

**Let's  
Get  
Married!**

**Or should we just move in?**

## **Let's Get Married! - Or should we just move in?**

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# My experience of living together

(Anonymous)

I've been asked to share anonymously my experience of living together. I lived with the woman who is now my wife for 4 years before we were married. We've been married for more than 20 years now. You might say I've got no right to speak to you about living together if I've done it myself. I don't think that's true. You can take or leave what I'm going to share, but I'm sharing what went through my head back then.

I met my girlfriend back in the 70's. A wild time indeed. I speak to you now as a follower of Jesus but I surely wasn't back then. She and I got together and really hit it off. We were instantly sexually attracted to each other and I was young and fit and didn't muck around in beginning a sexual relationship with her. At the time I was drinking heavily and smoking dope and basically enjoying parties and everything I thought were the hallmarks of a good time. Man, the sex was good, phew! She was a bit older than me and experienced in these things. I remember at the time that the sex consumed me. My parents didn't like this girl for all sorts of reasons, our age difference and I suppose they could see the effect she was having on me. Their attitude kind of drew me closer to her. We soon began to live together. It was us against the world. I was in love ... or was I? I'd had a smattering of Christian values presented to me as a church school boy but none of it made any sense to me ... anyway, I reckoned marriage was just a piece of paper and what was more true and real

than the love we shared. I was living for the moment, full of life and simply enjoying the sex and the company.

A bit of a stormy relationship developed because she had the odd sexual fling with other guys and I with other women. Everyone was doing it. What's the problem ... but it was a problem and very painful and hard to understand. But why so painful considering we kept telling each other that we loved each other and yet at the same time wanted freedom to have sex with others. Hmmm ...!! there seemed to be some deep seated clash between wanting committed intimacy but still wanting our freedom. I remember I became very confused at the time as I painfully realised that you can't have both.

A little later, she became pregnant. Wo!!! ... hang on. Another human involved here. Fights, rejection from my family and an abortion. Whaaat??? This is serious. Sex has consequences. Things are getting a little more complicated than I expected. Not long after this, despite protection, she became pregnant again. I had to really think things through now. But that's just it ... I'd never really thought about the implications of anything I was doing. When I sat down and really took a good hard look at myself I slowly and reluctantly had to admit that I was only in this relationship for the sex. Living together simply better facilitated my capacity to have sex. I was in it for ME. What did I really think of this woman, this female, this person, this individual in the bed with me. A prostitute could give me the same sex she was providing. What's the difference? I deep down knew that there was a huge difference .... but what was it? Who is this body, dare I say, soul, next to me quietly sleeping. Where was I at?

I began to see that the implications of two people coming together sexually and living together are enormous. I now had a child on the way. I began to speak about marriage but she wasn't interested. So I got on with life and suppressed my thinking for a while. A son arrived. I wasn't a Christian remember, but seeing that baby being born somehow deeply affected me. I saw my woman at her weakest and yet somehow at her strongest. I saw how vulnerable a woman can be. It slowly, ever so slowly, dawned on me that the difference

between living together and marriage is commitment and that commitment needs to be expressed publicly. So at that point I insisted that she either marry me or I was going to leave her.

The difference between being married and living together is huge. Don't tell me your situation is different. Don't tell me you're truly committed if you're living together ... please! C'mon. You're not. I know, I've been there. All my friends who've lived together have had to admit the same thing.

Well, she eventually married me, and 3 or 4 years later we both became Christians, but that's another story. Please think deeply about what you're doing and I hope this booklet will be a help to you in thinking things through. It's important that you understand God's view of sex and marriage.



# Why you should keep reading

John Stasse

*Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women. When blushing brides walk down the aisle in the 1990s, more than half have already lived together with a boyfriend. (Popenoe and Dafoe )*

*The proportion of men and women choosing to cohabit prior to entering a registered marriage continued to rise. In 2000, 71% of couples indicated they had cohabited prior to marriage compared with 29% in 1980. (The Australian Bureau of Statistics)*

When it comes to marriage we have basically two choices: *one*, that it was the result of a group of people, presumably primitive cave dwellers, sitting around talking one night and deciding ‘Hey, let’s get married!’ And upon discussing and deciding what that would involve agreed it would be a good idea and paired off one male to one female in a life-long monogamy. The other, put forward in the Bible, is that marriage was instituted by God and given to celebrate and protect human love through the generations.

If the former is true then the model of marriage we know needs to be confirmed or altered to suit each new generation as well as each individual. In this understanding, which fits the approach of

modern social engineers, there is no reason why there should not be polygamous marriages, homosexual marriages, serial monogamy or even unbridled promiscuity. Everything is up for grabs, and depends largely on the desires of the individual or on the persuasiveness of a dominant group in society.

As Christians we reject this approach, believing rather that marriage was instituted by the God of the Bible and defined and described by the God of revelation, that is in the Bible. Indeed the Bible has an extremely high view of marriage, declaring it to be the symbol that most clearly illustrates and explains the relationship of Jesus Christ to His church as His bride (Eph 4:22-33). In other words, no person can consistently be a Christian and have anything but a high view of marriage seeing it as binding upon all generations, and defined by the Bible as being a life-long covenant of commitment between a man and a woman to each other.

