

Cohabitation

Talking Points

Attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage are rapidly changing, in general society as well as among Christians. Some people begin to be sexually active because they are committed to the relationship and plan to get married in the near future. Others seek the joys of a sexual relationship without the commitments of marriage. 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. Does the Bible shed light on these social developments? Can cohabitation be seen as a culturally acceptable form of marriage? Should parents and church leaders be concerned? How does God see this? Clearly there is a lot to talk about!

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, sexual intimacy and covenants. By considering God's good and positive design, we shall be better placed to evaluate current social developments.

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), and between God and a family - like that with king David's family (2 Chr. 21:7). Marriage is also described as a *covenant* (Mal. 2:14). Interestingly, the 'safe place' of the *marriage covenant* consists of two components: a *horizontal* component - when a man and a woman promise life-long exclusive fidelity to each other, and a *vertical* component – when together they promise God that they will love and be faithful to each other. 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.

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. 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).

Marriage and Virginity

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). To strongly discourage cohabitation or occasional sexual intercourse before marriage, the Law of Moses required the death penalty for the non-virgin. When the apostle Paul gave instructions on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:25-38, he equated 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 Testament, there is a clear expectation that sexual intimacy begins with marriage and not before.

Cohabitation – Talking Points

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. Many have noble motives and well thought out reasons to live together¹. Consider the following motives and reasons.

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

Proposal: Cohabitation will help us discover whether we are sexually and emotionally compatible before we commit for life. **Discussion:** 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.² With the right attitude and in the right environment your sexual skills and satisfaction will grow. The marriage covenant provides the right environment for sexual and emotional compatibility to flourish.

2. 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

¹ More may be found in my book ‘Cohabitation and Sexual Intimacy Before Marriage’ – freely available from www.philipnunn.com under eBooks.

² Further tips and guidelines are given in my book ‘Pre-Marriage Relationships’ – also freely available from www.philipnunn.com under eBooks.

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. Decide to make your life decisions based on Biblical principles rather than personal ideas or convenience.

3. 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. **Discussion:** Of course, good intentions are important. But good intentions in themselves are not enough. 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.

4. Today cohabitation is like marriage.

Proposal: The Bible was written a long time ago and in a very different cultural setting from the one we live in here today. Shouldn't the Christian church stop resisting these natural social developments and recognise that today cohabitation is an acceptable lifestyle option? **Discussion:** 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. 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.

5. 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:** 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 still 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. But this does not reduce in any way the clear will of God for humanity: first marriage, and then sexual intimacy. Remember, the Bible, God's *objective* written Word, takes precedence over our *subjective* impressions of God's will.

6. We live together without having sex.

Proposal: We are planning to get married and in the mean time we live alone together without having sex. **Discussion:** Of course, it is possible for a couple who deeply loves each other to live alone together *without* sexual intimacy. Because I find no Scripture that explicitly forbids this, I 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. It is 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'. Sexologists tell us that this may adversely affect your future marriage – particularly affecting women. But the main reason I wish to discourage this type of cohabitation is because it is dangerous, it makes it easier to sin and to bring regrets into your relationship. Even with good and honourable motives, we all have weak moments. It is wise to build in safeguards, to create distance between yourself and the temptations you wish to avoid.

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 in some complex situations 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.

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. 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 on 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 marriage covenant is designed by God for the joy and benefit of human beings. It creates a 'safe place' for love, sex and the raising of children. It helps bring stability and security to relationships and society. 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.

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