

Cohabitation and Sexual Intimacy before Marriage



**Does the Bible
shed light
on these social
developments?**



Philip Nunn

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FOREWORD

Please read this foreword: I have written this book to help those who are sincerely seeking God's mind as to the future of their relationship. No, am I not trying to win an argument, or to judge you or anyone who may not agree with my conclusions. My wife Anneke and I are parents to four children aged 18 to 26. Our eldest daughter is married and the second will marry within two months. I write with love and concern, as a father to my children. Please read it that way. Yes, I am trying to convince you that marriage, and not cohabitation, is God's way. That God's design for marriage is a very good one. That a covenant marriage is worth waiting for and entering into.

When God reveals His mind in Scripture, He does not do so to make life more difficult for us. Entering into a marriage covenant does involve boundaries and duties - but these are not supposed to be a burden to us. The focus in every loving relationship is not that of avoiding wrongs but that of seeking to please the one we love. When we feel unconditionally loved, and love in return, duties will still require discipline and effort - but they "are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Once we are deeply conscious of this environment of love, grace and acceptance, we will *desire* to stay within the God given boundaries, as the apostle Paul writes, "Love is the fulfilment of the law" (Rom.13:10).

Read this book carefully. Read it prayerfully. Let the Holy Spirit *illuminate* your understanding of Scripture, *warm your heart* to trust God's wisdom and unconditional love for you, and then, let Him *strengthen and empower* you to act accordingly. That is my prayer for you.

The social acceptance of cohabitation and sexual intimacy before marriage may well be modern trends, but the concept of marriage is as old as humanity itself. In writing, I am indebted to the insights of many others. Here I would particularly like to thank Moniek, Liliane, Anna, Mariska, Maarten, Jean, Peter, Sytse, Rutger en Gerard for their interaction with earlier drafts. You have helped make this what it now is. My thanks also to Malu and Vic for being to open and vulnerable - and for agreeing to share part of your personal story here - in Section C. And Martine, thanks again for your creative illustrations! I like them!

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INTRODUCTION

Some people begin to be sexually active because they are committed to the relationship and plan to get married in the near future. How does God see that? They reason, “if we love each other and we are both happy together, how can this be wrong?”. A growing number of lonely elderly Christian couples are choosing to cohabit and not to marry in order to avoid complications with the inheritance of their children or financial loss in their individual pension or tax arrangements. In the past, basically all Christian groups and denominations taught and insisted that sexual intimacy was *only* to be enjoyed within marriage. Is that interpretation of Scripture still valid today? Should parents and church leaders be concerned? Is it right for Christians to judge the behaviour of others – especially in these intimate and private matters?

Maybe you are a new Christian, you have surrendered your life to Jesus, you know that loving Jesus and obeying Him go together (John 14:21), and are now wondering how your commitment to Jesus will affect your relationship with your partner. Perhaps you currently cohabit. Maybe you have children from that relationship. You are now wondering what your next step should be. These pages have also been written for you!

Terms used: We shall be exploring three closely connected subjects: *Sexual intimacy* - by which I mean healthy sexual activity including intercourse, *cohabitation* - by which I mean living together in a sexual relationship before marriage, and *marriage* - by which I mean a husband-wife relationship united by God and generally recognised by a community. It is of course possible for a loving couple to live together before marriage without sexual intimacy - this situation will also be addressed. It is also very possible to have premarital sexual intimacy without cohabiting - you need not live together in order to be sexually active. You will find that most of what is written here will also be relevant to that situation.

Summary: Attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage are rapidly changing, in general society as well as among Christians. Does the Bible shed light on these social developments? Here I will try to show you that the answer is ‘yes’. Sexual intimacy is blessed by God *only* within the context of a marriage covenant between a man and a woman. This is God’s good design, a design revealed to us to encourage and protect something important and beautiful. Following God’s design is always the best course of action for us personally and also for society in general. Since cohabitation involves sexual intimacy *before* marriage, it involves sexual intimacy *outside* of marriage. And all forms of sexual intimacy outside the covenant of marriage violate God’s good and loving design for humanity. Anything that conflicts with God’s good design is ‘wrong’ - the Bible calls this *sin*. And sin is never good. It is bad for you, it is bad for your relationship and bad for society in general. Sin always kills something (Rom. 6:23). Submission to God’s design, however, always leads to life and human flourishing.

Structure: Before we explore a number of motives and reasons given by people who choose to live together as husband and wife before marriage, I suggest we first look at what the Bible says about marriage and covenants. By considering God’s good and positive design, we shall be better placed to evaluate current social developments. We will then end with some practical considerations as you ask yourself, “how does God see my current situation?” and, “what should my next step be?”.

Part A: Marriage and Covenants – Designing a ‘Safe Place’

Much thought has been given to the design and construction of a ‘safe place’ where heart and brain surgeons can carry out their delicate jobs. Much thought has been given to the design and construction of nuclear power stations, a ‘safe place’ where controlled nuclear explosions can be turned into heat and electricity. Similarly, God designed and revealed to us what *He considers* to be a ‘safe place’ where soul-bonding and loving sexual intimacy can grow and flourish. The Bible refers to this ‘safe place’ as a *marriage covenant*.

Marriage as a Covenant

The prophet Ezekiel used the analogy of a *marriage* to explain God’s relationship with Israel: “I gave you my solemn oath and *entered into a covenant with you*, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine” (Ez. 16:8). A covenant is the strongest form of agreement between two (or more) parties. Covenants provide stability to relationships and to society in general. In the Bible we find *horizontal* covenants – covenants between individuals, like the one between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 23:18), and between families and peoples, like the one between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 26:28-31). But there are also *vertical* covenants – covenants between God and a person - like that with Noah (Gen. 6:18), between God and a family - like that with king David’s family (2 Chr. 21:71), between God and a people - like the covenant with the people of Israel (Ex. 34:27) and the “new covenant” with Christians (Lk. 22:20). Interestingly, the ‘safe place’ of the *marriage covenant* consists of two components: a *horizontal* component - a covenant between a man and a woman, and a *vertical* component - a covenant between the couple and God Himself. Clearly marriage is not just a ‘piece of paper’. It is much more than a convenient social arrangement. Marriage is a carefully and thoughtfully designed ‘safe place’ where couples can freely and confidently be themselves without fear of rejection or possible future separation, where they can be completely open and vulnerable, where they can give themselves fully to each other.

The Horizontal and Vertical Components of a Covenant

When a number of Israelites were considering divorcing their wives, God spoke to them through the prophet Malachi, saying, “It is because the LORD is acting as the *witness* between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your *marriage covenant*” (Mal. 2:14). God presents Himself here as a witness. He is a witness when a man and a woman promise life-long exclusive fidelity to each other – which is the *horizontal* component of the marriage covenant. But God is more than just a witness. It is God Himself who somehow *unites* the man with his wife. At that special moment of marriage something remarkable happens: “they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what *God has joined together*, let man not separate” (Matt. 19:6). Perhaps because of God’s active role in uniting the couple, the *marriage covenant* is referred to as a *covenant of God* (Prov. 2:17). We also promise God that we shall love and be faithful to the partner He has given us – this is the *vertical* component of the marriage covenant.

You may have noticed that traditional Christian wedding vows are usually structured to reflect these *vertical* and *horizontal* covenant components. The couple first stand facing the person officiating their wedding. They are asked one or more questions, something like, “Will you take Elizabeth/Peter to be your lawful wife/husband, to care for her/him, etc.”. In turn the man and woman respond, “Yes, I will” – these are promises made to God – the *vertical* component of the marriage covenant. Then the couple will turn and face each other and make some promises, something like “I take you to be my wife (or husband), to have and to hold from this day forth, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to

cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy law, and this is my solemn vow. May God help me". These are promises made to each other, with God and family and friends as witnesses – the *horizontal* component of the marriage covenant. And then the person officiating the wedding declares the happy couple husband and wife!

