

Engage360 Podcast | Episode 38: The Significance of Singleness

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Welcome to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad you have joined us again this week. My name is Don Payne and I get to be your host, but I also want to welcome Tessa Thompson to the podcast as a guest cohost. Tessa serves in our student life department helping direct student life and programming, which basically means she gets to do a lot of fun stuff. But you should probably introduce yourself.
- Tessa Thompson: Yeah. So I work in Student Life and basically our goal within the seminary context is to help students be able to complete their programs effectively, efficiently, and holistically. So I enjoy listening to you, Don. And now I'm glad to get to ask some of my own burning questions.
- Dr. Don Payne: Tessa welcome, really, really glad you are going to co-host for a couple of episodes. Actually, Tessa connected us with our guest today who is Dr. Christina Hitchcock. And Dr. Hitchcock is professor of pastoral theology at the University of Sioux Falls, which you might guess is in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Christina, welcome. Welcome to Engage360.
- Dr. Hitchcock: Thank you very much. It's great to be here.
- Dr. Don Payne: We are delighted you're here. Dr. Hitchcock was on campus a few months ago to speak about the topic of today's podcast and we wanted to hear more from her, particularly as her topic now culturally has some even deeper or newer layers of significance. Anyway, she's the author of a fairly recent volume entitled, *The Significance of Singleness: A Theological Vision For the Future of the Church* that was released by Baker Academic in 2018. Christina, you're kind of on the seminary podcast circuit now, aren't you?
- Dr. Hitchcock: I've done a few, which has lots of fun. I'm really enjoying it.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, yeah, I'm wondering, is there anything cooler than being on Seminary podcasts?
- Dr. Hitchcock: No, obviously there's not, I mean, Seminary is the coolest graduate school there is. And then to get on a Seminary podcast, I mean you've arrived.
- Dr. Don Payne: No, there's nowhere to go. If you were on NPR, that would be a step down.
- Dr. Hitchcock: I probably, I mean, unless I was being interviewed by a seminary professor on NPR maybe.

Dr. Don Payne: Well clearly, clearly, I don't know. Yeah. I'm not sure where you go from here, Seminary podcast cause this is where all the people really are. Anyway. Tessa, you had some earlier acquaintances with Christina, so give us a sense of that.

Tessa Thompson: Yeah. So Kristy and I, it's great to have you here again and I so appreciate your wise words, in relationship to this idea of singleness, especially with in our evangelical culture. So we'd love to hear some of what you've come to discover and it's funny. I did recently get married, I'm almost 30, so this has been something that's actually very dear to my heart as well as we've talked about. And it, I got married on March 7th, so right before all the stay at home orders, and a lot of well intentioned people have said, wow, aren't you so glad that you got married before you went into quarantine? And I think sometimes those, those comments while well-meaning and while I am very glad I was able to get married, it always has this undertone of question of like, okay, because I wouldn't have been okay if I was single, or now I'm better somehow or you know, it would have been too difficult to be alone. So while I think that quarantine has actually done something in terms of bringing up the very real experience of singleness. But talk through that a little bit. Like why is that stigma there? Why, where does that marriage preference come from? Especially in the Church?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, I mean that's it. That's a huge question. And I think a difficult one, I think it comes from more than one source, but I do think it's seems to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that the American Evangelical Church privileges marriage over singleness. And that marriage is the prize that Evangelicals are taught from a very young age to go after. And I think especially women and so I think there's, there's lots of different things related to this. I think I, but I think overall the American evangelical church has taken the sexual ethic of the larger American culture and then has essentially adopted as their own, but kind of given it a spiritual gloss or veneer. And that, of course is marriage. And so the wider culture sees sex and a sexual or romantic relationship as kind of the thing that makes us fully grown up and fully human because it's that thing that we engage in on as autonomy individuals.

Which is really kind of the crux of what it means to be American is to be free and independent. And our sexual lives have come to be the way in which we most fully expressed. And so to be in a sexual relationship is to be free and independent, to be a true American, to be a true grownup, to be a true human. And I think the church has largely imbibed that. But recognizes also at the same time that of course the way in which the culture practices that isn't, doesn't work with Christianity. So we've kind of said we have to have that, but in marriage. And so marriage is a place where we can have our sexual identity most fully and freely expressed. And we can become that full human being, that truly grown up person, that really true American person. And so I think the church is really kind of become part of that American agenda almost without realizing it.

Dr. Don Payne: Is it fair to say that maybe a subtle manner singleness for at least lots of Christians has become problematic? Or is that an overstatement?

Dr. Hitchcock: No, no, I think it is problematic for a lot of Christians.

