unmarried, then they would be saying something else that would be a temptation. Married women are not immune to such things. So realize that this is just a fact of life, and until the world changes, we will all be exposed to comments that are either deliberately rude at worst, or at best thoughtless and unkind. We might as well determine now that we will handle this like Christian women. And how exactly is that?

First of all, handle it with grace. A gracious spirit answers with gracious words. Peter tells us that "the Lord is gracious" (1 Pet. 2:3); Christ was known as gracious (Lk. 4:22), and Ecclesiastes says that "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up" (10:12). It is easy to be annoyed or offended. We don't need grace to do that. But it requires grace from God to return good for evil, to overlook an insult, and to respond to an unkind comment with kindness. We are God's people; we must imitate Him in this.

Sometimes we really are too hard on others. They meant no harm. They did not realize it would hurt your feelings. They thought they were being friendly or funny. In fact, they meant it as a compliment! After all, they said you were pretty. But our tendency is to take it hard. We immediately attribute motives and assume they were intending to hurt us. This is where we have to lighten up a little and have a sense of humor about it. People generally are insensitive and say stupid things without thinking. That is why the Scriptures are so full of exhortations about the tongue. Assume that for each hurtful comment you have ever received, you have probably spoken at least a dozen to others. This will then give you a spirit of humility yourself. Let others' unkind comments be sermons to you, teaching you

to be far more sensitive and caring to others than you have been before.

When saying this, I am not pretending that comments like these are no big deal. I know they are hurtful, unkind, insensitive, rude, and unloving. They can cause discouragement, embarrassment, annoyance, and even bring on tears. They can easily stumble you and lead to self-pity or cause you to doubt the Lord's mercy toward you. My point is not that these comments are no big deal. Rather, I want to encourage you to learn to deal with them with grace and wisdom. You want to process them like a Christian woman, not like a worldly woman. Sometimes half the battle is recognizing what is happening. If you can see it coming and identify it as a temptation, then you can ask God to give you a gracious answer and not stew about it later, thinking about all the very witty things you could have said to put that person in his place! If you know this is a stumbling block, and it is, then pray preventively that God will keep you from temptation. Then you can go with a sense of humor, wondering who it will be this time to make the witty crack.

This is a universal problem. Cancer patients hear horror stories from well-meaning friends about so-and-so who died a quick death after being diagnosed with the same disease. Pregnant women hear about terrible deliveries. When I was pregnant with my first baby, a well-meaning friend asked me who my doctor was. When I told her, she replied, "He almost killed my cousin!" And then she went on to tell the gory details. If you are building a house, you will hear horror stories about other people building houses. So naturally, if you are unmarried, people will give you unhelpful, unmarried comments. Why do we do this to one another? I surely do not know. It must be our first instinct, but we should know better. But we recognize it far better when others do it to us than when we are doing it to others. So cultivate humility in this area and pray

for a gracious tongue. And don't assume that you are the only person who has to deal with this.

A gracious spirit also requires a lively sense of humor. Don't take it all so very seriously, even though the questions may be awkward. So many unmarried women are asked very sticky questions, often from people they don't even know very well. First of all, you don't have to answer them all. Just because a person asks you a very personal question does not mean you are required to give an answer. And of course it is better not to answer at all than to tell an outright lie. "Do you wish you were married?" someone might ask. Now, don't lie about it and say, "Oh, not really. I'm very happy with my life." What you really might want to say is, "What a stupid question!" But perhaps a gracious answer would be something like, "Do I ever!" And if you feel chatty, you can go on to say something like, "But I want to be married to the *right man*. I don't want to be married just to be married."

On the other hand, someone may ask a question that is way too personal. "Is anyone pursuing you right now?" "Is there anyone you are interested in?" "Have you ever been proposed to?" It may even be more specific and sticky. "What do you think of Brian? He's an eligible bachelor." Of course you may answer these if you want to. But an answer is not required. Why not laugh and say, "Do you really think I would answer such a question? No way!" Answering or not answering is perfectly acceptable. The one thing that is not acceptable is taking offense. Change the subject! You decide if it is someone you want to confide in or not.

Sometimes the well-meaning ladies in church will tell you they are praying for you. Say, "Thank you for thinking of me!" Be grateful for their kindness and don't let it ruffle you. After all, if you do want to be married, isn't it great to know people are praying for you in this? In our congregation, a few of the older Christian women have dedicated themselves to praying

for husbands for the unmarried women. They are serious about this, and they rejoice when they can “scratch a name off the list.” This is not insensitive or crass. It is real Christian love.

Sometimes friends will want to press you to meet someone or ask you what you think of someone. The same principle applies here. Answer the questions that you are comfortable with. But don't allow prying questions to force you to make your private feelings public. And welcome help that really is help. There is no sin in trying to get unmarried people to meet each other, and no sin in wanting to meet each other. Don't over-spiritualize this process. My parents met on a blind date, and they are not unusual in this. Take all the help offered, if it is really going to be help. But feel free to pass when you know it won't really be the kind of help you want.

Finally, don't let comments like, “Why isn't a pretty girl like you married?” keep you from attending weddings or other social gatherings. You need to participate in community life. You need all these people (even if they are insensitive), and they need you. Realize that each comment has come with God's permission and view it as part of your sanctification. Learn to be more gracious in your own conversation so that you are not asking nose questions yourself. And if the Lord permits you the opportunity, graciously tell them that such questions really make you uncomfortable.