

HOW MUCH DOES IT MATTER IF CHRISTIANS LIVE TOGETHER BEFORE MARRIAGE - Part one

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WHY PEOPLE COHABIT BEFORE MARRIAGE - AND ARE THESE REASONS VIABLE?

I admit there is a certain mistaken logic to the reasons I frequently hear from professing Christians as to why they are sure it's simply prudent to have a trial period of living together before committing to a permanent marriage relationship. They're simply extrapolating the same reasoning we all use in other large life decisions.

For example, about eight years ago I bought a new car. Though it was the previous year's model, it was brand new - never been driven. It was probably the nicest car I've purchased - a lovely Hyundai Elantra. And at \$27,000, it's still the most I've ever paid for a car in my entire life.

When I was settling on choosing between two or three cars for purchase I went in and took this car out for a drive. I wanted to see exactly what it would be like to **drive** this car. There are certain experiences you just can't get from reading the brochure. You want what's commonly called a **test drive**.

How would you react if you went in to test drive your potential car purchase and the salesperson said, “***Well, I’ll let you take the car out for a drive but not until you’ve given me the money for the car. You can’t test drive it until you are irreversibly committed to buying that car.***”

You’d probably say that the reason you **wanted** the test drive was to see if you **wanted** to make a commitment to **owning** that car - that you’d not be in a position to **buy** that car until you **tried it out first**. And nobody thinks there is anything unreasonable in making that request. You shouldn’t be expected to make the commitment to purchase until **after** you’ve tried out the vehicle.

Unfortunately, a vow-binding marriage isn’t like a car or a shirt on a store hanger. By nature, there is no way to take a vow-binding marriage off the hanger and try it on before purchasing. It is the biggest commitment in any life and, by definition, can only be experienced **after** the irreversible commitment has been made.

And this doesn’t feel safe for many people. It sounds like some kind of trap where you can’t see what a choice is really **like** until you can no longer get out of the **consequences** of that choice. It’s a scary business, marriage.

This is what has made **cohabitation without marriage** the fastest growing type of relationship in the country. It seems to offer the test drive marriage vows don't allow. In Canada the rate of cohabiting relationships is increasing **4 times faster** than married couples. And in the United States **70%** of the population will cohabit before entering marriage. And a very high percentage will marry someone **other than** the one or ones they have lived with.

Not surprisingly, as the church so typically seems to follow culture's lead, this same arrangement is widely accepted, even among people who think they are disciples of Jesus Christ. I've read in supposedly Christian books that cohabitation may actually be a good way to save Christian marriage from soaring divorce rates. And if marriages are eventually saved from divorce God must be pleased with the fruit of effective cohabitation.

And so this is our study for a few weeks. Does this kind of reasoning stand up? Is it true, first of all, to God's revealed will in Scripture? But in addition to that, does cohabitation deliver what people seem to think it delivers?

This is where I want to start today. Are we being given the straight goods in these glowing praises of cohabitation before marriage? And I'm absolutely convinced we're not. I am convinced, over and over again, that when God's ways are turned upside-down it is not just some **religious rule book** that's violated. God's visible created order - **our physical lives in this real world** - never have and never will thrive violating divine will.

By nature this opening message will be different from my typical pattern in a Sunday teaching. Most of the data I want to pull forward today *isn't* from Christian sources. Almost none of the statistics come from *inside the community of faith*.

And that's deliberate. What I hope we all see when we leave the church today is the *reliability of God's revelation* isn't *dependant on religious doctrine* to be verifiable. That God's way is *open truth*. It will stand up to *any honest examination*. Divine truth isn't just effective because "*people of faith*" choose to abide by it. That's the reason for the different texture of today's teaching. So stay with me.

It is also worth noting this is a relatively easy topic to study statistically. It has the two ingredients necessary for verifiable study data. There is an *abundance of subjects* to study. And this information has been collected over a very *long period of time*.

There are multiplied millions of cohabiting couples to study and data has been collected since the early 1960's. And since 1960 the number of cohabiting couples has increased *fifteen fold*. All that to say the information collected is highly accurate and reliable and has nothing whatsoever to do with facts being manipulated by a Christian prejudice.

