

Cross-Cultural Worker Singles Issues: The New Singleness

In the second chapter of the Bible God told Adam and Eve that a man would leave his parents and be united to his wife (Genesis 2:24). Since that time some individuals have married and others have remained single.

Many differences in marriage customs have developed in various cultures over the centuries. However, two things remained relatively unchanged for thousands of years in the development of Western culture: who people marry and when they marry. Only during the past couple of centuries have changes occurred in these two things to create the new singleness.

Old Testament Times

As translated 400 years ago in the King James Version of the Bible, Leviticus 19:29 reads, “Do not prostitute thy daughter to cause her to be a whore.” The same verse in the New International version says, “Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute.” It seems inconceivable that a father could ever do that. How could this be?

The Talmud, essentially a commentary on the Old Testament, particularly the first five books, may shed some light on this verse. Here are the comments of some Jewish rabbis centuries ago.

- R. Akiba: “This refers to the delay in marrying off a daughter who is already a *bogereth* (past puberty).” A footnote explains, “Having attained puberty, she may become unchaste if not married” (Sanhedrin 76a).

- R. Kahna: “The only poor in Israel is the subtly wicked and he who delays in marrying off his daughter, a *bogareth*.” (Sanhedrin 76a).
- R Abaye: “Which poor man is subtly wicked? He who delays marrying off his daughter, a *bogereth*” (Sanhedrin 76b).
- The next paragraph states that a good man “leads his children in the right path and marries them just before they attain puberty” (Sanhedrin 76b).

These comments from the teachers of the law make two things clear about the culture at the time of the Talmud. First, parents were responsible to find spouses for their children. Second, ideally marriage should take place as soon as children became adults and were sexually mature. Marriages were arranged, and they took place about the age of puberty

Under ancient Hebrew law the minimum legal age of marriage was 12 for women and 13 for men. This was formalized later when women went through bat mitzvah at 12 and men through bar mitzvah at 13. Of course, not everyone married at 12 and 13, but they could if their parents found them a spouse and wanted them to marry.

New Testament Times

At the beginning of the New Testament we find that the parents of Mary, mother of Jesus, had carried out their responsibility. Mary was “engaged” to be married to Joseph. She had also passed puberty because she was pregnant (Matthew 1:24). She was probably in her teen years and her marriage had been arranged by her parents.

Under Roman law at that time men could marry at 14 and women at 12. When a

Roman woman reached her thirteenth year, her parents began to look for a husband for her. Any woman not married by 19 was distinctly an “old maid.”

As it developed, the Roman Catholic Church followed the same general principles. In the early Middle Ages the church said that at puberty males should either marry or “embrace ecclesiastical continence.” Later in the Middle Ages the church recognized the marriages of men 13.5 and women 12.5 years old.

England

Arranged marriages were still the norm in 16th century England. The minimum legal age of marriage was still 12 and 14, although the arrangements were often made years before.

- “She could never fansie or cast favour to hym, nor never will do;...she sais she knowis not, but bie the sayenge of her father & mother, forther, she sais, she was married to hym biecause her frendes thought she shuld have had a lyvinge bie hym;...” [sic] (Elizabeth Hulse seeking a divorce from George Hulse, married at 4 and 11).
- “That he would refuse to take the said Margaret to weif; and that he would not consent to the said marriage which was solemnized in his minoritie...”[sic] (Roland Dutton refusing to carry out the contract, made at 9 and 5, of marriage to Margaret Stanley.

Note that these were arranged marriages, not forced marriages. In England children could be betrothed as infants, but the agreement could be broken until the child was 10 with no penalty for anyone. However, if the contract was broken when the child was

between 10 and 12, the parents were fined. Both the parents and the “child” could be fined if the contract was broken when the “child” was over 12. At the age of 12 “children” were considered responsible enough to be fined for breach of contract.

Colonial America

The minimum legal age of marriage was still 12 and 14. Here are some quotes from American history.

- 1704, Connecticut: “They generally marry very young, the males oftener as I am told under twenty years than above.”
- Pioneer Kentucky: “A marriage that sometimes united a boy of sixteen to a girl of fourteen was an occasion of merriment that brought out the whole fort.”
- “The girls of North Carolina married so early that grandmothers of twenty-seven years of age were frequently found.”

The Puritans in colonial America recognized the power of the sexual drive and saw to it that their children married as soon as possible, the best way to prevent premarital sex and sexual perversion.

They disagreed with the Roman Catholics who “ensnared” their children in vows of virginity. Thomas Cobbett, a Puritan, wrote that such people “not being able to contain,” would be guilty of “unnatural pollutions, and other filthy practices in secret; and too oft of horrid murders of the fruit of their bodies.” [sic]

The New Singleness

For thousands of years the most common practice was for parents to find a spouse for their children and arrange

marriage at about the age of puberty. However, between the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries Western culture made major changes.

Three Changes

Three changes occurred which had two major consequences relative to singleness.

First, in 1882 Parliament raised the age at which women could marry from 12 to 13 (an attempt to raise it to 16 failed). However on August 14, 1885, Parliament raised the age from 13 to 16 under pressure from the London Salvation Army. In 1926 Westermarck wrote that marriage at puberty is only among “uncivilized races.” In 1934 Goodsell wrote that laws permitting marriage at 12 and 14 should have disappeared from the laws of “enlightened states,” that such laws were a “social stupidity.” Most states at that time required women to be 18 and men to be 21 to marry. What was considered normal for thousands of years was labeled as uncivilized, unenlightened, and socially stupid.

Second, a summary of 218 studies between 1795 and 1981 concerning the age at which 220,037 women had their first menstrual period was published in 1983 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. This first period is very near puberty in women. This study showed that during these years the average age of puberty for women declined from about 16 to about 12. Puberty in men is not as obvious, but other evidence shows about the same change in men. For example, when Bach was choir-master in Leipzig, choirboys sang soprano until they were 17 or older. Today this change comes at about 14. At the same time that laws were passed to increase the age of marriage by six or seven years, people were reaching the age of puberty three of four years earlier.

Third, though we do not have legal records or physiological data to show exactly when it happened, arranged marriages became less common during this same time period. Though arranged marriages were common in colonial America, they were rare by the middle of the twentieth century.

Two Consequences

The three changes that happened between the middle of the 19th and 20th centuries had the following two major consequences relative to singleness.

First, everyone is now required by law to live part of his or her adult life as a single. No longer is a person allowed to marry at the age of puberty. This has social implications for all kinds of relationships such as friendships, sexuality, and loneliness.

Second, people can no longer blame their parents or anyone else for either their spouse or for the fact that they are not married. That blame game for the arranged marriage goes back to the very beginning. When God confronted Adam about his disobedience, Adam said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some...” (Genesis 3:12).

Likewise if a person was not married, he or she could blame parents for not making the arrangements or having an appropriate dowry. Also in Genesis we find that Laban wanted to be careful not to be blamed for Leah not having a husband, so the evening of the wedding Laban slipped Leah into bed with Jacob (Genesis 29:22-30).

Today since each individual is responsible for marriage or singleness, he or she has no one to blame but has to accept the responsibility for the chosen spouse or the singleness.

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