

SINGLE

BY BEVERLY DALE

SATISFIED

CELEBRATING SINGLE WOMEN AND FEARLESS LOVE

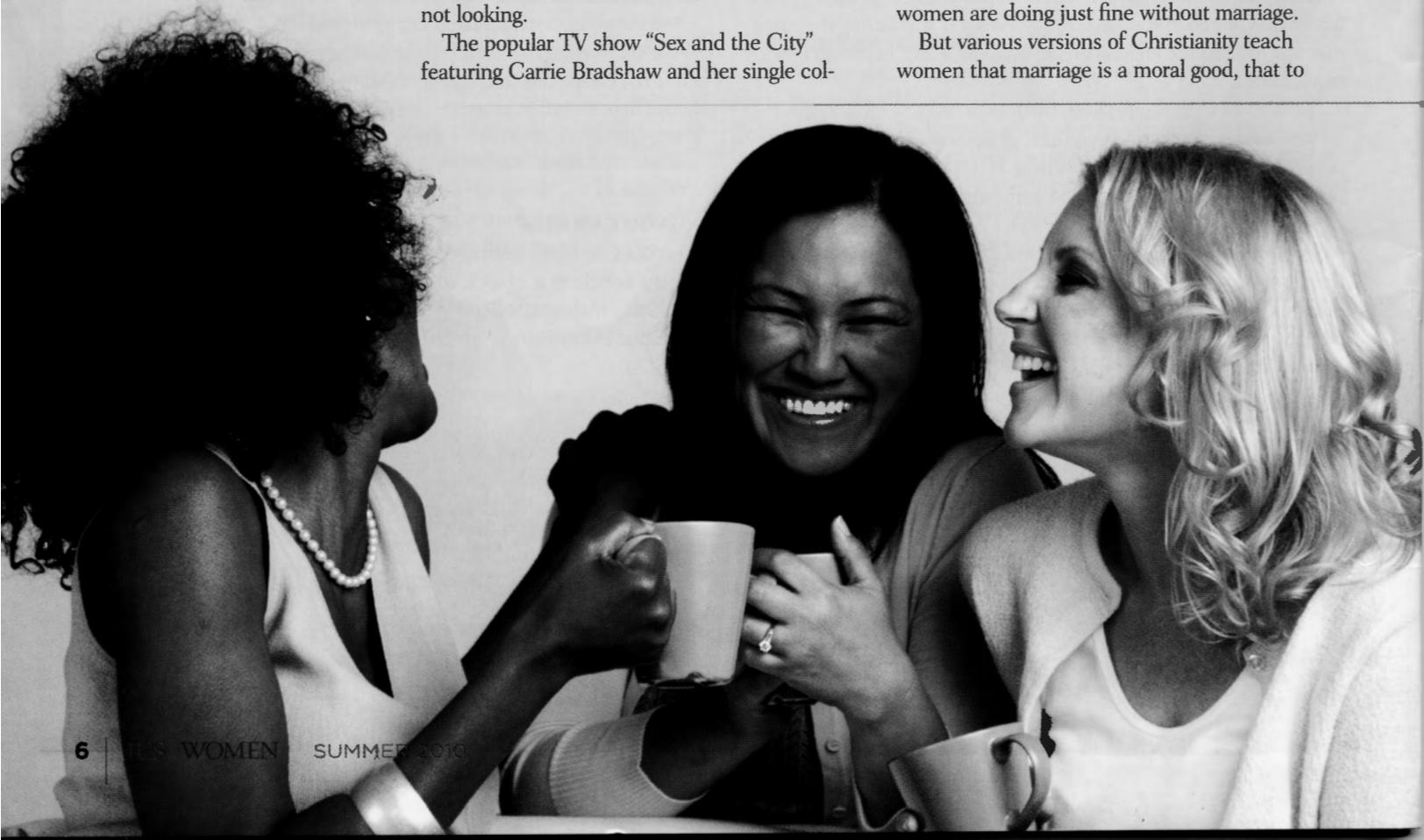
The results are in: The image of lonely, sad, old, poor women is, according to the AARP, based solely on stereotypes. In 2005, the number of single women in the United States first outnumbered those married. As demographer William Frey noted in a 2007 article in the *New York Times*, "For better or worse, women are less dependent on men or the institution of marriage. ... Younger women understand this better, and are prepared to live longer parts of their lives alone or with non-married partners."