The important point today is this - ***by any measuring stick cohabitation doesn't work.*** There are no positive features in the statistical data. This is not a ***religious*** conviction. It is an ***unbiased, universally observed fact supported by virtually all surveys and data.***

I want to quickly look at this fact from ***three angles:***

1) **COHABITING RELATIONSHIPS DISINTEGRATE FOUR TIMES MORE OFTEN THAN EVEN THE HIGHEST OF DIVORCE RATES**

Please remember, we're not talking about couples who merely ***sleep*** together. We're talking about couples who have ***moved in*** together - who have made the commitment of sharing a home together without marriage vows. ***Those*** relationships, on the conservative side of statistics - break up four to one more than even the highest divorce rates.

What makes this such a sad fact is another amazing statistic. The Pew Research Center in the U.S. finds that ***Millennials*** have a stronger desire for marriage than any previous generation alive today. They've come out of homes that in record numbers have been shattered by divorce. And generations tend to be shaped by what they feel they have missed out on or been denied.

So Millennials crave secure marriages. And they fear bad marriages. They feel they **must get it right** when they marry. The pressure is on. They simply can't afford to make the same mistakes as their parents. And cohabiting seems to offer the best chance of learning the ropes of the marriage relationship while still allowing the chance of an easy exit if things go sour.

Remember, the plain data reveals the vast majority of couples cohabiting desire marriage and see their present cohabitation as a **stepping-stone** to marriage. The **Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan** notes that a full **75%** of cohabiting couples are aiming at eventual marriage. And **62%** feel living together before marriage is the best way to avoid that eventual marriage ending in **divorce**.

They're wrong. Even if what they **want** is good, the **way** they are seeking it is absolutely **disastrous**. Remember, marriage **requires** things cohabitation does not. Marriage demands something at least one of the cohabiting partners wants to avoid. **That's why cohabitation exists.**

And the easy-out of cohabitation is the poorest training ground for the life-till-death commitment of marriage. You can't **learn** commitment in an **uncommitted** relationship. In fact, the statistics prove the drift-in-opt-out pattern of cohabitation consistently paves the way for the same carry-over of drift-in-opt-out continuation in the following marriage. In other words, cohabitation **trains** couples to leave marriages when they become challenging.

Please think about this. It's what **Professor Scott Stanley of the University of Denver** calls the "**sliding vs. deciding**" syndrome. His research (his **non-Christian** research) reports that cohabitators who do eventually marry most often **just slide into marriage because of the "relational inertia created by cohabiting."**

Take special note of that telling phrase, "**relational inertia.**" Simply put, he means cohabitation makes it more difficult to leave a bad relationship than getting out of a bad **dating** relationship. That's because the cohabiting couple has already tied up some of the loose ends of the dating relationship by the act of living together, sharing financial commitments, rental obligation, relational roles, etc.

This is so important. Couples in a terrible relationship are less likely to **end** the relationship of cohabiting than that of dating. In other words cohabitation sets couples up for a bad marriage relationship in a way traditional dating doesn't.

So this first point is basic to everything else. ***Does the experience of cohabitation teach couples things that will make them better spouses after marriage?*** We have an absolute answer to that question. It doesn't. It's not even close to true. The evidence is consistent and conclusive.

Sociologists at the universities of ***Chicago*** and ***Michigan*** state emphatically that ***"....the expectation of a positive relationship between cohabitation and marital stability has been shattered by studies conducted in several Western countries, including Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, and the United States."***

This is the universal conclusion on this issue. In their study, ***"The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce,"*** sociologists ***William Axinn*** and ***Arland Thornton*** conclude that ***people with cohabitation experience prior to marriage are 50 to 80 percent more likely to divorce than couples who have never cohabited.***

Do you see what this means? Quite shockingly, even leaving all the other principles of a godly marriage aside just for a moment, if you want to increase the chances of your marriage lasting by 50 to 80 percent, all you have to do is ***not*** do something. Just don't move in together before the wedding.

I have one other thought under this first point. It's sadly missed in this day of political correctness that cohabitation is also the most **sexist** of all social relationships. I'm going to deal with this at length next Sunday night. For now I simply mean the man and the woman, the vast majority of the time, don't enter the cohabiting relationship on the same footing. Studies show that approximately 75% of women enter a cohabiting relationship considering it a doorway to eventual marriage. Roughly 20% of men think of it that way.

