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Towards a Theology of the Single Mother

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By
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Towards a Theology of the Single Mother

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“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”
-Mary, in Luke 1:46-48

“I am a student of theology, I am also a woman.”
-Valerie Saiving,
“The Human Situation: A Feminine View”

“I am also a mother.”
-Bonnie Miller-McLemore,
Also A Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma

Introduction

Families are changing. The white picket fence nuclear family with a mother, father, 2.2 kids and a dog is no longer the norm for American society. Families look less and less like “traditional families.” Blended families, children born out of wedlock, cohabitation, step-families, multigenerational families, adopted children, single parent families, foster parents, and homosexual partners raising children are all part of the fabric of society.¹ Society has changed so much that, as feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether points out, “it is no longer possible to speak of one predominant “normative” model of family.”²

Despite these changes, the family, in all its forms, is still considered one of the fundamental bases of society as we know it. From the biblical world until now, families have and most likely always will be important, even as their shape changes. In his chapter “Towards a Theology of the Family” in the book *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, New Testament scholar Stephen Barton writes, “from classical antiquity on, the family had been seen as a fundamental building-block of the civic community.”³ In order to prioritize the importance of families, some in conservative evangelical churches have called for a return to “family values,” which translates to a father who works and a mother who stays home with their children. For example, the theologian John Piper encourages homemaking as “God’s plan” where “the

¹ L. Street et al., “1. The American Family Today,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project*, December 17, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>.

² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 181.

³ Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996), 456.

home is the University and mom is the Professor of this all-encompassing subject.”⁴ The provider father and the homemaker mother is, for Piper and others, “God’s plan” for families, and any family that does not look like that, must, by logical extension, fall short of God’s plan. Because of this narrow definition, any other family arrangement simply does not have value. Piper describes these alternate family forms as “far from ideal.”⁵

Statistics demonstrate, however, that a return to the “traditional nuclear family” is not realistic nor is it likely. As of 2014, fewer than half of children today live in “traditional families.”⁶ Single-parent households are more common than ever before.⁷ As of 2016, over 20 million US children live with only one parent, a number that has almost doubled in the past 30 years.⁸

Churches are presently struggling to find practical ways to pastor 21st century families, especially single-parent families. Even books written to support single mothers struggle to give practical advice. In *Single Moms Raising Boys*, author Dana Chisolm, who is a single mother herself, recounts a story of another single mother who came to her with the very real concern about how her son wanted an earthly father. The only advice that Chisolm gave to her (and the other single mothers who are the intended audience of her book) was to “believe that the Author

⁴ “The Making of a Homemaker,” *Desiring God*, last modified December 31, 2009, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-making-of-a-homemaker>.

⁵ John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 1991), 245.

⁶ Gretchen Livingston, “Fewer than Half of U.S. Kids Today Live in a ‘traditional’ Family,” *Pew Research Center*, December 22, 2014, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>.

⁷ “Families and Living Arrangements Main - People and Households - U.S. Census Bureau,” accessed February 25, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/hhes/families/>.

⁸ Ibid.

of Fatherhood is real.”⁹ In other words, if a single mother can simply believe in God, God will supply all the needs of her family, including physical ones.

This sort of “advice” does a disservice to the humanity of single mothers and their children by making a single-parent family’s physical needs less important than their spiritual needs. By telling single mothers that focusing on God will solve all their problems ignores the realities of single motherhood. While God is indeed the “Author of Fatherhood” and God does give good gifts, the reality of single motherhood is difficult, lonely, and tiring, and books like *Single Moms Raising Boys* flatten the complexity and nuance of life for a single mother into a prayer for more faith.

If churches cannot find effective ways to minister to diverse families, and non-traditional families are becoming the majority, then churches are failing the majority. Simply put, they are failing to be Christ in the world by failing to minister to, care for, encourage, and disciple the majority of people. In this thesis, I argue for a theology of single motherhood in the church. Churches should reevaluate how they conceive of single-parent households because they are doing a disservice to families with lacking pastoral care; churches’ numbers will dwindle if they only focus on reaching traditional nuclear families. Churches need single-parent households as much as single-parent households need the support of churches. An examination of the theology surrounding both singleness and single parenthood as well as the challenges that single-parent families present to practical theology is needed in order for the Church to thrive and survive in the 21st century.

⁹ Dana S. Chisholm, *Single Moms Raising Sons: Preparing Boys to Be Men When There’s No Man Around* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2007), 178.

Statement of Problem

In theology and practice, churches consistently prioritize married couples over single people – both singles who are parents and those who are not. Carla Barnhill, mother and *Christianity Today* contributor, states the problem: “our churches have elevated the family to a position of importance that is out of sync with the call of the gospel.”¹⁰ Heterosexual married couples are prioritized over singles. Beyond the Catholic Church, American Christianity gives little value to single people. Singles are seen as inherently flawed and incomplete. Single women are encouraged to “pray for their future husband” and read books like *Get Married: What Women Can Do to Help It Happen*.¹¹ Rarely are single women encouraged towards singleness as a calling. Single parents are likewise deficient because their family unit is “incomplete” or a “broken home.” Often, churches avoid the subject of single parenthood altogether. While in evangelicalism there is Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, there is no corresponding “Focus on the Singles” or “Single Parent Research Council.” Churches often want to bring in new families to their churches, but the same intensity to bring in new singles is not there.

Single parents do not fit into married groups and Bible studies nor do they fit into whatever “singles” or “young adult” ministries that churches offer. For example, Christ Church Cathedral, the cathedral from my own diocese, the Diocese of Texas, offers a “20s and 30s” young adult group. All of their events are evening events, but none offer childcare and most go

¹⁰ Carla Barnhill, *The Myth of the Perfect Mother: Rethinking the Spirituality of Women* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004), 15.

¹¹ “Praying Boldly for a Husband,” *CBN.com (Beta)*, last modified October 17, 2013, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://www1.cbn.com/singles/praying-boldly-for-a-husband>.

late into the evening.¹² For a single mother, attending these events would require finding one's own childcare and juggling bedtimes and homework. On the other hand, a single parent is not going to fit into a group for married couples, and mothers groups tend to meet during the day when single mothers are working.

Pastoral advice is missing as well. Encouraging single women to pray for a new husband or telling women that the Lord will be the knight in their fairytale is not useful nor helpful.¹³ Perhaps the grossest extension of this lack of theology was "Bridefare," touted in the mid-1990s by family values proponents as a way to encourage young single mothers to marry off and thus reduce their reliance on welfare.¹⁴

Divorced mothers, who once experienced the church as married but now engage with the church as single parents, feel this lack of pastoral care acutely. For example, I was a member of the Evangelical Friends denomination, and my husband and I shared the role of volunteer Youth Pastor at our church. After our divorce, I became a single mother. As my husband had been asked to step down from youth ministry in the divorce, I was left to navigate single motherhood and youth ministry alone without any help from the denomination or church leadership. When I decided to step down as youth pastor at the end of the school year because I could no longer effectively serve, find fulltime employment, and be a mother, my senior pastor gave sympathy but offered no other help. After a few years passed and I had found a healthier balance of life,

¹² "Cathedral 20s & 30s," *Christ Church Cathedral, Episcopal*, accessed March 4, 2017, <http://www.christchurchcathedral.org/cathedral-20s-30s/>.

¹³ Chisholm, 36.

¹⁴ Vivyan Campbell Adair and Sandra L. Dahlberg, eds., *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 40.

work, and motherhood, I went back to that same senior pastor to wrestle with the call to ministry I still felt. By that point, my ex-husband had been restored to his previous position as youth pastor and the senior pastor felt like they could not accommodate a fifth teaching pastor, so he encouraged me to plant a church with little thought to how difficult that task might be to juggle in addition to being a single mother. I gave up in the early planning stages of that church plant because I could not imagine adding a church plant to my already full load of responsibilities.

The lack of practical pastoral care for single-parent families is rooted in the focus of current conservative evangelical theology on the traditional, nuclear family. There is little conversation about what a theology of the family that serves all types of families could look like. A theology of the single mother could open up that conversation, and in turn, churches could begin to pastor and minister to the rising numbers of non-traditional families.

Defining Terms

For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to “single mother” and “single parent” or “single-parent family” interchangeably. “Single mother” refers to the household with the mother as the sole adult in a household with one or more children. While single fathers are increasingly more common, this paper will focus primarily on the interactions of theology and single mothers because, as a single mother, that is where my understanding is.¹⁵ “Evangelical” refers to Christian churches and beliefs that unite a distinct group of Christians who agree with David Bebbington’s four-fold characteristics of evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, Biblicism,

¹⁵ Gretchen Livingston, “The Rise of Single Fathers,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project*, July 2, 2013, accessed February 27, 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/07/02/the-rise-of-single-fathers/>.

and crucicentrism.¹⁶ The National Association of Evangelicals assert that these four beliefs unite evangelicals. I use the term conservative to underscore the conservative theological and political adherence of this distinct subset of Christians. Although formerly a conservative evangelical as an Evangelical Friend, I am writing now as an Episcopalian and Mainline Protestant. While Mainline Protestants will agree theologically with some of the tenets of evangelicalism, (e.g. crucicentrism),¹⁷ their beliefs are often more progressive. For example, they allow female clergy and affirm gay marriage. Finally, “family values” refers to conservative theological and political views on the family held by conservative evangelicals, formed out of their evangelical belief structure. For example, the conservative evangelical group Focus on the Family lists the following values on their website:

- “We believe that marriage is the foundation of family life, and that God's design for marriage is a relationship where both husband and wife are committed to loving and caring for one another for a lifetime.”
- “We believe children are a gift from God, and thrive best in a home where both mother and father are committed to raising them with love, intention, and care.”
- “We believe that Christians have a responsibility to promote truth and social policy that improves the strength and health of the family, as God designed.”¹⁸

All of these conservative values point to a singular understanding of “the family.” With these definitions in mind, I will work towards a theology of the single mother.

¹⁶ “What Is an Evangelical?,” *National Association of Evangelicals*, accessed February 27, 2017, <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

¹⁷ For example, the Good Friday liturgy highlights the Episcopal belief in the atonement of Jesus on the Cross. See *The Book of Common Prayer*, 276-82.

¹⁸ “Foundational Values | Focus on the Family,” accessed February 27, 2017, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about/foundational-values>.

Thesis Contribution

In order to work towards a theology of the single mother, I will begin with an examination of scripture through the lens of the single mother. With a hermeneutic of the single mother, the non-traditional families of the Bible begin to rise up out of the margins. Discovering a plurality of families and an encouragement of singleness in scripture will lend insight on how to care for single-parent families from a Biblical perspective. Next, I will look at how current theologies of the family apply to single-parent families. I will examine theologies of the family from both a complementarian, conservative perspective and a progressive, feminist perspective. I will show how single motherhood offers a challenge to complementarianism and other evangelical “family values” campaigns, and I will also show how feminist theology has largely left single mothers unexplored. Working from those two theologies of the family, I will begin to suggest a theology of the single mother. Finally, I look to address practical pastoral theology for how churches can practically respond to, minister to, and minister with single mothers in their congregations and be agents of justice. As there has been little study focused on the intersection of single parenthood and theology, I hope that my thesis can be the beginning of a conversation about single motherhood within theology.

Chapter 1: A Biblical Examination of Single Parenthood

While conservative evangelicals point to a singular biblical understanding of the family, a careful examination of scripture shows that narratives involving families are much more complex. Throughout scripture, there are examples of single-parent families as well as other examples of non-traditional family structures. These families are not idealized. Anglican theologian Adrian Thatcher points out in his book *God, Sex, and Gender* that “biblical stories do

not present a particularly ‘rosy’ picture of the family.’¹⁹ He argues that remembering that idea provides an important corrective against sentimentality and idealization of one family type. The diversity of families in the Bible underscores that idea. The multiplicity of examples and the fact that not all the families in the Bible are idealized proves that there is not just one biblical understanding of family in the Bible.

A Reading of Genesis and Gender

In order to have a full understanding of family roles, including motherhood, both an awareness of how gender was understood in the culture of the biblical world and an understanding of how current culture understands gender must be taken into account. Thus, while sex is a biological understanding, and only females can become mothers, the idea of gender is fluid and affects understanding of how mothers should operate within a culture. When there is only one parent in a family and that parent must fulfill both parental roles, what constitutes the “feminine” and “motherhood” becomes murky and shows the fluidity of gender roles. Motherhood is understood within our culture based on a culturally situated understanding of gender, and it is from that point that I examine a theology of the single mother.

