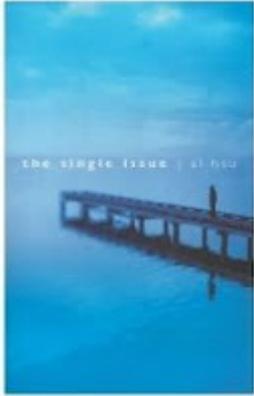


Review: The Single Issue



Al Hsu's *The Single Issue* should have been called "The Person Issue." It is a book that is meant to be about singleness – it certainly is that – but it so well-handles the issue that it provides an excellent insight into life itself, the place of relationships, community, marriage, celibacy and God-given identity. Without realising it, I think Al Hsu's has provided an excellent work on the spiritual disciplines of life – no matter what your marital status.

I was lent the book by a friend of mine as a means of preparing for our current sermon series on "Money, Sex, Power." There is plenty of material on sex and sexuality (consider my previous review of the book *Sacred Sex*) and its expression in married life. What material out there affirms both sex and singleness without seeing them as uncomfortable guests in an awkward conversation? A lot of writers are condescending at best and deluded at worst when it comes to commentary on sexuality and singleness. Al Hsu brings a contribution that is biblical, meaningful, applicable, and delightful.

Hsu recognises that there is an overemphasis on married life in the church and a misplaced ideal. The church's response to the sexual liberation of the 20th century has meant an idealisation of the nuclear family – and the Christian single person comes under a significant amount of pressure and expectation to marry and fit into that ideal. But Hsu asks:

"Is there an alternative to all this? Can Christian singles find a positive view of singleness that moves beyond traditional expectations and stereotypes? However one might classify or categorize today's singles, several things are clear. One is that singleness itself does not determine a

particular lifestyle... More significant is our attitude towards being single and how we choose to live as singles.

“To that end, singles are asking many questions. ‘Am I to be single for ever, or will I eventually marry?’ ‘What is God’s will for my life as a single person?’ ‘How do I satisfy my needs for companionship and relationship?’ ‘What is my identity in a world of married couples?’” (p28-29)

And so Hsu does a fantastic job of unpacking singleness – it’s history (chapter 2) and biblical expression – and the many misconceptions concerning it. For instance, “the significance of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 is that it affirms that *single persons are no less whole people for lack of marriage*, in contrast to Jewish thought.” (p35) Later on he uncovers the incorrect Greek mythology of “soul partner” that lies behind the prevalent thought in Western culture that “each one of us is an incomplete half searching for the perfect other half who will make us whole. This belief runs completely counter to biblical teaching.” (p76)

He also does well to unpack the issue of God’s will when it comes to marriage – not just the general will of God but the particular will that causes people to perhaps even blame God for the lack of a partner. In this regard he gives an excellent exegetical exposition of the concept of the “gift of singleness.”

“... the ‘gift of singleness’ is not something that must be spiritually discerned or subjectively felt. Singles do not need to search their hearts to see if they are truly able to live as contented singles. It is not some supernatural empowerment for some function of ministry. Rather, the gift is a description of an objective status. If you are single, then you have the gift of singleness. If you are married, you don’t. If you marry, you exchange the gift of singleness for the gift of marriedness. Both are good. Simple as that.”

(p61)

He then affirms how singleness is indeed a gift – providing freedoms and opportunities that are not available to the married person. And I love how he demonstrates how holy singleness expresses God's love just as much as holy matrimony:

“By not having a spouse, a single person is free to build many relationships with many people. In this way, the single adult is an example of the fact that God loves all people, not just a few. While married Christians emulate God's exclusive love, single Christians demonstrate God's non-exclusive love.” (p98)

The two chapters of the book that have the most broad applicability are the chapters entitle “From loneliness to solitude” and “From aloneness to community.” These are chapters that unpack and help us not just with our marital status but with our *humanity*. There is much depth to these chapters and a constant drawing of a person to live their life for God in the *kairos* (time/opportunity) of the present. A summary seems trite, but it gives the broad idea – “Fellowship with God is the solution for loneliness. Companionship with fellow Christians is the cure for aloneness.” (p138)

Finally Hsu touches on the issue of sex and sexuality. He does not waiver from the biblical view of marriage being the only place for sexual intercourse. But he is never negative. Here we have pure sweetness of beautiful, counter-cultural truths. “Sex is a drive, not a need,” (p173) he asserts. “It is no higher calling for singles to be celibate than for married couples to be monogamous.” (p177) Celibacy is not a denying of sexuality, rather celibate people are “fully aware of themselves as sexual beings but who express their sexuality in a celibate way.” (p178)

Even here the application is not just for singles – but for all those who struggle to express sexuality in a godly way. The world cries out for us to express our every whim – whatever comes “naturally.” But as Hsu asserts:

“The answer to this point of view is to recognize that the Christian life is rarely ‘natural.’ Far from it. It is not natural to love your neighbour, or to turn the other cheek, or to forgive someone who has wronged you. In the same way, resisting sexual temptation – or any kind of temptation – is not the ‘natural’ thing to do.”(p183)

And applies:

“Instead of fighting an endless and losing battles against sexual temptations, a more constructive approach for Christian singles [and I would add married people as well] is to come to view sexual temptations as an affirmation of our identity as sexual beings – and also as a reminder of our dependence on God.” (p180)

This is an excellent book. I have a couple of small quibbles - I think he overemphasises advice for people to wait for a while before they get married – I can see his point, yet I cheer for young people in their early twenties (even late teens) who are willing to step up to the plate of commitment – for that is also counter-cultural. But this book is a good read – especially for singles, and those who are struggling with their singleness – but this book would be a benefit for anyone seeking to engage with the deep things of life.