Characteristics of a Covenant – Planning your Wedding

Although the Bible narrates the stories of many single and married people, it does not prescribe how a wedding should take place. Every culture and social grouping is free to develop their own mutually significant ritual or ceremony. The fact that the Bible views marriage as a *covenant* does, however, suggest some important features. For example:

- (a) A Promise: A covenant always has content. You make a vow. You agree to or promise something. Covenant participants bind themselves to certain duties. A marriage covenant also contains a "solemn oath" (Ez. 16:8). You agree to be mutual owners of each other's bodies. You promise to love, care for and be faithful to each other for the rest of your lives.
- (b) Witnesses: A covenant is usually a public affair. In a marriage covenant, a man would leave "his father and mother" to be "united to his wife" (Gen. 2:24), and this was no private matter. At least the father and mother - the families - were involved. There are witnesses. As noted earlier, God Himself is described as one of the witnesses in the marriage covenant (Mal. 2:14).
- (c) A Symbol: Biblical covenants are often accompanied by symbols. The covenant with Noah was associated with a rainbow. The covenant with Abraham was associated with circumcision. The new covenant is associated with the Lord's supper – a symbolic meal. Some marriage covenants are associated with special wedding gifts. Today some people use wedding rings, signatures or some other visible sign to show that your culture or society recognises you as being husband and wife.
- (d) A Moment: Covenants are usually embedded in some social celebration, ceremony or ritual. There is a defining moment when the covenant is enacted, a moment when some oath is spoken and accepted, a moment when the covenant comes into force. You never slide or drift into a covenant. This also applies to the marriage covenant. Cohabitation never drifts into a marriage covenant. Just as there is an agreed moment when a house is bought and an insurance policy becomes effective, there is also a moment when you "enter into a marriage covenant" (Ez. 16:8).



If you are planning to get married, how could you incorporate these covenant features into your wedding ceremony? As stated above, the Bible does not prescribe how a wedding should take place. You are free to make it a big or a small event – depending on your taste and budget. But since your marriage is considered by God to be a covenant, you may want to make your big or small wedding event also *feel* like a covenant

enactment. You can do this (a) by incorporating some of the covenant features into the ceremony – like exchanging vows, having and acknowledging witnesses, doing something symbolic, (b) by referring to your marriage as a covenant, and (c) by dropping the word ‘covenant’ at special moments in the wedding, like during the vows or when you exchange rings. Be creative! Be confident! Work at making your wedding a beautiful, clear and positive statement!

Marriage and Sex

Some wrongly think that sexual penetration can also turn a man and a woman into husband and wife. Because they are sexually active they *feel* that they are already husband and wife. The apostle Paul said that “he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body”. And to support this affirmation he quoted from Genesis, “the two will become one flesh” (1 Cor. 6:16). He is not suggesting that sexual intercourse creates a marriage covenant, but rather that *sexual activity bonds souls together*. The only correct place for this binding of souls together is within marriage. What a Christian does with their own body and with the body of someone else is seen by God and is significant – even one-night-stands. Tearing apart souls that have been bonded through sex always leaves a mark. It can hurt. It can be very damaging. The apostle ends by urging all Christians to “flee from sexual immorality” and to “honour God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:18-19).

Isaac and Rebekah: When they met, we read that, “Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen. 24:67). It is reasonable to assume that they did not go into the tent together to play Monopoly! But neither should we think that it was their sexual act alone that turned Rebekah into Isaac’s wife. Notice that this is a communal event - in full view of those around them, Isaac brings Rebekah into “the tent of his mother” – not to be compared with a private holiday tent! There is a rich social protocol involved in this story: Abraham sends his servant to find a *wife* for his son (24:3-4). Her father agrees to give her to be his wife (24:51), Rebekah also agrees to go and to be married to Isaac (24:58). God is involved in the choice (24:14). The families on both sides were aware, in agreement and in some way involved in their marriage (24:37,50,55,58). In passing, it is well worth taking note that girls were expected to remain a virgin until their wedding day. In the case of Rebekah, we are told that she “was very beautiful, a virgin, no man had ever lain with her” (24:16).

Marriage after Sex: A clear case which illustrates that sex does not turn a man and a woman into husband and wife can be found in the Law given through Moses. We notice that sometimes after *unlawful* sexual intercourse, like rape, the couple were required to marry (Deut. 22:28-29). The fact that the couple were required to marry *after* sexual intercourse clearly indicates that their sexual intercourse did not turn them into a married couple. Of course, cohabitation and rape are not to be compared. The point I wish to make is that sexual intercourse did not turn the couple into husband and wife. The Bible is clear that sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed only within the covenant of marriage, and it is also clear that sexual intercourse does not in itself create marriage. Sex should follow marriage. Sex does not turn a man and a woman into husband and wife.

Marriage and Virginity

Some people ask, “Where in the Bible does God condemn cohabitation?”. They consider temporary cohabitation a new social phenomenon unknown in Bible times. They therefore conclude that the Bible has no light to shed on this practice. There are many sins that are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. The Bible is silent on rape within marriage. The Bible is silent

on the sexual exploitation of children. To understand God's mind on a matter we must go beyond searching for particular words. A very strong indication that cohabitation has never been God's plan is the strong relationship we find in the Bible between marriage and virginity. In Israel, a man would expect his new wife to be a virgin (Deut. 22:13,20). In other words, it was a normal expectation that women would lose their virginity on their wedding night. With this common expectation, cohabitation did not need to be explicitly mentioned and forbidden. This link between virginity and the marriage covenant was no small matter. To strongly discourage cohabitation or occasional sexual intercourse before marriage, the Law of Moses required the death penalty for the non-virgin.

Joseph and Mary, for example, were committed to marry each other. While waiting, working and preparing for married life, they abstained from sexual intercourse. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he knew it could not be from him. After being informed in a dream that Mary's pregnancy was supernatural, Joseph continues to care for and wait for her. "But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son" (Matt. 1:18-25). An example of sex-free waiting while committed to marriage.

The connection between marriage and virginity is also evident in the writings of the apostle Paul. In giving instructions on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:25-38, he equates a 'virgin' with an 'unmarried' person. In other words, the 'unmarried' person was expected to be a 'virgin'. Virginity was lost when sexual activity began – when they entered the marriage covenant. In both Old and New Testaments, there is a clear expectation that sexual intimacy begins with marriage and not before it.

Marriage and Fornication

Some believers in the new Christian community at Corinth viewed sex as something negative, something to be avoided. They wrote to the apostle Paul asking his view on the matter: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with [literally, 'not to touch'] a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1). The apostle disagreed with this statement. Sexual intimacy is good and beautiful. What the apostle strongly condemned was *fornication* or sexual immorality. That should stop.



What does the apostle mean by fornication? He goes on to explain this. The only solution he provides to avoid

fornication or sexual immorality is that "each man should have his own *wife*, and each woman her own *husband*". Take note that the reference here is not to a male or female friend or partner, not to a possible future wife or husband. The way the apostle continues makes it very clear that he has the marriage covenant in mind: "The husband should fulfil his *marital duty* to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not *belong* to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not *belong* to him alone but also to his wife" (1 Cor. 7:1-4). It is only after you are married that *marital duties* begin. It is only after you are married that your body *belongs* to another. We conclude, therefore, that by fornication the apostle had in mind all forms of sexual intimacy outside marriage. Christians

are called to abstain from fornication. Yes, sex is good and healthy, but first marry and then, as co-owners of each other's bodies, enjoy each other sexually as well.