“In the beginning...” Conservative evangelicals and family values proponents point to these beginning scriptures in Genesis to preach the prioritization of marriage and “the family.” For example, evangelical pastor and theologian John Piper plainly states in a 2007 sermon that “I want us to see that God’s original plan in creation was for men and women to marry and have

¹⁹ Adrian Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender: An Introduction*, (Hoboken: Wiley, 2011), 456.

children.”²⁰ According to evangelicals like Piper, these first stories in Genesis ordain “the family” as normative by God. For example, conservative biblical scholar Andreas Köstenberger, writing in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, asserts that according to “the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis [there is] scriptural support of an understanding of the authority structure, the order of creation, which exists between a man and a woman. . . Adam and Eve are called into service as normative examples of how men and women should interrelate.”²¹ Conservative evangelicals seem to agree that Adam and Eve provide definitive information for the structure of relationships between men and women.

I argue that Adam and Eve do not create the pattern of life for all families as clearly as conservative evangelicals assert, nor do I agree that marriage and the nuclear family can be prioritized from the beginning of Genesis. The earliest of families does not look like the nuclear family. Scripture tells a story more complicated than that. The first creation account found in Genesis 1 offers an image of God breathing life into the whole earth including humans: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). God made both males and females in God’s own image. God blessed both the male and the female, and told them to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” While this alludes to procreation as well as stewardship, it says nothing about marriage or what the normative structure of the family should be.

²⁰ John Piper, “Marriage Is Meant for Making Children . . . Disciples of Jesus, Part 1,” *Desiring God*, last modified June 10, 2007, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/marriage-is-meant-for-making-children-disciples-of-jesus-part-1>.

²¹ Ken M. Campbell, ed., *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 251.

In the second creation account found in Genesis 2, man and woman were not made simultaneously. First, man was created, then because “it is not good that the man should be alone,” God created a helper (*ezer*) for the man (Genesis 2:18). Here the author of Genesis plays on the Hebrew words *ish* and *ishah*, the *ishah* (woman) out of *ish* (man). In verse 24, there is an allusion to marriage. “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Perhaps this, taken in conjunction with the command to be fruitful and multiply in the first creation account, is an encouragement for the family. Debra Hirsh, in her book *Redeeming Sex*, points out that this verse creates a “liturgy” of the new family.²² Evangelical pastor Tim Keller agrees with Hirsch when he calls Genesis 2, “the first wedding.”²³ The language here does lend itself to a liturgical or ritualistic understanding, where these verses would become the patterns on which to base public marriage vows. However, if that is the case, then single-parent families would disrupt the liturgy. A broken liturgy does not necessarily mean that single-parent families are inherently broken or flawed however. Putting the two Genesis creation accounts together, these accounts offer a descriptive, but not necessarily normative, understanding of the family for all families.

These two creation accounts in Genesis also provide the root of conservative evangelicals’ understanding of both sex and gender. They point to these passages in Genesis to argue for the biological differences between male and female and masculinity and femininity, a discussion intertwined with discussions of family and marriage. Sex, the idea of maleness or

²² Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2015), 67-8.

²³ Tim Keller, “The First Wedding Day – Genesis 2:18-25 | Monergism,” accessed April 14, 2017, <https://www.monergism.com/first-wedding-day-%E2%80%93-genesis-218-25>.

femaleness, is determined by biology. There are obvious biological differences between chromosomally males and females that cannot be avoided.²⁴ It is on these biological differences that conservative evangelicals stake their understanding of complementarian theology and family values. However, biological differences only tell part of the story. Gender, or the idea of femininity or masculinity, is a social construct.²⁵ Gender is dependent on culture, and is often reinforced by power structures within each culture. How single mothers should act is reinforced by these power structures.

To show how gender is constructed by culture, during the time of the New Testament, the Greeks and Romans had a different concept of gender than we have presently. Ancient Greek and Roman gender roles were divided between the active participant, or male role, and passive participant, or female role.²⁶ The ideal male would be one who refrained from sexuality, and females were those unable to restrain from sexuality. Combined with Greek and Roman honor codes, females should be kept pure by removing all chance of sexual impurity, to which they believed women were naturally disposed. Single mothers would have been viewed differently within the Greek and Roman culture.

A constructionist view of our modern concepts of gender are different from that of the Romans and Greeks. Masculinity and femininity are no longer about active and passive roles. Gender is understood to be fluid, determined by the current cultural context. The idea of gender being culturally constructed is ignored or dismissed by complementarian theologians in favor of

²⁴ Elaine Storkey, *Created or Constructed?: The Great Gender Debate* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster Press, 2000), 14-21.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

²⁶ Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 111.

promoting the biological differences. Their essentialist view of gender holds assumptions derived from biological sex, ignoring cultural context. Theologian Stanley Grenz, for example, shows some understanding of how biological sex and the roles within families intersect. He states that there is a “basic difference between male and female. But what is more difficult to determine is what that difference entails and how such differences ought to find expression in the roles that women and men fulfill in their various relationships, including within marriage.”²⁷ Grenz shows some nuance in the cultural construct of gender and biological sex and how those play out in familial relationships. I argue that a constructivist view of gender should be kept in mind as gender affects how society views motherhood and single motherhood.

The Old Testament and Single Mothers

Single mothers play prominent roles in the Old Testament. Tamar, Hagar, and others challenge the idea of the traditional, nuclear family in the Old Testament. Biblical scholar Beth M. Stovell argues that, Tamar, in Genesis 38, was in a “liminal state” between the protection of her husbands and the protection of her father-in-law, Judah, who should have provided for her after she became a widow.²⁸ She sought sexual relations with Judah, after losing her first two husbands Er and Onan. In the eyes of “family values,” Tamar’s sexual sin should be punished. Tamar sought sex outside of marriage to resolve her problem as a childless widow. She sought a child to have an inheritance. Tamar became pregnant out of wedlock, a situation in which many single mothers find themselves, though most do not find themselves that way by their own

²⁷ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, James W. Skillen, and Michelle N. Voll, *Women and the Future of the Family* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 52.

²⁸ Beth M Stovell, *Making Sense of Motherhood: Biblical and Theological Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 11.

father-in-law. Instead of being judged harshly by God for “playing the whore” (Gen 38:24), Tamar was rewarded and commended.²⁹ Tamar’s sex out of wedlock was redeemed. Tamar was rewarded for her deception with twins. This is not the “ideal” family situation. Tamar’s story is not the narrative that conservative evangelicals tell. God rewards and redeems a single mother in Tamar.

Hagar is the first single mother recorded in the Bible. After she followed orders by Sarah, Hagar was cast out by Sarah and Abraham, creating a single-parent household with Ishmael. Hagar, a slave-girl, is given to Abram by Sarai to produce a child with Abram. She gives birth to Ishmael, but Sarai “deals harshly with her, and she ran away from her” (Gen 16:6). Like with Tamar, she is cast away by those who were supposed to protect her, which is a situation with which many single mothers identify. While in the wilderness, God finds Hagar and convinces her to return back to Sarai and Abram. Here in the wilderness, God makes a promise directly to Hagar, a woman, without referencing a man, as is the usual biblical tradition.³⁰ Also, Hagar is the first person in the Bible, male or female, to name God, *El Roi*, “the God who sees.” Despite her singleness and the rejection she has endured, Hagar is favored by God. After returning back, Hagar is then permanently cast out by Sarah and Abraham, making her a single mother yet again. At this point, just as the first time, God hears her cry and that of Ishmael. God cares about this single mother alone in the wilderness with her son, and God blesses her.

²⁹ Ibid., 10.

³⁰ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Liberating Sexuality: Justice between the Sheets* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016), 15-16.

Womanist theologians have identified with Hagar. Womanist theologian Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder points out that “womanist maternal thought addresses the specific racial context of African American women and the mothering challenges connected to it that are unique to mothers in this social context.”³¹ Likewise, single mothers, whatever their social context, can identify with Hagar, cast out by Abraham and Sarah to take care of her family alone. Hagar also proves that the nuclear family is not the only biblical family structure in the Hebrew Scriptures.

There are many other examples of single motherhood within the Old Testament. The widow of Zarephath who helped Elijah was a single mother (1 Kings 17). The widow with the oil was also a single mother, who was able to save her children from slavery participating in a miracle (2 Kings 4). Naomi became a single mother of her two sons when Elimelech died (Ruth 1:3). There are other single mothers, many unnamed, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, underscoring that a plurality of family structures existed in the Old Testament.³²

The New Testament and Single Mothers

Stories of non-traditional families continue in the New Testament. According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus himself has no earthly father (Luke 2). Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. Yet, this holy family was blessed. Mary, pregnant with the incarnate God, was not broken. Joseph marrying Mary did not suddenly make the family complete. However, according to conservative biblical scholar Köstenberger, writing for the Family Research Council, only when Joseph married Mary did they fit the Biblical definition of the family. He writes, “the Bible

³¹ Stephanie R. Buckhanon Crowder, *When Momma Speaks: The Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 22.

³² 2 Kg 8-9; Jer 15, 49; Lam 5.

defines ‘family’ in a narrow sense as the union of one man and one woman in matrimony which is normally blessed with one or several natural or adopted children.”³³ When this definition is applied to the family of Christ, the narrowness of the definition is exposed. This narrow definition seems out of step with God when God used a woman who was not married to bring the Messiah into the world.

Jesus himself, born into a non-traditional family, continued to redefine family throughout his ministry. From the beginning of Christ’s story in the gospel of Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus is full of women like Tamar and Ruth who were members of non-traditional families.³⁴ Then Jesus himself asked “who is my mother and who is my brothers?” (Matthew 12:48). Christ’s answer is not in his own biological family but those who do the will of his Father. Christ redefines family as those who do the will of his Father. This new family, created by Christ, pushes back against the kinship and clans that were the dominant social structure of Christ’s time.³⁵ The Kingdom of Heaven was more important to submit to than kin or clans.

This submission creates a new family, one in which those whose families are actually broken or hurting can find refuge. As Debra Hirsch writes, “there can be no such thing as a *single* person in God’s expansive family.”³⁶ No matter one’s marital status or family structure, all are welcome into Christ’s new family. Additionally, Jesus remained single his entire life.

³³ Andreas Kostenberger, “The Bible’s Teaching on Marriage and Family,” *Family Research Council*, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.frc.org/brochure/the-bibles-teaching-on-marriage-and-family>.

³⁴ Gilberte Baril, *The Feminine Face of the People of God: Biblical Symbols of the Church as Bride and Mother* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 118.

³⁵ Don S. Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 177.

³⁶ Hirsch, 58.

Jesus, as far as the gospels and the early church tells us, never took a wife. Thus, Jesus lived outside the boundaries of what conservative evangelical Christians promote as a “proper” family. If Christ is our model for living, the model for the normative family should be examined through that lens. Singleness, perhaps, should be elevated if the 21st century church is to resemble the church of the New Testament. The command in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply should not be promoted over the model of Christ’s own life on earth. Christ, by his own life, redeemed singleness.³⁷ It is time for the Protestant Church to reexamine the importance of singleness, both for those who are single parents and those who choose a life without a partner.

Paul understood the importance of singleness. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul gives guidelines to those who would take up the call to singleness. Paul states clearly that the unmarried and widows should “remain unmarried as I am” (1 Cor 7:8). Later in the chapter, Paul gives his reason why: to remove anxiety and promote “unhindered devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor 7:32-35). There is little ambiguity in Paul’s writing here. Paul is clearly elevating singleness over married life as a high calling, but this is not presently celebrated in the Protestant Church.

Roman Catholics have taken up Paul’s call to singleness, but evangelicals have largely rejected it. There are few prominent examples of evangelical singleness. Also, evangelical theologians struggle to apply Paul’s writings to their own context. Köstenberger, in his chapter in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, writes, “singleness, similar to adolescence, was probably not as clearly defined a concept in New Testament times as it is in the Western World

³⁷ Ibid.

today.”³⁸ Paul seemed to understand singleness adequately when writing about it, so rather than admitting that singleness has value, Köstenberger dismisses singleness as a concept in the ancient world.