This reality is borne out in earlier research from the AARP that revealed only a third of single American women between the ages of 40 and 69 were in an exclusive relationship; however, an astonishing 24 percent either had no interest in dating or were open to a mate but not looking.

The popular TV show "Sex and the City" featuring Carrie Bradshaw and her single col-

leagues reflects the reality that being single has many advantages, at least for white women of a certain economic level. It's also clear these single women are not constrained by religious guilt about sexual exploration, either. The show implies that if economic freedom is in place, single women are doing just fine without marriage.

But various versions of Christianity teach women that marriage is a moral good, that to



be a woman is to be a wife, and that sexual behavior can only be moral within marriage. So can Christian women celebrate singlehood as Carrie Bradshaw does? Can women be true to their spiritual path with or without a husband? Can faithful women be single and sexual?

I believe the answer to all of these questions is an unequivocal, "Yes." In fact, I'm convinced that single women are now freer than ever to spiritually discern who God is calling them to be, provided they are supported by a cultural acceptance of personal individualism and autonomy, the potential for economic independence, and reproductive and sexual self-determination.

We have the Protestant Reformation to thank for the current positive views of personal individualism and autonomy. By shifting the responsibility for one's faith to the individual and away from clergy authority, Martin Luther and John Calvin provided the roots for "individualism," even though the word was not used until much later.

Calvin is known to have asked, "What man in his 'sober senses' would want to call matrimony a sacrament?" He wrote, "God's ordinance is good and holy; so also are architecture, shoemaking, haircutting legitimate ordinances of God, but they are not sacraments." Such bold Protestant statements led the Catholic Church to make marriage one of the official seven sacraments during the 1500s. So, while Protestants today are likely to believe intimate, covenanted relationships between two people are sacred and blessed by God, we avoid sacramental language, emphasizing and valuing instead the personal autonomy to make individual decisions.

Individualism is consistent not only with most of the theology in mainline Christian churches but also in the culture at large, thanks to the push by various civil rights groups against hierarchical power arrangements. The women's movement addresses male power over women, the gay rights movement continues to challenge heterosexuality as normative, the civil rights movement challenges the unexamined assumptions of white privilege,

while womanists tend to challenge all of the above as inextricably linked. So, just as the early Protestant reformers challenged the autocratic authority of traditional Christian hierarchy, American cultural acceptance of individualism and the primacy of seeking personal fulfillment challenges beliefs in arguments for supremacy of power over others.

It's hard for us now to consider that a marriage-based life was so crucial to survival that early colonists wrote a 1636 law in Connecticut that read, "No man that is neither married, nor have any servant, nor is a public officer shall keep house of himself without consent of the town where he lives." And there is today a movement to promote traditional marriage as morally superior to other kinds of families or to remaining single. This view persuaded Congress, for example, to add to the Welfare Reform bill funds to promote marriage. When reauthorized in 2006, the bill included \$150 million to be spent annually for this purpose.

While pro-marriage proponents generally ground their views in a patriarchal and hierarchical understanding of family, employing the traditional Catholic language of "natural order," the focus on individualism creates a culture—and a church—that is more open to women in the public square as well as in the pulpit and in the labor force. This can, in turn, create the economic opportunities and independence portrayed in the women's lifestyles in "Sex and the City." It must be noted that economic independence and freedom are not automatic givens for single women, especially when race is taken into account. However, for those of us who take the Bible seriously, if not literally, are there biblical examples for single businesswomen and independent female change makers?

Christian women have never held the priorities of the expensive consumer goods of Carrie Bradshaw and her friends. Scriptures do note, in fact, that key financially independent women, many of whom were apparently single, had the economic freedom to generously support the early Christian movement. The Bible mentions Lydia, a businesswoman who sold purple textiles and who had the financial wherewithal to provide hospitality to the early

church (Acts 16:11–40). There were also Joanna and Susanna, along with “many others” (Luke 8:2–4), who provided direct financial support to Jesus as an itinerant rabbi.

In addition, there is a striking similarity between today’s cultural acceptance of individualism and Jesus’ central teaching, which contemporary theologian John Dominick Crossan summarizes as “radical egalitarianism.” The Mary and Martha story (Luke 10:38–42) reveals that Jesus commended women to step out of gender role categories if they limit their spiritual journey. His egalitarianism is also implied by his acceptance of a large number of female followers at a time when married women were considered property rather than autonomous persons in their own right.