Celebrating Sexual Intimacy

There is nothing shameful about sexual intimacy. God Himself designed this way of expressing love between a husband and a wife. I can imagine God smiling when looking down on a married couple enjoying sexual intimacy and thinking, 'Fantastic! This is what I had in mind!'. God is so positive about the marriage covenant that He depicts Himself as a husband, "Your maker is your husband" and then He adds, "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (Is. 54:5; 62:5). What contributes to making marriage a 'safe place' is this change in ownership. The moment a couple gets married, the ownership of their bodies changes from 'mine' to 'ours' (1 Cor. 7:3-5). This helps to make sexual intimacy within marriage a very special and unique experience. It is definitely worth waiting for!

Part B: Cohabitation – Evaluating Social Trends

Perhaps you have heard the story of the mother who was visiting her son and his just-living-together girlfriend for lunch. The son was keen to reassure his mother that he and his girlfriend were not sleeping together. The mother had her doubts but kept them to herself. Some ten days later she received the following email from her son: “Mum, I don’t want to accuse you of anything, but since your visit we have not been able to find the remote control for our TV”. She replied, “Son, I don’t want to accuse you of anything, but if your girlfriend were sleeping in her own bed she would have found the remote control by now”.

It may have occurred to you that this must be rather an old story, or perhaps one lived in a conservative sub-culture. Why? Because today it is rather ‘normal’ for non-married couples to go on holiday together, to share a tent, to share a bedroom, to share a bed. Today most sons do not feel they have to reassure their parents that they are not sleeping with their girlfriend. Most parents today seem to consider the cohabitation of their children as either ‘prudent’, ‘normal’ or ‘non-ideal’ – but few would label it ‘wrong’. Many churches marry cohabiting couples without even discussing the issue. Attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage are rapidly changing, among Christians as well.

Not all couples who live together before marriage have the same motives. Some have thought seriously about it. Others have slipped into the relationship. Clearly some people cohabit with no desire or intention to ever get married. Some wish to ‘have fun’ and then move on. Their focus is on their own pleasure and satisfaction. Social studies suggest that the main reason couples choose to cohabit is because they want to spend more time together with the person they love. They want to enjoy the relationship. Many have noble motives and well thought out reasons to live together. We shall now explore and evaluate together some of these motives and reasons.

1. We need to be realistic and prudent.

Proposal: Marriage is a life-long agreement. Cohabitation can help you make that important decision. Discussion: We live in a culture that fears commitment. Many employers opt for short-term work contracts. Most of us prefer to keep our options open as long as possible. We value



being in control of our own lives. Cohabitation offers the possibility to ‘test’ a relationship before formal commitment is made. It is like a marriage ‘audition’. The other may or may not know that he/she is being tested. It is a bit like taking a car for a ‘test drive’ before you commit to purchasing it. If the car does not live up to your basic expectations, if you have doubts about its quality or performance level, you feel free to return the car back to the garage, thank the salesperson and walk away. The big difference is that we humans, unlike cars, have feelings. The analogy may work well for you if

you see yourself as the purchaser. But the idea seems unfair, even repulsive, if you feel as though you are the car being tested.

2. We need to find out whether we are compatible.

Proposal: Marriage is a commitment for life. Cohabitation will help you discover whether you are sexually and emotionally compatible. Discussion: Marriage is always an act of faith. You will never fully know someone before you marry them. Actually, you don't fully know yourself. Even after living together for 3 or 5 years you still don't fully know another person. As you face new experiences in life, you and your partner will both grow and change. During the pre-marriage friendship, you can get to know the basic character of a person reasonably well. By getting to know the other person's family and friends, by finding ways to serve God and fellow humans together you will discover a great deal of the other person's priorities, character and way of life.¹ Sexologists tell us that medically things have to be very wrong for a couple not to fit together sexually. If there are any doubts in this respect, a doctor would be the best person to consult – rather than experimenting with pre-marital sex. Expressing love through sex and also the mechanics of sex itself are things that must be learnt. With the right attitude and in the right environment your sexual skills and satisfaction will grow. Love, grace and life-long commitment provide the right environment for compatibility to improve.

3. We feel that cohabitation is our most convenient option right now.

Proposal: We are studying in the same town. I have problems in my parents' house. We have serious financial difficulties. Cohabitation makes sense right now. Discussion: Yes, it may well be more *convenient* to live together while you prepare to get married. There may well be practical and financial benefits. You may save in travel time. You may make savings in rent, water, gas and internet bills. You may save money which could be used towards purchasing a house, paying school fees or financing the wedding day! The reality is that it doesn't always make economic sense to follow Jesus! Obedience to our heavenly Father is not always convenient. In fact, if the life of Jesus and the apostles is anything to go by, it is often the opposite. Jesus himself put it this way: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Decide to make your life decisions based on Biblical principles rather than personal ideas or convenience.

A sinful lifestyle is never the only option. God's way for you and your partner may be difficult to find, you may need to grow in patience, you may need to pay a price, but the Lord always makes a way. If you have set your heart on pleasing Him, at some point He will open a door for you: "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Perhaps family or friends may offer you alternative temporary accommodation so that you may live apart until you get married. It may cost you more, it may require more of your time and energy, it may be rather inefficient and inconvenient, but you will experience God's peace and blessing in what you do.

¹ Further tips and guidelines are given in my book 'Pre-Marriage Relationships' – also available from www.philipnunn.com under eBooks.

4. We have firm intentions to get married.

Proposal: We are committed to each-other and have fixed a date for our wedding. Cohabitation with serious marriage intentions cannot be wrong. It is like eating some of the biscuits you intend to purchase while waiting in line at the supermarket. Discussion: Of course, good intentions are important. But good intentions in themselves are not enough. A sound principle is: first ownership, then the privileges and responsibilities of ownership. That is why credit cards insist on signed contracts and why ownership papers are issued only after a payment has been received. Your house is insured *not* from the time you have serious intentions to insure your house, but from the moment you formally agree to the binding terms and conditions of the insurance company.



If you are a Christian, your body also belongs to God. “Do you not know that your *body* is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? *You are not your own*; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your *body*” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). You share ownership with God and are the sole administrator of your body. What you do with your body now matters to God. Then, when a couple gets married, another important transaction takes place: they become shared owners of each other’s bodies (1 Cor. 7:3-5). The God-designed ‘safe place’ for sexual intimacy only becomes a ‘safe place’ from the moment that you enter into the covenant relationship, from the moment that the marriage covenant is enacted, from the moment that God joins a man and women together, from the moment that you become shared owners of each other’s bodies, from the moment that you “are no longer two, but one” (Mat. 19:6) – and not before. It is good that you have chosen a date for your wedding. But fixing this date does not legitimise cohabitation. Enjoy the biscuits after you leave the supermarket!

5. We think temporary cohabitation is not ideal, but not a sin.

Proposal: We cohabit because we love each other and are committed to our relationship. We have freely agreed to cohabit. No-one is being wronged or hurt. Temporary cohabitation before marriage is not as good as marriage, but neither should it be considered wrong, sin, evil or perverse. Discussion: Who defines what is right and what is wrong? Christians have always believed that morality is not simply a social agreement. God and His revelation is the basis for morality. If the Bible teaches that some attitude or practice is wrong or sinful, then it is wrong and sinful regardless of what our fellow humans say.