This dismissal of singleness lowers the value of single people. Ignoring Paul’s prioritization of singleness over married life has important implications not just for those who are single but also single parents. The encouragement of Paul that the unmarried life should be celebrated for its ability to serve God better has the potential to provide relief for single mothers who are eager to serve God.

Other women in the New Testament challenge the narrative of “family values” as well. The woman at the well is one prime example. In John 4, for example, Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. She admits that “she has no husband,” and Jesus agrees with her because she has been married five times and the man she is living with currently is not her husband (John 4:17-18). The story does not say whether she had children with any of these first five husbands, and the story does not say whether her five husbands divorced her or died. However, she is living with a man outside of wedlock, which in most evangelical churches would disqualify her for ministry and in many would disqualify her for church membership. Jesus, however, gives her the living water. The woman goes in turn and evangelizes her town. The woman who could have a history of divorce and is shacking up with another man is an evangelist. In the current conservative “family values” evangelical culture, that woman would never stand a chance in ministry.

³⁸ Adair and Dahlberg, 264.

The early church also included examples of non-traditional family structures. In Acts of the Apostles, Lydia was the head of a household. Biblical scholar Margaret Y. MacDonald notes that Lydia may have been an idealized woman, but was likely based on a real woman who interacted with Paul.³⁹ The text does not say if she has children or not, or whether her husband was absent or dead, but MacDonald writes that Lydia, like other women in the New Testament who run a household presumably without a male figure, may be a widow.⁴⁰ Even if Lydia was idealized, she was a woman in charge of a household. She invited Paul in. This does not fit into the narrative of “family values.” From Lydia to Hagar and in between, the Bible depicts a plurality of family structures.

New Testament Family Models

The family in biblical times was organized around a patriarchal kinship structure. Neither ancient Hebrew, Greek, nor Latin have words analogous to the term “nuclear family” that complementarian theologians promote as biblical. Christian ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio writes, “family, however, is not a central idea in the New Testament. In fact, it hardly mentions family at all.”⁴¹ None of the languages in ancient Rome had the vocabulary to describe the nuclear family. For example, New Testament scholars Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch write,

“the Greek *oikos*, *oikia*, Hebrew *bayit*, and Latin *domus* can all refer to the physical building but can just as well, and more often do, mean: household, including material goods and slaves; immediate blood family; or family lineage... Nor does the Latin

³⁹ Carolyn Osiek, David L. Balch, and Jason T. Lamoreaux, eds., *Finding a Woman’s Place: Essays in Honor of Carolyn Osiek, R.S.C.J.* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 178.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 173.

⁴¹ Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 46.

familia refer only or even usually to the nuclear family, but rather to all persons and objects under the legal power (*patria potestas*) of the male head of the family.”⁴²

The lack of analogous terms underscores that ancient family structure differed from present-day family structures. The clan or larger kin structure, complete with slaves, was the primary family arrangement. It was this family structure that Jesus pushed back against in the gospels. The family structure Jesus rejected was the “patriarchal family clan,” not the modern family.⁴³

Hanlon Rubio suggests that, “Jesus is concerned with the creation of new forms of family and community that move beyond the problems of the traditional patriarchal model.”⁴⁴ The New Testament, and especially Jesus, encouraged nothing that resembled the nuclear family at all.

Jesus’ challenge to this traditional patriarchal model was where he differed from ancient society in their views of the family. The early Christians’ challenged the Roman sacredness of the family and kinship so strongly that they were charged as “home wreckers.”⁴⁵ Likewise, Jesus’ prohibition of divorce put him out of step with Roman culture. Jesus’ prohibition of divorce contrasted Roman social norms as divorce did not have any social stigma in the ancient Roman world.⁴⁶ Divorce simply severed familial relationships and property arrangements in ancient world.⁴⁷ Jesus and the early Christians looked at family completely differently than the society around them did. They were counter-cultural. The early Christians were looking to restructure the family around discipleship and allegiance to Christ rather than the families. This

⁴² Osiek and Balch, 6.

⁴³ Don S. Browning, ed., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 132-3.

⁴⁴ Rubio, 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁶ Osiek and Balch, 62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

was subversive. Osiek and Balch write, “the study of the early Christian family tells a surprising result: few Christian writers were interested in the family as such, but rather in family and household as image and proving ground for the church.”⁴⁸ Where the early Christians were interested in families, it was in creating a new vision for the world in which they lived. Discipleship, allegiance to Christ and not patriarchal kin, and the formation of a new spiritual family in the new church were their priorities. These are very different priorities for understanding families than the “family values” promoters have in mind currently. “The synoptic gospels yield a pattern of deep suspicion about families and blood ties: they can be inimical to the demands of discipleship, which must clearly take precedence.”⁴⁹ Discipleship was key, not promoting families. From this, the early church created a vision of an inclusive church based on model of adoption in early church.⁵⁰ The conservative view of the nuclear family is not supported as normative in the New Testament.

Chapter 2: Justice and the Single Mother

The widow, one form of single mother, was cared for directly by God. In addition to providing examples of single-parent households and other configurations of non-traditional families, the Bible also promotes care for the oppressed and marginalized. In passages like Deuteronomy 27:19, James 1:27, and Psalm 68:5 and 146:9, God cares for the widow and the orphan, the two forms of family that were most vulnerable in the biblical world. Neither the widow nor the orphan had a male for protection in the patriarchal societies of the ancient world, which left them vulnerable and at the mercy of others in society.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁰ Rubio, 57-60.

The widow was a concern in the early church as well. The present day understanding of a widow is simply a woman who has lost her husband. In the early church, there were “virgin widows” and other types of widows that were a concern for the church.⁵¹ Women were choosing to become a “widow.” Women were choosing to leave their husbands, withdrawing from married life, while their husbands were still alive.⁵² This was a concern brought up by Tertullian in his *Treatise on Marriage*.⁵³ If the concept of widow was more fluid in the early church, then single mothers who became that way by ways other than the death of a spouse would have most likely qualified as a widow. God’s care for the widow should extend to all single mothers, not just those who lost their husbands to death. There is overlap between the two groups of single mothers and widows, though not all widows become single mothers after the death of their husbands, and not all single mothers are widows. However, God cared for the widow because they were vulnerable in biblical society. Single mothers often experience this same vulnerability. If God cares for the most vulnerable in society, God’s care for the vulnerable widow will naturally extend to God’s care for the single mother.

In the 21st century church, single mothers should be cared for because single mothers are consistently among the most vulnerable and oppressed people in our society. Single mothers are particularly susceptible to poverty.⁵⁴ Those already in poverty are more likely to become single

⁵¹ Charlotte Methuen, “The ‘Virgin Widow’: A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?,” *Harvard Theological Review* 90, no. 3 (July 1997): 287.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 286.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Anna Baranowska-Rataj, Anna Matysiak, and Monika Mynarska, “Does Lone Motherhood Decrease Women’s Happiness? Evidence from Qualitative and Quantitative Research,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15, no. 6 (2014): 1458.

mothers, and women are more likely to become poor as single mothers.⁵⁵ It is not difficult to see how single parenthood can create a cycle of poverty. On top of her risk of impoverishment, the single mother has the added disadvantages of parenting alone, which brings its own laundry list of issues. Single parenthood is tiring, lonely, and financially demanding. This difficulty is compounded by the challenges of separating from the father of the child (for whatever the reason – divorce, abuse, addiction, etc.), and/or the grief of loss.⁵⁶

Despite this, the single mother is often vilified by both current Western culture and the church alike. Writing from the perspective of single mothers within academia, Vivian Adair and Sandra Dahlberg write about vilification in their anthology of stories from educated, poor, single mothers. They describe their own experiences concluding that “poor, single welfare mothers and their children are physically inscribed, punished, and displayed as the dangerous and pathological Other.”⁵⁷ The church’s treatment of poor, single mothers has been similar, promoting ideal two-parent households over single parenthood. Many, both in the Church and outside of it, have pointed out the strong correlation between the two-parent biological family and economic prosperity.⁵⁸ For example, Focus on the Family plainly states that “the research is clear: If we are concerned about elevating the well-being and life opportunities for children, we

⁵⁵ Karen Rowlingson and Stephen McKay, “Lone Motherhood and Socio-Economic Disadvantage: Insights from Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence,” *The Sociological Review* 53, no. 1 (February 1, 2005): 35,39.

⁵⁶ Baranowska-Rataj, Matysiak, and Myrnarska, 1466-7.

⁵⁷ Adair and Dahlberg, 27.

⁵⁸ William H. Jeynes, “The Family, Religious Commitment and Economic Prosperity,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (2014): 96.

must be concerned about the health and strength of the two-parent family.”⁵⁹ Conservative evangelicals have consistently focused on promoting marriage to solve the “ills” of single parenthood. However, correlation does not mean causation. The sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary D. Sandefur, in their book *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, explore whether the two-parent family is the solution to poverty and single parenthood is to blame for the onset of poverty. They conclude, “without a randomized experiment, we can never rule out the possibility that some other variable is causing both family structure and children's failure in school. Because of this, analysts will always disagree about whether family structure plays a causal role in determining child well-being.”⁶⁰

It cannot be determined whether or not single parenting is the root of the problems of society or a symptom. I agree with sociologist Melanie Heath’s assessment: “single parenthood does not necessarily lead to poverty.”⁶¹ A myriad of other factors impact the relative wealth of a single-parent household. Yet, the label of “welfare queen” or “sexual pariah” still sticks to the single mother. Single mothers and academics Adair and Dahlberg write, “the template, or master narrative, that positions the poor, unmarried mother as sexual pariah is set against the alleged order of a universe made rational by “man’s” native ability to be logical and self-reliant.”⁶² Single mothers are an easy scapegoat by those in power and judged by different standards than

⁵⁹ “30 Years of Research: A Child Deserves a Mother and a Father,” *Focus on the Family*, last modified January 1, 2008, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/marriage/marriage/30-years-of-research>.

⁶⁰ Sara McLanahan and Gary D. Sandefur, *Growing up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 11.

⁶¹ Melanie Heath, *One Marriage Under God: The Campaign to Promote Marriage in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 9, accessed September 23, 2016, EbscoHost.

⁶² Adair and Dahlberg, 37.

the rest of society. The historian Bethany Moreton points out the vivid distinction by which mothers – and single mothers – are judged:

“In the United States, rather than sharing some of the concrete costs of reproduction through social provisions, we assign the majority of these costs directly to individual mothers. Most of the persistent gender gap in wages—women working full-time still earn annually only about 78 cents on the male dollar— is actually a gap between mothers and everyone else. At work, mothers are held to stricter standards of punctuality and productivity, hired less often, and judged less promotable, less competent, less dependable, and less committed to their jobs—all demonstrated in experiments that control for actual differences in performance or qualifications.”⁶³

All of these ideas beg the question: have churches bought into the narrative of the “welfare queen” or God’s care for the poor?⁶⁴

The Bible is clear that God cares for the poor. Deuteronomy 15 commands Israel to take care of the poor in their land. Proverbs and Psalms offer wisdom throughout both books for the rich to take care of the poor.⁶⁵ Proverbs 14:31 states that “those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.” Taking care of the poor is linked to honoring God. Psalms 29:7 and Isaiah 1:17 both link doing right and righteousness to taking care of the poor. The Lord asks, “is not this to know me?” about “judging the cause of the poor and needy” in Jeremiah 22:16. Luke’s beatitudes call the poor blessed and gives the poor the Kingdom of God (Luke 6:20). James echoes the same sentiment in his letter (James 2:5). In Luke 4:16-21, Luke describes Jesus’ reading in the temple of the scroll of Isaiah, announcing “good news to the poor.” Throughout the entire Old and New Testaments, God’s care for the

⁶³ Bethany Moreton, “Why Is There So Much Sex in Christian Conservatism and Why Do So Few Historians Care Anything about It?,” *Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 727.

⁶⁴ Adair and Dahlberg, 35.

⁶⁵ Proverbs 14:21, 19:17, 21:13, 22:9, 22:23-3, 28:27, 31:8-9; Psalm 35:10, 41:1-3, 72:12-4, 109:30-1, 113:5-8, 140:12.

poor is evident. Since single mothers are often poor, churches should heed the advice of God to care for the poor when it comes to single parents. Thus, between God's care for the widow (of which the care for the single mother would be an extension) and God's care for the poor, the Church needs to care both about and for single-parent families.

