

ONE
BY
ONE



WELCOMING THE SINGLES
IN YOUR CHURCH

GINA DALFONZO



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A NOTE ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS IN THIS BOOK

To provide a range of perspectives on being a single Christian beyond just my own, I sent out a number of questionnaires to single friends and acquaintances who had agreed to share their thoughts and feelings on the subject of singleness. These interviewees represent a wide range of ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, and denominations. Names have been changed where requested. I have italicized all quotations from these interviewees to make it as easy as possible to distinguish their words from other quotations in this book.

These interviews were conducted over a number of years, as I worked on the book. Since being interviewed, some of the participants have married, but a number of them are still single. Regardless of their current marital status, all of them have had experience with prolonged singleness and had good, thoughtful insights to share. I'd like to thank them for their help.

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Thanks most of all to Jesus Christ, my Lord, my Savior, and my Rock. In You is life.

INTRODUCTION

“Do you have children?” asked the nice lady in the church restroom after I had introduced myself.

“No,” I replied, and added, “I’m not married.”

Sudden, awkward silence.

This little dialogue—what there was of it—will be instantly recognizable to most single Christians. To announce your singleness is very often the way to bring a conversation with a fellow churchgoer to a screeching halt.

Here’s a commenter called “Daisy” at the *Wartburg Watch* blog:

If you . . . when asked (even at church or church functions), “Are you married/ have kids?” . . . say “No, never” the person gets quiet real fast and doesn’t know how to talk to you after. You’re made to feel like a freak.¹

And here’s a story from my friend Fiona:

The last women’s retreat I attended had an icebreaker activity the first night. Every question assumed that women were married with children and did not work

outside the home. One of the icebreakers was “If you have more than three children, move to the table behind you and get to know others at that table.” A young woman came to my table, and her first question was “Well, how many children do you have?” When I replied, “I don’t have any children. I’ve never been married,” she said in a pitying voice, “Oh!” and with a stricken look on her face shrank back in her chair in silence.

To understand the experiences of Daisy, Fiona, myself, and many, many others, you have to understand that today’s church—particularly the evangelical Protestant church—sees itself as deeply, irrevocably family-oriented. At a time when divorce, cohabitation, and teen pregnancy are rampant, the church has taken its stand in favor of doing things the biblical way: married parents raising children in the fear and admonition of the Lord.

It naturally follows that families, especially families with children, are honored, encouraged, supported, and praised by the church. And that’s a good thing. Parents of young children are doing a tough and often thankless job; I’ve taken care of enough children in my life, even though only temporarily, to know that. They need all the encouragement and support they can get.

What the church doesn’t always understand is that single Christians need encouragement and support too.

On the Margins

I do not feel that the church has been supportive of me as a single. I have had pastors, elders, and their wives say

to me that [my church] is not a good church for older singles. (“Why do you attend here?”)—Erin

I think that churches don’t know how to minister to singles—because protracted singleness is such a new phenomenon and so many churches are trapped in wishing that it was still the 1950s.—Ashley

A single stands out as apart from the crowd, and not in a positive way. There are no invitations to lunch after church or other social gatherings, mainly because I don’t really “fit in.”—Jim

*I think nowadays the church has put so much focus on the nuclear family (especially ones with children) that anything other than that gets pushed to the wayside.
—Robyn*

Frankly, a lot of the time, the church simply doesn’t know what to do with the single and childless. We haven’t followed the standard path. Marriage seminars and couples’ weekends are not for us. There aren’t a lot of sermons about how we should navigate our lives and relationships—and when there are, as my friend Eric once remarked, they usually boil down to “Don’t have sex.”

We don’t have children in AWANA and Sunday school. The ushers aren’t supposed to hand us roses on Mother’s Day. We can’t talk diapers and homework and lost retainers and three a.m. feedings. (Well, we can, if we have extensive experience with friends’ babies and young relatives, or even if we remember some of our own childhood experiences. But honestly, most people don’t expect or want us to have

much to say. Why hear from the dilettante when you can go straight to the experts?)