In marriage the couple give up the precious gift of singleness and all the privileges and blessings which go with it in exchange for the privileges and blessings that proceed from the equally precious gift of marriage. In cohabitation the couple seek to have all the privileges and blessing of marriage whilst holding on to the privileges and blessings of singleness. That is why cohabitation is inherently unstable (see p29). It also explains why cohabitation can not come close to being a 'trial' marriage as it is sometimes declared – there is no mutual surrender in commitment to the other.<sup>1</sup> In the marriage vows you make a covenant that covers every area of your life, until death separates you. It is a vow to complete loyal, committed, pure fidelity to the end. No other vow but that of faith in Christ is so demanding! How different from this is the cohabitation mind set which effectively says “I James take you Susan to be my wife. I promise to love you whenever possible and for as long as I feel like it.” The argument of a trial marriage is seen to be false when you refuse to take on the restraints of life-long, circumstance-wide commitment. Without this commitment there can be no building of the trust so essential to self-exposure and self-denial necessary in a

life-long relationship at this level. Only when there is trust and the confidence that the partner will promote the other's welfare will people be able to truly abandon themselves in order to expose themselves without fear and shame. This takes time, but it starts with acceptance and confidence in the other's commitment to 'me'.

The reality, however, is that the church exists in a world that has largely and increasingly rejected the reality and authority of God, and as a result its members find themselves under increasing cultural pressure to conform to the trends and practices of the world. This is perhaps no more keenly felt than in the area of marriage through the rising acceptance of cohabitation.

Such is the pressure that sweeping across some areas of the church is the sentiment that we have to get use to this, after all there is nothing we can do. Though we would prefer our children and our friends to adopt marriage the reality is that many do not, or are at least deferring marriage until later. The cry goes up that we must face reality.

But such capitulation is a dismissal of the prophetic role of the Christian church (which is to be exercised even when it is not wanted – 2 Tim 4:2), and to give to the next generation a bag of scraps (exposing to them the less than full potential blessing God provided for in the covenant of marriage, and also bringing upon them the judgement of God because they have trampled upon His law and His blessing). Even more, it is a slur against God's wisdom and love – that He didn't and doesn't know best, or that for some reason He is withholding the best from us. It is also foolish in the face of the experimental evidence that is increasingly coming to light.

The conclusion of Popenoe and Dafoe based on a comprehensive survey of recent research data is:

*But a careful review of the available social science evidence suggests that living together is not a good way to prepare for marriage or to avoid divorce. What's more, it shows that the rise in cohabitation is not a positive family trend. Cohabiting*

*unions tend to weaken the institution of marriage and pose clear and present dangers for women and children.*

This of course merely reinforces the pre-existent teaching of the Bible which has been ‘out there’ since the beginning. The dual tragedy is that it is taking modern ‘experts’ so long to recognise the truth, and secondly that it is so hard to get this information out to the very people who need to hear it.

The aim of this booklet is two-fold: *firstly* to celebrate marriage as God’s precious gift to humanity to protect and promote human love at its most intimate level, and *secondly* to offer help to those who are confronted in some way with the claims that there is a viable alternative to marriage.

In order to do this we need to be clear on our terms. Why do we use the word cohabitation rather than de facto which many use to describe their relationship and which has some levels of legal recognition in our nation?

The reason revolves around the word ‘commitment’ and the belief that many wrongly use the word de facto because this commitment is not present as it is in marriage through the vows made to one another. Where commitment is mutually expressed in cohabitation but not formally recognised as in a ceremony and by state recognition, then we have what is a de facto marriage (*a marriage in fact* though irregular in construction). Where it is formally expressed and recognised we have a marriage duly celebrated and established.

In the Bible, whilst a ceremony was in some measure present, it was not the ceremony that made the marriage but the covenantal exchanging of vows – the expression of commitment to a permanent relationship of mutual care and intimate involvement, and that publicly before witnesses who effectively endorsed and approved the vows. In marriage as effected in our society this is done in a formal context before a registered celebrant (minister or civil), and hence with state involvement.

In de facto marriages, rightly defined, this is done in private and sometimes before friends but without state involvement. This used to be called a common law marriage, and may have been established by something as simple as jumping over a broom or a line drawn in the dirt to indicate that the couple have together entered into a new future as one. As a result it was quite different from a couple living together for comfort, convenience, cost-saving, sex or with the intent of testing the viability of the relationship. To some degree it would have the hallmarks of a marriage beyond sharing accommodation and sexual activity. It is interesting that the armed forces of this nation apply a series of tests in order for a member to be able to claim this title (which brings with it certain benefits including couple's quarters). The fact that they are living together is insufficient grounds, there has to be evidence of at least a real though informal commitment to the relationship.

The word cohabitation, often called 'living together'<sup>2</sup>, however more correctly describes the reality we see every day as couples share accommodation and engage in sexual relationships but make no commitment to each other, where the 'partners' maintain separate identities and financial control. Indeed even an informal commitment is abhorrent to this relationship in which freedom not commitment is the key. Freedom not only in being together, but also of leaving at any time.

Whilst de facto is closer than cohabitation to a biblical view of marriage as the lifelong commitment of a man and a woman to each other, de facto is still very inadequate due to its rejection of a formal, public, legalised seal on the commitment, and as a result is as susceptible to the inherent instability of cohabitation or 'living together' relationships. In any case, in our modern day true de facto situations are rapidly moving towards extinction under the deluge of cohabitation with which it has become confused. So much so that the words are generally used interchangeably (see p.29). Hence our concern in this booklet to show that 'living together' or cohabitation is no substitute for the full-on marriage relationship instituted by God.

Does the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments say anything specific to the marriage versus cohabitation confrontation? Yes. The biblical response to cohabiting couples is given in Deuteronomy 22:28-29. It occurs in a context of various scenarios relating to couples found to have engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage.

