

Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

Developing A Biblical Sexual Worldview Chapter V

Cohabitation vs. Marriage

A Bible Study for Mature Christ-followers

~by Dr. John P. Splinter

*When I think of Lorelei my head turns all around
As gentle as a butterfly she moves without a sound
I call her on the telephone, she says be there by eight
Tonight's the night she's moving in and I can hardly wait
Lorelei let's live together, brighter than the stars forever
Lorelei let's live together, brighter than the stars forever
Dennis Deyoung and James Young ~ Styx*

It's the decision of this generation ~ to live together without marrying ~ to have "all the benefits and none of the liabilities" of marriage ~ at least that's the theory. People ask, "Isn't it wise to "test run" a marriage before actually making things formal?" Since 1960 the percentage of couples cohabiting has increased by 1,000 percent in the USA¹. The next few pages will present research findings, as well as scripture, as we compare/contrast cohabitation and marriage.

On the plus side of the ledger are several reasons why cohabiting is often seen to be a good thing:

- Living with a close friend
- Having sex any time
- Saving money by renting or buying one place instead of two
- Giving a potential marital relationship a trial run
- Providing a two-parent environment for the children of single parents

Of course, in this discussion there's a negative side too. Here are a few downbeat thoughts:

- Inability to commit ~ perhaps fear of commitment
- Fear of intimacy
- Broken sense of morality ~ morality treated as either irrelevant or situational
- Inability to delay personal gratification
- Emotional damage caused by sexual intimacy outside of marriage
- Worrisome existence of a quick exit in case a better option comes along

In the last 20 years cohabitation has been thoroughly studied by professional researchers ~ from university professors to therapists, from primary research to literature reviews ~ and it's safe to say the research findings are not encouraging. Indeed, one Ph.D.² concludes that there *is no* research favorable to cohabitation. Perhaps a quick review of some actual research may shed better light on the issue. What follows are references from mostly non-religious clinical literature pertaining to cohabitation.

Lower probability of marriage: People who live together before marriage appear to be much less likely to marry one another. Researcher Hilda Rodriguez (1988) writes, "Women who cohabit have a lower probability of marriage than women who do not. If a woman does not marry her first cohabiting partner, her chances of marriage decrease even further."³ In their study of cohabitation, socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, researchers Manning and Smock⁴ (2002) write, "cohabiting unions are increasingly not resulting in marriage." In research published by Leadership University,⁵

"A Columbia University study cited in New Woman magazine found that 'only 26% of women surveyed and a scant 19% of the men married the person with whom they were cohabiting.' A more comprehensive National Survey of Families and Households, based on interviews with 13,000 people, concluded, 'About 40% of cohabiting unions in the U.S. break up without the couple getting married.'"

Lower trust: MacLean & Peters⁶ found that cohabiting couples showed significantly lower trust of one another than did married couples. Nock⁷ found that cohabiting couples expressed lower levels of commitment to their relationships, reported lower levels of happiness with their relationships, and had poorer relationships with their parents than comparable married couples.

Less stable relationships: Stets⁸ found that prior cohabiting relationships *negatively influenced* current married and cohabiting relationships. For married subjects, cohabitation with someone other than the current spouse produced a negative effect. Stets wrote, "It is suggested ... that those who cohabit with someone other than their intended spouse may be predisposed to problems in relationships." Gage & Anastasia⁹ found that cohabiting relationships were more unstable than formal marriages. Sarantakos¹⁰ wrote, "Stability and continuity among cohabiting couples were very low compared with married couples. Cohabital breakdown was not only significantly higher, but also more multiple and complex than marital breakdown. Cohabitation was judged to be an unstable system." Dr. David Popenoe, noted Rutgers University sociologist explains, "the very act of living together may lead to attitudes that make a happy marriage more difficult."¹¹

Teachman & Polonko¹² found that data from a national longitudinal study supported the hypothesis that premarital *cohabitation increased marital disruption* in the US, and that this finding was consistent with evidence from Sweden and Canada.

Higher levels of violence: McLaughlin, Leonard, & Senchak¹³ found that cohabitation was associated with premarital aggression. Ellis¹⁴ found that men were more likely to beat women they live with than those they married. Stets & Straus¹⁵ found that (1) the highest rate of assault

was among the cohabiting couples; (2) violence was most severe in cohabiting couples; and (3) the most frequent pattern was for both cohabiting partners to be violent. Huffman, Chang, Rausch, and Schaffer¹⁶ discovered that there were two factors consistent with males who chose to cohabit: They had lower levels of religiosity, and they had more tolerant views of rape. This may help make sense of research by Rodriquez and Henderson¹⁷ who found that cohabitation was the only relationship in which females outnumbered males as homicide offenders!

