

Missionary Singles Issues: Identity

A conversation between two single teachers in an international school could go something like this.

Mary: “John, when I’m here at school, I know who I am and where I fit. I am on the faculty with people like you and I am a teacher to the children in my classroom. However, the only other missionaries here with our agency are a married couple. When I am with them, I feel like a third wheel. I’ve been very careful not to do anything flirtatious, but I am sure Jan sees me as doing so.”

John: “I know exactly what you mean, Mary. I’m fine here at school, but I feel different in my agency. Three other families are here with my agency, but the norm is ‘married with children.’ Whenever we get together, I feel like the odd man out because I don’t have much interest in discussing what to do with the kids or how to make time for my spouse.”

These single missionaries are talking about issues related to their roles and their identities.

Identity

Although there are a few hermits who withdraw from other people and live alone, most of us get much of our identity from our relationships with other people. Of course, we have our identity in our relationship with God as being his children, but we still need other people made in his image. We learn what our roles are as we interact with these other people, and much of who we are comes from living those roles.

Paul was a single missionary who knew his identity well. When in Jerusalem Paul was arrested as a mob became violent. Here is the way Paul gave his identity as he introduced himself to the crowd (Acts 22:3).

- I am a Jew (his cultural identity),
- Born in Tarsus of Cilicia (city of his birth where he learned Greek language and culture),
- But brought up in this city (Jerusalem as a Third Culture Kid where he learned to speak Aramic and to live in the Jewish culture),
- Studied the Jewish faith under Gamaliel (his religious identity through a famous teacher).
- He became a follower of Christ and Anannias who sent him to witness to everyone everywhere (verse 15).
- Finally, he revealed that he was a Roman citizen (verse 27).

Paul told about all of the cultures and people who had given him an identity. He knew who he was.

Likewise, Jesus knew who he was even at twelve years of age when he stayed behind in Jerusalem as his family left to return to Nazareth. When his parents found him with the teachers of the law and said they could not find him, he said, “Didn’t you know I would be in my Father’s house?” Then he went to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. He was clear about his identity as related to God in heaven and as related to his parents on earth.

Of course, we must remember that in Jesus’ culture he would become a man within a year, when he became 13. He was not six years from adulthood as he would be in Western culture today; he was a matter of months from becoming an adult at that time.

Identity vs Role Confusion

Unlike in the time of Paul and Jesus when teenagers knew their identity, teenagers today go through a period of time when they do not know who they are and where they fit. During this time of forced singleness these teenagers go through what Erik Erikson called an identity crisis and are confused about the roles they are to play.

During this identity crisis, teens are no longer children but the culture still does not consider them to be adults. So they have no specific roles to play and are confused about who they are and where they fit. The usual path to identity is to find work, settle into a community, become involved in a church, marry, and have children. As they take on more and more of these roles, they become more and more sure of their identity.

Unavailable Roles

Individuals who remain single past the age of adolescence find the roles of being a spouse or a parent generally unavailable to them.

- Husband. By definition an unmarried man is not a husband.
- Wife. Likewise, by definition an unmarried woman is not a wife.
- Father. In some places and some occupations a man is able to adopt a child and be a father, but it is often complicated in a host culture, and the child grows up with no mother in the home.
- Mother. Likewise, it is often complicated for a woman, and the child grows up with no father in the home.

People who are not committed Christians often want these roles, so they simply try living together without the

commitment of marriage and have children without being married. This disregard of God’s word usually does not lead to the satisfaction they are seeking. However, it does disqualify them from being Christian missionaries.

Single individuals who become missionaries find other common roles which are available but are also less likely to contribute to their identity.

- Work. Single missionaries usually join an agency in which the other workers are spread around the world so the single missionaries may never meet most of their colleagues in their agencies.
- Community. Although most single missionaries have a place they call “home,” they are seldom there. When in their passport countries they are often traveling to raise support. When serving in their host country, they do not see neighbors at “home.”
- Church. Although single missionaries have a home (sending) church, they seldom attend it because they are either raising support in their passport countries or serving far away in their host cultures.

Available Roles in Passport Country

Singles in their passport countries usually have the same spouse and parent roles unavailable. They often have more choices of other roles available to them, and they can join these roles as well. With more Christians around, they tend to form interest groups in which fellowship is around these other interests so that it makes little difference whether individuals are married or single. Here are some examples.

- One church has a NASCAR Sunday school class of about 50 people, both

male and female. Conversation before and after Bible study revolves about cars and races.

- Another pastor and youth worker have become storm chasers. It makes no difference whether one is single or married when chasing a tornado.
- Another church has a knitting/crocheting group. Marital status makes no difference when putting yarn on a needle.
- One community has a book club and a garden club in which singleness makes no difference.
- When spending the weekend hunting or fishing with the guys, marital status makes no difference.
- When attending a ladies night out to shop and watch a chick flick, marital status makes no difference.

The list is just about endless when it comes to clubs and interest groups both inside and outside the church. In these groups, the usual topic of conversation is whatever the group is about, so whether a person is single or married makes little difference.

Available Roles in Host Country

In many host countries where unmarried missionaries serve, marriage and parenting take more time out of people's lives, so married couples have less time for clubs or groups. In addition, far fewer such groups exist, especially in the single missionary's heart language. Therefore, it is much more difficult to find other roles which contribute to one's identity.

These roles can range from variations of parental and spousal roles to those quite unrelated.

- Godparents. For centuries in many Christian denominations godparents have

been responsible for things ranging from the child's baptism to his or her religious education. A male godparent is a godfather (in the classical sense, not the "mob" sense), and a female godparent is a godmother. Regardless of age unmarried missionaries can play this "parental" role.

- Aunts and Uncles. Family names and their roles are played by other members of the agency. Unmarried men about the age of the parents are often called "Uncle ____" and unmarried women are often called "Aunt ____" Sometimes older men and women are called Grandpa and Grandma.
- BFF (Best Friends Forever). A current term people who text use for individuals in a David and Jonathan relationships is BFF. Such a person is one who is always there for you no matter what happens. With the commitment of agape love and the intimacy of phileo love such people are invaluable assets.
- Mentoring. Whether being mentored or doing the mentoring, either role in these wonderful relationships gives one a sense of identity.
- Colleague. Close relationships with others at your own level, such as fellow teachers, fellow physicians, are roles that give identity to those who are playing them.
- Face-to-face relationships are usually the most meaningful. However, with skype or other such means at our disposal free of charge, such relationships may be valuable and enduring.
- Connections with Christian nationals may be very rewarding and fulfilling. They may name their children after you or become "Mom" and "Sis" to you. As such you become part of their family.

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