And seeing as how most of us have never had the chance to practice the daily, selfless love that having our own family requires, we *must* be arrogant and self-centered, as well as ignorant about all these really important things in life. It stands to reason.

Not only that, but we're living, breathing contradictions of certain teachings that have become pervasive in the evangelical church. Generations of young churchgoers have been taught that if they just stay abstinent until marriage, if they properly practice dating or, more often, courtship, they'll be blessed with great, sexually fulfilling marriages.

But what of those of us who did follow the rules and have remained single into our thirties, forties, and fifties? We're the bad examples, the anomalies, the ones you *don't* want to teach the kids about . . . even if we did everything right. Who wants to stand up in front of a Sunday school class or youth conference and say, "Be abstinent until you get married—and oh, by the way, it's possible you'll never get married"?

The head of the organization I work for, John Stonestreet, knows something about this unenviable task. John frequently speaks to Christian homeschool groups, and when he does, he sometimes quotes from an article I wrote about "princess theology" (the teachings about how "you're a princess and God will bring you a knight" that are so popular with many Christian educators).² John sets out to disillusion his young listeners gently about those princesses and knights. He breaks it to them that, in fact, following a specific formula does not necessarily mean God will give them a spouse.

John tells me that many of these students, especially the girls, get really upset over this. This is not what they've been taught, and it's definitely not what they want to hear. I feel sorry for those kids, but I'd feel even sorer if they were to keep believing that lie and then blame God for not making their dreams come true. Or if they committed to chastity unaware of what it might require of them and then ended up walking away from their faith altogether when that commitment required more than they believed they could handle, as so many have done.

I've actually asked a few Christians to try to imagine going fifty-two years without sex. The look I get is pretty interesting.—Carole

As I was working on this book, a story broke on social media about Christian football player and abstinence advocate Tim Tebow getting dumped by his girlfriend over “lack of sex.” Who knows how accurate it was—probably as accurate as any given trending headline on Facebook, which is to say, maybe possibly a tiny bit accurate (but not much). The point is, as one might expect in this day and age, the internet was soon overrun with mockery of Tebow and his beliefs.

For about half a second, I thought of sending him a “Good for you” message, just to counter it all. Then I thought better of it—not just because my one puny message would most likely get lost in the social media flood but also because a young man who's dedicated to chastity probably does not want to hear “Good for you” from a forty-year-old celibate woman. It'd be like getting a “Welcome to the Lonely Hearts Club” letter from Miss Havisham. However faithful

and devout Tim Tebow is, it's safe to say that I am the person he does *not* want to become.

And yet, somehow, we anomalies are fast becoming the norm. Many people have tried to figure out why. The problem is that even when their intentions are good their understanding is often incomplete.

An Insider's View

Some women have occasionally alluded to the fact that I spent a lot of time pursuing my career/education, and that might have affected why I am still single. I understand the point somewhat, but I despise it when it is cast in a certain tone. If I happened to meet the right man while I was in the process of all these things, I would have certainly wanted to marry him. Should I have sat around and not pursued these things and waited for marriage to happen instead?—Bea

In June 2010, sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox stated in an interview, “I think the emergence of a ‘soulmate’ model of marriage, where young men and women hold very high expectations for a future spouse, helps to explain why more women—especially highly educated women—find themselves without a husband and a desire to have a child as their biological clock winds down.”³

The important thing to remember here is that Wilcox is a sociologist. It's his job to look at the statistics on a given issue and try to identify and analyze trends. He's actually a very good sociologist; several years ago he wrote a book called *Soft Patriarchs, New Men* about certain trends and behaviors

among Christian husbands and fathers that I thought was excellent, and I've followed his work ever since.

But sociology has limits. It can see numbers but it can't really see the people behind them. And I believe that, in an area as complex and sensitive as this, sociology can't necessarily capture all the reasons behind a trend. As a result, there are times when it paints these trends with too broad a brush.

That's why we single people have grown used to hearing statisticians and sociologists make pronouncements about us that have very little to do with our actual experience. While a sociologist might look at educated single women and see a group that tends to be too picky, the truth is "high expectations" can mean simply "the hope of finding a guy with whom one can begin and maintain a conversation lasting longer than ten minutes, let alone a relationship." And I'm not male-bashing here; a lot of single Christian men have similar things to say about the women they've dated.

