

Why did Paul prefer singleness for himself and others?

The apostle reminds us that Christian life—married or not—isn't about personal fulfillment.

by [Kutter Callaway](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saint Paul*, oil on canvas, c. 1657

In his book *The Divine Magician*, Peter Rollins explores the human tendency to create and pursue idols. Much like Adam and Eve, all humans long for some object that lies on the other side of a veil of prohibition (like a magician's curtain). Because this object is inaccessible to us, we invest it with a kind of religious significance, revering it as sacred. As a result, in our daily lives we operate with the assumption that if we could somehow obtain the object of our desire, it would provide us with the kind of wholeness and well-being that we seek.

But Jesus pulls the magician's curtain back to reveal the truth: our sacred object is an illusion. And it always has been. There is nothing behind the curtain that will ever fulfill us. In fact, the "lack" that marks our lives—the "emptiness" we obsessively attempt to fill—is actually created by the very object that we seek. So even when it is obtained, our experience of the fulfillment it provides is profoundly unfulfilling. Thus for Jesus to say that marriage and sex are not part of resurrection life is not to make a once substantive reality disappear. Instead, it is to reveal to us that our sacred object never actually existed in the first place.

What I find most interesting about Rollins's book is how often he refers to marriage and romantic relationships to make his point about the idolatry that pervades the Christian community. Indeed, as Rollins points out, the obsessive quest for marriage among single Christians and the elevation of the marriage relationship within our Christian communities seems to be one of the more fitting images for humanity's idolatrous tendencies. Rollins explains:

To understand this, we need only think about the ubiquitous fantasy, propagated across our culture, of a couple who are able to make each other whole, complete, and fulfilled. Not surprisingly, the stories that describe this vision tend to end at the moment when the couple meets, often signaled by the phrase "and they lived happily ever after." What this suggests is that after all the dragons have been fought, the evil stepmothers overcome, and the curses broken, the couple melts into each other's arms and finds satisfaction.

According to Rollins, Jesus does not reveal our idolatry in order to save us from our desires—as if our core longing for intimate human relationship were the problem. Rather, Jesus locates our desire in another register altogether. In other words, Jesus isn't some cruel bully who is taking away our favorite toy and making us feel childish

and guilty for enjoying it in the first place. Instead, he is opening up a reality in which our desire is “emboldened, deepened, and robbed of its melancholic yearning.” To use Rollins’s language, Jesus is signaling the disappearance of the idol and the appearance of the icon: “When we are caught up in idolatry, we focus on some special object that makes everything else in the world mundane. In contrast, the iconic way of being helps us experience the mundane as infused with special significance. In theological terms, this is the idea of God in the midst of life.”

As the “image [*eikon*] of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), Jesus is quite literally the “icon” of God in the midst of life. But as it concerns our understanding of marriage and sexuality, the iconic nature of Jesus’ ministry is about more than just his teachings. If Jesus is in fact the “new Adam” (Rom. 5:12–15; 1 Cor. 15:20–28, 42–49) and thus the only true human being, then his lifelong singleness and celibacy undermines the notion that marriage is the only relationship in which a human might flourish in the fullest sense of the word.

The apostle Paul’s singleness functions in a similar albeit qualitatively different way. In both cases, though, their teachings about marriage and singleness were rooted in a prior and more fundamental way of seeing and thus loving the world. Much like those who were eunuchs “for the sake of the kingdom” (Matt. 19:12), both Jesus and Paul literally embodied in their own life and being something of a reality that was still to come.

It is at least in part for this reason that Paul was able to speak credibly to members of the newly forming Christian communities with such a challenging word: “I wish that everyone was as I am [celibate and single]. But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that” (1 Cor. 7:7). Much like Jesus’ teaching on celibacy as something that is “given” to people, Paul is suggesting here that God gives to some the gift of celibate singleness and to others the gift of marriage. They are both inherently good gifts and should be received as such, but neither represents an “ideal” state to which all Christians ought to conform.