In the immediately preceding verses (vv.25-27) we are confronted with the question of rape. Where it is alleged to have occurred in a field the assumption is to be made that the woman resisted but no-one heard her cry. In this case marriage is not necessary, but compensation is to be given, which was evidently meant to provide for her within her father's house into her old age as she may never now find a husband. In vv.22-24 we have the account of a virgin betrothed, that is her marriage was not yet consummated (the Bible had a much stricter view of 'engagement' vows than we tend to have today). In this case the couple are discovered in the city, the assumption being made here that she did not resist for people certainly would have heard a cry. In this case the sexual activity is seen to be an act of adultery against the betrothal vows and the penalty of adultery was to be applied. Both cases, incidently, indicating that the sexual act did not and does not constitute a marriage, though it certainly does undercut a marriage commitment.

When we come to v.28-29 we have a woman who is a virgin and who is not betrothed or engaged to marry who is discovered in a relationship with a man – it may have been a one-off situation or it may easily be the latest in many such previously unnoticed or unrecognised sexual encounters, the people may not have even realised till then that this couple living in town weren't married at all. All would easily fit the scenario laid out before us. It is the outcome that is important to us – for here, unlike the previous situations, the direction comes "*she shall be his wife for he has humbled her*". And so serious was this to be considered that there was an added dimension in that divorce was never allowed to them.

Jesus confirmed this position. In John 4:16-19, in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman we see that

Jesus makes a distinction between marriage and cohabitation. He tells her that she has had “five husbands” but that the present man she was living with was “not [her] husband” (v.18). Whatever more can be said about the quality of her relationships with them, these first five men were sequentially yes but real, legally recognised “husbands”. Jesus refuses to so recognise the one she was currently living with to use modern terminology. *‘Jesus did not regard this relationship as a genuine marriage, nor their relationship as being equal to or even proximating towards that of a husband and wife. It is not a trial marriage, but a promiscuous relationship that needs to be regularised. Jesus was confronting her with her sin as one being controlled by sexual appetite. She was making use of marriage and was now playing at marriage, expressing contempt of God’s institution and hence of God Himself.’* (Retief, p.113-4)

Cohabitation was not to be tolerated amongst the people of God, in biblical terms it is the sin of promiscuity. In no way does God allow cohabitation as a temporary let alone viable alternative to marriage – those who tried were to be brought as quickly as decently possible into marriage, the commitment that ought to be the guard of sexual activity was to be publicly made and recognised. Sexual morality cannot be fudged. Sex outside of marriage is always wrong, including sex before marriage. The Bible calls us not to accept alternatives to marriage, but to honour marriage, and to honour God and each other by so doing.

This booklet calls you to honour God and the one you love with waiting and preparing for, and then celebrating and working at your marriage.

Love waits for the best. Don’t sell your relationship short!

- <sup>1</sup> “The research clearly debunks the supposedly “common sense” hunch, believed by a majority of young people and their parents, that cohabitation ought to improve the chances of marital success in a world that places new and more demanding expectations on relationship satisfaction. Indeed, the research, known widely among marriage educators, but a well kept secret in the wider community, not only shows that it does not help the longevity or stability of marriage to precede it with cohabitation, but it doubles the chances of marital failure.’ Kerin, T., ‘The Myth of Pret-a-Porter Marriage, It takes a lifetime to marry your life to that of your partner’, *Threshold*, 61 Winter 1999, p.21.
- <sup>2</sup> “By simple definition, living together - or unmarried cohabitation - is the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household” (Popenoe and Dafoe, *Threshold*, p.10). Patricia Morgan indicates that cohabitation has come to mean “a ‘live-in’ liaison, where younger people are increasingly more likely than their predecessors to end cohabitation by separation rather than marriage.” (Morgan, p.25).

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# God's plan for us

Bruce and Pat Christian

One of the most enjoyable aspects of pastoral ministry is preparing couples for marriage and conducting their wedding service. When God said at the very beginning, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18), the solution He came up with was one of the most wonderful and beautiful inventions imaginable. After more than 35 years of experiencing its joys and challenges we can testify that every facet of it just keeps on getting better!

This, of course, should not surprise us - for two reasons.

Firstly, we were built for marriage. When God designed us He had marriage in mind. If we fall head-over-heels in love with someone, and they reciprocate, what is happening to us - all the feelings and emotions - is exactly what was intended. It is not an accident of evolution. We are fulfilling the very purpose God had for us. In the words of the old song, we are "Doin' what comes naturally".

A commonly used form of the Marriage Service used by our Church contains a key statement in the Introduction that expresses it this way:

*Marriage is a holy estate, instituted by God. The Scriptures hold it in the highest regard, commending it to all people ...*

Indeed, the Bible is full of love stories. Perhaps the most beautiful and moving is the story of Ruth and Boaz, with Jacob and Rachel coming a close second. Parts of the Song of Solomon get embarrassingly personal and intimate.

The second reason why we should not be surprised at how wonderful marriage is may not be so obvious. The key statement in the Marriage Service quoted above continues ...

*... and consecrating it because it signifies the mystical union between Christ and his Church.*

*Therefore, it is not to be entered upon lightly or inadvisedly, but thoughtfully and in reverence for God...*

This is mind-blowing! It is what makes a Christian marriage so special. When two believers get married they are saying to their family and friends, to the Church and the world around them, “What we are doing is a picture, a model, an enactment, a demonstration of our relationship to God in Christ.”