Dr. Don Payne: They see singleness as problematic?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, I think they do. So I'm a college teacher and I met most of my students. I'm at college teacher at a small Christian liberal arts college. And I certainly think most of my students come to college expecting to find their spouse there. And that if they don't, I think especially for the female students, that this can genuinely lead to a spiritual crisis because they've been taught their whole lives that marriage and motherhood are God's best plan for them and that it's what God wants for them and that God will provide a good young Christian man to help this all happen. And when that doesn't happen in the timeframe that they're taught to expect, they start to question a lot of the things they've been taught as Christians. What does God really want from me? Does God really love me? How do I find a place in God's community if I'm not married and I'm not a mother? Because those are the ways in which so many women enter into the church. And so I think it certainly creates a spiritual crisis for many people who are facing singleness. And I think the church itself doesn't know exactly what to do with single people. And so the church also sees singleness as a problem, usually a problem to be solved by helping people get married.

Tessa Thompson: Right or providing some sort of program that's specific for a single group where they can enjoy themselves. Yeah.

Dr. Hitchcock: Right. And almost always, I feel like the underlying point of those singles groups is to pair people off. I mean, this is how it's a Christian dating opportunity. And again, that's not necessarily a bad thing. I'm not opposed to people meeting each other and getting married. But it does seem that the churches primary to single people is to create opportunities so that they can stop being single eventually.

Tessa Thompson: Yeah. And I noticed there was an article in *Relevant Magazine* that came out recently that talked about why specifically single women are leaving the Church. And they pointed to this sense of there not being a place for them. And I'm curious, Christina, how you understand the theological underpinnings of what kind of propels our programming, propels our space making. Where are some of those theological breakdowns that make it so that there aren't natural spaces for single people?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, you sent me that article and I read it. I thought it was very interesting. And I, and I thought it was very true to my own experience. I haven't done any studies on it or anything, but it certainly rang very true for me that singleness I think in the Church is doubly hard on women. And I don't at all mean to downplay the experience of men. But women so often in Evangelical churches,

especially Evangelical churches that don't have a clear understanding of women in leadership in the church, women so often enter into the church via their husband or children. And those other people make spaces for women in the church. So like I have students who, female students who want to marry a pastor because that's the way that they see themselves getting into church leadership is via their husband. I certainly experienced when I had my first child, that all sorts of opportunities opened up for me, both the fellowship and community, but also in other ways because suddenly I was a mother and so I had access to new groups into new options that I hadn't had before.

And so I think singleness shines a bright light on the fact that the way in which the church, many evangelical churches order themselves, naturally exclude certain people. And that it doesn't actually, that our churches don't always take as seriously as they should the gifting's of the Holy Spirit, rather that our churches are often making decisions about who leads and how they lead based on things more like sex, gender, social status relationships with other people. And again, not at all to say that those things aren't important. They are, but they don't strike me as the way the New Testament talks about how the church is organized, that the church is organized by the workings, empowering, and giftings of the Holy Spirit. And I do think the way in which single people encounter the church helps us see that, where we're falling short in that area.

Dr. Don Payne: Are there versions of what you've described that are true for single men as well as single women?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yes, absolutely. I think there are. So for example, churches very much liked to hire as their pastors, men who are married. And I think one of the reasons for this, I think there's more than a few, but I mean, one of the reasons is, and my dad was a pastor. I know how pastor's wife works. Like you, you kind of get two for one, when you hire a married man his wife is, is many, many times going to be very helpful and is going to back him up and kind of be your second employee who you don't have to pay. But I also think having a wife makes a male pastor safe that he has proved certain things. That he is heterosexual, that he is not a pedophile, that he is, you know, it's a, you know, those, and we live in a sexually dangerous world. That is absolutely true. And so we look for markers that make people in authority look safe. I think the last few years have proved that those markers are not necessarily trustworthy. But I certainly think that they're kind of the markers we look for. And so single men, I think not just pastors, but single men in the church are looked at with a lot of suspicion and a lot of fear that they're not safe. I think single women are often kind of pitied, and single men at a certain age, are looked at with a lot of suspicion. That they're not safe people to be around.

Dr. Don Payne: How do you think this impacts discipleship and the formation, the godly formation of people when this particular set of identity constructs is super imposed upon them by their churches?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, that's a great question. I think it can have lots of consequences. I mean, one of the things that I've spent some time thinking about is the cost to friendship that are that are sexual culture both in the world and in the church is extracting from us. That that friendship is not valued or recognized now in the way that I think a Christian fellowship requires, because again, because every relationship is seen first and foremost through a sexual lens. And because of course we're, we're a culture that is experimenting sexually in all sorts of ways. No relationship, almost no relationship is free from the suspicion that it's a sexual relationship. And so friendship has become suspect. A friendship between two people of the same sex has become suspect. And I think even this is much more traditional, friendship between people of opposite sexes is suspect. What's really going on there? But I think this is really dangerous when it comes to discipleship because discipleship of course is something we do in community, we don't follow Christ all by ourselves.

