

“Arise from the Dust and Be Men”: Responses to President Benson’s Address to Single Men

A Lone Man in the Garden

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I AM A DIVORCED FATHER WITH TWO BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN. Married for eleven years, I have been divorced for ten. I continue to experience the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood, I consider myself a member in good standing, and I remain sealed to my children. But because I have not remarried and because I have received a cancellation of sealing to my ex-wife, I am technically in the same category as the never-married. I am not eligible to obtain “a fullness of glory and exaltation in the celestial kingdom” unless and until I remarry. I am devoted to my religion, however, and I want to see the Church lovingly include and encourage all members to become active participants, so I accepted this chance to share some of my observations and experiences.

In the 1988 April general conference priesthood session, President Ezra Taft Benson addressed the single adult brethren of our Church concerning the need to take on the responsibilities of marriage. Although his speech focused on the never-married male, the implications apply equally to all unmarried adult male members, including the divorced and perhaps the widowed. (I qualify the category “widowed,” because although widowed men are often encouraged to remarry and provide the means for another sister to enter “the fullness of celestial

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glory," they themselves, if they have been married in the temple and are members in good standing, are viewed as having fulfilled their covenants honorably.)

When I heard President Benson's speech, I must admit my emotions were mixed. On one hand I was very pleased to hear President Benson address the issue of the single male in the Church. For too long the singles issue has been seen only as a woman's problem. Also, the fact that the highest rate of inactivity in the Church lies among divorced males and the second highest among never-married males marks this issue as urgent.

On the other hand, the speech was painful to me, not just because it was reminding me of obligations and calling me to change, but because of its tone and approach. And this was disconcerting because I have been raised to accept unquestioningly the authority of Church leaders.

I do not take issue with the doctrine expressed in the speech or with the right of the prophet to call members to change their ways. This is, after all, his right and calling. As for marriage, I believe that two people in a good relationship, loving and supporting one another equally through the trials of life and, if possible, creating children, is wonderful and good. And I know that happily married couples can experience a higher level of joy than a single person. I know this because the times I feel the most like "a lone man in the Garden of Eden" are those times when something especially positive or pleasurable happens and I have no one to share it with. Sharing happiness is truly a higher experience than feeling happy by yourself. We singles often repeat the adage, "There are a lot worse things than being single." And we are right, but we must likewise admit that there are also better things.

The tone of President Benson's speech also troubled me. I heard his words as those of an adult lecturing a child. Singles are perhaps overly sensitive to this approach because they often find themselves treated as eternal teenagers both in their wards and in their immediate families. Too often adulthood comes to be defined by marital status rather than by age and maturity.

To be fair, I realize the limitations of any speech given in a conference setting. It must be directed at an audience with a wide and diverse spectrum of emotional, intellectual, and cultural backgrounds; it is restricted by time; it must quickly develop an ideal goal based on doctrine; it must be translated into teaching examples; and it must end with a call for behavioral change. This is not an easy achievement for any speaker. I also recognize that the prophet is often viewed as a father figure representing our Father in Heaven and that he frequently speaks to the membership in that capacity. However, in a speech that called

me at age forty-eight to radically change my lifestyle, I would have felt more comfortable being addressed as a brother and a fellow adult.

But this father-to-errant-child approach by itself would not have evoked such a strong reaction to the speech. It was President Benson's concluding quote from 2 Nephi 1:21 that troubled me most: "Arise from the dust, my sons, and be men." Not only did I feel that this placed me in company with Laman and Lemuel, but that my very masculinity and adulthood were being questioned as well—simply because I was not married. My first highly emotional response to this quote preempted the logical and intellectual responses upon which I usually pride myself. I also felt that an issue I find complex was being treated simplistically. The message this quote sends to an often already sensitive audience is, "O.K. children, quit playing childish games and grow up. It's time to change your ways." To an adult male who has never married and who has spent a lifetime developing his particular personality and life patterns, this implies that profound change is simply a matter of saying, "I will." Yet very seldom is willpower alone successful. And to divorced males it implies that there are no complexities involved in their situations. It is just the inevitable complexities involved in any divorce, however, that so frequently lead these men to inactivity.

