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Christian and Single

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A funny thing happened to Jana Bennett on the way to writing a book about the plight of being Christian and single.

She fell in love and got married.

Bennett, assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton, still stands by the premise of her first book, *Water is Thicker Than Blood: An Augustine Theology of Marriage and Singlehood* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Christians who are single are often treated as inferior citizens in their churches. Being single can — and should be — a vocation, she contends.

"In the Catholic church, there are two vocations. You either get married or you join a religious order. Single people are treated more like second-class citizens in the church," said Bennett, who talked about the book this month at the annual conference of the Society of Christian Ethics in Chicago. "All you have to do is look at the number of events for families and couples compared to those for single people in Sunday church bulletins."

The book's title suggests that, in contrast to popular belief, the bond of baptism remains stronger than family. The spiritual life should be more meaningful and go deeper than the love even for family, according to Bennett.

"A lot of my single friends would pine away, 'When will I find The One?' I thought, 'This can't be a way to live life, to always be wondering if the next person would be The One.' To pin all your hopes on meeting a mysterious person you don't know yet shouldn't trump a relationship with Jesus Christ, whom we've already met."

When Bennett was single, she joined a Christian community of six other single adults at Duke University, where she earned a Ph.D. in 2005. Housemate Joel Schickel, adjunct professor of philosophy at the University of Dayton, moved out and they began dating. Married for almost four years, they have a 14-month-old daughter, Lucia.

Bennett, who teaches classes in Christian marriage as well as ethics and faith and justice, contends there's plenty of room for both single and married people in the church. Early theologians glorified the monastic lifestyle, while contemporary thinkers espouse the value of strong marriages and families.

"I devote a section of the class to being single and choosing that lifestyle," she said. "Even if we choose to be married, we'll probably find ourselves single at one point. My recommendation is that both single and married people find ways to move past the dichotomy. I encourage people who are single to teach Sunday school, even if they're not parents. If you're baptized, you're considered a parent to others."

Bennett cannot offer a prescription for every Christian who's single, but she urges them to "do the radical things the Gospel calls us to do," such as working in a soup kitchen or visiting the elderly. "Be with the homeless. Be with the hungry. Be a family that practices hospitality."

Bennett described St. Augustine, a fifth century bishop and prolific writer, as "a seminal figure people turn to again and again for views on sex, marriage and family." Relying on his writings, she uses her book to show that marriage and singleness cannot be considered separately.

"I tell students that it's ok to be single. I question whether our love affair with marriage is the best thing," she said. "We get so obsessed with the high divorce rate without thinking that the problem could sometimes be marriage (to the wrong person)."

"Some people," Bennett said, "are called to be single, to become disciples of Christ. A sense of family can come out of that."

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