In the Bible, however, we also discover that not all wrongs are equally bad, not all sins are the same. The fact that the Law given by God to Moses contained punishments of differing severity was because some sins were considered more grievous than others. For some very serious wrongs an offender was to be put to death. In His teaching, the Lord Jesus also implied this gradation of wrongs or sins. He said that if the people in a town rejected His kingdom message, their punishment would be *more severe* than that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:15). Why? Because their guilt was greater. The more we know, the more grievous is the act of disobedience. Lesser wrongs do not become right or acceptable when compared with greater wrongs. Wrong remains wrong, that sin remains sin. Jesus taught that the perpetrator of a

greater wrong “will be beaten with many blows” and the perpetrator of a lesser wrong “will be beaten with few blows” (Lk. 12:47-48). Both did wrong, both are punished.

This gradation of wrongs makes sense. The fine for crossing a red traffic light is larger than the fine for incorrect parking. Why? Because one is more dangerous, it is a graver wrong. To murder is a graver wrong than to steal. To commit adultery with your body is a graver wrong than commit adultery in your mind (here no third party is involved). To violently rob a bank is a graver wrong than to evade a legitimate tax payment. But all of these are wrong! In a similar way, mutually agreed sex before marriage is a lesser wrong than rape. Cohabitation with serious plans to get married is a lesser wrong than promiscuous sex. The fact that there is gradation in wrongs should not lead us to make some forms of wrong acceptable. Lesser wrongs do not become right or acceptable when compared with greater wrongs. *Sexual intimacy within marriage is right, and outside of marriage it is wrong. Cohabitation is, therefore, not simply ‘not ideal’. It is wrong.*

6. We want to be culturally sensitive.

Proposal: The Bible was written a long time ago and in a very different cultural setting from the one we live in here today. Today we have no masters or slaves. Women are equally educated and respected in society. Shouldn't the Christian church stop resisting these natural social developments? Shouldn't Christians recognise that today cohabitation is an acceptable lifestyle option? Discussion: The Bible contains different cultural settings. It recognises, for example, that Jews and Egyptians, Romans and Greeks have different customs and traditions. As a well-travelled apostle, Paul was culturally aware and extremely flexible (1 Cor. 9:20-23). But the gospel message remained the same. Sin remained sin, and all sinners needed a Saviour.

The institute of marriage is not a social or cultural construction. God invented it. God still “joins together” every man and woman in marriage (Matt. 19:6). There is nothing ‘old-fashioned’ about marriage. Marriage *ceremonies* may well become ‘old fashioned’ and benefit from adaptation and modernisation. In fact, every culture is free to develop its own ceremony or protocol to formalise their marriages. The Bible allows for happy and creative diversity. But when a government or society seeks to downgrade the unique and lasting bond of marriage or to change its definition, Christians are called to stand up and be different. Yes, we adapt to the culture we live in, but we must consistently resist the cultural elements that conflict with God's revelation. “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29). As long as men and women live on earth, the covenant of marriage will never become outdated. Let's actively honour it. Remember that the ‘safe place’ of marriage is designed by God for our benefit. It is not a joy-killer but a joy-enhancer and a joy-protector.

7. We are not perfect, but then, no-one is perfect.

Proposal: The practice of cohabitation may well be mildly wrong, but then, no Christian is perfect. We are completely accepted in Christ not because of our perfect behavior but because of the completed work of Christ. Discussion: It is true that on earth only the Lord Jesus was perfect. The rest of us need a Saviour. Once we turn to Jesus, once we repent and give ourselves to Him, He forgives *all* our sins, our past and our future sins (1 John 1:7; Rev. 1:5). At the point of conversion, we gain a new *position* as children of God. Our new position is one of holiness. We are holy. God the Father sees every born-again believer through Jesus, and we are therefore completely accepted in Him. From that firm position we are called to start living our Christian life. We are holy, and we are now urged to grow in practical holiness, to become more holy in the way we live, “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever

those who are being made holy” (Heb. 10:14). In short, our loving Father wants us to become more like Jesus. Yes, you and I and every other Christian may sometimes fail, but our desire to live in a way that pleases God remains strong and alive.

By the time the apostle John was an old man, he had seen fantastic growth in the early church, but also much failure. Yet he kept on urging believers to reject sin and continue to grow in holiness. “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1). Do not use the sad failures of others to lower your own standard of holiness. Our lives are to be measured against God’s expectations, not those of others. Do not use God’s abundant grace and your firm position in Christ as reasons to tolerate wrongs and sins in your life. Actively seek to please your Master. Don’t settle for pre-marital sex or cohabitation. The apostle Paul is very clear, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?... What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1,2,15).

8. We feel that cohabitation is currently God’s way for us.

Proposal: We have carefully thought about cohabitation and we have concluded that it is ok. We now cohabit and experience God’s peace in our relationship. Discussion: How you and I *feel* about different activities depends on our upbringing, what others are doing around us, our opinions and the opinions of other people we respect. Our feelings respond to our conscience. If our conscience is in harmony with God’s word, it will send the right signals to us (Rom. 9:1; 1 Cor. 4:4). It is our responsibility to educate our conscience with God’s word. How can we discern whether a thought or impression comes from God (Rom. 8:16), Satan (1 Cor. 7:5) or is our own creation (1 Cor. 2:15)? To distinguish between these sources we *need* to consult the Holy Scriptures: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). It is God’s word that confirms whether or not a thought, feeling or impression comes from Him. It is God’s written word that determines what is right or wrong.

Even when cohabitation may feel right, even when I may think I have received a vision, a dream or a special message from God endorsing it – sexual cohabitation remains a sinful lifestyle. Yes, I am aware that there are some very complex situations where God’s grace, wisdom and guidance will be critically necessary. We shall explore some of these at the end of the next section. But this does not reduce in any way the clear will of God for humanity: first marriage, and then sexual intimacy. The objective written ‘Word of God’ takes precedence over our subjective impressions of ‘God’s will’. The author of Hebrews goes on to remind his readers that the day will come when every Christian will “*give account*” of his or her life to God (Heb. 4:13). Our lifestyle choices will be judged by an objective standard. Interpretations of God’s word may vary. But God’s word, God’s revelation, God’s truth remains unchanged: “the word of our God stands for ever” (Is. 40:8). In God’s eyes, therefore, not all interpretations are equal. Some are deficient, some are simply wrong. An interpretation is only good if it is harmony with God’s truth. Let’s make no mistake, our lifestyle choices, including choices we make about sexual expression, matter to God.

9. We enjoy sexual foreplay, but without penetration.

Proposal: We love each other, and we express this in different ways. We feel free to touch and caress each other’s bodies, we sometimes share a bed together, but we have firmly decided to keep sexual penetration for after marriage. Discussion: In the Bible the word *adultery* is used

to describe the sin of a married person having sexual relations with anyone other than their marriage partner. The Greek word translated *fornication* or *sexual immorality* is *pornea* – which broadly speaking refers to all forms of *unlawful* sexual activity. Since the only form of *lawful* sexual activity is that between a husband and a wife, then any sexual activity outside marriage, like adultery, incest, homosexuality² and premarital sex, is *unlawful*. It does violence to God's good design for sexuality. To equate 'sex' with 'penetration' is to misunderstand the scope and purpose of sexual intimacy. Sexual foreplay is part of the soul bonding process. Sexual intimacy is God's idea and is designed to be fully enjoyed between a man and a woman within the loving 'safe place' of a marriage relationship. This beautiful package includes foreplay, the pleasure experienced as a couple share and fondle each other's bodies, the physical excitement, sexual penetration, orgasm and the peaceful embrace thereafter. This is all part of one beautiful package – to be opened and enjoyed between a husband and a wife - only within marriage. To open this package outside of marriage involves sexual activity *outside* marriage and falls into the category of *fornication*. "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4).



