

Singles Adopting

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Welcome back. Today's question is, I'm curious about your thoughts regarding the growing trend of singles in the church adopting children. More specifically, is the biblical prohibition of sexual immorality simply a nominal command to keep sex within marriage for its own sake because God commanded?

Or is it also a safeguard that ensures children, the natural consequence of sexual intercourse, are birthed into a covenanted relationship? If the answer is the latter, should it also inform our views of singles adopting?

Or does it matter since the family structure is already fractured and the single person is trying to repair the breach? Does single adoption betray any aspect of God's designs? Or should an unmarried believer consider other factors?

There was recently a single adoption at my church and largely the women gushed with how brave this woman was to take this child on alone, how this is caring for widows and orphans like James Commands, etc.

The men I spoke with were much more sceptical and reserved in their praise, but they couldn't put their finger on why they were flummoxed, wondering if you could give some wisdom, a non-supporter for obvious reasons.

[1:10] Yes, this isn't an easy question to answer, and although the questioner might want to be anonymous, I have to go on the record. I think these sorts of issues should not be treated just with blanket statements.

They need to be treated with prudence that takes regard for the specific circumstances. However, prudence always operates according to principles, and so I can give principal approaches to thinking about these questions, principles that can be brought to bear upon specific cases.

And so here are a few principles that we should bear in mind when considering this. First, that when children are born into a biological family, that child is an expression of the one-flesh union of their parents.

That union exists prior to any economic arrangement, any legal covenant or deed. It exists prior to any political order, prior to any economic transaction or medical procedure.

In all of these things, it is something that arises in a context that's primarily defined by a loving union of two bodies. And that child is an icon, is a representation, a manifestation of the one-flesh union of the couple, of their parents.

[2:36] And so that's significant, that the child is, as such, one that is born from this one-flesh union of a man and a woman. And there are good things about that, that it's not just the child, the child is not a chosen project.

The child is not a mere decision on the part of the parents. It's a begotten infant, a begotten child that represents the union that they have between them.

And there are ways in which modern forms of reproductive technology violate and undermine this. IVF, things like that, are going against this order in ways that are troubling and concerning, specifically in certain forms, where there is surrogacy involved or where there is donor gametes.

Those are very concerning situations. And as Christians, we should be a lot more clear-sighted about these. Another principle to bear in mind is that this is one of those issues where, well, it's not so much a principle, but when we're dealing with this issue, we need to take into account just how sensitive an issue it is.

That this is dealing with the very form of family formation. And for many people, this will be an issue that strikes very close to the heart.

[3:57] The questions that we are raising here are questions that have implications for how some people relate to their children, how some people relate to their own identities, and how some people relate to their parents.

And so we need to treat this with sensitivity. On the other hand, we need to recognise that these issues are broader than individual sensitivities. They have to do with forms of social order that are just and unjust.

They have to do with procedures and legal structures that may be destructive of family order, that may be undermining what is good.

And so we need to take into account the very deep sensitivities that people bring to this debate, while also considering some of the broader questions that may strike against those, that may make people feel threatened.

And so it's important to deal with both, to recognise the presence of deep sensitivities in this debate, but also the presence of objective principles that can make people feel uncomfortable and threaten some of their things, some of the things that they hold most deeply, and some of their closest relationships as well.

[5:11] When we're talking about adoption, we're talking about something that comes as a response to a tragedy, the separation of a child from their natural parents. And our first priority over all else should be avoiding the tragedy rather than merely responding to it.

So if at all possible, if we want to restore a healthy relationship between child and parent, and natural parents, natural parents, so we want to ensure that they are not separated from their parents.

And to the extent that they are separated, we want to minimise that as much as possible. When we're talking about adoption, we're talking about something that should be an act of charity.

Now, as an act of charity, it does not mean that there are no complicated self-interest involved in the process. When we're talking about moral action, we often think in terms of self-sacrifice, altruism as purely disinterested action, that you're acting on behalf purely of someone else with no sense of your own interests.

And that, I think, misses an important part of the picture, that to act in a truly charitable way, you are seeking to have communion with that other person.