In short, sometimes people get caught up in trends when they never wanted to. Personally, I was absolutely certain, from the time I was about five years old, that someday I would be married and have children. It never occurred to me to doubt it. Of course, I also thought I was going to be a ballerina *and* a concert pianist, so my dreams weren't always realistic. But the dream of marriage and a family—that one seemed like a reasonable and easily reachable goal. It happened to almost everyone, after all.

Fast-forward three decades.

When I turned thirty-five and was still single, I felt a little like Roxie Hart in the musical *Chicago*. I admit that's not a very sanctified reference (and I should probably specify that I didn't actually want to shoot anyone), but it's one I couldn't

seem to stop thinking about. Like Roxie, I was older than I had ever intended to be—at least, while still being single—and facing “one big world full of no.”

I hadn’t deliberately delayed marriage; on the contrary, I had eagerly hoped and prayed for it. I had done my educational and career planning—my real career planning, I mean, beyond the ballerina-and-pianist stage—with that goal in mind: I wanted to be a writer, not just because I loved to write but also because it could fit well with being a stay-at-home mom. And I’d gone out with a number of Christian men, looking for the one God might have for me.

But for some reason, none of those relationships ever really went anywhere. Marriage, despite my certainty that it was my destiny, just did not happen. And it’s the same story for many of my friends—and for many beyond my circle of friends as well.

Here are just a few of the explanations that frequently get tossed around: (1) There are more Christian women than men. (2) Christian relationship fads have swept through the church, leaving both sexes afraid to talk to each other. (3) Too many singles are content with their status. (4) There are too many small groups or not enough small groups. (5) There is too much “being friends” or not enough “being friends” . . . the list of explanations goes on and on and on. Some have validity, others not so much. But regardless, it seems that a new one pops up with every day that passes.

It all boils down to this: so many of us who desire marriage and children simply don’t manage to get there. In all honesty, the fads, trends, and “how to” books just haven’t done us that much good. In fact, many of them have left us feeling more helpless, alone, and unequipped to deal with the opposite sex

than we were before. And they've left the rest of the church wondering what on earth went wrong and how to fix it.

This book attempts to deal with some of the difficult questions and issues raised by this unprecedented situation.

But before we get underway, here's what this book is *not*. It's not a place for me to try to provide everyone with answers and solutions and *The One Best Way to Snag a Spouse*. (If I knew that, I'd already be married and I wouldn't be writing this in the first place!) It's not a place for me to push a certain spiritual method of approaching singleness and marriage. It's not an attempt to try to revolutionize the church in some way; I'm more interested in trying to help create a better climate within the church than in trying to give the whole church a makeover.

This book is an insider's view. It goes behind the scenes, beneath the sociological and theological explanations, and explores some of what's really going on with single Christians.

As well, this book is meant to serve as a sort of mirror to the church, a way for a few of us single Christians to tell the church as a whole about the messages we've been hearing and what we think about those messages. It's a way for us to tell our fellow Christians about what our real needs and desires are and how the church can help support us in reaching our goals, living our lives for Christ, and becoming fully functioning, supportive members of the church. At the same time, it's also a way to discuss and to praise what the church is already doing well.



My approach here, as I've hinted, is not a statistical one. The statistics on singleness have been covered and rehashed

and analyzed elsewhere, by people who understand them much better than I do. I'll touch on them now and again, but more often, I'm simply going to share some of my own thoughts on the situation, along with the thoughts of various Christian single friends and friends of friends with whom I communicated while writing (as mentioned earlier), and the insights of single Christian writers and leaders whose works I've found helpful.

I hope these thoughts are useful and constructive. And I hope they start to break down some of the stereotypes and help change the way the church thinks about the singles in its midst. Church conversations like the one I described at the beginning could go very differently—and friendships between marrieds and singles in the church could grow and thrive—if we could learn to focus on the truth that a person's identity is found in Christ, not in his or her marital status. I hope this book will help with that process.