Setting up protective fences together: To some this begs the question, what exactly belongs to this 'beautiful package'? How far can we go physically before marriage? Explicit listings of appropriate and inappropriate practices cannot be found in the Bible. This does not mean that appropriate and inappropriate behaviour does not exist. In the Bible we find principles. The Bible does not provide detailed instructions for all areas of life. Ask yourself: is this 'beneficial' to me, my partner, our relationship and our Christian witness? Is this practice distracting us from better things? Is it becoming 'addictive' – is it mastering me? (1 Cor. 6:12).

As to appropriate male/female behaviour before marriage, I suggest you seek advice from mature Christian couples in your church who have happy and healthy family life. Appropriate behaviour can vary between cultural settings. Recently a youth worker shared with me the following 4 tips she normally gives in these situations: "Do not touch any part of your boy/girlfriend's body which you do not have. Keep your clothing on. Do not lie together on a bed. When you are in a room together, always keep the door open". To these you may wish to add your own 'protective fences'. You are setting up these fences to help you to have a healthy and God-pleasing relationship. A good driver is not one who drives as closely as possible to the edge of the precipice without falling over the edge, but one who drives with prudence, one who does not take unnecessary risks. As a couple, be cautious. Do not awaken those powerful sexual instincts until you have created the 'safe place' in which you can express them (Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5). Agree your boundaries together and help each other to live within them.

10. We live together without having sex.

Proposal: What makes cohabitation a sin is that it involves sexual intimacy outside of marriage. Our situation is different. We are planning to get married and in the mean time we live alone together without having sex. Discussion: It is possible for a couple who deeply loves each other to live alone together *without* sexual intimacy. They live together as friends in a non-sexual relationship, like a brother and a sister. Because I find no Scripture that explicitly forbids this, I

² For a closer look at his important social development I refer you to my book 'Homosexual Partnerships – Biblical and pastoral considerations' - also available from www.philipnunn.com under eBooks.

conclude that this type of living together *does not* fall into the category of sin. Fornication is not involved. And yet, I would still like to discourage you from doing so. Consider the following reasoning:

We know that the Christian life is much richer than a life avoiding prohibitions. Of course, we respect Biblical prohibitions but our focus and drive is a *positive* one. Because we love God, we want to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph. 5:20) and then do it. I think that the apostle Paul had this in mind when he wrote: “Everything is permissible’ - but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’ - but not everything is constructive” (1 Cor. 10:23). It may be ‘permissible’ for a Christian couple who deeply loves each and feels a strong sexual attraction to each other to live together without having sex. But is it ‘beneficial’ to God and His interests? Is it ‘constructive’ – does it contribute positively to God’s kingdom? As Christians, we represent Christ and His interest on earth. Our lifestyle choices are therefore important. I propose that this arrangement can be unwise, unhealthy and dangerous:

Unwise: Unwise because you send the wrong message to the world around you. When friends and neighbours who know you are Christians notice that you *start* living together *after* getting married, you honour, uphold and reinforce the value of marriage. “Marriage should be honoured by all” (Heb. 13:4). You send out a positive kingdom message to any who may care to notice it. Of course, our relationship with God is something personal, but the way we live is something public. We are to be light and salt in this world, positively different.

Unhealthy: Unhealthy because you must suppress your good, strong and natural sexual desires while living together in a ‘brother-sister’ type relationship rather than as ‘husband and wife’. I hear from sexologists that this ‘artificial’ way of living can create unhealthy sexual patterns that may adversely affect a relationship after marriage – particularly affecting women. But the main reason I would discourage this arrangement is because it is dangerous.

Dangerous: Dangerous because you make it easy to sin, and to bring regrets into your relationship. The Bible tells us that Satan is actively seeks to encourage us to sin. Even with good and honourable motivations, we all have weak moments. “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!” (1 Cor. 10:12). It is wise, therefore, to be cautious, to avoid dangerous situations, to build in safeguards, to create geographical distance between yourself and the temptations you wish to avoid.

When you enter into the covenant of marriage, together you become one ‘new entity’. From that day on, you share ‘everything’ together. Sex is part of that ‘everything’. Choosing to share the ‘everything’ together (*except* sex) before marriage is not only dangerous but is also rather artificial. Why not choose to use your wedding day as the beginning of your *big* life change? Choose to keep a substantial amount of that ‘everything’ until after you are married.

Marriage is a big and happy milestone event in your life, in the life of your partner and in the lives of two families. If you are a Christian, use your wedding day to publicly express your clear commitment to and endorsement of the institution of marriage. Live clearly and publicly apart until the day of your wedding. And thereafter, live clearly and publicly together! Not because there is a law, but because you want to be prudent and wise, because you want to provide a good example to those who come behind you, and because both of you want to publicly and clearly show that you endorse and honour the institution of marriage. By clearly living apart until you get married, you are sending a positive message, you are helping advance the values of the kingdom of God.

Part C: A Time for Action – Creating your own ‘Safe Place’

Good theology always calls for action. Or as James bluntly puts it, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). We humans find obedience difficult. Submission of our will, our opinions and desires to the Lordship of Christ can be a struggle. Our heavenly Father seeks more than cold, mechanical obedience. He seeks our heart. He delights in children that love Him, trust Him and willingly follow His instructions.



Knowing that our heavenly Father always wants the best for us, we *choose* to obey Him. Acknowledging the Bible to be God’s word, we *choose* to submit to its authority over our lives. Of course, human emotions, logistics and financial considerations are important. But what finally drives a Christian to make certain clear and radical decisions is loving submission to God’s revealed will. It is only with this attitude that we can allow God to speak into our situation. If I have already made up my mind, if I have already decided what I will or will not do, then I am no longer

open to listening to His voice. I shall only be seeking arguments and people who will support what I have already decided to do. But if our attitude is right, then we can expect God’s Holy Spirit to guide us and give us His perspective as we seek answers to the following two personal questions: ‘How does God see my current situation?’ and ‘What should my next step be?’ Have you submitted your life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Do you have the right attitude towards God and His word? That is a necessary starting point.

If it is worth doing, it is worth starting well!

If you are currently considering the option of cohabitation, I strongly urge you not to do it! Most of those who cohabit and later marry agree that marriage is in some way better than cohabitation – that is why they marry. The marriage union is God’s good design to enhance and protect the long-term relationship with the one you love. Go for God’s best! Start your life together with marriage and not with occasional sex or with cohabitation. It is the beginning of a new and very important and enduring phase in your life. Choose to start well!

A clear choice: If you love each other deeply and find the sexual attraction difficult to resist, the Biblical solution is neither occasional sex nor cohabitation. To enjoy sexual intimacy without fornicating, “each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). The Holy Scriptures offer you, therefore, a clear choice between two options:

- (a) Get married - “But if they cannot control themselves, they should *marry*, for it is better to *marry* than to burn with passion” (1 Cor. 6:9), or
- (b) Keep your distance - in order to “flee from sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18).

Cohabitation may have some practical or financial benefits, but it is far better to pay a price and wait until you get married and enjoy the blessing of God on your relationship. To the Christians in Thessalonica Paul wrote, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality... Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thes. 4:3, 5:22). As previously

discussed, living together with your future spouse even without any form of sexual intimacy is both unwise and dangerous. “Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise but as wise... because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16). Ask the Lord to open doors. Share your accommodation needs with fellow believers. Actively seek alternative temporary living arrangements.

Patience, abstinence and self-control: These are important disciplines needed both before and after marriage. If patience, abstinence and self-control are developed and practiced before marriage, they will help protect your relationship after marriage. Deciding to keep the ‘special package’ of sexual intimacy closed until your wedding day will honour God and strengthen your future marriage.