Besides our cultural acceptance of individual freedom and the possibilities of economic viability for single women, the third component that makes for satisfied single females — according to “Sex in the City,” anyway

erroneously called the “bride”) in the Song of Songs. She sings her poems of love and sexual attraction to her beloved self-confidently and with exuberance and abandon. This is a woman who, defying convention and her family’s wishes, seeks out the sensual and erotic reciprocity of her lover, all freely given without the entanglements of a legal marriage arrangement. According to Hebrew scholar David M. Carr, the Song of Songs, “stokes the fires of the imagination, getting explicit enough to get the flames burning, yet not dousing them with the water of description” (*The Erotic Word: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Bible*, Oxford, 2005).

Now while it is true that mainline churches tend to maintain a huge, silent void when it comes to practical discussions about positive sexual decision-making for mature single adults, the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalists have developed an extensive sexuality curriculum called “Our Whole Lives” for kindergarten age through old age. This curriculum can

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— is sexual expression. Research shows that single women continue to be sexually active, regardless of any public policies that might promote abstinence until marriage.

A woman is able to control her own reproduction, first, through the technology of affordable and available contraception and, second, with the legality of abortion, if this is the option she believes is best. Christian women have the freedom to pursue, thoughtfully and responsibly, a sexual ethic that embraces the body — with its passions and pleasures — as the divine gift that it is.

When thinking about sexuality, Christian women might want to consider the incredible, uncensored sensuality of the single biblical woman (sometimes

help Christians think through a moral sexual framework consistent with affirming religious values.

A well-informed sexual ethic and a well-considered sexual expression among single women of faith can have great moral significance. In her classic essay, theologian Mary Pellhauer challenges us to consider the significance of the female orgasm not just for ourselves but for the wider world as well. She writes, “Ecstasy spills over onto the world outside the bed, not accidentally but intrinsically. It awakens rejoicing, but more: wonder and reverence, the poignant astonishment that we are here, that we live, that anything at all is here, that life can unfold such bursting joy” (in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, edited by James

Nelson and Sandra Longfellow, Westminster John Knox, 1994).

As these three issues converge—the cultural acceptance of personal individualism and autonomy, the potential for women’s economic independence, and women’s sexual self-determination—single women can celebrate that they do not have to be locked into the same old, gendered jobs if their interests lie elsewhere, accept unhappy marriages because of a belief that God expects women to sacrifice themselves on the domestic altar, or choose ill-advised husbands because they are unexpectedly pregnant with no other options.

Now women can begin to spiritually discern who God is calling them to be in this wounded world. Unencumbered by marital and possibly familial responsibilities, this freedom can be used for deep, inner listening to God’s voice. For their book *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women* (Bantam, 1992), Sherry Anderson and Patricia Hopkins conducted interviews with female spiritual leaders from various faith traditions to discover commonalities of women’s spiritual journeys. To their surprise, they found themselves being asked repeatedly by interviewees if they had found other women who could be true to their own spiritual path while also being in a relationship with a man. The stunning and honest answer was that they had found very few. Anderson and Hopkins concluded that women are trained to be in intimate relationships with men in such a way that can actually impede their spiritual lives and spiritual callings.

Is it possible for Christian women to use their time of being single to take charge of their spiritual lives in new ways? To live sexual and faithful lives with authenticity and honesty? To use their economic independence to help other sisters on the journey? Can single woman step forward as leaders in the faith in ways that married people can’t?

I believe overwhelmingly, yes, they can. Single women are in a position to consider seriously how best to put God first in their lives, to dream, plan, vision, and most importantly, as did the women in the early church, take leadership in creating the realm of God “on Earth as it is in Heaven.” This must be done fearlessly. It must be done out of the passionate energy that comes from loving ourselves and our lives. This then spills out to the wider world. It is what Melissa Etheridge calls “Fearless Love.” She sings, “I am what I am, and I am what I am afraid of. Oh, what am I afraid of? I need a fearless love ... I want to live my life pursuing all my happiness. I want a fearless love. I won’t settle for anything less.” So, celebrate, sisters! Celebrate being single with a fearless love!

To learn more

Study questions for this article are available at www.discipleswomen.org.

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