We weren't meant to. And of course we can't. When we enter into relationship with Jesus, we enter into a relationship with all his people. And the culture in which everything has to run through a sexual lens makes that kind of community very difficult. And it requires us to focus all of our community on the nuclear family because the nuclear family is the one place that has the possibility of being free of sexual suspicion. So the church gets narrowed down into the nuclear family. And I think we often see that the nuclear family is seen as the prototypical church. So the church is modeled after the family, not vice versa. And so I think that gets the church wrong. I think it gets the family wrong. And I think that means discipleship is, becomes modeled after this kind of nuclear family, 1950s Americana nuclear family, patriarchal unit, that I don't think has much support in the New Testament. It's not that the New Testament is opposed to nuclear family. It's just not.

Dr. Don Payne: Family was very different.

Dr. Hitchcock: Right. It's not the model that the New Testament is holding up as for how to do everything.

Tessa Thompson: Yeah. I think it's interesting how you just talk a little bit about that sense of community and how actually in your book you mentioned that single people actually give us a even a more robust understanding of what God meant in terms of living together. And I, going back to Don's question of the implications then on what sanctification and growth look like as well. I think we have a pretty clear picture of, you know, the bridegroom of Christ, the church, God relates to us as a lover to his bride. That we have the sense of robust sanctification happens in marriage. You learn to lay your life down for one another. But often for single people, the path feels unclear. We don't have a direct vision. Can you fill us in just a bit on, on how you see holiness through a single lens?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, I do think sanctification is so often associated with marriage. That marriage is the place where you learn to sacrifice and love another person. And parenthood, you know, just doubles down on

that. And certainly of course all of those things can be used to sanctify us. But I do tend to think, I always think people who say that are the people who got married very young, because I always want to say, have you tried being celibate for 10 straight years as an adult? That might sanctify you a little bit because of course, the kind of singleness that I'm talking about, that we're talking about, is a singleness that involves celibacy and not the promiscuous sexual life of Hollywood. Kind of do whatever you want.

So singleness I think is - of course we can be sanctified in marriage, but the idea that it is kind of the harder road than singleness I find, frankly, laughable. Because marriage is the primary avenue by which so many of our longings and desires start to be fulfilled, which is a wonderful and good thing. But singleness, by its very definition is where we learn. We have to learn to trust God for those things that we have been taught our whole lives will be supplied, in some other way. So community love, relationship, intimacy, security, financial security, social security, the next generation of people coming along. All of those things that we're taught to hope for and long for in singleness. And again, a celibate singleness. Those things are not going to be available to us in the ways that our culture teaches us to expect to experience them. And I really think anyone who's serious about committing their sexuality to Christ in their singleness, meaning to be celibate, is going to have to learn to depend on Jesus and to trust Jesus to supply the things that normally come in other ways.

In my book, I have a chapter on Macrina who was a fourth century, monastic is kind of anachronistic to apply to her, but that's essentially what she was, an early monastic. And she saw singleness as a way to train herself in virtue. And by virtue she meant the ability to fully trust God for everything. And so she kind of said, I'm not going to take advantage of those things. The world has to offer that, that are there to take care of me. I'm going to purposely let those things go so that I can learn every day that the person I depend on is Jesus. That the person who supplies all my needs is Jesus. And that doesn't mean she goes away from community and never has any friends or anything. In fact, those things are supplied. But in ways that are different in new avenues than she would have been taught to expect in that time, in that place. And her time and her place, is actually quite similar to our time and our place. And so I do think singleness trains us to think about God's future, and the way which God intends for community to exist.

Tessa Thompson: Well, can you tell us more about that? How is singleness a picture of the future?