Remember, weddings need not be large expensive events. A marriage covenant can also be made in a simple and meaningful way. Wedding rings, the bride’s white dress, the groom’s suit with matching hat, the beautifully decorated wedding hall may be part of your dream – but as far as the Bible is concerned, they are all optional extras! Your wedding is a very special event in your life. It is worth waiting for. Make a clear statement with it! Do it well! Start well!

Sex bonds souls together

Sexual intimacy, even occasionally with a friend or prostitute, does something to us. It creates a lasting link between humans (Prov. 5:20-22; 1 Cor. 6:16). Scientists have discovered that by physical contact and sexual intercourse special hormones are released by the brain into our bloodstream. In women, the release of *oxytocin* enhances *social bonding*, be it with her baby who stimulates her nipples during breastfeeding, or with her sexual partner. A similarly important hormone among men is *vasopressin*, which affects his social behaviour, sexual desire and *pair bonding*. What is clear is that sex in some physical way bonds people together. When the Bible says that on marriage a couple shall become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) this is much more than the few moments their bodies are physically united in sexual intercourse. Sex physically bonds people together.

But sex also bonds souls together. That is why the apostle Paul urges his Christian readers to “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:17-20). Perhaps you have already engaged in pre-marital sex. If you have been sexually intimate with someone, your soul is unhealthy and sinfully bonded to that person. That is bad news. The good news is that there is power in the name of Jesus to break all type of sinful soul-bonds.

For the repentant Christian there is always hope. The blood of Jesus is powerful enough to cleanse us from all sin. Acknowledge before God that you have sinned. Confess your sexual sin to the Lord and ask Him to forgive you. Make a commitment in your heart and before the Lord to distance yourself from that person (or persons), to live a sexually pure life until your wedding day. Commit to honour God with your body from now on. Then, in God’s presence, mention that person with whom you have had unlawful sex and, in the name of Jesus, break that soul bond. You could pray something like:

“Father God, I recognize that I displeased you and sinned against you when I was sexually intimate with John/Martha (and confess what you did).
I sincerely repent of this sin and ask You to forgive me and cleanse me. Amen”

Then, after thanking the Lord for His forgiveness, you could proclaim aloud to the spiritual world something like: “In the name of Jesus I break the soul-bond which exists between John/Martha and me”. Something then happens in the spiritual world. The sinful link between your soul and the soul of that sexual partner is broken - you are set free. You may do this alone, or you may go through this repentance and cleansing process with the support of a mature Christian friend or trusted church leader. If you are considering marriage and are not sexually clean, I recommend that you follow this repentance and cleansing process. You must have noticed that clean objects stick together better. It will strengthen your marriage union.

Separate what is ‘clear’ from ‘what requires clarity’

Perhaps you are honestly confused about your current status. It will help you to clarify your thinking if you separate what is clear from what still needs to be clarified. What is *clear* is that God’s intention for sexual intimacy is that it should be celebrated only within marriage – and therefore that sex outside marriage is wrong. What is *not always clear* is when a couple is actually married.

Unclear: Sometimes the marital status of a couple is not clear – and this needs to be clarified. For example, a couple can be married but for a number of reasons they may not have registered their wedding formally. It may be good for such couple to register their marriage with the State. It may be good to arrange a Christian ceremony or celebration, however this registration, ceremony or celebration will not marry the couple, but rather confirm a marriage that already existed. I know that married couples in indigenous communities in Colombia may register their marriages with the State years later. It would be absurd to claim that all the couples in the indigenous communities are cohabiting until they register their marriages with the State. I suggest that couples in such communities are united by God in matrimony when they, in their communities, in their traditional way, are considered husband and wife. As you can see, the ‘marriage moment’ sometimes needs careful thinking and clarification.

Clear: What is clear is that sex between couples before this ‘marriage moment’ is wrong. It is wrong for a single person to engage in regular or occasional sex. If a couple cohabit and are seriously planning their wedding within a week or a few months, they are still not married. Sex *before* the ‘marriage moment’ is sex *outside* of marriage, and therefore wrong. This principle is clear.

Choosing your ‘marriage moment’ – the two-step marriage

Some consider cohabitation and marriage as equally valid *forms of relationship*. However the covenant involved in marriage places marriage and cohabitation in different categories. Marriage and cohabitation are not different in form but in *essence*. At the ‘marriage moment’ God unites the couple in one new entity - not before, and not after. But the wedding itself, the marriage ceremony, can take on many different *forms*.

The development throughout history has resulted in different cultures and countries offering different types of wedding ceremonies. Interestingly, in most cultures there is ‘a moment’ when a man and a woman are recognised as husband and wife. Most Western countries offer a choice of both civil and religious weddings. A couple that wishes to marry is usually required to first marry legally with a Notary or a government office. A few hours, days or weeks later, if they wish, they may celebrate a religious wedding in a church or elsewhere. Unless a church has a license to marry, we are faced with this odd ‘two-step’ marriage. This two-step marriage generates a number of interesting questions:

1. Where did this 'two-step' marriage come from? In Bible times many different wedding traditions were available. The Jews, Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians all had their own traditions, methods or *forms* to unite a couple in matrimony. The governments in those days allowed couples to choose a marriage *form* depending on their culture. Weddings in Bible times were social events. About one thousand years ago, the Roman Catholic Church made use of its power and influence over European secular governments to insist that all births, weddings and deaths should be registered at the Church. Around this time, it became a requirement for everyone to marry in a church building under the guidance of a priest. This arrangement continued until the time of the French Revolution (1780-1880). At this time, in order to reduce the power of the Church and strengthen the power of the secular State, Napoleon Bonaparte took the ability to marry couples and register births, deaths and marriages away from the Church and gave it to the State. From that time onward we have had the 'two-step' marriage in a number of European countries. That is why couples are legally required to first be married by the State and then, if they wish, celebrate with a religious ceremony. In the UK, a government official is present at church weddings, or the priest, pastor or some person in the congregation is licensed to register weddings in the name of the State. All Christians in the UK enjoy a 'one-step' marriage. For many years, the Roman Catholic Church was the official religion in most Latin American countries. Their wedding was therefore the official wedding. Notaries were allowed to marry non-Catholic people. Today non-Roman Catholic Christians in these countries also live this 'two-step' marriage situation.



2. When is a couple actually married? Is a couple married at the government office or a few hours, days or weeks later at the church ceremony? This is a very important question. Of course, it is good to ask God's blessing over your marriage union. But non-Christians who only marry in government office are just as married as Christians. Christian couples are not *more* married than secular couples. Take note that nowhere in the Bible do we find instructions that require Christians to marry in a church. Neither does the Bible present examples of Christians marrying in a church. We must be careful to distinguish between Christian traditions and God's revelation. Only the latter has authority. Marriage is God's gift to humanity, not only to the church.

Unless a government recognizes church weddings, a couple will only be *legally married* after they sign a marriage document in a government office. In some countries, like here in The Netherlands, it is illegal for a church or religious body to pronounce the couple married before they are pronounced married by the State. After visiting the Notary or government office, a couple is lawfully married. But in practice, most Christian couples *choose* to consider themselves married after they have exchanged vows in a Christian ceremony – in the presence of God, friends and family. This is their choice. I think it is a good choice. But a Christian couple can also choose to consider themselves married at

the moment they sign the marriage document at the government office. In the eyes of God, they would be married then, just like the secular couples. The 'two-step' marriage has unfortunately introduced an artificial ambiguity into the exact moment of marriage. This ambiguity can be easily eliminated when the couple clearly and publicly state their choice of 'marriage moment'. I am sure the Lord God endorses the couple's choice.