Now, that is awesome. God the Creator incorporated human marriage into the basic design of the Universe in order to help us to understand and experience here and now a taste of our eternal relationship with Him! At the beginning of the Bible we are told that it is not good for man to be alone. Throughout Scripture we see God’s unchanging plan of permanent, monogamous marriage laid down, spelt out, and reinforced in human history. And then at the end of God’s inspired Word we are given the promise that our Bridegroom, Christ, will come quickly to be united with his Bride, the Church (Revelation 22:17-21). In other words, God intends our marriage to be a visible and tangible expression of the spiritual reality of our belonging to him!

So, for these two reasons we ought to expect the experience of marriage to be absolutely fantastic - because it is fulfilling what God designed us for, and because it is God’s way of showing us how He is relating to us, the people He loved so much that He sent His Son to die in order to make us His own.

## First things first

If all this is true, why is it that so many marriages fail? Why is it that even the marriages that are holding together are often functioning more like a clapped-out VW than like the well-kept Rolls Royce they ought to be? It is sad to witness the very thing God designed specially to give us the greatest joy becoming nothing better than a troublesome burden.

A large part of the problem is a failure to treat the marriage relationship itself as a top priority. Under the pressure of modern living it is so easy to let other things become more important: our job, our recreational interests, our friends, and even our children! The Marriage Service introduction quoted above goes on to remind us of the need to make each other our top priority ...

*... with due consideration of the reasons for which it was ordained.*

*Firstly, it was ordained for the lifelong companionship, help, and comfort which husband and wife ought to have of each other.*

Marriage is, of course, a very complicated piece of machinery. A man who has lived for himself as a self-contained, independent individual for 20 or so years of his life, and who is the product of a whole host of complex cultural, genetic, and chromosomal components, falls in love and decides to become “one flesh” with a woman who is the product of an entirely different set of complex variables. If you think the meshing of all this together into a smooth-running, well-oiled unit is going to be easy, try co-authoring a chapter in a book about marriage with your wife!

Because marriage is so important to God’s Plan involving Creation and Redemption, for the two reasons outlined earlier, He has made sure that his written Word, the Bible, will serve us adequately as an Operating Manual for the marriage machine.

## **Vive la différence**

One thing the Bible makes clear is that it is our differences, perhaps even more than the things we have in common, that are important in the development of a healthy marriage. We tend to be irritated by our differences but, as in every part of the created order, the differences - the contrasts, the opposites - can be what makes the whole so rich and meaningful and beautiful. In the marriage relationship, one person will “make up for” something lacking in the other, supporting and helping where needed, and gladly accepting help and support in return.

Among the saddest trends in our modern western culture are the failure to recognise the built-in differences between men and women (psychological as well as physiological), and the failure to acknowledge the built-in feature that the only workable marriage relationship involving sexual union is the combination of one man and one woman.

What a blessing it is to have an understanding and loving companion of the opposite sex who anticipates our ups and downs, who makes allowances for our weaknesses and compensates for them, a person who perhaps even knows and understands us better than we know ourselves and still loves and supports us. Isn't this a great gift the Lord has given in His plan for us, not only as a key part of the whole Plan of Creation and Redemption, but in His plan for us as individuals? Even learning to live with someone who doesn't do things the way I've always done them (ie who is therefore wrong!) and who can't even think like me (ie who is therefore illogical!) is an important part of the gracious way the Lord knocks off our sharp corners and smooths out our rough edges to make us more like Christ. “Why can't a woman be more like a man?” asks an exasperated Professor Higgins in “My Fair Lady”. The answer, of course, is clear - God had an important purpose in making us different.

If only we would be more enthusiastic in taking up the challenge that marriage offers us for growth because of the differences! For instance, if we applied Jesus' Golden Rule, “As you would that others

should do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12), to the challenge offered by marriage, we would be less concerned with *finding* the right person and more concerned with *being* the right person

## **Real \*love\***

Another thing the Bible makes clear is that the basic cement that holds a marriage relationship together in a meaningful way is \*love\*. Now \*love\* has been written like this deliberately. The English word ‘love’ does not do justice to the Greek word it translates in the New Testament. Today, ‘love’ is more likely to be understood as the gratification of lust as in the use of the expression ‘making love’ to describe even the most casual and love-less sexual encounter.

The real word we want, \*love\*, is given a more complete definition in the well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 13, especially in the practical advice of verses 4-8. You know the description: “Love is patient, love is kind, ...” and so on. If only we could consistently express our love for one another in these terms. When we do manage to come somewhere near it the rewards are wonderful, but we are slow learners, and our self-centredness is often a fairly well-established disease. It is no use trying to excuse ourselves by saying that Paul is setting too high a standard. He is only describing how, and how much, Jesus loves us - and He is asking me to love my wife in the same way (Ephesians 5:25). Remember, marriage is meant to be a reflection of how God relates to us.

## **Humble, forgiving, self-sacrificing**

Let’s just look at three basic aspects of the New Testament concept of \*love\*: it is humble, it is forgiving, and it is self-sacrificing.

How often do we introduce tension into our relationship because our pride stops us from admitting when we’re wrong? We try to rationalise and shift the blame to someone else, behaving exactly the way Adam behaved in the Garden of Eden. It’s anyone and everyone else’s fault but mine. “The woman **you** put here with me - **she** gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12). How pitiful.

How sad. How much like me when I blame my wife, or my children, or my genes, or my circumstances, for my sinful behaviour. \*Love\* involves humility. It confesses unconditionally, with no strings attached and with no ulterior motive. It says, "I'm sorry" - and means it.