Now imagine. Who do you think has the upper hand in that kind of arrangement? O, you might think a woman would simply say, "Fine, it's best I find out now my man isn't interested in marriage. I can get out of this easily and find one who is."

But don't forget the previous point of the "**relational inertia**" created by cohabiting. The plain fact is most **don't** get out. They imagine they will **change** their cohabiting partner over time - "Maybe he'll change his mind. Maybe he'll come to love me more." They stay with the same man, all the while destroying their chance for a happy marriage and family. And remember, biological clocks can tick faster than wedding bells ring.

2) **COHABITING RELATIONSHIPS CONSISTENTLY MANIFEST A MUCH HIGHER RATE OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE**

It is statistically proven ***men with rings on their fingers are safer men to live with.*** True, there is still nothing but shame to be felt for the violence exhibited in married relationships. It is all sinful and deserving of the sternest punishment. The Biblical call is for men to ***lay down their very lives to honor their wives.***

But think about this. ***The Journal of Family Violence*** reported on the most common relationship between batterers and victims. ***“The most frequently cited relationship was cohabitation at nearly 50% of couples living together”*** This was nearly triple that of married partners.

Lastly this: ***Michael D. Newcomb*** and ***P.M. Bentler*** came to this conclusion after extensive research published in ***“Assessment of Personality and Demographic Aspects of Cohabitation and Marital Success”*** - ***“Cohabitors experienced significantly more difficulty in their relationships with adultery, alcohol, drugs, and independence than couples who had not cohabited. Apparently this makes marriage preceded by cohabitation more prone to problems often associated with other deviant lifestyles - for example, use of drugs and alcohol, more permissive sexual relationships, and an abhorrence of dependence - than marriages not preceded by cohabitation.”***

Enough said.

3) **LOVE WILL KEEP US TOGETHER? HOW COHABITATION PAVES THE WAY FOR SEXUAL ACTIVITY OUTSIDE THE COHABITING RELATIONSHIP**

According to studies at the University of California, ***“The odds of a recent infidelity were more than twice as high for cohabitators than for married persons.”*** And here’s the important part - ***“This held true even when researchers controlled for issues such as increasingly permissive values about extra-marital sexuality....The commitment mechanisms of marriage were likely reasons for the difference.”***

Remember, this is not some Christian radio program’s conclusion. These are totally secular observations. It is also the same conclusion of the American ***National Sex Survey*** which found live-in boyfriends are more than ***four times*** more likely than husbands to cheat in the last twelve months. And live in girlfriends more than ***eight times*** more likely to cheat than wives in traditional marriages.

The survey concluded there is a ***“relational clarity”*** to marriage that affects not only both people in the marriage relationship but also potential outside sexual partners. A man or woman with a wedding ring is more ***off-limits*** than someone without a ring.

There are actual **names** for people who disregard the vows and boundaries of marriage. Even the most morally careless of people still have at least a slight repulsion again the escapades of those who are still thought of as **adulterers** and **adulteresses**. But when was the last time you heard anyone say with shock, ***“You mean he actually slept with a cohabiting man or woman?”***

4) **THE VERDICT IS IN. EVERYONE BENEFITS WHEN MARRIAGE IS HELD IN HONOR**

IPAD TEXT - Hebrews 13:4 - “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

There will be other teachings in this important series. But here is my closing point today. God’s revealed will for the beauty of marriage isn’t just the flexing of Divine muscle. This isn’t God just saying ***“Do this my way, or else!”***

God’s **will** is always a revelation of God’s **grace**. It is an expression of what works best and fulfills most. Even for society at large there is a **common grace** that preserves family life and decency in our land.

But for the serious follower of Christ there is more. There is something beautiful in that word, **“undefiled.”** It speaks of purity and freshness. It speaks of something **unpolluted**. It’s like asking the question, **“Why would anyone prefer contaminated drinking water when they could have something pure and safe?”**

Sin never just brings **guilt**. It always diminishes **life**. It dilutes **joy**. Preserve anything **undefiled**. So if you’re with a partner and he or she is trying to pretend to be following Christ while asking you to move in **don’t fall for it**. If you’re a young woman you will never train your man into a husband that way. And if you’re a young man that girl of yours deserves to be loved by a groom like Jesus would lay down His life for His church. Never settle for less.