Higher levels of substance abuse: In addition to domestic violence, Stanton¹⁸ found that cohabiting couples were more likely to be substance abusers as well ~ perhaps due to the lack of commitment and connection as experienced by married couples.

Greater probability of divorce: Stanton¹⁹ found that people who live together before marriage *increase that couple's probability of divorce by 50 – 80 percent, if they marry!* McManus²⁰ found that only 15 out of every 100 cohabitating couples were married after a decade, and that living together before marriage *increased the probability of divorce by 50 per cent.* The Readers Digest²¹ published research stating that couples who live together are over 33% more likely to divorce. Barna²² found that, “People who cohabit prior to marriage have an 82% greater chance of divorce than do couples who marry without having first lived together” (p. 66). The *Prepare/Enrich*²³ organization writes, “Couples that live alone before marriage seem to have the best premarital relationship, which we have found is also predictive of later marital success.” Axinn & Thornton²⁴ said that the results of their study, “...are consistent with hypotheses suggesting that cohabitation is selective of men and women more approving of divorce.”

Sociologist Pamela Smock²⁵ said most couples who live together, marry or break up within 18 months. She found that only one-in-six couples were still living together after three years, and just one-in-ten after five years. Smock's University of Michigan study found that “live-ins” are less happy than married couples, less sexually faithful, and less financially well-off.

Meanwhile, those who go on to marry after living together are far more likely to end up divorcing. University of Chicago sociologist, Linda Waite, details how living together can undermine marriage in her book, *The Case for Marriage*.²⁶ In this book she makes the case that cohabiting changes attitudes to a more individualistic, less relationship-oriented viewpoint. That fact alone may be the key reason why cohabitation doesn't work: The focus is more upon the self, than upon the other.

Some may argue that since the divorce rate is already in the 50% range, how much worse can it be to cohabit? The research here is numbing. Canadian researcher Anne-Marie Ambert found, “...in the 20-30 age group, 63% of women whose first relationship had been cohabitational, had separated by 1995. This compared to 33% of women who had first married.”²⁷ Bumpass and Lu found that “...marriage rates for cohabiting couples have been plummeting. In the last decade, the proportion of cohabiting mothers who go on to eventually marry the child's father declined from 57% to 44%.”²⁸ In a 1992 study of 3,300 cases, researchers DeMaris and Rao found that in their marriages prior cohabitators were “estimated to have a hazard of dissolution that is about 46% higher than for noncohabitators.”²⁹ Researchers Bumpass and Sweet³⁰ found that within two years about half of all cohabiting relationships end in either marriage or a parting of the ways,

and after five years only about 10% of couples are still cohabiting (data from the late 1980s). In comparison, only about 45% of first marriages today are expected to break up over the course of a lifetime.

Research conducted by *Focus on the Family* confirms all of the above, finding that cohabitation lends itself to lower relationship quality, less stability, more disagreements, and a higher risk of abuse. While one might suspect that a conservative organization such as *Focus on the Family* may come to such conclusions, yet their conclusions are no different than the conclusions of non-Christian, secular researchers. Cohabitation is ruinous, if what one really wants is the attachment, security, longevity, and joy of marriage.

Stating it another way, the temporary advantages of cohabitation provide a negative wager if one genuinely seeks love. If one is not seeking love right now but hopes to have it later, then cohabitation is an impediment to that goal also. Carlie Simon wrote lyrics that apply well to cohabitation: “Tonight you’re mine completely. You give your love so sweetly. Tonight the light of love is in your eyes. But will you love me tomorrow?” If someone needs to ask, “But will you love me tomorrow,” then it’s not trust, it’s not stable, it’s not belonging, it’s not commitment, and it’s not love.

In a sad but real sense, cohabitation is merely one way that people delude themselves into believing one can circumvent the plan established by a loving Creator. The growing body of clinical research clearly demonstrates that cohabitation lends itself more to the destruction of love than to the fulfillment of love. The bottom line of circumventing God’s perfect plan is the sadness of what could have been.

This being so, let’s talk for a moment about God’s plan. In the first chapter of Genesis, after it says that God created male and female (i.e., sexuality), it says, “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good.”³¹ In the second chapter of Genesis, scripture gives the basis for marriage, speaking of a man leaving his father and mother and being united to his wife, and their becoming one flesh.³² One man, one woman, for a lifetime.

Scripture talks about Adam and Eve being naked and unashamed.³³ Yet Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Thereafter, the first symptom was fear (they hid from God).³⁴ The second symptom is interesting to ponder ~ shame ~ they covered up their nakedness.³⁵ It’s fascinating that Adam and Eve exhibited sexual shame in response to a non-sexual sin. They disobeyed God by eating forbidden fruit ~ which was by no means a sexual form of disobedience. Yet their guilty response toward God exhibited sexual embarrassment (“We were naked, so we covered up.”) It’s interesting that Satan used shame back then, and still uses it today, as he harasses human beings after he lures them into sexual disobedience against God.