Yet, what is perhaps even more important for Paul is that both forms of Christian life—single and married—are not first and foremost about personal fulfillment or self-actualization but about the right ordering of our desires. Sex has its place, but it isn’t ultimate, which means that a Christian’s sexual passions need to be directed in ways that will lead to both individual and communal flourishing. In Paul’s mind, the best way to cultivate this kind of generative life is through the disciplining and directing

of our sexual desires in every relationship. Paul makes this clear when he repeats himself: “To the unmarried and widows I say that it is best for them to remain as I am [celibate and single]. But if they do not have self-control, let them get married. For it is better to marry than to burn with sexual desire” (1 Cor. 7:8–9).

This is neither a prudish suppression of sexuality nor an attempt to say that marriage is only valuable insofar as it “extinguishes” our sexual desire. Instead, much like Jesus, Paul is situating all our passionate longings within the larger framework of Christian community and discipleship. For not only is the genital expression of our sexual desire not ultimate in any sense, but as Christians our sexuality is not finally our own. So even when Paul offers up the possibility of sexual expression within marriage as a “concession” for those who are “burning” with desire (1 Cor. 7:6), its primary function is to direct this desire in a way that will allow the community to thrive, and not simply to satiate the lone, sexually frustrated individual.

The Greek word for “burning” here is *pyrousthai*, which invokes a sense of overpowering excess not unlike an uncontrolled forest fire. (It’s where we get the words *pyrotechnic* and *pyromaniac*.) What Paul is addressing here are not the base-level sexual urges that every human being experiences on a daily basis but rather sexual desire run amok—a kind of chaotic impulse that threatens the livelihood of the surrounding community. In other words, to “burn with desire” is not simply to have one’s internal sexual embers stoked. It is to run the risk of burning the entire forest to the ground. It’s pyromania gone wild.

Thus for Paul there are two equally legitimate channels for directing one’s sexual desire (or desire of any kind) in a way that leads to the community’s flourishing. The first option, which Paul personally favored, is to remain single and celibate. However, Paul’s letter to the Corinthians suggests that those who are called to marriage—the second option—must also demonstrate the right ordering of sexual desire not only for the sake of their marriages, but also for the sake of the broader community.

Apparently there were some within the church at Corinth who were suggesting that married Christians should remain celibate in order to honor God with their bodies. In response, Paul acknowledges that married couples would do well to mutually agree to a period of abstinence in order to “devote [themselves] to prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5). This is a rather revealing insight in its own right, for it underscores the fact that even for those who are married or about to marry, the Christian community needs to

develop a more robust notion of celibacy within marriage. As it turns out (and as any married person will readily admit), real marriages do not involve endless sexual activity—which means that vast amounts of married life demand that spouses direct their sexual desires in ways that are strikingly similar to the practices of those who are single and celibate.

Paul situated all desires within the framework of Christian community.

But Paul rejects the notion that married Christians should remain permanently celibate (1 Cor. 7:1-3). After all, to say that married couples should avoid sexual expression altogether would be to deny that marriage and human sexuality were created goods, designed and given to us by God. So Paul makes it clear that spouses should not deny each other sex. But in the midst of offering this pastoral advice, what he does not say is that simply because two people are married they are free to express their sexuality in whatever way they desire. In fact, it's quite the opposite. On a very basic level, to be a Christian spouse is to renounce one's rights over one's body and its attendant desires, for the body of each spouse now belongs to someone else. "It is not the wife who has the rights to her own body, but the husband. In the same way, it is not the husband who has the rights to his own body, but the wife" (1 Cor. 7:4).

The idea that neither spouse has any authority over his or her own body would have been profoundly countercultural in Paul's day, but it is equally challenging for contemporary readers, even if for different reasons. Whereas a first-century audience would stumble over Paul's claim that husbands have no rights over their own bodies and are subject to their wives, contemporary readers are more likely to object to the way Paul calls into question the inalienable rights of the autonomous individual. Interestingly, the word for "rights" in this passage is *exousiazo*, which is perhaps better translated as "power" or "authority." The basic point remains the same though: as a Christian spouse, my body is no longer my own. It belongs to another. I have no "power" over it, even as it concerns the various ways I desire to express my sexuality in and through my body.