3. What is the function of the church ceremony? If you live in a country where the government recognizes a church wedding, then the Christian ceremony or church event will be used to marry the couple. If you live in a country where Christians must first sign a marriage document in at government office, then, after signing, the Christian ceremony or church event can be used to mark the beginning of that marriage union. At that moment, in the presence of God and witnesses, they enter into a marriage covenant. God makes them one flesh. They become husband and wife. They have created a 'safe place'. They are now free to live together and to consummate their union.

But if a couple has chosen to consider themselves married from the moment they signed the paper in the government office, this couple then will arrive at the Christian ceremony or church event *as a couple already married*. This may take place days, weeks or months after their legal or civil wedding. The function of the Christian ceremony or church event in this case is not to marry them but to ask God's blessing over their marriage and celebrate their marriage union. Something in the invitation will make this clear. How will these two church ceremonies differ? In form and 'feel', probably not very much. Both will be happy moments of celebration. Both may have songs, talks, prayers, and even vows. But in the first case the liturgy will make clear that a couple is being married. In the second case, it will be clear that the union of a married couple is being blessed.

Remember that there is nothing odd or wrong about repeating wedding vows. In marriage retreats we sometimes re-enact a collective wedding in which all couples present are invited to reaffirm their wedding vows to God and to each other in the presence of God and all those present at the retreat. Some couples will have been married for 5 years, others for 30 or 40 years. The public repetition of the wedding vows strengthens their union and their commitment to each other. But it is clear to all that we are *not* marrying anyone at these marriage retreats. After the vows, it would *not* be appropriate to say: 'we now recognise you as husband and wife'. We are only endorsing, asking God's blessing and celebrating marriages that already exist. This is similar to what would happen in a church service if a couple have chosen the signing at government office to be their 'marriage moment'.

Regardless of your choice of wedding *form*, every marriage has a 'marriage moment'. There is a moment in every kind of wedding when a man and a woman are considered by both God and society to be husband and wife, whether it is in a civil or religious ceremony. After that moment, we no longer speak of cohabitation but of marriage. Sexual intimacy before that 'marriage moment' goes against God's will for your relationship. Sexual intimacy after that 'marriage moment' is approved and blessed by the Creator.

Cohabitation is a private matter – the church should not judge.

Some suggest that the Christian life is a private matter and that no Christian is in a position to judge another. Jesus Himself said: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matt. 7:1). Isn't every Christian responsible for his own life? We are all sinners, so why should one sinner judge another? When the Lord Jesus told His disciples not to judge, he was not telling them to 'mind

their own business'. He was correcting their attitudes as they sought to help or instruct others. After telling His disciples not to judge, He told them how to help an offending brother. He said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, *first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye*" (Matt. 7:2-5).



A speck in an eye is no asset! It may be painful to remove, it may take some time, but it *is a positive act*. It is a friendly and a loving act. The eye and the whole body will benefit. To ignore it would be unkind. Christian communities should not ignore couples who engage in sexual intimacy outside of marriage. Cohabitation should not be allowed to become an acceptable form of premarital relationship. It is an act of kindness to call such couples to repentance. We are not to judge motives (2 Cor. 4:5), only behaviour (1 Cor. 5:12). The objective is not to condemn, but to heal, not to remove the eye, but to remove the speck and allow the eye to heal and function normally – for the benefit of the eye and of the whole body.

Recently cohabiting?

Perhaps you are cohabiting and are planning to get married later – perhaps soon. Maybe you chose to cohabit not knowing that this was not God's way. Maybe you thought it was not a serious wrong so you did it anyway. Repentance involves agreeing with God. You have now seen that sexual intimacy is approved and blessed by God *only* within the context of a covenant marriage between one man and one woman. Recognise together before God that you began the wrong way. Like any other sin, cohabitation can be forgiven. The apostle Paul urged the believers at Colossi to, "put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: *sexual immorality*, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). Put to death means 'repent and stop'! The way back to pleasing our heavenly Father starts with recognising that He is right, and we are wrong. It requires acknowledgement of wrongdoing and confession of sin. With true repentance, there will be a change in our behaviour, a turning away from practices that are "improper for God's holy people" (Eph. 5:3).

If at all possible, I would strongly recommend that you separate and live in different houses and come together again only after you get married. Use this time positively, to reflect, to deepen your convictions, to grow closer to the Lord. Sometimes one half of the couple does not consider cohabitation wrong or is simply unwilling to take serious corrective action. The corrective action is still necessary but will be more painful. We stand individually before God. As individuals, "each one" of us will give account to God of our actions and lifestyle choices (2 Cor. 5:10). Yes, obedience in this area may well be inconvenient, it may be humiliating or

embarrassing, but it is definitely worthwhile. Your willingness to pay a price to obey the Lord does something good in your heart. Obedience to God will strengthen your marriage. Obedience allows God's blessings to flow!

Long term cohabitation?

There is great variety in the situations that lead to cohabitation. Perhaps you have become a Christian recently and are seeking to 'organise your life' in order to please the Lord. If you have been cohabiting for many years, the answer to the question 'how does God see my current situation?' is not always simple to give. You have not yet officially married and yet you may have marriage responsibilities. You are not free to simply drop the relationship and seek another. Start by recognising that knowingly or unknowingly have entered into this relationship through the wrong door. Confess this to the Lord and seek His forgiveness. Then start working at formalising the relationship by getting married - the sooner the better.

So, you might ask, what should my next step be ? After the acknowledgement and confession of sin, the practical steps towards marriage may differ significantly depending on your situation. Some couples choose to separate for a few weeks or months, organise their wedding, and then come together again. For couples with young children, this option may not be wise. Other couples have decided to sleep in separate beds or abstain from sexual intercourse until their wedding day. Maybe you can think of some other practical and yet radical solution. Better still, ask God to give you an idea and to guide you. Don't blindly follow what others have done. Your deep desire is to glorify God with your life. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit, who lives in you, will somehow give you an indication as to what your next step should be. You must be willing to obey, willing to pay a price, willing to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Be bold and take corrective action.

An encouraging example

Vic and Malu were cohabiting when they began to walk the Christian life. When they expressed their interest in getting baptised, we used the occasion to visit them in their flat and discuss with them the Biblical teachings on conversion, the Lordship of Christ and also marriage. They became aware that cohabitation was not God's way. What should they now do? We encouraged them to pray and seek the Spirit's guidance on this matter. On the day of his baptism, Vic asked if he could read a letter before the church family – some 300 witnesses. We agreed. Here is his letter:

My dear brothers and sisters,

Today I will be baptised. Thank you for sharing this special moment with me. Before I receive God's blessing, I want to share something with you: As some may already know, within four months Malu and I plan to get married. We are really looking forward to this very special day. The truth is that Malu and I have already been living together – we started our relationship in a different way than the way God had intended for us. Sexuality and marriage go together, but we selfishly chose sexual gratification before the appointed time. We now know that this choice was not correct. We plan to get married soon. We would like to say to all the young people in the Church: "Do not give in to your sexual desires... Many make the mistake which we also made. Many end up alone, unhappy and leave a piece of themselves behind. Learn from our mistake, because not every story has a happy ending." Two months ago, the Lord convinced us that living together was wrong. Since then, Malu and I made a vow to stop having sex together and to sleep

separately until our wedding day. We believe that God has forgiven us and we are looking forward to our wedding: a wedding with the Lord in our hearts and in our lives. A wedding in which two lovers will be united in one. Brothers and sisters, please pray for us.

What a clear testimony of what God was doing in the life of these new Christians! Their words sent a very strong and positive message to the whole congregation. This is not a model for all situations. If you are currently cohabiting, the Lord may guide you to set things right in another radical way. What I like about their testimony is their clear recognition of wrong and their practical steps to set things right.