[6:30] So there isn't a sense of interest. You're not acting in a purely disinterested way towards the child that you adopt. You're acting in love towards them. You're taking an interest in them. And that taking an interest is different from disinterested action, but it's also different from purely self-interested action or action that's overly self-interested.

When we're talking about adoption, then we need to recognise that charity should be at the heart of it. It's putting the interests of the child above our own. And it also should be about, as such, resisting the dynamics of the market.

The market, although we may desire children, that does not give us a right to children. That does not make adoption appropriate. Just because people have a strong desire to have children, does not make it appropriate for them to be given the position of adopting.

Rather, adopting should be something that places the interests of the child as paramount, the well-being of the child. And so there is no right to adopt as such.

This is something that's become increasingly significant in the context of things like same-sex marriage, where it's presumed that since there is this couple that can't have children of their own, there is a right, first of all, for them to have marriage, but then also for them to adopt children.

[7:55] And that is something that we must resist. There is no right to adoption. Rather, the interests of the child must be placed as paramount in every single one of these situations.

We should also recognise that there is something about the shape of marriage that precedes the child, but opens itself up to the child. And so marriage is something that is ordered towards children

in a way that singleness is not.

Singleness is, as a vocation, not ordered towards children. Marriage, however, is. Marriage is ordered towards children in a number of different ways, not least the fact that there is a binding commitment between two people to live together in a loving union that is ordered towards people beyond themselves.

If this was purely self-interested, if marriage was purely about the interests of adults, divorce would be easy. Divorce would be, if you fall out of love, you can leave your marriage.

But the fact that marriage is ordered towards ends beyond those of the immediate ends and preferences of the married couple themselves is one of the things that makes it suitable for the bearing of children.

[9:09] We've increasingly de-institutionalised marriage, created an understanding of marriage that removes the stigma from divorce, removes the challenge to be faithful and lifelong in that union.

And for that reason, our marriages are less suitable for children now than they were before. It's one of the reasons fewer children are born, in part, because people don't have the security of a union that is truly committed.

And when that safety and security does not exist, that deeply committed action of bearing children is much more difficult to engage in because there is so much uncertainty.

There's so much that could fall through. When we're thinking then about adoption, we need to recognise that adoption is something that should ideally occur in a situation that has the same outward orientation, that same commitment, that same structure and security that marriage does. Marriage exists for the benefit of children. It opens up a couple to that end. And it's something that subordinates their personal ends to a greater end.

[10:27] It's ordered out beyond itself. It's ordered towards a certain form of hospitality. And so ideally, if we're having children, we want them to come into a context where they are welcomed.

That's one of the reasons marriage exists, to create a context of welcome, where the child is born into a context where the love that they are an icon of, that one flesh union, is a love that is lifelong in its commitment.

And so they have security in a loving, secure home, but they also have the security that they are the expression of something that their parents are so committed to that they will, they are an expression of their parents' love and their parents are so committed to that love that they will not allow it to be damaged, they will not allow it to be broken.

And that is the ideal situation that we should be seeking for. Now where that fails, ideally we want a situation that is most closely approximate to that, that has that same openness towards children.

There is also a significance in the fact that it is male and female. It brings together the two halves of humanity towards a common end, that they are brought together in a one flesh union that represents the union of humanity in its two halves, but also represents something about the broader character of society.

[11:53] Male and female are not just two people exercising parenting. They are the two sexes, they are distinct from each other. And as such, the child that's born into a relationship with a mother and a father, a natural mother and father, they are being trained and socialised socialised into the deeper order of society, a deeper order where they have mother and a father, where they relate to male and female.

And that relationship is not merely a matter of certain tasks that mother and father perform, their socio-economic benefits that accrue from having two parents or something along those lines.

Rather, it's, in large part, it's having these people who represent, who stand for, who are archetypes, who symbolise, who represent these deeper realities of male and female, working in loving concert with each other and representing something of how society should be, how society, in this relationship of marriage, expresses its welcome to those yet to be born.

And then, as that union is expressed more generally throughout society, that welcome is extended even further. And so, when children are denied that, they're being denied something very important.

When we think about children in the case of adoption, we often allow our very individualistic approach to identity to shape our way of thinking about these things.