Yet, scripture paints a lovely picture of a man admiring his naked wife, with desire,³⁶ and of a woman pursuing her beloved husband.³⁷ Furthermore, scripture teaches that husbands’ and wives’ bodies belong to one another after marriage.³⁸ This is to say, God created marital sexuality, He saw that it was “very good,” He understands it completely, and adds His blessing to it.

It is likely that the single, most significant facet of human sexuality, is not that it is sensual, nor that it is exciting, or that it communicates deeply. Rather, the most significant facet is that it is overwhelmingly powerful. As Solomon pondered love and sex in the *Song of Songs*, he wrote, "... love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away."³⁹

Sex was intended by God to be a bonding agent within marriage ~ to link a man and a woman at the heart in such a way that nothing in the world could penetrate the bond. Jennifer Morse writes, "Human sexuality is fundamentally about the mutual gift of self of the partners. In the area of human sexuality, the best and most reliable way to pursue our happiness is to give ourselves completely to our sexual partners. If we start from self-interest, concern for the other person is added after the fact."⁴⁰ Because sex outside of marriage is more about self-interest than about giving happiness to one's partner, it usually functions in a destructive manner to any ongoing relationship.

The bond that sex provides is so powerful that when kids are sexual in their dating relationships, and then break up, the pain is often so great that research has found girls are three times more likely to attempt suicide; boys are eight times more likely.⁴¹ The term, "recreational sex" has become standardized in our culture as people "hook up" for one-night stands. Is it any wonder, then, that the divorce rate in this culture continues to hover near the 50% rate.

Sex is so powerful that the only thing able to contain it without being destroyed by it, is marriage. Outside of marriage, sex becomes very similar to a fire outside a fireplace ~ dangerous and destructive. Certainly, sex can be exciting outside of marriage, but it's a bit like a wild fire that warms a person as it burns a house to the ground.

Scripture is often seen as being condemnatory in nature ~ condemning people for having a little sexual fun here and there. That approach to understanding the heart of a loving Father is a bit like a five-year-old child trash-talking a parent who won't let him play in the street. God is far more interested in rewarding the obedience of His children, than in punishing their disobedience.⁴²

And God's intent for marital sex is that we would *thoroughly* enjoy one another's bodies.⁴³ Yet it is clear that God wants us to keep sex within marriage.⁴⁴ It's a bit like becoming a virtuoso on one musical instrument, rather than a second-grader who can play "Chopsticks" on many musical instruments. But it's far deeper than that, because within marriage, God intended that sex would bind us together and then motivate us to plumb the depth and richness He created in each of us.

To settle for less than that, is common but foolish. Yet our culture today strongly encourages us to use sex as a toy, rather than as a golden thread in the tapestry of two lives eternally joined through mutual commitment and showered by Godly blessing.

Research is clear: Married people have the most sex,⁴⁵ and they have the best sex.⁴⁶ People who marry rather than cohabit are far less likely to divorce,^{47, 48} they have higher levels of marital happiness, stability and agreement,⁴⁹ and lower levels of physical violence.⁵⁰ They are less

likely to have affairs,⁵¹ and all of this is just “fallout” from obedience to God, who blesses those who are obedient to His will and His ways.⁵²

Bible Study

1. Read Genesis 2:24. Does this text imply that marriage was to be between one man and one woman? Does it imply that it was to last for a lifetime? (Tip: If the latter were not so, then the word immediately after “flesh” would have been, “until....”) Can you think of any other texts that would lead us to believe that marriage was intended by God to last for a lifetime?
2. Genesis 1:31; 2:24-25; Prov. 5:18; Song of Solomon 4:1-7; and 5:10-16. Discuss why God created sexuality. Was it just for procreation, or did the God of the Universe have an extended purpose? Discuss what Satan’s purpose is in His activity within God’s creation, specifically in regard to human sexuality.
3. Read Genesis 2:25; 3:8-10. It’s possible to “burn out” our shame sensors, so that one can do any sexual act with anyone and feel no shame. But in the person who still has an active conscience, why does sexual sin bring shame, and what does that teach us about God’s purposes for sexuality?
4. Have a man read Song of Solomon 7:1-9. Then, have the men in the group discuss why this portrayal is masculine in nature. (Tip: It’s OK to discuss this – it’s in the Bible.)
5. Have a woman read Song of Solomon, 8:6-7. Then, have the women in the group discuss why this portrayal is feminine in nature.
6. Read Psalms 5:12 and Proverbs 3:33. What does it mean, within the realm of sexuality, for God to “bless” a man and woman?
7. Jer. 15:19a; 18:7-10; 26:3, 13. What if a person has really messed up in their sexual life. Does God hold grudges?

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