Single-parent families deserve this care because they are vulnerable and often impoverished. However, vulnerability and poverty does not make a family broken or lesser. Single-parent households are still fully families. A tension exists between these two points. Single-parent families should be protected and cared for as God cares for all the vulnerable in the world, but they should also be considered complete families. Churches should take heed to navigate this tension as they minister to single-parent households.

Chapter 3: Challenges to Current Theologies by the Single Mother

Just as examining scripture through the lens of the single mother challenges current understandings of scripture, current theologies should be re-evaluated through the lens of the single mother. Current theologies of the family provide a starting point from which to begin to imagine a theology of the single mother. Both complementarian theology and feminist theology shed light on what a theology of the single mother could be, but from very different perspectives. Evaluating these theologies through a single-mother lens will help work towards a theology of the single mother.

A Challenge to Complementarian Theology

Single-parent households challenge complementarian theology. Complementarian theology has much to say about family structures, but little to say about single-parent family structures. Complementarian theology is the belief that men and women "complement" each

other, giving men leadership and hierarchy over women. This “complementary” structure deems the “proper” place of men over women based on men’s innate qualifications for leadership, popularized by theologians John Piper and Wayne Grudem. Grudem describes complementarity as “the self-designation of the evangelical constituency that would see God’s created design for men and women as comprising male headship in the created order, reflecting itself in the requirement of a qualified male eldership in the church and the husband’s overarching responsibility in the leadership of the home.”⁶⁶ Complementarians base this “not on temporary cultural norms but on permanent facts of creation,” or in other words, on an essentialist view of the biological differences between the sexes and biblical constructs of gender.⁶⁷ The biblical verses they find support for these complementarian gender roles are the following: 1 Cor 11:3-16 (esp vv. 8-9, 14); Eph 5:21-33 (esp vv. 31-32); and 1 Tim 2:11-14 (esp vv. 13-14).⁶⁸ Piper and Grudem write, “at the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.”⁶⁹ In other words, everything that makes a female “feminine” has to do with her reaction to males. They insist that this is the essence of femininity, based on both a biblical and biological understanding of maleness and femaleness.

However, Piper and Grudem acknowledge that “hundreds of behaviors may be feminine in one situation and not in another.”⁷⁰ So while they argue that the feminine is a biblical and

⁶⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002), 241.

⁶⁷ Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

biological construct, femininity is also situational or contextual. For them, the hierarchy of males over females is also biblically and biologically sound. This allows the man in the relationship to be closer to God and the protector of the woman. Like tiers of umbrellas one over another, God is over the male who is over the female. However, in reality this creates a shrunken hierarchy. Sociologists Hedy Red Dexter and J. M. Lagrander argue how this shrunken hierarchy works when they write, “by making God and husband equivalents, husbands are authorized to demand from wives what God demands from all of us – obedience. This equivalence shrinks and confuses the hierarchical order.”⁷¹

Complementarian theology even goes so far to suggest that a hierarchical marriage is the way in which Christ will set things right eschatologically. The proper submission of women to men will be realized when everything is right: this is the *telos*.⁷² In the hierarchy of complementarianism, single women have the double problem of being both single and female, as the hierarchy extends to married couples over single people as well as men over women.⁷³ Overall, Dexter and Lagrander point out that the complementarian argument is that “single women, working and raising children, are not normal; pro family activists would have us believe that they go against God’s perfect plan.”⁷⁴ The only biblical and biological construct for understanding maleness and femaleness is through the institution of male-female marriage.

⁷¹ Hedy Red Dexter and J. M. Lagrander, “Bible Devotionals Justify Traditional Gender Roles: A Political Agenda That Affects Social Policy,” *Social Justice* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 105.

⁷² Adair and Dahlberg, 250-1.

⁷³ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, *God-His and Hers* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), x.

⁷⁴ Dexter and Lagrander, 102.

Piper and Grudem's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* has a single explanation for how single mothers fit into the complementarian structure. Piper and Grudem write:

“Someone might ask: So is a woman masculine if she is a single parent and provides these same things [leadership, etc.] for her children? Are these only for men to do? I would answer: A woman is not unduly masculine doing these things for her children if she has the sense that this would be properly done by her husband if she had one, and if she performs them with a uniquely feminine demeanor.”⁷⁵

Piper and Grudem do not explain what a “uniquely feminine demeanor” might look like in this situation. However, they do write later in their book that “sometimes women must exercise authority in the absence of any better alternatives; but such situations are far from ideal.”⁷⁶

Again, Piper and Grudem do not explain why these situations are less than ideal, so the reader is left to guess. Perhaps the lack of explanation in their book is that single mothers disrupt the hierarchy of their theology. Who might be the “protector” of the single mother? While Piper and Grudem do not discuss this concept in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Grudem at least explains how complementarian theology could apply to single people generally in his book *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*. Grudem suggests that singles need to be a part of a church community, where “qualified male elders are responsible for the spiritual welfare of their membership.”⁷⁷ Grudem does not give any suggestions for single people if a church community does not have “qualified male elders.” However, he does elaborate on how complementarian singlehood might play out in a church community:

⁷⁵ Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 37.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 245.

⁷⁷ Grudem, *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 91-2.

“The temporal priority of the male in the image of God means that in general, within male-female relationships among singles, there should be a deference offered to the men by the women of the group, which acknowledges the woman’s reception of her human nature in the image of God through the man, but which also stops short of a full and general submission of women to men. Deference, respect, and honor should be shown to men, but never should there be an expectation that all the women must submit to the men’s wishes.”⁷⁸

Like in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* speaking to single mothers, this deference outside a marital relationship is vague. Single women are not told exactly how to find this nebulous line between full submission and deference.

Just like the widows in scripture, the single mother has no husband to be the authority over her as her keeper. The single mother is no longer under the protection of her father either. The single mother in a conservative evangelical setting has no one in between her and God, except perhaps the male elders of the church, assuming that is the hierarchy of the single mother’s church. She only need to find some imaginary line between deference and full submission and not become too masculine while she raises her children in a situation that is less than ideal. It seems that a single mother does not fit the complementarian patriarchal hierarchy very well.

Perhaps this lack of fit is why Piper and Grudem call the situation single parent households find themselves in as “less than ideal” or “a sad record.”⁷⁹ Lack of fit to a theological premise, however, does not make single parent situations less than ideal. Lack of fit to a theological premise simply challenges the assumptions and patriarchal structure in which the theological premise is made. Single “welfare” mothers challenge patriarchal authority by not

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 330.

submitting to heterosexual marriage, and thus these mothers are characterized as dangerous.⁸⁰ Dismissing an entire group of people and their situation as less than ideal does not validate one's theology. Complementarian theology fails to provide a workable model for single mothers, and therefore must be refined at the very least. It is not the single parents that should be dismissed, but instead, the theology that attempts to dismiss them as a group of people.

Single-parent families show how complementarian theology cannot be an acceptable theology in the church. The terms "family" and "values" should not be "read through gender hierarchy."⁸¹ Single mothers remind the church that the "traditional family" is not-so-traditional after all, and not the only sort of family about which God cares. God cares about widows, orphans, and even single moms. Single-parent families necessarily disrupt the neat argument of complementarian theology and force outside the box thinking. Single mothers create a lens through which the whole system of complementarian theology needs to be reevaluated, and if complementarian theology cannot provide a less vague and more sound explanation on how single mothers fit into their theology, then the entire complementarian theology needs reworking.

As theologian Jamin Hübner describes in his article "The Evolution of Complementarian Exegesis," some complementarian theology has adjusted over the years. For example, New Testament scholar Douglas Moo, a contributor to Piper and Grudem's *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, has adjusted his take on how Eve's deception might influence a

⁸⁰ Adair and Dahlberg, 35-6.

⁸¹ Elizabeth M Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, and Mary E Hobgood, *Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 115.

woman's ability to teach as based on 1 Tim 2:11–13.⁸² Likewise, New Testament scholar and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* contributor Thomas Schreiner has adjusted his view on “head” (*kephalē*) in more recent years.⁸³ I am hopeful that a more thorough consideration of single mothers by complementarian theologians and biblical scholars might produce similar adjustments to complementarian theology.

A Challenge to the “Biblically Ordained Traditional Family”

Complementarian theologians insist that their idea of the “ideal family” is the biblically ordained one. “From an historical and anthropological point of view, it is too simplistic to talk about ‘the natural family’ in a monolithic way.”⁸⁴ History does not give evidence for one “biblical ideal family.” As I have already argued, the families of the biblical world do not line up with today's nuclear family. Instead, the “ideal family” is a cultural-construct from the Industrial Revolution.⁸⁵ However, it is this Industrial Revolution construct of the nuclear family that complementarians have drawn on as normative. Even in more recent U. S. history, a plurality of family structures has existed distinct from the nuclear family. From its very inception as a British colony, the United States has had a plurality family structures.⁸⁶ For example, there has been the Puritan patriarchal structure, the southern slaveholding larger

⁸² Jamin Hübner, “The Evolution of Complementarian Exegesis,” *CBE International*, last modified Winter 2015, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/evolution-complementarian-exegesis>, 11-12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Thatcher, *God, Sex, and Gender*, 452.

⁸⁵ Lawrence H. Ganong and Marilyn Coleman, *The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2014), <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlbk&AN=915864&scope=site>, 1214-5.

⁸⁶ Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, 75-80.

patriarchal households, the southwest Native people's family structures, and Roman Catholic matrilineal structures.⁸⁷ History does not share the complementarian's view of the nuclear family as the only example of the family.

Neither psychology nor practical theology share the complementarian view of the nuclear family as the biblical family. Drs. Jack and Judith Balswick, both professors of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, point out this flaw in their book *The Family: A Christian Perspective of the Contemporary Home*. They bluntly write, "it is a common mistake for Christians to defend a cultural version of marriage as the biblical ideal."⁸⁸ Likewise, practical theologian Don Browning, in his book *Equality and the Family*, underscores that complementarian proponents

"tended to believe that the nineteenth-century family with its working husband and stay-at-home wife was derived directly from the biblical plan for families. They seemed unaware that the family of the 1950s reflected the contingent character of a specific economic organization of domestic life that had its roots in the Industrial Revolution rather than the New Testament."⁸⁹

From historical, psychological, and practical theological perspectives, the nuclear family can be considered neither biblical nor normative. Despite this, "family values" as a promotion of the nuclear family lives on as a conservative priority based on complementarian belief of the biblical truth of the nuclear family.

⁸⁷ Ganong and Coleman, 1213-9.

⁸⁸ Balswick and Balswick, 68.

⁸⁹ Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 107.

The biblical ideal of the Kingdom of God is not based on the nuclear family, but on the radical reshaping of the family in Christ. Pushing the “ideal family” instead of being the family of Christ falls short of the biblical ideal of the Kingdom of God.⁹⁰ Allegiance to the family of Christ and discipleship point to the greater good of the Kingdom. Taking care of widows, orphans and single-parent families are a piece of that . Promoting family values and the nuclear family falls short of the vision of Christ for the Kingdom of God. As practical theologian Janet Fishburn said, “Where the concerns of the nuclear family become the focus of the church, the conservation of middle-class values can blind both leaders and people to the prominent concern for social justice found in the Bible.”⁹¹ The existence of single-parent families should be part of that concern for social justice, not denigrated as “broken families” and dismissed as less than the ideal family.

A Challenge to the Idolization of Marriage

If singleness is a problem, marriage – according to conservative evangelicals – is the solution. Adair and Dahlberg note that conservative evangelical theologians want “marriage and the family [to] continue as the primary divinely instituted order for the human race.”⁹² Grudem and Piper suggest that “perhaps, if there had been no fall, there would have been no singleness.”⁹³ Likewise, Focus on the Family’s website on Marriage states that “this beneficial, cohesive family unit, however, faces unprecedented challenges today, including divorce, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births and fatherlessness – trends which contribute to lessened

⁹⁰ Hirsch, 185.

⁹¹ Ibid., 187.

⁹² Adair and Dahlberg, 282.

⁹³ Piper and Grudem, xxiv.

family, individual and community welfare. One study estimates that divorce and unwed childbearing alone cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$112 billion a year.”⁹⁴ Single parenting, according to Focus on the Family, not only challenges families but costs taxpayers money. These conservative evangelicals remain firmly entranced by the idea that marriage will solve American society’s problems.

