

a single view of relationships

Rachel Owusu-Ankomah calls us to our true identity



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‘When will you marry?’ or ‘is there anyone special in your life?’ seem to be common questions asked of singles at family functions or events with friends. Our society seems obsessed with who someone is seeing, dating, sleeping with, or married to. This fascination

is also present in the church, where not being in a relationship can make you a second-class citizen whose life will only begin when you find ‘the one’. Our relationship status has become heavily associated with our identity. Why is this, and is this a right approach to relationships?

Deep, intimate relationships are seen from the very beginning of the Bible in the Trinity, a complex loving relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, all being present at the creation of the world.¹ Out of this comes God's relationship with humanity, the triune God creating humans 'in our own image, in our own likeness'.² There is also recognition that it is not good for a man to be alone,³ a nod to what it means to image God relationally. These words usher in Adam and Eve's marriage. The Bible also ends with a marriage, the wedding of the lamb where the beautiful bride of Christ – the church – is with her bridegroom – Jesus.⁴ These Bible bookends and intervening stories about different sorts of human relationships, from Abraham and Sarah,⁵ Ruth and Naomi,⁶ David and Jonathan,⁷ to Jesus, Mary, and Martha,⁸ show that the connections we have with God and one another are important.

They are the ways through which God helps us navigate life and this world. Whether that's the means through which we hear the gospel and are saved,⁹ how we are disciplined and shaped,¹⁰ or encouraged by and pointed to the hope we have in Jesus Christ,¹¹ they ultimately should point us to him and his glory!

the fall of relationships

The plan was always God's people, in God's place, dwelling, communing with and worshipping him, thriving and flourishing in the world he created. Sin spoils that, as we declared that we want to live in God's world, our way, effectively living in his world, without him. The consequences are broad and far reaching. Primarily our broken relationship with God, but also broken relationships with one another, with our own bodies, and the world around us.¹² We can all reel off countless examples of broken relationships in our own lives and the lives of those we know. But how has our view of relationships been affected by the fall?

making good things, God things

As humans, instead of worshipping the creator God

we have turned to worship and give our efforts and attentions to other things, and that includes relationships in all their guises. This good thing that God has given us has for many become all consuming. Perhaps scanning the room at a Christian event in search of our future spouse, or pining away in our thoughts and fantasies about the perfect partner. We see this with the story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel.¹³ Tim Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* explains this story of a lovesick Jacob willing to do anything to get and sleep with the woman of his dreams, Rachel. We see a distraught Leah, hoping that the child born by her unloving husband will improve the relationship that has caused her so much misery. It's a mess; this family, descended from Abraham, and through whom the Messiah would come instead, look to sex and relationships as their saviour.¹⁴

the sexual prosperity gospel

Relationship idolatry appears in many forms. One that has been common in the church over the last few decades is the 'sexual prosperity gospel'. Coined by Katelyn Beaty, the term refers to promises that God will reward Christians who hold to pre-marital purity with amazing marriages to the

This doesn't mean that we should shun or avoid relationships for fear of putting them above God. Rather see them in their right place in light of our identity in Christ.¹⁷ As we seek to live a righteous life, we should we bring all of our thoughts and desires to God and allow him to shape them.¹⁸ In our relationships with one another we should remember that people are created in the image of God and are thus precious and valuable. We should treat them accordingly, not just in person, but also in our hearts and thoughts.

In his short book, *Purposeful Sexuality*, Ed Shaw makes the case that our sexuality is not only for marriage, pleasure and reproduction, but also to image God and his passionate love for us. This is helpful; as Christians we can be left thinking that our sexuality is just a stumbling block into temptation or an annoying driver that makes us crave for intimate relationships in unhelpful ways, regardless of our marital status.¹⁹

We should also seek to form authentic, intimate relationships where we love one another well, not just in the context of marriage, but as a family in Christ of brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers.²⁰

Within the church we also need to be mindful of our language and attitude towards relationships so as not to perpetuate relationship idolatry. Let's, for example, affirm and celebrate singleness in the same way we do marriage. In her podcast *Living single* – Yana Conner does this, seeking to move the conversation about singleness past contentment to celebration.²¹

Next time you are asked about your relationship status, how will you respond? Let's be people that live the better story and encourage others to do the same. Let's not be defined by our relationship status but by who God says we are. ■

perfect spouse, great sex and ultimate fulfilment. It arose out of the 1990s purity culture as an antidote to the hook-up culture present in the society at that time. The reality is it can set many of us up for a fall, thinking that when we get into that relationship or get married our struggles will be gone and our desires for intimacy completely fulfilled – something God never promises. As Beaty points out, when this teaching fails it can make people call into question the goodness and faithfulness of God.¹⁵

how do we live a better story?

For the Christian, our identity should first and foremost be in Christ. Who he is, who he says we are, and what he has done for us. He alone is our saviour and the one who gives complete purpose and hope.¹⁶

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