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, I mean, so I think singleness tells us several things about God's future. Three in particular, I think that the singleness is first of all, is a sign that the church is our true and eternal family. That the church is the one human institution that Jesus says will go on into the resurrection. The church is that human institution that will be raised from the dead. We're given no guarantee, in fact quite the opposite that marriage will go into the resurrection. That our relationship in God's future will be always through Jesus Christ. So my husband won't so much be my husband as my brother in Christ. My children won't so

much be my children, as my brother and my sister in Christ, that doesn't deny our biological relationship. It just means that God's future is when we will be related to each other through Jesus in the way that we were always supposed to be. And so of course, biologically my children will still be my children, but first and foremost, there'll be my brother and sister in Christ. So the church is our first family and it's easy to forget that, but that is God's future for us. Secondly, I think singleness reminds us that our identity is found most fully and truly in Jesus Christ. That I am a Christian. That is my first identity. And in our current situation, so often our identity is found through who we're married to, who our children are, what our job is, how much money we have. And again, not all of those things are bad and those are even good markers of who we are and how we fit into a community. But so often I think the church allows those things to be, to shape our identity in the fullest possible way. And I think in our current situation that our sexual relationships are the ways in which we most fully identify ourselves. And so singleness says, no, my, my truest identity is found in Jesus Christ. And then of course, singleness is a sign of the future resurrection. That singleness now is a sign of what God's future world is going to look like.

I mean, when the Jews, the Pharisees asked Jesus about the woman who's been married seven times, etc. Jesus really, really turns the question around on them and he says, you're thinking about God's future, the whole wrong way. God, in God's future, we will. God's children will be resurrected and they will be like the angels, and he says, they will be the ones who can call God father. And so that idea that we are related first and foremost to God himself and then to each other through Jesus and that community is in and through Jesus Christ, not through the communities that we're used to now. And again, that doesn't mean those communities are bad. It means they are looking forward to something more. And singleness is a sign of that future thing.

- Dr. Don Payne: It's almost like we can practice being kingdom citizens through singleness or singleness might be the best, the best anticipatory practice.
- Dr. Hitchcock: Absolutely. Singleness is the training ground for God's future and if the church can't recognize that, then I think the church should - when the church can't see singleness as a sign of God's future, then I think the church is not being future-oriented. And that's a real problem. Like how we treat singles is, is kind of a, you know, the canary in the coal mine. Are we really looking forward to God's future or not?
- Dr. Don Payne: So I'm, as a theologian, I'm thinking now about how the way we envision and treat singleness is an eschatological litmus test. And in fact, I've just been teaching on eschatology the last couple of weeks in one of my classes and it never occurred to me that singleness has so many eschatological implications to it.
- Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that's why the subtitle of my book is *A Theological Vision for the Future of the Church*. That I really do think that most, the evangelical church in general is thinking about marriage through the lens of

Genesis one and two. And so it is a backward looking, looking understanding of who we are as people and how we relate to each other. Whereas what, what I think the church on every level should be doing is looking forward to God's future and that God's future is always telling us who we are. And that even the Garden of Eden is only meant to propel us to look forward, not to look back. And so, the folks who are most dependent on Genesis for understanding marriage and singleness I think are really not just wrong on the singleness question, but it's just not the right way to be thinking about who we are as a people. We are a forward, future-oriented people. And the more we can live in a way that trains us to be ready for God's future, the better. And that doesn't mean every single one of us has to be single, but it means the church needs to see singleness as a sign of God's future and embrace it as that sign and be willing to learn from single people. This is what it looks like to live in God's future.

Tessa Thompson: And I think it has great implications too for marriages. And the way that we propel people into marriage with these idealistic hopes and visions of all my loneliness will be gone, and I'll have this sense of completion. And the reality is, loneliness is a reminder that we need Jesus always, even in marriage. And I think that's beautiful. I bet also during COVID and quarantine, people are feeling acutely their singleness, but people are feeling acutely their marriage choices as well, very important.

Dr. Don Payne: That is all very true. Because during this quarantine it was about three weeks in that I think my wife and I had, she knew, she knew it was coming. I was blind-sided. So we had our real good one, a real, real good blowout. Because, and that's in the context of a really good marriage, you know, loneliness and those relational challenges are not, they're not the sole domain of any marital status. Hey, we need to kind of start to land our plane here. But I would, Tessa mentioned COVID and we're a couple of months in as we're recording this. We're almost a couple of months in to, cut down things like that. And I'm curious what some of your observations are on how this whole social phenomenon has impacted many who are single.

Dr. Hitchcock: Yeah, I mean, that's a great question and I'll freely admit upfront that I'm not sure. Obviously I'm in shutdown too, so I don't exactly know what other people are doing and how it's affecting them. I do, I have noticed, so for example, with my students, especially those who are seniors, so they're right on the verge of launching into the world kind of on their own. They've had to leave their dorms and go someplace else. And especially for those who don't have a stable and loving nuclear family, it has really caused a lot of difficulty and confusion for them, because if you can't go home to be with your parents, where do you go? And of course, they're 22 years old, they're adults. And at the same time, they're kind of in this limbo and I haven't, I don't know, but I, but the church is not where they're turning to figure out their kind of practical, concrete situation. And I think that's too bad.