Even egalitarian theologians have bought into the idolization of marriage. While their solution looks different from the patriarchal complementarian model, egalitarian theologians such as Dan Browning still find the new family ideal to be “the committed, intact, equal-regard, public-private family” where “intact” = mother + father + their kids in a “lifetime marriage.”⁹⁵ However, conservative evangelicals drive the pro-marriage agenda much farther than egalitarian marriage supporters would. For example, sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas write, “many Americans believe a whole host of societal ills can be traced to the lapse in judgment that a poor, unmarried woman shows when she bears a child she cannot afford. The solution to these problems seems obvious to most Americans: these young women should wait to have children until they are older and more economically stable, and they should be married first.”⁹⁶ In other words, if only these women were capable of not getting pregnant, society would be their version of a modern-day Eden, devoid of problems. For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a feminist theologian turned conservative, insisted that feminism is what leads to single parenting because

⁹⁴ “Marriage: The Issue,” *Focus on the Family*, last modified September 1, 2008, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/marriage/marriage/marriage-issue>.

⁹⁵ Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, 1-2.

⁹⁶ Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

previous to the feminist movement, women would have “shotgun weddings.”⁹⁷ Fox-Genovese alleges that shotgun weddings where a young pregnant woman marries the man that got her pregnant is preferable regardless of the circumstances surrounding single parenthood. She also argues that single parenthood causes societal ills for young men as well. For her, acceptance of single parenting directly leads to the “hooliganism of bands of under- or un-employed men” and leads to the “rise in crime, drug use, and underemployment.”⁹⁸ Piper and Grudem agree with Fox-Genovese: “As the sad record of illegitimate children, ‘single parent’ homes, and the pathological violence and personal instability of unattached, single men have shown us, we cannot afford to disconnect people from marriage this way, as the feminists, wittingly and unwittingly, have done.”⁹⁹

Pro-marriage conservatives tie pro-marriage policies to their pro-marriage theology. For example, some pro-marriage proponents have gone so far to promote marriage by tying it to governmental Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits.¹⁰⁰ In Oklahoma, pro-marriage classes were a requirement to receive TANF benefits in the hopes that young women would marry and get off the welfare rolls. There is no evidence this program actually worked the way it was intended. Examining pro-marriage policies, sociologist Melanie Heath asserts that these policies place “the responsibility on single mothers to pull themselves out of poverty through marriage.”¹⁰¹ Despite evidence that children growing up in single-parent families are not doomed to a life of poverty and misery, and whatever disadvantages that occur are not

⁹⁷ Fox-Genovese, Skillen, and Voll, 31-32.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 330.

¹⁰⁰ Heath, 2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 73.

necessarily because of single parenthood but could be because of poverty or problems before the divorce affecting children, these pro-family policies persist.¹⁰² They persist because “arguments made by marriage advocates simplify the facts and suggest unanimity among social scientists.”¹⁰³ Social scientists are not all in agreement, and the idolization of marriage by pro-family groups does not fix the problems affecting single-parent families. This is simply an extension of the blaming of families (read: women) for the ills of society.¹⁰⁴

This sort of blame aligns with other parts of the conservative evangelical pro-marriage agenda. Single parenting goes along with homosexuality and divorce as the main problems with society. “Divorce, single moms, homosexual rights – all were interpreted as evidence of social doom due to an abdication of traditional roles that conservatives believe serve God and country best.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, single parents are a problem, and they are a problem that, in conservative evangelicals’ minds, create a slippery slope downward. For example, when Glen Stanton from the conservative evangelical group Focus on the Family was interviewed about same-sex marriage, he said,

“If we have to honor the relationship that two guys have, then we have to honor the relationship that a guy and his three wives have. We have to honor the relationship that two heterosexual single moms have. If we are going to offer health benefits and government benefits to other configurations, why keep anybody from joining together and saying, ‘Our relationship is significant, too,’ regardless of what that relationship is?”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Ibid., 76.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁴ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 103.

¹⁰⁵ Dexter and Lagrander, 111.

¹⁰⁶ “If Same-Sex ‘Marriage’ Is Legalized, Why Not Polygamy?,” *Baptist Press*, accessed April 7, 2017, <http://www.bpnews.net/17889/if-samesex-marriage-is-legalized-why-not-polygamy>.

Gay marriage and single parenting are tied inextricably to the downfall of society, brought down by their weight on the conservative taxpayer. According to conservative evangelicals, single parents are simply a drain on society. For example, James Daly of Focus on the Family plainly states, “the obvious solution of building a culture where moms and dads are encouraged to stay together has been ignored by many of the men and women seeking a solution to poverty.”¹⁰⁷ Poverty and society would be fixed if single mothers were no longer a problem to be fixed. This judgment of single women (along with homosexuals and divorcees) alienates entire categories of people.¹⁰⁸ There is little concern for the widow or the oppressed expressed in these views. Elizabeth M. Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, and Mary E. Hobgood, feminist theologians note in their book *Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques*, that conservative evangelicals see “women’s work to care for children while single as a moral failing rather than an accomplishment.”¹⁰⁹ There is no concern for the difficult job that single parents do nor their children. The only concern is to promote the sort of family that they have deemed the “biblical” ideal.

A Challenge to “The Family”

One of the roots of this understanding is from the conservative evangelical’s overall understanding of family. They understand there to be one, single family type that is valid – their focus is always on “*The Family*.” However, as feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether points out, “there has never, of course, been only one form of family.”¹¹⁰ Progressive social scientists also point to families in the plural to describe the reality that families are not just one

¹⁰⁷ “The Underreported Cause of Poverty,” *Jim Daly*, April 30, 2014, accessed April 7, 2017, <http://jimdaly.focusonthefamily.com/the-underreported-cause-of-poverty/>.

¹⁰⁸ Hirsch, 135.

¹⁰⁹ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 115.

¹¹⁰ Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 4.

type. Jack and Judith Balswick describe this difference as “family pluralism perspective” rather than “family deficit perspective.”¹¹¹ They argue that just because a family looks different from the nuclear family of the Industrial Revolution, it does not make it any less valid as a family. Balswick and Balswick continue, “divorce reorganizes a family but does not destroy it.”¹¹² Having a plurality of families does not lessen the value of marriage or families. They are both still important, but allowing for a plurality of families rather than “*the* Family” encourages acceptance and validation of single parents and their families. This aligns with what social scientists have found for how society as a whole values marriage despite what pro-marriage and pro-family proponents would argue. Studying low income single mothers, the sociologists Edin and Kefelas show that while “the *practical* significance of marriage has diminished, its *symbolic* significance has grown.”¹¹³ Even among secular society, marriage and families are not under attack. They are still valued despite a plurality of family forms and the legalization of gay marriage. Valuing single-parent families does not diminish two-parent households in any way. However, valuing single-parent families does help churches show love to those families. Valuing single-parent families helps grow the Kingdom of God.

An Extension of Feminist Theology

As complementarian theologians have had the single focus of promoting hierarchical marriages and families, feminist theologians have worked to describe alternate theologies of the family to counter patriarchal structures. Many feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Anne Carr, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, have argued for a theology of the family

¹¹¹ Balswick and Balswick, 246.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 245.

¹¹³ Edin and Kefelas, 201.

that is egalitarian and is based on equal-regard between partners as a healthier model of the family than the hierarchical structure of complementarian theology. I agree with that idea, but feminist theologies often fail to deal with the realities of single parenting. More importantly, feminist theologies have yet to be adapted practically in evangelical churches. The patriarchal family structure is still the dominant one, and the patriarchal family structure needs to be challenged in order that healthier theologies make it down to the local church level. Feminist theologies have begun to do the hard work of pressing back against patriarchal structures. Within current patriarchal systems, the assumption is that men are hierarchically above women, as seen in complementarian theology. Single mothers are especially low in the patriarchal hierarchy because of their gender and their “broken” relationship status. Feminist theologies push back on this hierarchy towards equality between the sexes, which raises up all women including single mothers. By exposing the oppressive structures that hold all women back, feminist theologies work to give women a voice and a place at the table. Single mothers benefit from this just as all women and all mothers benefit from this work.

More specifically, feminist theologians have begun to explore the intersection of patriarchal structures and motherhood. As theologian Bonnie Miller McLemore writes, “patriarchal images of motherhood must be deconstructed, it seems, before new images can be constructed.”¹¹⁴ Feminist theologians such as Miller McLemore and Cynthia Rigby have explored the beginnings of feminist theologies around motherhood, an important beginning to the conversation about single motherhood. Feminist theologies of the family, such as Miller

¹¹⁴ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 94.

McLemore's important work *Also a Mother*, have provided a starting point for a healthy theology of the single mother. Rigby describes in her article "Exploring Our Hesitation: Feminist Theologies and the Nurture of Children" how feminist theologies are beginning to work towards healthier understandings of both motherhood and families. She writes, "feminist understandings of theological anthropology, atonement, and hope challenge us to develop paradigms that reject motherhood as exclusive, life-sacrificing, and self-denying and reclaim it as inclusive, life-sharing, and self-fulfilling."¹¹⁵ These are important first steps in the conversation about understandings of God and motherhood and more specifically single motherhood.

There is much work to be done to continue this conversation about theology and motherhood and single motherhood. For a theology of motherhood and families to be truly inclusive, they must include the realities of single mothers. While very often feminist theologians mention single mothers in passing and acknowledge that the single mother's experience is often different from the experience of mothers in nuclear families, very few have focused exclusively on the experience of single mothers. Stephanie Crowder's womanist work, *When Momma Speaks: The Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective*, is one of the few feminist texts that bring single motherhood to the forefront.¹¹⁶ However, feminist theologies of the family and motherhood have only just begun to be explored. The conversation is only beginning when it comes to theologies of the family, motherhood, and specifically single motherhood. Crowder notes, "it is time to begin crafting a feminist theology of parenthood that

¹¹⁵ Cynthia L Rigby, "Exploring Our Hesitation: Feminist Theologies and the Nurture of Children," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (January 2000): 541.

¹¹⁶ Crowder, *When Momma Speaks*.

compromises neither the full humanity of children nor the full humanity of women.”¹¹⁷ This is an admirable goal, and such a feminist theology of parenthood needs to also include the full humanity of all mothers – both married and not.

Chapter 4: Towards a Theology of the Single Mother

Single mothers can help reveal truths about God. Having a healthy theology of the family, especially one that is inclusive of single-parent families, has important implications for practical theology and ministry. However, a theology of the single mother is not a theology FOR single mothers. It is a theology OF the single mother. A theology of the single mother is the same theology as for every other human on the planet because theology tells us about God and God is unchanging. A theology of the single mother enlarges our view of God so that our images and understanding of God can hold both the traditional nuclear family and the non-traditional family. This comes from a biblical ethic of the family where all in society are cared for.¹¹⁸ A theology should include care for all of God’s children, including single mothers.

A theology of the single mother needs to be Trinitarian, include an egalitarian understanding of gender, be shaped in the image of God, and be incarnational. A theology of the single mother will incorporate the idea of holy friendship as the basis for healthy relationships. Language is important in the discussion of single mother theology. Even in academia the language of “broken” has been used to describe single-parent families.¹¹⁹ A better description might be the term “fragile families,” as this shows that single-parent families are in fact fully

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 540.

¹¹⁸ Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 253.

¹¹⁹ “How can broken and reconstructed families live out the vision of domestic church that is given as a gift and challenge to all families in the church?” in Rubio, 166.

formed families, but also shows that they do need a different kind of care than two-parent households.¹²⁰ Another possibility is “disrupted family.”¹²¹ Combining this idea of fragile families with feminist theologies of the family gives a place to start for a single mother theology.

Feminist theologies of the family are, for the most part, based on an egalitarian marriage and equal regard between both partners. While this is an important distinction from complementarian theology, it is not very helpful for a family unit with only one parent. Having equal regard for a partner who is no longer in a committed relationship with the single parent is not useful. However, single parents are still in relationship with those around them. Single parents are still in relationship with their children, they are still in relationship with friends, family, and other people around them, and they are still in relationship to God. These relationships should be egalitarian. As theologian Adrian Thatcher points out, ideally and “theologically, [the family] can be a relationship and an institution where God’s grace is experienced and where people nurture and healing.”¹²² Even in single-parent households, that can still be true. Despite the non-traditional family structure of single-parent families, single mothers still reveal truths about God.

Based on the Trinity

A theology of the single mother must be based on the relationship, and our aim for what our earthly relationships should look like is the relationships within the Trinity. The relationships between ourselves and other people are part of what makes us human. Christians serve a God who has relationship in God’s very being. God-in-relationship is by definition part

¹²⁰ Heath, 94.