Obey God or the Government?

The Roman Catholic Church has never recognised civil marriages. It ignored Napoleon! It continued to consider marriage a sacrament that only a Roman Catholic priest could officiate. Most other non-Catholic Christian congregations have historically accepted civil marriages as valid marriages. There are some strong Scriptures to encourage Christians to submit to the governing authorities (Rom.3:1,5). Until half a century ago, the legal system in many countries was reasonably in harmony with the Holy Scriptures. But things are rapidly changing. Now the State approves divorce and remarriage under circumstances that the Bible would not approve. Now the State provides marriage certificates to couples of the same gender. Sometimes the State will forbid a marriage that the Bible would not forbid. If a government declares a wrong practice to be good and legal, it remains wrong. Christian churches today who wish to remain faithful to Scripture will need the clarity and boldness of the early apostles who, when forced to choose between God and State replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" (Acts 4:19). There will be special situations when the State says 'this couple is married', and the church will have to say 'no, they are not married' – and sometimes the other way around.

It can be complicated! The church is there to help you.

Life in a fallen world can sometimes be very complex. For most couples, the Scriptural guidelines we have explored together are relatively clear. What is required is a humble submission to God's revealed will. But we humans have ensured that sometimes the correct application of God's revealed rules and principles can be very difficult to find. In such situations, I suggest you seek the help and guidance of mature, Bible-grounded and experienced leaders in your local church. To illustrate what I have in mind, consider the following real-life examples:

- **Unbelieving partner:** A woman comes to faith after cohabiting for 25 years. She has 3 grown up children with her partner. He is not a Christian, he loves her and their children. She loves him and wants to marry him. He is committed to their relationship but for some personal reason he refuses to become legally married. Is this couple already married in God's eyes, although they have not yet formally registered their marriage? How could we as a church help in this situation?
- **Excessively large dowry:** An African Christian couple in their mid-twenties are in love and wish to marry. But the woman's family requires such a large dowry that the man would have to work until well into his 40's before he is able to raise enough money. Should Christians break with such traditions? How could we as a church help in this situation?
- **Complicated documentation:** Some personal documents are usually required in order to marry legally. Sometimes one of the required documents becomes practically impossible

to get hold of – for example, the government registry office is in a war-torn district or has been burnt down. Sometimes a person wishes marry but the divorce papers from a previous marriage, due to inefficiencies, costs and technical reasons, take years to be completed. How could we as a church help in these situations?

- Legal restrictions: An illegal immigrant from Russia, for example, may be refused permission to marry a local German. But the Bible does not prohibit a marriage between a Russian and a German. How could we as a church help in this situation?

If your situation is a simple one, don't turn it into a complex one. Be patient. Humbly obey the Lord's good and wise directives. However if you currently find yourself in a relatively complex situation, I suggest that you do not try to solve it on your own. Seek the help and support of wise and experienced Christians. After all, church leaders are called to "watch over you as men who must give an account" (Heb. 13:17). I am convinced that for a humble and repentant heart, God will always show a way out. There are no impossible situations where a Christian must just 'live in sin'. In a sphere of openness, trust, forgiveness, patience and grace, I am sure the Lord will lead you and the leaders of your local church to find a way. Complex situations sometimes require unique and unconventional solutions of grace, but He will show a way, and the church is there to help you find it!

Public confession? Church discipline?

Should sin be confessed publicly before the church? Should the sins of pre-marital sexual intimacy and cohabitation be reasons for the church to take some form of disciplinary action? You may be aware that convictions and customs vary between Christian congregations. My understanding of Scripture leads me to conclude that a local church is called to distance itself from those who call themselves Christians but insist in living a sinful lifestyle (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Such individuals should be excluded from the protection and privileges of Christian community life. They should be asked not to participate at the Lord's Supper. Once a couple have recognised the sinfulness of their lifestyle, have confessed their sin to the Lord, and are doing all in their power to set things right, the church should shower them with love, grace and as much support as possible. Like the father of the prodigal son, we rejoice when a fellow believer has recognised the error of his or her ways and is returning home.

Public confession: God's promise to the repentant Christian is clear; "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). To whom are we required to confess our sins? When we sin, we always offend God. When we repent, we should therefore always confess our sin to Him, and receive His Fatherly forgiveness. But sometimes our sin affects others. When the prodigal son sinned, he sinned against God and his father. Upon repentance, he said: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Lk. 15:21). We should confess our sins to God and also to those who have been affected by them. Public confession to the whole church should only be necessary if the sin has hurt or affected the whole church. The instructions given by the Lord Jesus on how to handle a person who has sinned against you reinforce the principle that problems should be solved in small settings. If after repeated attempts the offender remains unrepentant, then whole church may need to be involved – but this is as a final resort in extreme situations (Matt. 18:15-17). Holy living is important, but I am convinced that *fear* and *shame* are very blunt tools to promote holy living in the church. My strong preference is to encourage holy living by *transforming minds* through good, balanced Bible teaching, increasing love and devotion to the Lord Jesus by reminding all how wonderful He is, and promoting an environment of grace

and forgiveness - in which the Holy Spirit can produce His fruits in every believer (Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 12:1-2; Gal 5:22-23).

What is the purpose of church discipline? Order and discipline are necessary if we are to have healthy families and churches. The different forms of church discipline are *not* given to *punish* wayward believers. On the cross, Christ took our punishment. Our sins do not require double punishment. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient. The different forms of church discipline are not given to punish but (a) to help the offender reflect on the seriousness of their sin, (b) to encourage the offender to acknowledge his or her sin and repent, (c) to protect the offender from participating in parts of church life in an unworthy manner, and (d) to protect the congregation from bad teaching or a bad example, knowing that "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor. 5:6). If a believer has humbly recognised and confessed his or her sin, I suggest that church discipline is no longer necessary or applicable. Some ministry restrictions may be appropriate to give time for stability to grow and mutual confidence to be restored.

CONCLUSION

Sexual intimacy is a beautiful package designed by God to be enjoyed *only* after marriage. In the Bible, marriage is presented as a *covenant* – the strongest form of commitment between two parties. Covenants have content, vows, and clear beginnings. Covenants help bring stability and security to relationships and society. The covenant of marriage creates a ‘safe place’ for love, sex and the raising of children.

It is a common expectation in Scripture that both partners in a couple remain virgins until the ‘marriage moment’ when the marriage covenant is enacted, when God makes the two one, when the ownership of their bodies changes from ‘mine’ to ‘ours’. This will occur during the church ceremony or some culturally acceptable social gathering - in countries where the State recognizes such weddings. In countries where ‘two-step’ marriages exist, Christian couples will first marry legally by signing a marriage document in a government office and then, if they wish, have a Christian ceremony or celebration. Their ‘marriage moment’ will be at the government office or at their church ceremony. It is their choice. Any sexual activity *before* this ‘marriage moment’ and therefore *outside* of this ‘safe place’ does violence to God’s design for marriage. Occasional pre-marital sexual intimacy and cohabitation which involves sex *before* the ‘marriage moment’ is also sex *outside* of marriage - it is also wrong.

If you are considering cohabitation, please don’t do it! God has something much better for you. Start well! If you currently cohabit, recognise that you are running in the wrong track. Acknowledge your wrongdoing, seek God’s forgiveness and get back on the right track as soon as possible. If your situation is complex, seek help from your local church. If you honestly want to please the Lord, He will show you a way and empower you to walk it.

The ‘safe place’ of marriage is designed by God for the joy and benefit of human beings. The marriage covenant is not a joy-killer but a joy-enhancer and a joy-protector. Trust God. Be patient, be self-controlled, be radically Christian. Obedience to God’s design always leads to blessing.