

Vantassel, S. (1994). Celibacy: The Forgotten Gift of the Holy Spirit. *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 12(3), 20-23.

□CELIBACY: THE FORGOTTEN GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

For decades, Pentecostals have emphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit's gifts. Although met with an apathetic and even hostile reception, Pentecostals worked to change the views of their fellow Christians. Pentecostals worked so hard because they realized the Biblical foundation for their position. They were convinced that the Holy Spirit gave gifts of tongues, prophecy, healing (and others) for the Church's continued benefit. And that being the case, Pentecostals refused to work for God's Kingdom with fewer tools than God had intended. In short, Pentecostals told our Protestant brothers and Sisters that being Biblical means encountering the entire Bible, including 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Yet in spite of this corrective brought to the Church, Pentecostals have become vulnerable to the same charge levied against their critics. By failing to give due attention to all the Spirit's gifts, Pentecostals have read God's Word with selective eyes. For in all the excitement over the moving of the Spirit, one gift was overlooked. And that Gift was celibacy. Some might say, "But all the gifts are not equal, Paul tells us to desire the better gifts (1 Cor 12:31)." I agree, all the gifts are not equal. However, I also recognize that Paul never instructs us to regard some gifts as unimportant (1 Cor 14:1). I believe that celibacy is one of those neglected gifts. I hope that the following discussion will raise our awareness and will exhort us to give proper attention to this important gift of the Holy Spirit.

Unlike some gifts, celibacy enjoys strong (even emphatic) Scriptural support. In Matthew 19:11-12, Christ tells the disciples about people who become eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Then to add emphasis, Christ breaks with Judaistic tradition and commands his listeners to remain single for the Kingdom of Heaven if they are able. who can accept this lifestyle to accept it. Christ says this despite Judaism's strong emphasis on marriage. By affirming the call to celibacy, Christ asserts that one's service to the Kingdom of Heaven is more important than one's duty to marry [□].

The Apostle Paul also takes up the gift of celibacy. Although in this situation, Paul must discuss the issue with people who disparage marriage. These worldly converts, the Corinthians, believed that true spirituality was demonstrated by a celibate lifestyle. The difference between Paul and the Corinthian Christians lies not in their support of celibacy but in their rationale for their support. Paul extolls celibacy for pragmatic reasons. Celibacy is better because it permits the individual to give more time to Christ's work not because sex/marriage is evil. Paul responds to the Corinthians' ascetic error. Paul does not consider celibacy to be a lesser lifestyle or an unChristian one. Rather, Paul contends that celibacy is a better way because the celibate individual has fewer restraints to serve Christ. Thus, Paul does not have a low view of marriage (cf. Eph. 5:22-33). Rather, he has a high view of ministry and the second coming.

In light of the Biblical evidence support for celibacy, why has Pentecostalism paid little attention to it. Shouldn't Pentecostals', in their recognition of the Spirit's work, embrace all His marvelous gifts? If we are to restore the Church to its New Testament character, shouldn't celibacy have a part in that restoration? If Pentecostalism boasts of being a Back to the Bible movement why the silence regarding this gift.

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One reason for Pentecostalism's neglect of celibacy is that it is a product of its heritage. Pentecostals simply followed the pattern of their Reformational ancestors. Ever since Martin Luther assaulted Catholicism's celibacy requirement for priests, celibacy as a church institution declined in non-Catholic countries. A downward trend which has continued to contemporary times. Pentecostalism's traditional antagonism to Catholicism has added further hesitancy to do anything catholic lest it appear to be compromising.

However, Reformational heritage does not sufficiently explain the reason behind celibacy's decline. There must be another. I believe the answer lies in the spirit of Western Culture. Given our culture's tendency to equate sexual gratification with happiness, it should come as no surprise that few hear God's quiet call to celibacy. Pentecostals failure to recognize celibacy as a spritual gift gives ample proof of how we have permitted culture to impact our theological agenda. Do not think that sensuality has only affected lay people. It has clouded the thinking of ministers as well. I have raised the topic of ministerial celibacy with various Christians and invariably they resist/demure. Even though they concur that the Bible supports celibacy, they do not believe that the topic should be raised or emphasized. Ironically, their resistance comes not on theological or Biblical grounds but on practical ones. I kept hearing various reasons why celibacy wouldn't or couldn't work. It is almost that they do not believe that the Bible can be practically applied. So in light of this pragmatic argment against celibacy, I would like to counter each of their objections in turn. For I believe that Pentecostalism's failure to embrace celibacy is damaging to the cause of Christ.

However, in all fairness, I must say that the rise of sensuality does not fully account for all the resistance either. I think two more reasons account for Christian hostility to celibacy. First, people have trouble relating to people who are different in some significant way from them. Differences of race, gender, financial status, education etc. constitute reasons why people do not get along well. I think that it is likewise with those called to celibacy. I think people just have a hard time trying to relate. The second reason is related to the first. Christians resist the concept of celibacy because they are intuitively threatened by it. Meeting a celibate person forces you to wonder if you yourself were called to celibacy but resisted the gift. Celibacy may conjure the fear that God has called me to a lifestyle that I will hate. The unfortunate thing about this ideas is that it does not understand the nature of God's call to celibacy. If God calls you to celibacy He will provide you with the grace to enjoy that lifestyle.