Two notes before we start. First, you'll find that I mostly focus on Christians who have been single all their lives. There's a reason for that—namely, that I'm part of that group. This is what I know best and what I'm best equipped to write about. I will incorporate the insights of divorcees and widows I've talked to and whose works I've read, where appropriate. But obviously, their experiences are something I cannot write about firsthand.

As one of my interviewees, Carole, put it:

Even among singles there are differences and different needs. A single/never married/no kids has different needs than one who has been married and may or may not have kids. A single mom has other needs.

It has been my experience that the church has improved on meeting the needs of single moms. Society has as well. But I feel like I don't fit at all.

While acknowledging that the various groups among singles do indeed have different needs that should be addressed, I will keep my focus on the needs with which I'm most familiar. That said, the widowed and divorced are more than welcome to respond to this book with their own perspectives. I sincerely hope they do.

Second, throughout this book I will be talking about and quoting some prominent Christian thinkers, writers, and publications. I want to make it clear that, when pointing out the flaws in a quote or an argument, I'm not trying to judge or condemn the person or the publication as a whole. No matter how great or good a Christian may be, he or she is still human and therefore prone to mistakes—and nowadays, this particular subject seems to be hard for people to grasp clearly, making it especially likely to trip up even many good and smart Christians. So my deconstruction of some faulty thinking among our leaders is not meant to insult or demean them in any way. We all have our blind spots, myself included, and I will do my best here to treat others as I hope to be treated when my own errors are pointed out—with respect, humility, and grace.

SECTION 1

Stigmas, Stereotypes, and Shame

What did I do wrong?

I look around me at family members, neighbors, colleagues. So many couples, so many families. So many people preoccupied with home and children and all the cares and concerns and mess and busyness and affection that go with them. So many people who have what I've been longing for . . . what I may never have.

Did I Do Something Wrong?

Having bought a subscription to Ancestry.com, I work on my family tree, tracing various branches further and further back, fascinated by the names and lives of people I've

never known whose blood runs in my veins. Natalina married Giuseppe; their daughter Antonia married Luigi and then they Americanized their names to Antoinette and Louis (They really did! Maybe whoever was working at Ellis Island that day was a student of French history?); their son Albert married Martha; their daughter Joyce married Joe (son of Mary and Tony, grandson of Marco and Nicolina), and they became my parents.

And then there's me—still sitting there alone on my branch, feeling like I'm getting the ghostly side-eye from all those old Italians who married young and had lots of children and couldn't imagine how there could be any difficulty about the matter.

They tell me the Chinese have a name for people in my situation: “broken branches.” “They are the biological dead ends of their family,” explains journalist Mei Fong.¹ Am I a broken branch, a dead end? Will I be the end of that long line that was flourishing until I came along?

Why am I different? What did I do wrong?

These questions haunt many of us. In a sea of couples, we feel—pardon the pun—singled out, different, penalized for something we had so little control over. What *did* we do wrong? How could we have done things differently? How could we have made them go right?

“You Have Not Sinned”

Before we go any further, I need to make something clear. The feelings I've been describing are just that: feelings. I don't want to downplay the role or the value of feelings—they're real, and they matter—but sometimes, if we're not careful,

they can get out of control and give us a distorted picture of the truth. And these feelings in particular are not grounded in reality. The truth is the Word of God doesn't say that being single is wrong, sinful, or bad.

On the contrary, we know that Paul was all in favor of it:

Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you. . . .

But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction. (1 Cor. 7:25–28, 32–35)

We've all read those verses. They remind us, or should remind us, that singleness is not a moral failing or a cause for shame. On the contrary, the single person has equal worth and dignity with the married person before God.