¹²¹ McLanahan and Sandefur, 11.

¹²² Thatcher, 460.

of the being of God. Likewise, as the theologian Stanly Grenz states, “Biblical Christianity declares that to be human means to be persons-in-relationship.”¹²³ We Christians model the Trinity by being in relationships with others. Single mothers are no different than any other Christians in this respect. This Trinitarian relationality should form the basis for all relationships for Christians, including single mothers. Family can be represented in a Trinitarian relationship as well with God as Israel’s parent, Christ as the groom to the church, and the Holy Spirit as empowerment.¹²⁴ Even without a “groom” in a family, a family can still model a Trinitarian relationship. A family is whole simply by interacting with others and with the Trinity. “Wholeness” does not require two parents. A Trinitarian understanding of relationship is not hierarchical, and thus does not need a “protector” for a single mother. All relationships within the Trinity give and receive equally. Likewise, church relationships are based in the Trinity.¹²⁵ In fact, as theologians Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann write, “only a human community can be the image of the triune God.”¹²⁶ Communities, especially churches, exhibit the interconnectedness that is the Trinity.

However, this relationality of the Trinity is important especially for single mothers because “individual responsibility as complete self-sufficiency” is opposed to the relationality and interconnectedness known by Christians in the Body of Christ.¹²⁷ All humans are interconnected with each other. We all depend on each other. The idea of self-sufficiency goes against the idea of the Trinity. Single mothers are especially affected by the argument of self-

¹²³ Fox-Genovese, Skillen, and Voll, 48.

¹²⁴ Balswick and Balswick, 13.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹²⁶ Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann, 9.

¹²⁷ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 15.

sufficiency. Conservative evangelicals argue that single mothers must get off welfare, pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and support their families by working. They argue that working to support their families is the best thing for poor, single mothers because it encourages self-sufficiency. It ensures that single parents are not becoming dependent on others or the government. On the other hand, those same conservative evangelicals say that the best place for the mother in a traditional family is to stay home with her children. They argue long and hard for families to work to where the mother can stay home with the children and cite evidence that is the best place for mother, child, and even for the father. It is completely illogical to say that it is best for the single mother's children for their mother to work, but for the children with two parents, it is best for their mother to stay home. Both cannot be true. However, conservative evangelicals argue that both somehow are true. A re-examination of beliefs surrounding how single mothers are forced to work and support their children needs to happen, and these beliefs need to be re-examined based on the idea of Trinitarian interconnectedness.

Between God's own relationality within God's self and God's love of justice, the importance of considering how single mothers, like widows and orphans, especially need others is obvious. Self-sufficiency is a myth. All humans need others, and those "fragile families" like single-parent families, orphans and widows, need others even more than "traditional families." Lacking the help of a second parent, they need the help of others in their churches, friends, and extended families. Beginning a theology of the single mother on the relationality of the Trinity is a reminder that relationships are vitally important for the survival and health of the single mother, and their children. A single mother "going it alone" is likely to fail. With the support of

a church family, remembering their own Trinitarian relationships, a single mother will be better equipped to thrive.

Based on the *Imago Dei*

A theology of the single mother must also be based on the image of God, in which we as humans are created. Single mothers are no less made in the image of God than those who are married. They are no less human. They share the *imago Dei* with every other human, so they cannot, no matter what their relationship status, be considered less. Simply their existence makes them created as the image of God. Even complementarian theologian Wayne Grudem admits, “all single individuals, including Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul, are fully the image of God, yet they never entered into the male-female union spoken of the first pair of humans in Genesis 2.”¹²⁸ No matter what their relationship with the other parent of their children, a single mother’s relationships with others reflect the Trinity and thus reflect the image of God, because as Balswick and Balswick contend, “relationality between the distinct human beings (male and female) reflects the *imago Dei*.”¹²⁹ There is nothing “broken” about single parents nor their families. They are equally created in the image of God.

Cristina Grenholm, in her book *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology*, challenges her readers with a question about the *imago Dei* and motherhood: “What happens if we base our reflection of God and human beings on the perspective of motherhood?”

¹²⁸ Grudem, *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 76.

¹²⁹ Balswick and Balswick, 63.

And conversely, how is our conception of motherhood affected by our Christian heritage?”¹³⁰

This is an important question for considering a theology of the single mother.

Highlighting the importance of single mothers being made as the *imago Dei* is an important pushback against the discussion of sin that so often pervades discussions of single mothers. Often, but not always, there has been divorce or out-of-wedlock pregnancy for single mothers. This does not make them any less bearers of the image of God than any other human. However, often single mothers are sinned against – by violence, abuse, a divorce they did not want, rape, drug abuse, and systems of oppression and poverty. This concept of sin needs to be addressed too when discussing single motherhood. Single parents very rarely choose to be both single and a parent. Most would prefer to share life together with someone and parent with a partner. Parenting alone is hard. Parenting alone is exhausting. When the only language around sin is personal sin and not systems of sin against a person, the narrative of loose single mother becomes commonplace, but a theology of the single mother based in the *imago Dei* challenges that perception.

Having a theology of the single mother that is based on the image of God underscores the importance of treating single mothers justly. As theologians Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood write, “one key dimension to justice is the claiming of rights as part of the assertion of the dignity and well-being of persons.”¹³¹ Single mothers, created in the image of God, must be treated with dignity and respect as heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. No longer should single-parent families be considered “broken” or single mothers be considered lesser. Just because

¹³⁰ Cristina Grenholm, *Motherhood and Love: Beyond the Gendered Stereotypes of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2011), 23.

¹³¹ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 16-17.

single parents are more likely to be in poverty or because there was the sin of divorce or out-of-wedlock children does not make single-parent households any less valuable than a “traditional” nuclear family. This understanding of single mothers, created in the *imago Dei*, should always undergird the church’s understanding.

Based on an Egalitarian Gender Understanding

A theology of the single mother must have an egalitarian understanding of gender, because complementarian gender issues project onto the “brokenness” of single-parent families. God is neither male nor female. Single mothers are made in the image of God, and God has no gender. The lack of a male figure does not make single mothers less than the full image of God, but single mothers do disrupt the hierarchy of complementarian theology because there is no man to protect or rule over the single mother. The reaction against this is to lay blame on the mothers for being “broken” and to blame men because they are not stepping up to their “proper” place as leaders and fathers. Much has been written in recent years about the need of men to rise up as fathers. For example, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Piper and Grudem’s chapter “Where’s Dad?” tackles this issue.¹³² This chapter details how children have something lost because of single parenthood that can only be captured by a man. This “Christian masculinity” or “biblical manhood” is an attempt at recapturing traditional hierarchical roles for genders. For example, a billboard was recently purchased that stated, “Real men provide; real women appreciate it.”¹³³ These sorts of attitudes that promote man as the provider and women

¹³² Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 378-387.

¹³³ “Debate Breaks out over North Carolina Billboard - WSMV Channel 4,” accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.wsmv.com/story/34589489/debate-breaks-out-over-north-carolina-billboard>.

as the acceptor of the man's provisions are prominent in Christian circles.¹³⁴ Assuming men need to be more "manly" would solve the ills created by single mothers is a ridiculous presumption. This thinking has influenced even writers giving advice to the single mothers – that they need to raise boys to be "macho" even without a father in the picture.¹³⁵

To assume that a single parent cannot be a protector of her own children or that she needs a protector because she is female is simply neither biblical nor scientific. A father figure does not suddenly solve all the issues surrounding single-parent families just because a male magically appeared. Women and men are equal in Christ according to Paul in Galatians 3:28, no matter what complementarians find as "biblical" support for their sexism. Feminist theologian Cynthia Rigby writes, "because both are created in the image of God, women are fully human only as they create as well as nurture, and men only as they nurture as well as create. To separate nurture from creativity is, from a feminist perspective, highly questionable."¹³⁶ Just as God is both nurturer and creator, single mothers (and every other human) are both nurturers and creators. Single-parent families are not broken or missing one half of the image of God. They are complete already. While it is true that parenting is easier when there is more than one parent in the picture, that is not an issue of gender roles or hierarchy. The lack of help that a single parent has could be solved by support from their church community or extended family. The gender of the help for a single parent is irrelevant. Parenting is gender-less, just as God is gender-less.

¹³⁴ "How the Christian 'masculinity' Movement Is Ruining Men | Religion News Service," accessed February 25, 2017, <http://religionnews.com/2016/08/30/how-the-christian-masculinity-movement-is-ruining-men/>.

¹³⁵ Chisholm, 115.

¹³⁶ Rigby, 548.

Based on the Incarnation

Often the theology most lacking when working towards a theology of the single mother is the theology of the incarnation. Jesus walked the earth in a physical body, born from an actual mother, and took up physical space. If God sent God's only Son to walk this earth in a physical body, God must care about our own physical bodies. However, this incarnational theology has mostly been ignored when it comes to single mothers. Telling single mothers that Jesus needs to be the head of their household, as Barbara Gardner did in her book of advice, *Jesus and the Single Mother*, is not helpful.¹³⁷ Single mothers inhabit a body, just as Jesus did on earth. They need touch. They are lonely. The physical interactions that single mothers have with their children – the hugs and high-fives – are helpful, but they do not complete the physical needs of humans to be in contact physically with other humans. Jesus sat and ate and had his feet washed with a woman's hair. Even the resurrected Christ respected Thomas' request to touch Jesus' wounds. Jesus inhabited a body in both his life and his resurrected appearances. Physical contact and our physical bodies are both important. Promoting the spiritual over physical is not healthy or helpful. The duality of the spirit over the flesh, handed down from Greek neo-platonic philosophy from thousands of years ago, is heretical. Our physical bodies are important, because Christ came in a fleshly package, born in a stable among physical, earthly stuff. Our bodies are not lesser than our spirits. Humans are one complete package – body, mind, and spirit. Elevating one (the spirit) over another (the body) is bad theology.

¹³⁷ Barbara Gardner, *Jesus and the Single Mother*, (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1990), 33.

The duality of spirit over body is especially apparent when dealing with the church's response to single mothers. Telling women that God is the author of fatherhood and is completely real when either a single mother or her children long for the physicality of an actual, living fleshly father, as Chisholm does in her advice in *Single Moms Raising Boys*, cheapens the incarnation.¹³⁸ However, dealing with issues of physical bodies when talking about single parenting brings up the taboo issue of sex that many churches would rather sweep under the rug and ignore. Balswick and Balswick argue, "not wanting to wrestle with the difficult question of sex and singleness, churches sometimes seek an easy out by declaring that single people should deny their sexuality or by completely ignoring the question."¹³⁹ Overall, this has been the response of evangelicals, though slowly there is awareness that denying our physical bodies is harmful to theology and people. For example, the author of the book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Josh Harris, recently apologized for the harm his book did to promote a purity culture that elevates the spiritual over the physical.¹⁴⁰ Harris said in an interview, "we have God's word, but then it's so easy to add all this other stuff to protect people, to control people, to make sure that you don't get anywhere near that place where you could go off course. And I think that's where the problems arise." "That place where you could go "off course" is where physical bodies become close, but Harris is now seeing how his denial of our incarnational bodies was something added to God's word. Denying the importance of physical touch – whether it be kissing in a dating relationship or the loneliness of a single mother – harms people.

¹³⁸ Chisholm, 178.

¹³⁹ Balswick and Balswick, 178.

¹⁴⁰ "Former Evangelical Pastor Rethinks His Approach To Courtship," *NPR.org*, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2016/07/10/485432485/former-evangelical-pastor-rethinks-his-approach-to-courtship>.

The opposite extreme is to push single mothers to marry to fulfill their incarnational needs. This is also unhealthy as it denies the ability of a woman to be complete on her own. Finding the balance between pushing women to marry and denying their incarnational bodies is important. Ignoring the question because physical bodies bring up concerns of sin and sexual purity is not useful. What is helpful is to delineate between genital and social sexuality. Every human has both, but it is important to admit that social sexuality exists and that single mothers – along with every other human including Jesus – have needs based on their own social sexuality. In fact, rather than focusing on the myriad of sexual sins that surround many single mothers, Debra Hirsch suggests that the “failure to integrate sexuality into our lives and the life of the church” is itself a sin.¹⁴¹ In other words, having a theology that is not fully incarnational is sin. Jesus was incarnational – body, mind, and spirit – and so are single mothers. Theologians Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann write, “Jesus was whole, fully human, and liberates us to be fully human like him.”¹⁴² A theology must be mindful of that liberation by the incarnation of Jesus in order to be true. A truly incarnational theology will help the whole of single mothers – mind, body, soul and spirit.