The other side of the coin from humility is forgiveness. It's how we respond when the other person says, "I'm sorry". How many close family relationships are broken up irreparably, even for generations, through the bearing of grudges, our failure to forgive the short-comings of another person? "I can never forgive her for the hurtful way she treated me: the unkind and untrue things she said behind my back, the way she ignored and rebuffed me ..." Saying "I'm sorry" is hard, but saying "I forgive you", unconditionally, is even harder. \*Love\* involves forgiveness. In fact, it "keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Thirdly, one of the most ugly and destructive aspects of modern society, as it gives expression to self-centredness, is the emphasis we place on our rights, and the way we are so unwilling to be self-sacrificing. People even pay big money to learn how to be more assertive, more effective at manipulating others for their own advantage. It is doubtful if our economy or our social fabric can survive much longer if we fail to reverse this trend. Litigation, the demand to be compensated even if I contributed to the accident or there was no-one really at fault, the demand to have my own way, the demand for recognition, the desire to pursue my own agenda even at the expense of those for whom the Creator requires me to exercise responsibility in His ordered scheme of things - these are all symptoms of a collapsing society. For instance, sometimes economic circumstances require mothers of young children to go to work and leave them in day care, but all too often it is a failure to put responsibility before the need to fulfil a personal agenda. \*Love\* is self-sacrificing. It puts the needs and welfare of others first. How does all this work out in practice? Sadly, in our modern, self-centred society, marriage is becoming less like the picture the Bible paints,

less like the ideal God intended. More marriages are breaking up in Australia today than ever before, and more people are opting for relationships apart from marriage, avoiding the risk or suggestion of a long-term commitment. Both of these trends are taking us further away from what our Creator intended when He designed us. Frustration and insecurity are replacing the feeling of fulfilment and belonging that God longs for us to have, and that bring us true and lasting happiness. We are not talking here about the sadness and distress that occur when an otherwise happy marriage is broken up by independent, external circumstances such as the untimely, tragic death of a spouse. Events like this are part of God's inscrutable providence in a fallen world and we must trust Him to prove His sovereign grace in His own way in such cases. We are talking, rather, about a wilful rejection of the pattern laid down so clearly in God's Word.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that a husband is to love his wife "as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her" (verse 25). What a tall order for men! What wife, with a husband like that, wouldn't be happy and comfortable to submit to him "as to the Lord" (verse 22)? In a perfect marriage based on this pattern each partner would be secure to support and complement the other in every aspect of the relationship. There would be no need for contracts for divisions of labour within the home - there would be a race to put on the load of washing, to change the dirty nappy, to take out the garbage bin, to hand over the remote control, ... to do whatever would help the other person.

Perhaps this seems ridiculously idealistic and, in fact, quite out of reach this side of heaven (not that there'll be dirty nappies or garbage or TV in heaven!). But aiming for it in a broken world is a g-r-o-w-i-n-g experience, and a wonderful and important arena for the Holy Spirit to do His work in preparing us for heaven.

Is the real problem a lack of determination to put in the hard yards in order to reap the benefits God has promised? We have been conditioned by our society to look for the quick 'solution' rather

than pursue a more demanding pathway. We are trained to discard what is broken, or obsolete, or unfashionable, or unsatisfying, instead of persevering to repair it or improve it or meet the challenge of getting the very best out of it. Why has the catch-phrase “no pain no gain” come into common currency? Because in so many areas of life we are discovering that the promises of the easy road are, in the end, unsatisfying and unfulfilling. But, for some reason, we are slow to learn this lesson in respect of the marriage relationship God designed for our benefit!

## **Worth the effort**

What are some of the great benefits of a happy marriage relationship? Have a look at Ecclesiastes 4:9-12!

*Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their work  
If one falls down,  
his friend can help him up.  
But pity the man who falls  
and has no one to help him up!  
Also, if two lie down together,  
they will keep warm.  
But how can one keep warm alone?  
Though one may be overpowered,  
two can defend themselves.  
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

It’s all there! - companionship, load-sharing, two-heads-are-better-than-one, ideas-bouncing, breakdown assistance, encouraging, cuddling, better defence against adversaries, and so on. Is this not our experience when our marriage is running smoothly? So why don’t we put more time and effort into achieving this result more often?

## Wider implications

Yes, the Bible is the Manufacturer's Handbook, and those of us who have been at it for a while can testify that marriage IS the very complicated piece of machinery we have spoken about. Its ability to function is made even more complex under the influence of a social environment that has, for all intents and purposes, not only thrown out the Manual, but firmly believes that no Manual (or Manufacturer) ever existed. We go to glossy magazines instead for advice about love and marriage. Christians often don't realise how much they are being influenced by a secular humanistic world-view through our constant, uncensored reading, watching and viewing. The Biblical view of marriage must impact on every part of our lives, as individuals, in the family, and in society. The Marriage Service introduction recognises this as it continues ...

*Secondly, it was ordained to preserve the sacredness of family life, that children, who are the heritage of the Lord, might be duly brought up and trained in godliness.*

*Thirdly, it was ordained for the welfare of human society, which can be strong and happy only where the marriage bond is held in honour.*

If we don't get marriage right, in accordance with the Manufacturer's instructions, there is an adverse flow-on effect to everything else. It is not hard to see the obvious correlation between the increasing problems among children and teenagers and the breakdown of marriage in our society.

## Help needed

But we cannot get it right, even with the Manual open in front of us, if we are relying on our own resources alone. Two verses from the Psalms are worthy of special attention.