I don't necessarily think they're wrong, but I think the church is not the first place where single people try to figure out how to be single and to do it well, in just the practical day to day issues of what that looks like. That we are trained to turn to the nuclear family. And that of course means either a romantic partner or parents or siblings. And again, I'm not at all saying that's bad. Those are wonderful relationships to have and to be able to depend on. But in the absence of those, what do people do? And I haven't seen the church clearly present a plan or a structure to help people there. And again, COVID, which came on so suddenly is only highlighting that defect because it's easier to hide that defect or to pretend like it's not there when life's going on as normal. But when everything is kind of thrown into disarray and people's normal structures are taken away from them, then the lack in the church is highlighted. But I'd be interested in what you all have been seeing as well.

Tessa Thompson: I think that there is a hope and a possibility of, like you said, it's a heightened awareness because at this point we can empathize probably more greatly than before. Oh, what would it be like to be at home alone during this time? And I think it adds to probably the nuance but some of the ethics behind the stay at home order and how do you expect someone to be completely in solitude, and again, bringing to light the tension of people who live lives differently than the norm. Or the, I don't think it's really the norm, honestly, but the accepted social norm, so, yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Christina, for those who maybe have not thought about this as much as they should or they're simply, they're just starting to think about it, if you had to identify for them one very practical first step, what would you tell them to do?

Dr. Hitchcock: Well, read my book obviously, but you know, that's a great question. And it might, you know, it might depend on the person whether they're married or single themselves, that sort of thing. I mean, I think for married people, one of the first steps I would say is just start being friends with single people and not as a favor to the single people, but rather hoping that they're going to do you the favor of being your friend because, seeing them as in the light of someone, from whom we can learn so much about what it means to depend on Jesus and to trust in him. I especially since I've had kids have found that I really want to have single people around so my kids have more than just one vision for their own future. That they can meet single people who are happy, who are spiritually fulfilled, who have wonderful lives, and they can say, I can do that. I don't have to be scared of that. In fact, that's a good thing.

And I see my family embracing that. And so not, not befriending single people as kind of your good deed of the week, but as saying, Hey, I want to learn what you're learning. Can you share your life with me? Can I learn from you please? And for single people? I think you know, I think a lot of it has to do with being kind of the church and not giving up on the church, which I know is really tempting for a lot of single people. I totally get that. Being gracious to the church and not being afraid to speak up and to be determined and persevering. And to see that as part of you're calling for the church right now, that you are a

sign of God's future and that you, you know, that should give you a sense of boldness and an excitement that you can be assigned to your church of what it looks like to trust Jesus in a way that is totally counter-cultural and really genuinely extraordinary to a lot of people.

Dr. Don Payne: I really appreciate that. And in part because you're, you're really stretching my own thinking about this. Partly, well, probably a lot of reasons. My thinking needs to be stretched, not because it's been a long time since I've been single, but for other reasons as well. And one of the ways you're stretching me, and I hope many of us is to think of a single people as probably one of our most powerful discipling informational resources rather than merely thinking or, you know, only thinking about how do we disciple single people? What you said means that they are some of our greatest discipling resources that the church needs to be kingdom citizens. Yeah, this is really exciting. We're going to, Tessa you've got the last comment here.

Tessa Thompson: I just wanted to observe one thing that I love that Christina points out in her book is that none of us are, even if you are married, it doesn't guarantee you will be married forever and that singleness could happen to any of us at any time. And that this is like a, it's not just for a single person to grapple with, it's for all people. And I just as another encouragement of why this is applicable, I think to the entire church. You could be single again.

Dr. Don Payne: I want to put in another plug for Dr. Hitchcock's book, *The Significance of Singleness: A Theological Vision for the Future of the Church*. So by all means, grab a copy and start to read this together in your churches. You'll be well served for it. This has been great.

Tessa Thompson: We also are going to post the recording from Christina's keynote speech at our conference that we had in the Fall so you can keep look out on our website for that as well. If you want some more on this topic. And probably a little more academic and a really deep dive in theological significance.

Dr. Don Payne: On that note, do check our website for other resources as well. Even during the shutdown, we have a lot of things going on. Our President, Dr. Mark Young, is moderating weekly webinars on various topics of great interests. So I would encourage you to sign up for those and want to say thanks to my cohost, Tessa Thompson.

Tessa Thompson: Thank you, Don.

Dr. Don Payne: For her brilliant repartee. Thanks to you for spending some time with us here at Engage360 from Denver Seminary, and we look forward to talking to you again soon.