But this doesn't mean that the relationship between spouses is a zero-sum game. It's about the right kind of mutuality. For example, a husband may give his body as he is receiving his wife's as his own. In this way, he observes his wife's power over his body so as to enjoy not only his wife's body, but also his own.

From Paul's perspective then, just as it is with celibate Christians, the sexual desires of married people also need to be rightly ordered if they are to be truly life giving, which is to say that they are to be directed toward the other in self-giving love. Whether one is single or married, a fully flourishing human life simply does not come about by acquiring the object of one's sexual desires. Instead, it only ever comes about when we are altogether freed from our obsessive quest for personal wholeness through sexual expression. The lifelong process of directing and disciplining our sexual desires is not about finding an "appropriate" Christian expression for one's sexuality. It's about cultivating a generative space in which we routinely set aside our own desires so that the other might thrive.

The point here is that Paul understands marriage and singleness in the same way that he understands every Christian relationship—as an occasion for directing our desires in life-giving ways. The Christian faith as Paul sees it is one in which all our passions are reoriented and redirected along the lines of self-giving love. It is a life in which we harness our sexual passions in ways that are constructive for God's people in the world.

Paul's view of marriage and singleness is therefore neither anti-body nor antisex. To be sure, he is concerned with "sexual immorality" (Greek *porneia*) of every kind, both within marriage and outside of marriage (see 1 Cor. 6:9–18; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:35). But this isn't to denigrate desire, nor is it an attempt to say that our passions are inherently destructive or corrupt. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that our desires can and often do become misdirected. Regardless of the kind of relationship we are in or the amount of sex we are having, we have a seemingly infinite capacity for creating and pursuing illusions—those sacred objects that lie behind the magician's curtain. For some, the object is marriage. For others, the object is sex. Or maybe it's both. Either way, our obsessive pursuit of something that will never ultimately fulfill our deeper longings places us on a path that is destructive for our individual lives and the life of the community.

Put differently, according to Paul when it comes to the question of whether sex is a requirement for human flourishing, it doesn't matter if one is gifted with marriage or singleness. For on its own the simple expression of sexual desire always contains within itself a profound lack—an unfathomable emptiness. It will always leave one unfulfilled because, in an ultimate sense, sex is not actually what we desire. Sex is good (great even!). It provides humans with a pleasure unlike any other, and for some it also brings the blessing of children, so it certainly plays an important role in

our lives. But it will never make us whole. All our desires (sexual or otherwise) are reflections of a much deeper and more profound longing that can never be fully met by sex.

Although it certainly appears counterintuitive on the surface, Paul suggests that human beings are able to flourish—to truly thrive—not when they are finally able to express their sexuality through the act of sex, but when they abandon their obsessive quest for individualized sexual expression altogether. Put more positively, we embody and enact our humanity in its full breadth and depth only when we direct our passions toward the other in self-giving love.

In other words, like any human pursuit, sex is fully realized when it is about giving, not getting. And according to Paul, we already intuit this impulse toward sexual generosity on some level, only without a great deal of clarity. We see it now as if “through a mirror indirectly, but then we will see it face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Ultimately we desire to know and to be fully known by the only One whose love can actually satisfy those desires. This is the union for which our bodies long.

And it’s on account of this deeply embodied longing that Paul wishes that all Christians would remain single and celibate. It is not, as some have suggested, because Paul thought the return of Christ was imminent, but rather because celibate singleness is able to function as an icon for those with the eyes to see and ears to hear. It reminds us that no romantic relationship and no amount of sex, no matter how good they are, will ever actually be enough. It also fosters new relational dynamics in the present, producing ways of being we have yet to even imagine. As such, the icon of singleness helps liberate us from our desperate pursuit of the modern world’s most sacred of objects and instead creates a space where we might fall headlong into God’s loving embrace.

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