*Unless the Lord builds the house its builders labour in vain.  
(Psalm 127:1)*

*Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. (Psalm 124:8)*

Did you notice when you read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 that the final sentence makes a strange, illogical shift? The passage is all about two people helping each other and, suddenly without warning, a third is introduced! “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” The key to a Christian marriage is that the living Lord Jesus Himself is intimately involved in the marriage relationship. In His earthly life He lived out the perfect example of what it means to be humble, forgiving, and self-sacrificing. He demonstrated in practice what \*love\* is. He demonstrated in the midst of adverse circumstances what \*love\* is. In His sacrificial death on the cross He has taken our place of condemnation; He has suffered the punishment that should have come to us; He became our substitute. God the Father accepted His perfect sacrifice and raised him from the dead so that He now lives to intercede for us. The apostle John wrote:

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:9-11).*

The apostle Paul wrote:

*If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

Without Christ we cannot even start to fulfil the requirements of \*love\*; with Christ living in us we have the capacity to show how God’s gift of marriage can be one of the most life-transforming experiences for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world. Perhaps there has never been a more opportune time to see this happen than in Australia today. And unless we are seeing it happen in a clear, practical way among those who profess to be part

of the Church, the whole thrust of the Gospel message becomes ineffective.

*Marriage is a holy estate, instituted by God. The Scriptures hold it in the highest regard, commending it to all people, and consecrating it because it signifies the mystical union between Christ and his Church.*

## **Does marriage have a future?**

Marriage, the permanent partnership between a man and his wife with Christ as the Head, ought to be exciting and inspiring because it is what God designed us for, and because it is to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and His Church. But in our broken world, spoiled by sin, a God-honouring marriage doesn't happen without determined effort. It won't happen naturally. We need to persevere, with total commitment and in God's strength, showing real \*love\* to one another - practising humility, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice. The personal rewards are among the very best things we could ever experience. The secular, post-modern world around us has scoffed at the Bible's view of marriage and is now reaping disastrous results. It is time for us to prove by example that "as for God, His way is perfect" (Psalm 18:30).



# Cohabitation in society

Jeanette McHardy

*The reasons for living together unmarried ... can be reduced to one major reason, factor or cause: namely **convenience**. Legal, economic, social, personal, or sexual convenience are the driving forces which lead to cohabitation. Marriage is avoided because in this lifestyle convenience is coupled with legal responsibility and commitment, which cohabitants want to avoid at all costs. Sarantakos, Living Together in Australia, 1984, p95.*

Over time, definitions change. In order to analyse and discuss the statistical information on this subject, the definitions used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics will be used.

*Registered marriages: refer to formally registered marriages for which the partners hold a certificate. (Ref: Marriages and Divorces, Australia Cat no 3310.0)*

*De facto marriage: the relationship between two people who live together in consensual union who are not registered as married to each other. (ref: 1996 Census of Population and Housing)*

Much of the literature refers to cohabitation. Some refers to sexual co-residence. In Australian Bureau of Statistics terms, these are de facto marriages.

Cohabitation, or living in a de facto relationship, is socially acceptable and becoming more common. In 1995, the Australian Family Values Survey found that 62% of the Australian adult population agreed that it was *acceptable for couples to live together without planning marriage*. Almost 50% believed there should *be no legal distinction between cohabitation and marriage*.

Of those married in 1976, approximately 16% had cohabited prior to marriage. By 1992 this proportion had increased to 56%.<sup>1</sup> By 2000, this had risen to 71%<sup>1a</sup>, an increase of 55% over 25 years.

The number of de facto families (families where the parents were not legally married) doubled from 102,400 in 1982 to 204,600 in 1992. By 1994 there were 215,780 children living in these families.<sup>2</sup>

In 1997 (Australian Bureau of Statistics figures) 9.1% of all couple relationships were de facto relationships (756,780 people), up from 8.5% in 1992. Of these, 56% were in the 20-34 year age bracket.

In 1997, 69% of people living in de facto relationships had never been married, and those under 35 were most likely to be in this category. The higher proportion of separated and divorced de facto partners was aged over 35.

In 1997, 46% of de facto couples had children, compared with 30% in 1992.

## **What are the reasons people choose to cohabit?**

For some, cohabitation is seen as a better alternative to marriage - not as restrictive, more romantic, less painful to get out of, and each person has autonomy.

For others, it is the natural extension of a loving, intimate relationship and it will continue for as long as the couple is content with the arrangement.

For some, cohabitation is a trial marriage, a “test run” to see if “permanence” is likely to succeed. By 1993 approximately 57% of

marriages were preceded by a period of cohabitation.<sup>3</sup> Seven years later, this percentage has increased to 71%.<sup>1a</sup>

Co-habitation is a temporary alternative to marriage for some couples who live together until it is professionally or economically feasible to marry.

For others, co-habitation is economically advantageous, particularly if there are dependent children. The single supporting mother is entitled to Social Security assistance. In 1997, ex-nuptial births accounted for 28.1% of births in Australia, up from 13.2% in 1986. (ABS figures)

Where there is philosophical debate on cohabitation, those in favour of it argue that people cannot realistically be expected to remain sexually abstinent from puberty (11-12 years) until they marry (in their late twenties - the ideal age for marriage to survive). Therefore, to cohabit with a few is preferable to promiscuity with many. Society has become so “sexualised” that cohabitation is regarded as inevitable.

Cohabitation has become an institutionalised reality. Legal contracts are entered into with the view to avoid property entanglements should the relationship disintegrate. Inheritance and child custody are also matters covered in some of these contracts. More and more we are seeing “domestic partnerships” benefits for non-married couples, both heterosexual and homosexual. Health insurance, pensions, the right to inherit the lease of a rented apartment - these benefits are commonplace today.