This should be reason enough for the church to offer the single person genuine acceptance and support. But ask single

people if this has been happening in recent years, and you're likely to hear otherwise. Here's what a few of them told me:

I sometimes feel isolated, scrutinized, and ignored because the church is by nature a family-oriented community.—Jim

We kind of get shuffled to the background, particularly as adults, because the church doesn't know where to put us within their small group system.—Charity

I wish there was greater understanding that we are not "strange," and [more] intermingling by families with the singles.—Bea

The evangelical church in general seems to have developed a tendency to rush past those particular verses that elevate singleness, or gloss over them, or explain them away. I've even heard some say that if singles are going to cite Paul's example and advice on singleness, they'd better be prepared to go suffer and give their lives for Christ, as Paul did. For example, here's former Mars Hill Church pastor Mark Driscoll in a sermon on singleness:

Let's say for example there is a closed Muslim country that desperately needs Jesus. Should I go, with my wife and five kids, or should I have a single guy go and lean over the plate and take one for the team? I should send the single guy, right, because if he's there, and they capture and kill him—which is what they do if you preach the gospel in a Muslim country—at least he doesn't leave behind a widow and orphans.²

Thanks, I think.

As I wrote earlier, and as some of my interviewees have said, marriage and families have been elevated to such a high status in the church that single people don't always seem to fit anymore or, at worst, seem to have less value than married people—even when we're not being portrayed as cannon fodder! And then when the tough questions I mentioned come up in our minds, the ones that can keep us awake late into the night—*Where did I go wrong? What should I have done differently? Has God forgotten me?*—it's sometimes hard to feel as if we can turn to the church for answers and for help.

I don't say any of this to complain or whine. I want to make the church aware of the experiences of a significant number of its people in the interest of helping the body of Christ learn to recognize and cherish *all* of its members, not just those who happen to fit the ideal of parents/kids/pets. The first step toward changing the church's view of single Christians is to understand what, exactly, that view is and the thinking behind it. This is something I touched on in the introduction to this book. This section will explore it in more detail.

O N E



SINGLES AS PROBLEMS

“I’m going to speak of the sin I think besets this generation. It is the sin of delaying marriage as a lifestyle option among those who intend someday to get married, but they just haven’t yet. This is a problem shared by men and women, but it’s a problem primarily of men.”¹

With those words, spoken at a conference for Christian singles in 2004—and later broadcast on the radio by Dennis Rainey and Bob Lepine of FamilyLife Today—Dr. Al Mohler, then president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, sparked an outcry. Many single Christians wrote to him in protest. *Christianity Today* writer Camerin Courtney, herself a single woman, challenged Mohler’s views in a column titled “Is Singleness a Sin?”

“If the reasons for delaying marriage truly are selfishness, childishness, and a purposeful denying of God’s will, as Mohler, Rainey, and Lepine assert,” Courtney wrote, “then *those* things are the sins—not the resulting singleness. And

throwing around the s-word like that, especially toward a group of individuals who already sometimes feel devalued by the church, our families, and sometimes even ourselves, seems not only unscriptural but also irresponsible.”²

Dr. Mohler eventually clarified:

I stand unmoved, even more convinced that the argument I made at the New Attitude Conference is precisely correct. Singleness is not a sin, but deliberate singleness on the part of those who know they have not been given the gift of celibacy is, at best, a neglect of a Christian responsibility. The problem may be simple sloth, personal immaturity, a fear of commitment, or an unbalanced priority given to work and profession. On the part of men, it may also take the shape of a refusal to grow up and take the lead in courtship. There are countless Christian women who are prayerfully waiting for Christian men to grow up and take the lead. What are these guys waiting for?³

In section 2 of this book, we’ll take a closer look at some of the ideas about men and women implicit in this passage and how they relate to the current state of affairs among single Christians. But Mohler’s statement, as Camerin Courtney suggested, was a sign of a much broader phenomenon within the church. It’s the viewing of single people as a problem that needs to be solved.

Note that when Courtney unpacked Mohler’s statement, she made a list of qualities that seem to be bound up with singleness, according to his way of looking at the issue: “selfishness, childishness, and a purposeful denying of God’s will.” She wasn’t just extrapolating too much from his words. These are qualities that the church—consciously or unconsciously—often does attribute to single people.

We're often seen as solitary, self-contained, self-sufficient units, blissfully living our own lives without a thought for others.