Objection 1. This objection to celibate ministers flows from doubts about their ability to properly counsel people with family problems. Some argue that since a great portion of church ministry requires working with families and their problems, parishioners need a minister who can relate to their problems. Since celibate ministers do not have families of their own, they cannot have the insight lacks the experiential framework from which to counsel parishioners with family problems.

On the surface, this pragmatic objection carries a lot of weight. But on closer analysis, one will find that this objection arises from a skewed perception of reality. The first problem with the argument lies in its dependence upon a false assumption. This objection contends that one must have first person experience of a situation in order to be qualified

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to help others in that situation. The assumption's falsity can be seen in the following question. Do you think that a doctor must have had cancer him/herself in order to help a cancer victim? If you answer, "No." Then why do people require their pastor to be married in order to be qualified to counsel their family problems? When I tell people this they usually respond well this is different. But is it really?

The second problem with this objection is that it overlooks the learning that took place in the minister's own upbringing. People seem to forget that celibate ministers understand family life because they too grew up in a family with all its sibling rivalry, pains and joys. Chances are their upbringing was not unlike your own. Granted, the celibate minister would not have the experience of raising a family but that lack does not imply that they have no beneficial insight for your problem. People must recognize that many ministers have had a counseling course or two during their time at seminary. Today, many ministers have ample training in pastoral counseling enabling them to provide support, compassion and insight to many family situations.

Finally, this objection overlooks the resources available to the celibate minister. Contrary to popular opinion, there is no inherent necessity for the minister, whether celibate or not, to counsel every family problem. Lay leadership, such as elders or deacons, can provide experiential insight into the family problems of fellow Christians. We must resist the tendency to think that only the pastor can help. Paul argues that the pastor's job is to equip the saints for ministry and service. In this way, the minister's limitations in both number and experience can be overcome by creating a church of lay ministers each working to meet the needs of others (Eph 4:11-16). So a celibate pastor's referral of family problems to a mature, qualified married elder would not only give him time to deal with other issues but also to broaden the ministry base of that church.

Objection 2. Married ministers are less likely to fall into sexual sin. The objectors would point out how many Catholic priests fail to maintain their vows and even fall into sexual deviancy [□].

This objection has two problems. First, it contains a fallacy called "begging the question." It contains the hidden (and false) assumption that celibate people "burn with desire" as non-celibate people. This objection hasn't adequately accounted for the meaning behind the phrase, "gift of celibacy". By making this point, I do not mean that celibate people never struggle with sexual desire. To deny that would be like denying their humanity or their participation in the world. Celibate people still have hormones. They are not dead. The difference lies in their gifted ability to control and channel that sexual energy into another direction.

The objection's second problem is it appeals to a poor test group on the character of celibate people. Simply noting the problems Catholic priests have regarding celibacy does not constitute sufficient grounds to resist this gift because one has not shown that these priests were "called to celibacy." The Catholic Church has problems with the sexual fidelity of her priest because she offers men no other way than celibacy to serve the church. Thus each man must make an unBiblical choice, either ministry or marriage. One must also recognize that marriage in no way guarantees sexual gratification or fidelity. This fact has been made painfully apparent by the number of ministers in all denominations that have been caught in extra-marital affairs. Just because a minister is

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married does not mean that Christians don't need to pray for God's protection of that pastor's marriage.

It must also be understood that like marriage, celibacy is (or should be) a covenant within a community. As marriage is the public recognition of a couple's love, celibacy too requires the Church community not to respect that vow. In effect the community says, we will respect the vows of this couple and will therefore not commit adultery with either person. Likewise for the celibate person, the community needs to protect him/her from those who would seek to pressure/tempt the person to violate that gift.

Objection 3: Why do we need to talk/preach about celibacy? If God has called someone to celibacy than that individual will know it.

This objection is the weakest one that I have encountered. First, Christ requires us to preach the total word of God, not just the comfortable parts. Second, Pentecostals should avoid this objection particularly. For we know that it has been used against preaching about Tongues in various churches. Pastors would say, why do I need to preach on it? If God wants to give it to someone they will get it whether I preach on it or not. This view completely ignores the fact that the Holy Spirit is gentle in His activity towards us.

More importantly, our insensitivity towards this gift means that we don't receive its beneficial effects. First, celibacy permits the individual more opportunity for ministry. Too often ministers encumbered by families, decide their ministry choices not by the Holy Spirit but by finances. If you don't believe that, consider how many ministers leave a church to take a smaller congregation, with less money. How many more missionaries could we send overseas if they didn't have families to feed as well? How many small churches could find full time pastors if they didn't have to pay for three other mouths?

Second, celibacy emphasizes the importance of working for Christ's Kingdom by reminding us of this world's transience. I have often wondered, after hearing evangelists talk on the second coming, why none of them were celibate or preached on celibacy. It would seem to me that if they really believed Christ was coming back soon they wouldn't want to waste their time with a family.

In summation, I hope that the readers will reevaluate their stand on this important Biblical truth. For I believe that a healthy vibrant celibate gift operating within the church will be one more important step in building a Biblical Pentecostalism.

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