Based on Holy Friendship

Finally, a theology of the single mother should be based on the idea of Holy Friendship. One of the major metaphors in the gospel of John is that of friendship. Christ calls us friends. The idea of friendship is elevated above family for the disciples in John’s gospel.¹⁴³ Much of the language and ethics around friendship which was prevalent in the early church, like calling each

¹⁴¹ Hirsch, 78.

¹⁴² Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann, 54.

¹⁴³ Osiek and Balch, 144.

other sister and brother, has been lost.¹⁴⁴ A returning to this concept could help contribute to relationships and strengthen theologies. Holy Friendship challenges the patriarchy by making relationships based on egalitarian notions rather than hierarchies. The idea of Holy Friendship is not just for single parents, but as Jürgen Moltmann points out, egalitarian marriages can also be based on Holy Friendship.¹⁴⁵ Holy Friendship could especially help single mothers by encouraging both friendships with peers and intergenerational friendships within churches.¹⁴⁶ Friendship also is a possibility for reimagining the sexual ethics around singleness and single parenthood.¹⁴⁷ Holy Friendship could revitalize the relationships within churches and strengthen the “fragile families” headed by single mothers.

Moving Forward with a Theology of the Single Mother

I have only begun to imagine a theology of the single mother. Much more could be written and considered. Moving forward, imagining what a “model” family might look like in light of the plurality of family types could be a worthwhile effort. Likewise, as theologian Adrian Thatcher states, “a Christian theology of the family will only begin to be true if it takes very seriously the experience of families and family members who are impoverished, marginalized, victimized or violated.”¹⁴⁸ This is an important consideration beyond the scope of this paper. Single parenthood and its relationship to God is something only begun to be explored, and I hope that much more scholarship will be done in the future.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 116.

¹⁴⁵ Moltmann-Wendel and Moltmann, 20.

¹⁴⁶ Gardner, 39.

¹⁴⁷ Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 220.

¹⁴⁸ Thatcher, 454.

Chapter 5: Practical Theology Addressing the Needs of Single-Parent Families

The lack of healthy theology around single parenthood results in negative attitudes of churches towards single-parent families and lack of practical theology surrounding single mothers. There has been little written from either side of the progressive or conservative Christian spectrum about single parenting. The few books that have been written do push back on the idea that single-parent families are flawed or broken, which is a valuable and important pushback, but they lack the theological underpinning to give effective advice to single mothers themselves or the ministers and pastors who want to care for them. Telling single mothers that God is their “air traffic controller” for their families is not helpful for single mothers or the churches that care about them.¹⁴⁹ Instead, as the theologians Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood argue, “Christian churches in this country invested and continue to invest heavily in the bourgeois family form.”¹⁵⁰ Rather than promoting traditional family structures, churches could be at the forefront of treating single mothers as they would want to be treated. Or as Debra Hirsch writes, “instead of seeing what could be a great opportunity for the church family to step into this void, we find ourselves . . . frantically trying to prop up the nuclear family as the ideal family, believing if we could just get that right all our troubles would be resolved.”¹⁵¹ Refocusing the church’s efforts on reaching out to single-parent families (and other types of families) rather than trying to hold onto a non-existent “traditional” family form could be revitalizing to churches. How churches treat single parents is a witness to the love of Christ, and

¹⁴⁹ Teresa Whitehurst, *God Loves Single Moms: Practical Help for Finding Confidence, Strength, and Hope* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Revell, 2010), 2-3.

¹⁵⁰ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 159.

¹⁵¹ Hirsch, 185.

when the church fails at including single parents, this reflects poorly on the church. Churches should be aware of their treatment of single mothers and how that affects their witness to non-Christians. Churches can and should be the leaders in encouraging justice and inclusion for single-parent families. This begins with a healthy practical theology based on a theology of the single mother.

Reimagining Families

One way to apply a healthy theology of the single mother is to begin to reimagine the family as a plurality of families rather than one single, nuclear family being the sole example of “*The Family*.” Churches can lead the way with this idea by encouraging whole systems of families. The language that conservative evangelicals have around “*The Family*” is generally a narrow understanding of what they have deemed the one true way (based on a “biblical” view) of doing family. They promote the nuclear family to the detriment of all other family structures. This is not healthy in churches where families are messy and do not all look like nuclear families, and these non-traditional families continue to grow in number. Churches should start to examine their language around families to see if they follow the narrative of the one family type or if they in fact accept a plurality of families. This language is important. It is important whether a church uses the term “the family” or “families,” keeping in mind that there is a plurality of families within their congregations. One only promotes one type of family and the other admits the reality and includes all families within its folds. Churches should not limit their discussion of mothers or families to only those in ideal circumstances.¹⁵² The language around having one, nuclear family as the norm demotes all other family structures lesser. As

¹⁵² Stovell, 208.

sociologists Dexter and Lagrander write, “by calling itself pro-life and pro-motherhood, the profamily movement [within churches] makes nontraditional women anti-family.”¹⁵³ Making nontraditional women and nontraditional families opposed to family is not inclusive nor welcoming, and it does not follow how Christ included all into the new structure of the Kingdom of God.

Along these lines, churches should be cognizant of how their programs affect non-traditional families. Churches can do the work of examining their own programs, ideally with the input of single mothers and other non-traditional families. Questions churches can consider asking about how they serve all families: Is Mother’s Day a day to celebrate only those mothers who are part of a nuclear family or is it a day to be inclusive of single mothers, foster mothers, and even women who cannot or chose not to be mothers? Where do single-parent families fit in a church’s program offerings? Are churches relegating single parents into their singles groups? Is that the best fit? Are the primary discussions in parenting groups around marital relationships in parenting groups or do they encourage healthy relationships in general? When do the mothers groups meet? Do they only meet during the day when most single mothers are working or are their times when all mothers can meet? Do churches acknowledge the difficulties of getting children to church on Sunday mornings with only one parent to get children dressed, fed, and looking “acceptable enough” to be admitted into Sunday worship? Have churches asked how the ways they are doing church affect single parents? Do churches have single parents involved in the leadership or planning of programs and events? Even well-intended programs can backfire. At the beginning of this past school year, one very well-intended leader in my church suggested

¹⁵³ Dexter and Lagrander, 102.

that the families in the church share back-to-school photos of all our children in our church's private social media group. This leader intended for it to be an opportunity for the church to share in the joys of back to school with the families in the church. However, due to custody schedules, I did not have my children for the day they went back to school. I spent the day fighting back tears because the first day back to school was not joyous, and I could not share photos to celebrate. What was intended as an opportunity to share joys was not seen through the lens of all families. Churches generally do have good intentions, but looking at a church's offerings through the eyes of a single mother can help churches become inclusive of a plurality of families.

Encouraging Friendships

One simple way churches can become more inclusive of single-parent families is to encourage friendships, especially intergenerational friendships. As the gospel of John reimagines relationships in the Kingdom of Heaven through friendship, single parents can especially be helped from this reimagining. Single parenting can be lonely and isolating. Helping create networks within churches could help single mothers overcome that loneliness and isolation. Connecting single mothers with older women, much like the mentorship encouraged in Titus 2, could give single mothers the support systems they need. Encouraging intergenerational friendships could provide single mothers with both advice and encouragement from older women as well as the tangible help of babysitting. What a relief it could be for single mothers if there were older women (or men!) in their churches who would sign up to be on the list to pick up sick children from school and daycare so a single mother would not have to miss work or school when the inevitable call to pick up a sick child comes! In fact, the day the first

full draft of this paper was due, I got a call from my child's school nurse. In the midst of completing a draft, I was the only one around to go pick up my sick child from school. These are the burdens of single mothers that could be shared within the church. As social scientists have noted, "It is therefore possible that, in countries with a higher degree of social acceptance for alternative family arrangements and better family policies for lone parents, the positive impact of childbearing on happiness may turn out to be much stronger than the one revealed in our findings."¹⁵⁴ Likewise, if churches could encourage such "a higher degree of social acceptance for alternative family arrangements" and be a part of the "better family policies for lone parents," then churches could contribute to the health and welfare of single parents' happiness and their children's well-being. Encouraging friendships is a key piece of that happiness and well-being.

Promoting Singleness

Another way that churches can help single mothers is to reexamine their own biases towards marriage and married couples. There is a bias against singleness, or "singlism," for both those who are single parents and those who are single without children. Singlism, like sexism and racism, promotes the marrieds over singles. It is "stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination against single people."¹⁵⁵ Perhaps this is a symptom of churches being run almost entirely by married people, especially married men.¹⁵⁶ With little understanding of the realities of single parenting from leadership and even fewer single parents in leadership in churches, singlism is the result. Instead, single people – whether parents or not – should be celebrated as

¹⁵⁴ Baranowska-Rataj, Matysiak, and Mynarska, 1474.

¹⁵⁵ "Singleness Can Be Freeing. It's Time the Church Recognizes That. | Sojourners," accessed February 25, 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/singleness-can-be-freeing-its-time-church-recognizes>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

worthy in their own right and encouraged in their choice to remain single as the apostle Paul encouraged singleness as the better choice. Attitudes need to change in order to get back to the priority that Paul gave to singleness that is completely missing from contemporary Protestant churches. Theologians are beginning to recognize that “singleness should be recognized as a gift for the select few that holds significant advantages for ministry but is neither intrinsically superior nor inferior to marriage.”¹⁵⁷ However, this falls short of Paul’s command to be single as he is single. Getting the pendulum back towards acceptance of singleness is a move in the right direction, as singleness – both with children and without – should be celebrated. Single people are not inherently broken or “missing their other half.” Single people are wholly created in the image of God all by themselves. Married people in leadership should remember this idea.

Redefining Vocation

One additional way to support single parents is to reexamine and redefine the idea of vocation. The vocation of child-rearing and caretaking of others is given little monetary value in society. Childcare laborers and those who care for the sick and elderly are often some of the lowest paid workers, and this reflects on the undervaluing of parents who care for their children. Because caring for children creates nothing of monetary value, in capitalist society there is little value placed on this vocation. Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood write, “our society needs to redefine work to include the socially necessary labor of caring for children, the sick and the elderly, a task requiring the rethinking of the relationship of the public and private spheres.”¹⁵⁸ While the discussion of vocation is a larger one than can be discussed here, churches can still be

¹⁵⁷ Campbell, 264.

¹⁵⁸ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 18.

in the business of encouraging and supporting the vocation of motherhood and other caretaking vocations.

For nuclear families in the conservative evangelical sphere, motherhood is still an acceptable vocation. Piper and Grudem devote an entire chapter in their book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womenhood*, to the glories of motherhood and homemaking.¹⁵⁹ However, these same “family values” authors require single mothers to work (and thus not receive welfare.)¹⁶⁰ If motherhood is to be valued, it should be promoted equally for single mothers. Churches should begin to investigate this aspect of vocation, following in the line of womanist theologians who have already pointed out these discrepancies. As feminist theologian Cynthia Rigby writes:

“Womanists are among those feminists who point out that many mothers have no choice whether to work outside the home or not. To insist that they do betrays classist attitudes that ignore economic realities and thereby perpetuate the neglect of children and their mothers. The ongoing campaign of Dr. Laura Schlessinger and others to convince mothers that they can stay home—they simply have to tighten up their budgets—does violence to the single mother and her children as well as to poverty-stricken families.”¹⁶¹

If motherhood is indeed a valuable vocation, it should be valuable for all parents, regardless of their marital status. There is much work still left to be done to get to that point. However, motherhood should not be the only vocation available to women who have children. Rigby also points out that “because women are called to vocations other than mothering, and because we are called to support one another in our vocational lives, Christian feminist theology and the church are compelled to work toward creative social paradigms that compromise neither on the nurture

¹⁵⁹ Piper and Grudem, 364-377.

¹⁶⁰ Balswick and Balswick, 253.

¹⁶¹ Rigby, 544.

of children nor on the multiple vocations of mothers.”¹⁶² A healthy understandings of vocation in general and the vocation of motherhood specifically will help churches support single mothers in practical ways.