[13:27] So the child is separated from its parents. We think of that child very much as an autonomous individual, an individual that's cut loose. We don't consider the way in which a child is bound up with a larger community too.

A child is bound up with a heritage, with a lineage. And if at all possible, the ideal of adoption should be to minimise the break as much as possible and to repair it to the greatest extent.

And that means that we should consider very carefully when we're talking about things like private adoptions and international adoptions, the ways that so many of these, first of all, so many of these approaches prioritise the interests of the prospective adoptive parents over that of the children, and also how they allow for a breach of the connections between children and their origins and their heritage and their lineage.

Rather than actually restoring that and building it up, the child is removed from their context entirely, removed from their original connections, their original world, and brought into something quite alien. It's associated in part with the way that adoption is very much a middle and upper class thing, associated with middle and upper class people adopting children from lower classes and from international contexts in many cases.

[14:53] It's also associated with the way that there is such a preference for private and international adoption for many people over adoption through the foster system.

The foster system is a far more direct way of helping one's neighbours, of being committed to one's neighbours' wellbeing, those people who are immediately in need in your local area and immediate context, as opposed to the wider concern of can we have a child and let's find a child that meets our preferences.

There is something about children that express the givenness of life, life, that life is not something we choose, that we may have a child that's disabled, severely disabled, mentally or physically. We may have a child that is not going to excel academically or vocationally. We may have a child that is going to have severe problems in their life and yet there's something about the givenness of life that we accept that.

And there's the givenness of our neighbour. Our neighbour has been given to us in a way. Our neighbour has been placed alongside us and we must take concern for our neighbour. And when we choose to involve ourselves in situations far afield over our neighbour, we need to ask deep questions about our preferences, deep questions about our priorities.

[16:22] This does not mean it's always wrong, but it means that there are real questions, moral questions that we must ask about ourselves. Is this adoption an act of charity that is placing the interests of others far above our own?

Or are we allowing our own interests to take priority here? And so this is another concern that we must take into account. Ideally, adoption needs to minimise the break between the child and their original context, their original family even.

And so we should not focus narrowly merely on the socio-economic well-being of children. We need to consider the broader context into which they come. Now, I've spoken already how marriage between a man and a woman is ordered towards something greater than themselves.

This is something that's often been lost in the context of same-sex marriage, where same-sex marriage does not have the same taboo around open marriage, does not have the same taboo around divorce and these sorts of things, because it's very much seen as being primarily in the interest of the couple.

And when child comes into that relationship, it's primarily on the interests of the couple. Now, this is a concerning break with traditional understandings of marriage.

[17:44] When we talk about the debates about same-sex marriage, it's been seen as a right about a matter of equality. Very few people have spoken about the way that marriage creates limits, that creates social norms, that we should not have sexual relations before marriage, that we should not have sexual relationships outside of marriage, that we should expect people to, if they are considering sexual relations, they should get married, and that marriage should be lifelong and exclusive.

Those sorts of social norms aspects of marriage, those institutional dimensions of marriage, have largely fallen by the wayside. Those have been downplayed. Rather, we're thinking about bespoke marriage.

What serves your preferences? What serves your needs as a couple? And if you've fallen apart as a couple, what serves your needs as a detached individual?

Now, this is not the way that marriage is supposed to be. Marriage being ordered towards an end beyond that of the immediate preferences of the couple, is something that has social controls on it, that relations between men and women are regulated by social norms, stigmas, and by certain institutional forms.

And this is, in large part, to secure the well-being of children. Where that does not exist, there are problems. We also need to consider the way that children are shaped in different ways by mothers and fathers.

[19:17] First of all, mothers and fathers, it's not just that mothers and fathers, mother and father, they stand for different things. And so, children will relate to mothers and fathers differently because they stand for different realities.

They stand for the male and the female half of humanity. And those different, what they stand for, what they symbolise, what they are archetypes of, is something that precedes even what anything that they do.

So, however the mother acts, she is acting as a mother. However the father acts, he is acting as a father. And so, that archetypal or that symbolic, that representational aspect of the parenthood is something that we've often missed.