In Sweden and Denmark, the world’s cohabitation leaders, cohabiters and married couples have the same rights and obligations in taxation, welfare benefits, inheritance and child-care. Sweden has the lowest marriage rate ever recorded and one of the highest divorce rates; approximately 30% of Swedish couples sharing a household are unmarried. Cohabitation is regarded as an alternative to marriage in these two countries, and almost all marriages are preceded by cohabitation.<sup>4</sup>

## **How durable are de facto relations**

The Australian Family Formation Project found that 25% of de facto relationships lasted 12 months; 75% ended by four years. Of those living in de facto relationships, 20% had been involved in their relationship three months or less before moving in together; 25% had known each other 4-6 months prior to moving in together; 28% - 7-12 months; 18% 1-2 years- and 7% had known each other for more than two years before living together.

Of cohabiters who married, after 5 years of marriage 13% would divorce (compared to 6% of those who had not cohabited); after 10 years, 26% of those who had cohabited prior to marriage would divorce as opposed to 14% of married couples who had not lived together prior to marriage.<sup>5</sup>

## **WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF COHABITATION?**

As the statistics indicate, cohabitation is not a guarantee of a stable, secure relationship, either as a prelude to marriage or an alternative to marriage. “Married couples are more likely to resolve their problems or at least arrive at acceptable compromises compared to their cohabiting counterparts whose low-commitment, highly-autonomous relationships are often terminated in times of adversity.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The personal costs of cohabitation**

These costs are evident from studies done in Australia and overseas:

Rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times what they are among married couples.<sup>7</sup>

Cohabiting couples report poorer relationships with both mothers and fathers than married individuals.<sup>8</sup>

Women in cohabiting relationships are more likely than women in marriages to be victims of physical and sexual abuse - a US Justice Department study of 1992 found that a cohabiting woman is 56 times

more likely than a wife to be assaulted.<sup>9</sup> A 1994 study found that “those males who had cohabited displayed the most accepting views of rape”.<sup>10</sup> Another study found that “aggression is at least twice as common among cohabiters as it is among married partners”.<sup>11</sup>

A 1985 study found that when all the variables of class and maternal age are accounted for, “preschoolers in stepparent-natural parent homes ... are estimated to be 40 times as likely to become abuse statistics as like-aged children living with two natural parents.”<sup>12</sup>

A report in the Australian 24 February 1999 states that Australian research has found that the typical child murderer is a young man living in a de facto relationship with the victim’s mother.<sup>13</sup>

According to recent national Australian statistics for child abuse and neglect 24% of sexual abuse cases involving children 18 years and under were reported to involve a step parent or de facto partner (the year 1995-96)<sup>14</sup>

According to recent national Australian statistics for child abuse and neglect 24% of sexual abuse cases involving children 18 years and under were reported to involve a step-parent or de facto partner (the year 1995-96).<sup>14</sup>

In the UK, the relationship between child abuse and family structure was examined, and children living with cohabiting but unmarried biological parents were 20 times more likely to be subject to abuse than children living with their married biological parents. The risk increased to 33 times for children living with a biological mother and a cohabiting boyfriend who is not the biological father.<sup>15</sup>

Other research bears out the conclusion that the most unsafe of all family environments for children is the one in which the mother cohabits with someone who is not the biological father.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

Booth & Johnson<sup>19</sup> found some evidence that cohabiters bring characteristics to the relationship which make them poor marriage material - characteristics including personality problems, alcohol or drug abuse, financial irresponsibility, problems with the law, and

unstable employment patterns. A study published in the Journal of Personality Assessment observed: “In regard to problem areas, it was found that cohabiters experienced significantly more difficulty in their marriages with adultery, alcohol, drugs and independence than couples who had not cohabited.”<sup>20</sup>

## **The social costs of cohabitation**

The problems and difficulties associated with de facto relationships affect the society in which these relationships exist. Research indicates that there is a significant difference between the scholastic achievements of children from married couples and children from cohabiting couples. The latter are less successful in the majority of cases, which logically extends to the area of employment, where children of cohabiting couples report a lower rate of success. Drug use, crime and delinquency appear to affect significantly more children of cohabiting couples than children of married couples.<sup>21</sup> There is obvious social disadvantage for a significant proportion of children whose parents are not married, and the social disadvantage of individuals is a problem of society, be it in the form of drug addicted youth, alcohol abuse, unemployment, juvenile delinquency, perpetuation of the poverty cycle, youth suicide or general disenchantment with life.

*Cohabitors are by definition less committed to stable and enduring relationships, and especially to marriage; many also entertain non-traditional beliefs regarding marriage; and ... cohabitation experiences expose couples to liberal attitudes and environments, to modernism and tolerance to alternative beliefs and practices. Drugs, drinking, sexual freedom and social deviance are often tolerated more in a cohabitation environment than a marriage environment.*<sup>22</sup>

*Australia is seeing an explosion in children born to unmarried women. Births outside marriage have increased by 70% in the past decade. Twenty-seven per cent of children are now born to unmarried mother, reports Bettina Arndt.*

*...although most of these births are to de facto couples, the bulk of those relationships are very unstable. Many children end up being raised by lone mothers or accompany their mothers through new relationships.*

*“There are relatively few stable de facto relationships,” said Professor Peter McDonald, a demographer analyzing data at the Research School of Social Sciences for the project, *Negotiating the Life Course*.*

*“The real story is about people who are in and out of relationships. Even if the child is born in a de facto partnership, these often break down.”*

*The ANU research found 65 per cent of the ex-nuptial births were to never-married women in de facto relationship, 18 per cent to divorced but solo and a further 8.5 per cent to divorced but in de facto relationships.*