Connected with the concept of vocation is education. Churches should promote education for single mothers and their children. However, it is difficult to find the time to improve one’s education as a single parent. Juggling child-rearing and supporting a household leaves single parents little time for themselves, much less time to pursue an education. In spite of this, churches could still help single mothers with some of the hurdles of getting a better education. Churches could help single mothers with the process of getting into higher education and help them find grant and scholarship money to allow them to afford an education. Churches could help with childcare, and friends within the Body of Christ could be encouragers when getting an education seems too difficult. Despite this, education not the only solution to help single parents in their vocation. Poor women in the academy show that even women in academia struggle from the “marks of poverty” and struggle to get out from under the weight of poverty despite their education.¹⁶³ In other words, education is not the only solution to helping single mothers, but it should be considered one piece of practical theology that churches can get behind.

Safety Nets

An additional practical piece for churches to help single parents is to help provide single parents with safety nets. While friendships within the church are one aspect of an emotional and relational safety net for single parents, churches can support and provide many other safety nets

¹⁶² Ibid., 549.

¹⁶³ Adair and Dahlberg, 2-3.

for single-parent families. Since as Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood note, “the conservative vision of the common good – grounded in the market, traditional families, and private charity – and its attendant dismantling of the residual welfare state is actually a form of social Darwinism,” churches could be the only safety net many single parents have.¹⁶⁴ These safety nets can directly help single-parent families get out of and stay out of poverty. Sociologist Melanie Heath points out, “in countries with a more adequate safety net, single-parent families are much less likely to be impoverished.”¹⁶⁵ The United States is not one of those countries, but churches can still work to provide safety nets that can help single-parent families.

Childcare is one crucial safety net piece that churches can provide. As Piper and Grudem point out, the “best child care is provided by a mother at home.”¹⁶⁶ However, I disagree with Piper and Grudem that single mothers are part of the “‘working’ or ‘full-time working’ mothers [who] are turning down material rewards in favor of the next generation.”¹⁶⁷ Single mothers do not get to choose “material rewards” over their children. Single mothers are unlike married couples who can decide whether or not one parent could stay home with the child, thus eliminating childcare expenses. Single parents must have childcare. Childcare is one of the largest expenses for single mothers and all working parents, and it is not an optional expense.

There are multiple ways that churches can support better childcare options for single parents (and all working parents). Many churches have preschools and daycares in house. These are opportunities to serve the community, and could be prioritized for single and low-income

¹⁶⁴ Bounds, Brubaker, and Hobgood, 36.

¹⁶⁵ Heath, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 323.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

parents through sliding cost scales and other measures. My own church offers free afterschool care for the students from the junior high across the street. These are opportunities to serve and love the community. On a more personal level, the intergenerational friendships within churches can provide kin-like networks to help support the care of children. If others in the church are not able to provide childcare for single-parent families on a daily basis, church members can still offer to help with back-up plans for those times when emergencies come up. Most churches offer childcare or a nursery during church service times, but what about times outside those windows? Is the nursery still available for single parents to participate in the rest of the life of the church? Would a single mother have to turn down participation in small groups or leadership councils because there is no childcare? Examining these sorts of offerings through the eyes of a single mother will help churches see if they are supporting all families. Churches and Christian businesses can and should examine how they can support holistic working environments for all employees and their families. Churches could lead the way in this by how they treat their lay and clergy parents within their staff members and church members. Furthermore, churches can examine themselves to see if they hold the values of Piper and Grudem, assuming that all working parents are choosing financial gain over their children, or if they understand that some parents do not have the option of choosing between “material rewards” and “the next generation.”

Health insurance and maternity and paternity leave are two additional safety nets that churches can support families of all types. “Mothers are particularly exposed by the American system of linking access to important social benefits like health insurance and Social Security to

marriage rather than citizenship.”¹⁶⁸ In two-parent families where both parents work, families can choose between the employer health insurance offerings and choose the better one for their family, or if only one parent’s employer offers health insurance, that parent can carry the insurance for the entire family. Single parents do not have that option. Single parents are on their own to find health insurance for their families whether through employers or other governmental insurance options. If a single parent does not have a full-time job, finding health insurance can be even more difficult. Churches can lead the example for other business by making sure that they provide good health insurance benefits to their own employees. Churches can also consider offering health insurance to part-time employees who often have a difficult time affording insurance apart from their employer. Likewise, churches could be trendsetters on offering generous maternity and paternity leave packages for employees. Policies like these can show the world how families can be supported in the workplace, and can influence the business people in their own congregations to support similar policies for their own employees.

Leading the way by offering safety nets of childcare and health insurance, churches and Christian businesses create a reminder that, in the image of the Triune God, we are all interconnected. None of us is solely an individual. Neither are we completely alone. Offering safety nets to catch the least of these among us, starting with church employees, reminds both society and the church at large that we are connected to each other and to God.

Sharing Resources

The Acts 2 church shared resources among themselves, supporting a network of young, fledgling church communities. “All who believed were together and had all things in common;

¹⁶⁸ Moreton, 727.

they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Many in today’s capitalist society have dismissed this sharing of resources as descriptive rather than prescriptive for churches. However, as families become more diverse, churches should take note of how working-class families are changing to meet their needs. The ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio points out, “the nuclear family form that was prevalent in the modern era is crumbling, and working-class families are developing new ways of being family in a postmodern age.”¹⁶⁹ Working-class families, especially single-parent families, have been sharing resources among extended kin networks to deal with the realities of poverty for some time. Middle class families, on the other hand, have held firm to the Modern framework of the nuclear family.¹⁷⁰ Carol Stack, in her groundbreaking work *All Our Kin*, first described these networks of kin and shared resources that shape poor family structures.¹⁷¹ Rather than holding onto and upholding the nuclear family as the primary form of the family, churches could encourage a diversity of family structures already seen in working-class families. Churches could look to ways to encourage and mimic this structure of mutual support and sharing of resources, found first in Acts 2 and now seen in working-class families. One possibility is to consider the idea of forming intentional communities of single mothers.¹⁷² The radical idea of placing single parents together where they can support each other in a mutually beneficial space is outside of the ways that many in American Christendom understand church presently, but it is

¹⁶⁹ Rubio, 11.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 93.

¹⁷² Gardner, 39.

not outside the context of Scripture nor what is currently being done in working-class neighborhoods already.

Sabbath Rest

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways that churches can affect single-parent families practically is to encourage Sabbath rest. While all of God's children need to practice Sabbath, single mothers particularly need Sabbath. As single mothers Adair and Dahlberg write, "rest becomes a privilege we [single mothers] simply cannot afford."¹⁷³ Single mothers, between full-time childrearing and full-time employment, get little in the way of rest. Churches should examine how they promote Sabbath as a practice, and specifically look to ways that they can support single parents find Sabbath in their own lives. Simple offerings like programs where childcare is offered so parents can have a night out go far to offer support to time-starved single parents. Ensuring that a single parent can worship fully on Sunday mornings while juggling children on their own is another key piece of Sabbath. Churches should observe how their own worship practices help or hinder a single parent's ability to worship. Eco-feminist theology, like that of Rosemary Radford Ruether, can give insight on how to encourage a culture of Sabbath for churches and single mothers.¹⁷⁴ Having an entire culture of Sabbath at churches will encourage Sabbath rest for families in general, as most families find it difficult to create rhythms of Sabbath for their families against the tide of fast-paced American culture.

Churches as Transformational Communities

¹⁷³ Adair and Dahlberg, 32.

¹⁷⁴ Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 207.

In the end, churches and their practical theology should point towards establishing the Kingdom of God here on earth. Churches should provide small glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven breaking onto earth as Christ promised. The end goal for families (and society) is *shalom*.¹⁷⁵ Churches should work towards *shalom* with their practical theology. Making sure that single parents also have *shalom* is a key piece of this transformation. “Single motherhood, particularly among young people, has often been regarded as one of the most severe social problems, a symptom of the decline of marriage and of the weakening role of “family values,” and thus as a marker of a lack of responsibility and a route to social exclusion.”¹⁷⁶ Churches unwittingly play a part in this social exclusion of single mothers unless they are intentionally engaging with single parents to understand how they are being excluded. Until single mothers (and all the other oppressed and marginalized people in society) are fully included as part of the Kingdom of God, churches will lack *shalom*. As churches make progress in including single parents, they can work for those same goals in the greater community. Churches can be activists for single mothers, going to bat for programs that support single mothers in their communities. Churches could be a catalyst in this sort of transformation. Churches are, after all, in the transformation business. Churches, along with families, should be reimagined as “redemptive communities.”¹⁷⁷ Churches should actively work towards making their own communities spaces of transformation that support single parents in every way possible. That is a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Conclusion: A Way Forward

¹⁷⁵ Balswick and Balswick, 293.

¹⁷⁶ Baranowska-Rataj, Matysiak, and Mynarska, 1473.

¹⁷⁷ Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 229.

A theology of the single mother has much to offer the church. The single mother challenges the church to reread the bible through a hermeneutic of the single mother, to care for the widows, orphans, and all of the marginalized and oppressed including the single mother, to reexamine patriarchal complementarian theology and understandings of the family to include a plurality of families, to create better understandings of theology based on the Trinity, the *imago Dei*, egalitarian understandings of gender, the Incarnation, and Holy Friendship, and finally reexamine how their theology affects single-parent families in tangible ways. The single mother reminds the church that all relationships are important and that no one and no family is “broken” in the eyes of God.

Christ offers an example of what heavenly relationships will look like in Matthew 22. Christ gives Christians a glimpse into what relationships in heaven will be like. The Sadducees asked Jesus who would be married to the woman who was married to seven different brothers in the resurrection, Jesus told them that they had missed the issue entirely (Mt 22:23-33). Instead, Christ tells them that “for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” Christ shows them that their earthly relationships do not continue into the resurrected life. As theologian Gilberte Baril writes, “the human institution of marriage will be transcended.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, a theology of the family should no more be based on earthly relationships than they are in the resurrection. This is an important reminder that single parents, though their families are fragile, will not be judged in heaven by their marital status or the “brokenness” of their families. Single mothers are no better or worse than those that are married. Marital status is not a

¹⁷⁸ Baril, 27.

consideration in the new creation, but how churches treat the poor and the oppressed is an important part of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth.

There is important work still to be done in how churches interact with single mothers. Academics and theologians have only begun to consider how single parents are affected by their communities. For example, as Bonnie Miller-McLemore pointed out in 1994, neither academia nor the arena of pastoral care and counseling has really addressed “the current practices and theological ideals of family, work, and love.”¹⁷⁹ In the past 20 years, little work has been done in this field, and even less research has been devoted to the single mother. This needs to be corrected. The feminist theologian Cynthia Rigby summarizes many of the questions still to be addressed regarding motherhood in general, but all of the questions equally apply to single parenthood:

“Now that women have entered into these vocations, the time has come for feminist theologians—along with all others who care about the welfare of women and children—to ask: How does the vocation of motherhood co-exist with the other vocations to which women are called? How is the promotion of the full humanity of children included in the feminist vision? And, very importantly, how may feminist theologians engage these issues without communicating that it is primarily their responsibility—as female scholars—to resolve them? As feminist scholars continue their work on motherhood and children, the responsibilities of fathers, extended family, and community members must continue to come into play. As woman's vocation should not be limited to motherhood, so all men and women should be engaged, in some way, in the work of mothering.”¹⁸⁰

These questions stem from a theology of the mother and affect a theology of the single mother. Scholarship needs to continue in these areas, especially as a plurality of families becomes the norm for society.

¹⁷⁹ Miller-McLemore, 25.

¹⁸⁰ Rigby, 546.

Single parents are vital members of the Body of Christ. They cannot be ignored in churches any longer. As the single mother and author of *Jesus and the Single Mother* Barbara Gardner asks:

“Why do you fear us? Why would you rather give your time to running the business concerns of the church, the schools, the rituals? Is it because you fear that we will ask too much of you? That we will open your eyes and heart to the real state of affairs of the world? ... When will you hear us? When will you make the “widows” (read: abandoned women) and “orphans” (read: children abandoned by their fathers) the center of your religion, as Jesus told you to?”¹⁸¹

Single mothers have long been excluded by their sins of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing and by lack of support by their communities of worship. It is past time to correct this error. Single mothers have a voice, if churches will listen.

¹⁸¹ Gardner, 136.

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