We often think about parents merely in terms of the generic task of parenting, rather than in terms of what the parent stands for, what they represent. And we can see this often in the way that people respond in a very different way to the same thing coming from mother as it comes from father because mother and father symbolise different realities.

And they're not just interchangeable individuals. And this is the same, the same is true in an adoptive situation. The mother and the father are different. They stand for different realities.

[20:34] But even beyond that, mothering and fathering are different things. Mothers mother in a way that, and fathers tend to father. Fathers are more typically challenging of their kids.

They engage in more risky behaviours. They push their kids to greater boundaries. They encourage greater agency and self-mastery and a sense of agonism and individual strength.

And mothers are typically more unconditional in their love. They create a home. The home is created around the mother. mother. And she is the heart of that reality.

And when we lose the difference between mother and father, when we treat mothers and fathers as interchangeable, there is a deep denial of something that is integral to our humanity.

Now, the questioner asks why many men feel uncertain about this relationship with a single mother and an adoptive child. In part, it's because it's the suggestion that fathers are dispensable.

[21:40] I think we're seeing some of the effects of treating fathers as dispensable within our current culture. In part, the whole intense safety culture is what happens when you lose fatherhood, when you lose the sense of agency that fathers instill in their kids and inculcate in their families.

That sense of independence, of strength, of the ability to be robust and anti-fragile. And where that's lost, that form of parenting, you have a stifling sort of motherhood or nannyism.

And that is something that we're increasingly experiencing in our culture. As authority becomes feminised, there is something about fatherhood that strengthens us.

And where kids lose that, they are losing out on something very important. I think many of us realise that although both of our parents are tremendously committed people, if we come from intact homes, and we have deep and strong relationships with them, they cannot substitute for each other.

No matter how good they are, they cannot substitute for each other because mother and father provide something very distinct from each other, both of which are incredibly important.

[22:58] And if you lose one, you are saying something about one of the sexes that they are dispensable, that they are not really needed in the

task of raising children. And one of the reasons that marriage is so significant between a man and a woman is it's saying we need both halves of humanity to raise healthy people.

We need to learn to relate to male and female, whether we are boys or girls. We need to grow up in a way that we can relate healthily to women, and we can relate healthily to men.

Now if you're a boy, that involves being one of the guys, being able to grow into a man, to prove yourself as a man among men. And it involves being able to relate to women in a way that is appropriate, that works on their terms, that recognises and respects them.

Now where that is lost, there is a violation, I think, of a healthy social order. Now I've spoken earlier about the way in which adoption should ideally be about minimising the break and repairing the break to the extent that is possible.

When we consider that, I think it is appropriate in some situations that there should be single adoption. The single adoption can be related to someone who is closely involved with the life of the mother and father who have been removed from the scene or have proved inadequate as parents and in the best position possible to minimise the break and restore certain of the relationships.

[24:37] It's not ideal, but it can be a minimisation of certain amount of the breach. Also in the context of a foster system that is underserved by foster parents, I think there can also be a significant role played by single people on occasions.

But this is non-ideal. This is not the way that it should ideally be. Rather, it's something that is preferable to having kids in merely government facilities.

And so there can be benefits in single adoption. But it is not the ideal situation. There are a lot of principal reasons why we should be very cautious about it.

And ideally, we want to minimise the breach. And that breach, in part, is the breach with mother and father. mother and father, but for all that mother and father stand for.

The bringing together of the two halves of humanity in a unified reality that is lovingly committed to a common good, not just private self-serving ends.

[25:45] Putting all of these things together, I can see why people are concerned about these sorts of situations. concerned particularly when they seem to be driven by a prioritisation of the individual preferences and desires and rights of prospective adoptive parents over the concern of charity and placing the interests of the children as paramount.

There's a lot more that could be said about this, and I should not be understood as speaking directly to any specific situation. There are many things that mitigate specific situations that give them a particular character that demands a more conditional response, one that's more contingent upon the specifics of the situation.

But in these broad principal considerations, I think there are very good reasons to be very cautious about single adoption and to greatly prefer the adoption of a child into an intact family with a mother and a father.

Thank you very much for the question, and Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

And thank you once again to all of my supporters. Lord willing, as I said, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless, and thank you for listening.