Naturally, therefore, the increase of singleness within the church is seen as cause for alarm. Look at something else that Mohler said in his original speech: "What is the ultimate priority God has called us to? In heaven, is the crucible of our saint-making going to have been through our jobs? I don't think so. The Scripture makes clear that it will be done largely through our marriages." He also spoke of marriage as "the central crucible for adult-making."⁴

It's not just Mohler, either. Consider for a moment all the messages you've heard through the years from Christian churches and ministries about the importance and value of family. Most likely, they went something like this:

"Motherhood is the most important job in the world."

"Your only real and lasting legacy is your family."

"No one ever said on his deathbed, 'I wish I'd spent more time at work.'"

"If you don't have children, no one will take care of you when you're old/remember you when you're gone."

We're taught, too, that experiencing a faithful marriage and a healthy family life is the best way for Christians to reclaim the culture for God. Here's Candice Watters in her book *Get Married*:

I was sitting in class [in a graduate program in public policy] learning about all the ways our country was slipping from its constitutional foundation. And in a moment of exasperation, I raised my hand and called out, "So what's the solution?" I

really wanted to know, though I'm not sure I believed there was one. . . .

Dr. Hubert Morken didn't disappoint. He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and let his grenade fly: "Get married, have babies, and do government! *That's* how we win."⁵

If family life is the highest form of life on earth that Christians can aspire to, and if the family is the exclusive breeding ground of faith and virtue—if, in fact, it's the family that will arrest the decline of Western civilization—then, of course, increasing singleness is going to be a problem. If all this is true, we have around us an increasing number of stunted adults and half-formed saints, unable to reach full maturity or holiness because they're not married.

This view is given even greater credibility by those worrisome statistics I referred to earlier: the ones about cohabitation and extramarital pregnancy rates and other indicators of immorality spiraling out of control. As this one particular aspect of the wider culture—higher rates of singleness—spills into the church, the thinking goes, it must be bringing all those other unsavory trends with it. So it's our duty to urge the singles to marry as soon as possible . . . and if the singles don't or won't or can't get married, that makes them an even bigger problem than they already were.

Eric Reed of *Leadership Journal* frames the issue this way:

Today's young adults are marrying later, if at all, are technologically savvy, and hold worldviews alien to their upbringing. Barna Research president David Kinnaman, after a five-year study, declared that church leaders are unequipped to deal with this "new normal."

. . . Many ignore the situation, hoping young adults' views will be righted when they are older and have their

own children. These leaders miss the significance of the shifts of the past 25 years, Kinnaman contends, and the needs for ministry young people have in their present phase—if it is a phase.⁶

Debbie Maken is one author who believes that any attempt to encourage singles to make peace with their state in life is to encourage something unholy. She put it this way in her book *Getting Serious about Getting Married*:

Being a single person for too long has more capacity to produce negative characteristics in terms of sanctification than it does to produce healthy members of the body of Christ. And yet we persist in our churches to praise the single status, placing it on an equal level with marriage. We delude ourselves and the singles in our congregations into believing that participation in a few service activities will somehow redeem or offset all of the negative practical—and sometimes spiritual—consequences of remaining single despite God’s clear call to marriage.⁷

Probably very few Christians in the pews have thought through the issue to this extent, but these teachings—teachings that tell us singleness is a negative condition that needs to be redeemed or offset—do tend to spread throughout the church, often in subtle ways, and they do have an effect. I think they’re often behind the ways that people react to our presence in the church—like the woman I met in the ladies’ room that time, for instance, or the woman who was struck dumb by my friend Fiona’s announcement of her singleness and childlessness . . . or, on a larger scale, the pastors who accuse us of disobeying God’s will, or the leaders who shuttle us off to “young adult” ministries when we’re

well into our thirties and forties. (Frankly, I can't imagine where Maken got the idea that churches have a tendency to "praise the single status." I'm pretty sure the vast majority of single churchgoers will tell you that this has not been their experience at all.)

In a nutshell, if Christians really believe all, or even some, of this to be true—even at a subconscious level—then it's going to affect how they feel about the singles in their midst . . . not to mention how the singles feel about themselves and each other. It's true that, for many of us, there are times when we consider our singleness and all that goes with it a problem. But leaving that question aside for the moment, it's indisputable that to consider *people* a problem is something quite different—and damaging.