One of the major complications that all single males in the Church must deal with is guilt. The assumption is often made that single males are committing sin by choosing to remain in that state. According to this reasoning, they are not only keeping themselves from obtaining the celestial kingdom, but they are responsible for not helping some worthy sister to achieve her exaltation as well. In effect, then, they are not living up to their priesthood obligations. They often feel this guilt toward their parents and their Church leaders, because they sense that they have disappointed the very authority figures whose approval they most desire. It is also frequently difficult for them to seek counsel and aid from their bishops or other Church authorities, who are generally neither single, divorced, nor professional counselors, and who frequently have a difficult time relating to the pain and problems of their single brethren. We can assume, perhaps, that as the number of divorces in the Church continues to increase, so will the number of divorced authorities; but if the sensitivity of our leaders is left to evolve through slow experience unaided by education, many good members will be lost meanwhile.

Guilt is also inculcated into divorced males by priesthood lessons that define the husband/father as the steward responsible for the happiness and success of the family unit. These lessons facilely reassure the Mormon husband that as long as he is living the commandments and

doing everything the Lord would have him do, his family will be blessed and problems will be alleviated. When divorce occurs, then, the implication is that it must be the husband's fault. The ensuing sense of guilt is often reinforced during interviews; not many men can look their bishop in the eye and say, "But Bishop, I was living the gospel perfectly."

The Church needs to emphasize that during a divorce the pain and the free agency of all parties must be considered. One person cannot be held totally responsible for every idea and action of other family members. Traditional stories and generalized statistics usually indicate that the male's actions are at least the immediate causes for a divorce. But the Church must look beyond statistics and treat each divorce as a unique situation. We should strive to salvage all the souls involved with the least amount of self-imposed guilt.

Frequently, to lessen guilt feelings over divorce, a man will seek a second marriage for all the wrong reasons: to repent, to grasp at a second chance, to avoid being alone, etc. Another divorce often follows, and his sense of guilt is multiplied; this second failure convinces him that he must be at fault. This guilt, if not relieved by wise counseling, can become so unbearable that the only solution he sees is to remove himself from the sources. So he separates himself from God, parents, family, and church—all the authority he respects but feels he has disappointed.

Even in the best of circumstances the easiest path through life is to avoid obligations and commitments. A good marriage, however, usually provides each of its constituents with a partner who encourages the more difficult path. For unmarried people the Church itself becomes the partner from which we expect strength and support. So often, however, the Church unwittingly sends negative messages to its single partners. I mentioned earlier that single women in the Church are usually seen as victims of their situation and single men as perpetrators. We must recognize, though, that there are some women who, for whatever reasons, do not intend to marry. We must see that many men are as threatened by fears of rejection as their female counterparts and that men can also be misled and treated poorly. Neither sex holds an exclusive claim to victimization or exploitation; but because judgment is more frequently directed at males, many retreat into inactivity.

Another negative message too frequently received by single males is that they are second-class Church members. They see that the only single General Authorities are widowers. Occasionally a single male is placed on a general board or in a bishopric, but certainly not to serve as a role model. Yet single women frequently serve on general boards and in Relief Society presidencies for that purpose. For years policy at

Brigham Young University has restricted the hiring of single males but not single females. I recognize the Church's need to stress the ideal of the united family, but what about the ideal of individual worth? Single males are simply not respected in the same way as married males.

Another unfortunate message frequently sent to singles is the "marry at any cost" philosophy. Too often people marry because their biological clocks, their worthiness clocks, and their guilt clocks are all sounding alarms, amplified by Church teachings. The attitude that life begins at temple marriage is commonly taught in fairy tale marriage stories told to young Latter-day Saints as they grow and develop into adults. And adult single members often find themselves behind Church-ordained fences. In an attempt to meet their "special" needs, they are shuttled into single ward ghettos or single ward activities that separate them from "regular" members. Friends also usually try to introduce them to other singles rather than people with common interests, and more and more they find themselves pushed away from the mainstream membership of the Church.

Even in the priesthood, where all men share the same calling, mixed messages are sent. Married men are not taught how to be sensitive to their single brethren. There are no lessons that deal with divorce or singleness except for chastising statements such as President Benson's talk. The lack of such teaching and sensitivity does nothing to create a bonded brotherhood or a support system for single males. Men are notoriously harsh in their judgment of one another. And priesthood holders are taught to revere women and motherhood.

Sex roles established by tradition in the Church only reemphasize this: Men are seen as stewards, women as nurturers and comforters. So it is no wonder that, regardless of the actual circumstances, priesthood holders tend to see the man of the family as the guilty party in a divorce.

The single male must also face the constant problems of homophobia. Close male friendships from the age of twenty-five on are viewed with a jaundiced eye, especially between singles. Now that homosexuality is much more open, and much more frightening due to the threat of AIDS, Church members are even more suspicious and judgmental. It is probably for this reason more than any other that single men in the Church do not form more support groups and do not show physical recognition or acceptance by hugging or even placing an arm on the shoulder of another man. They don't touch. This fragile public image of the heterosexual single affects fellowshiping and social activity. It also causes economic problems for the single male because he is reticent about finding a roommate to share living costs.

There are other problems specific to divorced males that put stress on their active membership. In most divorce situations it is the husband who is cast out of the home, the family, the quorum, the ward, and the neighborhood. All of his immediate support systems are stripped away and he must establish new ones at a time of great emotional stress. Moving to a new apartment and ward, adjusting to a new lifestyle, separation from loved ones, and building new relationships are difficult activities in the best of circumstances; added to the pain of a divorce, the difficulty is multiplied a hundredfold. And on top of all this, the divorced father must now also support two households. Sometimes he may find himself reduced to a choice between paying either tithing or child support. If he reneges on either, he forgoes a temple recommend, which curtails his activity in the Church at the very time he needs it the most.

Those who have divorced know there is no way of receiving absolute fairness under the law. Children cannot be equally shared, household goods and material property can never be divided to the complete satisfaction of both parties involved. Almost inevitably, each divorced person sees his or her circumstances under divorce law as unfair. When the Church stands behind the law, it is frequently seen as equally unfair. Of course the Church upholds the law to maintain order in society; but it must carefully explain this position to divorced members, or it may be perceived as an adversary.

Another common problem among singles is health. Usually singles—especially men—have poorer health than their married counterparts because they don't have partners encouraging visits to doctors or good eating habits. They are often overtired and overworked. Busy married people sometimes joke that they wish they had the freedom and leisure of a single male, but generally, the image of the free and easy lifestyle is a false one. Most singles have to do everything for and by themselves—work, care for children, shop, cook, clean, juggle church assignments, etc. There is no one with whom to share the work load. If there are children in the household they must play the roles of both mother and father. All these demands tax their stamina and their mental as well as physical health. Usually these people are too tired for dating and social engagements. To stay active in the Church they also must suppress their natural sexuality. The resulting loss of self-esteem is often demonstrated by a lack of interest in personal appearance.

The Church also needs to be aware of the pain that church attendance can cause the divorced male. Every time he enters the ward he is reminded of everything he has been taught his whole life to strive for and doesn't have—the family unit, loving children, participation in

scouting programs for his sons, daddy-daughter dates. If his family moves away because of his former wife's new marriage or for other reasons, the reminder of what he doesn't have becomes almost unbearable. When this pain is coupled with mixed messages from the Church, the excuse for inactivity looks better and better.

There is also a growing fear throughout society of child molesters, and singles are always more suspect than married men. Thus they are often overlooked as potential scoutmasters or youth leaders, which further separates them from the love and comfort of being near children. They themselves are so sensitive to these images that they sometimes become afraid to even pick up or offer to hold a friend's child, even when they literally ache for a child's touch.

Singles are also seen as threats to friends' marriages, which means that long-time friendships frequently are dissolved after a divorce. Many married couples become uncomfortable with single friends because the common ground has changed between them. To fill the gap they usually try to line the single up with another single acquaintance. They mean well, but this often places great pressures on a friendship just when friendship is needed most. Marrieds often do not recognize the single's fear of another failed marriage, nor do they understand that dating expectations are much different as people get older. Usually the single has learned from his experiences to see more clearly what characteristics he should look for in a mate. Not wanting to date just to date, he becomes much more selective. But he also recognizes he might get caught in the trap of defining an ideal that is impossible to find.

What then would I recommend to help alleviate the growing alienation and inactivity of the single male in the Church? I would ask first that the Church address the question: "Should all people be married?" What about those members who feel, for whatever reasons, that it would be unwise for them to marry? Some people do have personality abnormalities, low or homosexual sex drives, or a strong preference for the solitary life. Some simply suffer from an acute fear of marriage. Should these members be encouraged to marry and make two people unhappy? If they are wise enough to recognize characteristics that would be a problem in marriage, we should encourage them to seek help. But we should not encourage them to marry unless and until they are ready.

Church leaders at all levels should be taught more sensitivity to single issues and problems. Every attempt should be made to show singles they are loved equally in the eyes of God. Support groups should be organized. There should be less judging by peers and more equal treatment in callings. Singles should not be segregated from other members,