*A third of the de facto parents marry after the birth of their child but 15 per cent of these marriages end within a few years. When the parents do not marry, 38 per cent of the relationships break up in under five years.*

*Most women bearing children outside marriage are young – over half of all ex-nuptial children are born to women under 25. Professor McDonald’s research provides new evidence that most of these are poorly educated. Fifty-one per cent did not finish secondary school and 70 per cent had no post-school qualifications.*

*This supports previous research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies which showed couples bearing children in de facto relationships were predominantly educationally disadvantaged and from low socio-economic backgrounds.*

*...Growing numbers of young, poor women are struggling to raise ex-nuptial children on their own. Over 75 per cent of never-married lone mothers are on the sole-parents pension.<sup>23</sup>*

There is abundant evidence that cohabitation is not a satisfactory alternative to marriage. A sound marriage is the ideal relationship

for the couple; the ideal family setting for their children; and the strongest and most enduring foundation for society.

*Marriage is the crucible of the social values we all rely on: loyalty, commitment, truthfulness, promise-keeping, self discipline and service.*<sup>24</sup>

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# Pastors, parents and young lovers

John Wilson

## Parenting

It's the unexpected that throws you off balance. Yet in those moments of sudden disclosure you must react with composure and wisdom that's consistent with all you've lived and taught before. Welcome to parenthood!

Doug and Marg's son Dale arrived at the beach house with a welcome guest – his girl friend. “Do you mind if we stay the weekend?” “Mind?” replied Marg, “we'd be offended if you didn't!” Dale still liked to come on family holidays, even though as the eldest of the family he'd moved into his own flat years ago. Doug mumbled something like: “How good it is to see you again” as he carried Dale's friend's gear into the hallway. A leisurely dinner followed; everyone seemed to relax and just enjoy being there.

Conversation sparkled; reminiscences flowed as the family laughed warmly together, gently bringing Rachel further into the family circle. All went well until Dale hinted at an early night and then announcing: “Dad, we'll take the end room, OK?”

With at least 2 or 3 seconds for the implication to register, Doug grimaced and glanced at Marg and with a look that, with 25 years' marriage, translates a thousand unspoken words. He knew they were wrestling with exactly the same dilemma. Questions buzzed simultaneously through the mind: Do we go with the "Not under my roof!" declaration of war? Or do we go softly-softly and pretend we didn't hear the "we" instead of the "I"? Do we talk of Christian principles now, or later in the weekend? Will Rachel be offended, or embarrassed? Does Dale care? Should we keep silent to hold the family together?

The Doug and Marg dilemma is lived out in different contexts and with as many variations as there are different families in this world. Sometimes, as a "Doug and Marg", you're not caught by surprise by that beach house announcement because you have seen the dilemma approaching for some time. Your son has had his girl friend over to his flat and you've noticed that she's still there for breakfast! You want to say something, but don't know how. He's not a Christian but still respects your beliefs and lifestyle, and definitely clings to the family circle.

Then the dilemma widens. Folk at church are getting the drift and putting two and two together (or should we say: one and one?) This heaps guilt upon guilt for you because of the thought "What will our Christian friends think about us? Their children are all married!" "Does this disqualify our leadership roles at church?" The short answer in most cases is "No" because Dale is accountable for his own actions and must live out the consequences of his own choices. But how do you raise the subject with him?

Three guidelines can be helpful at this time:

1. Determine that principle matters - even if the consequences of taking a stand on principle are not what you had at first hoped for. If you act and speak according to God's principles, you are working for long-term goals and are moving toward what in the long run will be most satisfying for you and your whole family. When it really

counts, let them know that your love for God and your allegiance to him exceeds love of family.

2. Raise the subject with them from your point of view. Begin with “you” as the subject not “them”. For example, your opening line may be: “Dale, your Mum and I have something to talk with you about that troubles us.” Or, “We are concerned over a matter that’s important to us.” This is more likely to open up conversation and minimise defensive barriers than the “You and your girlfriend are living in sin.” Or, “You’re wrong and you should get married.” End of meeting!

3. Continue to love them. Acts of kindness and gentleness toward Dale and his partner do not signal compromise of principle. If your relationship with Dale has always been to do some of his washing, mow a lawn or two, have him over for Sunday roast – keep it all going. Don’t withdraw privileges. Extend your kindness, your embraces and love to warmly include the girlfriend all the time that dialogue continues.

## **Pastoring**

Pastoral interviews with an engaged couple are a challenge. You never quite know what’s coming next. All is well as you think you know where the conversation is going until an unexpected U-turn brings a dilemma: Christian principle or popular vote? God’s Word or people in church? “After all, we have so few in church these days!”

It’s the dreaded blue form again. I forgot in the brief phone conversation my usual “clear the air” questions: Have you been married before? Are you part of this (or another) church? Are you living together? The phone call had come while dinner was on the table and my family wasn’t impressed.

When we come to the first marriage interview (the one that leads to an agreement to marry the couple, or not) I do not like to be caught by surprise. That’s the purpose of the questions over the phone. We chatted freely and made good progress through the blue

form. “Usual occupation?” ... always good for conversation. “Mother’s maiden name?” ... Then the one I dread: “Usual place of residence?”

Here the pen drops and my eyes return to the couple. They immediately sense that something’s up. They know what’s up, but they quickly try to sit on their consciences and not appear at all fazed by my pause. The dilemma is obvious. Do I, while noting their identical addresses, move on without much comment apart from a weak: “Well, it’s certainly not the Christian way, but everyone seems to be doing it now; and, after all, it’s better to marry than not”? Or, do I declare that this puts a real problem between us that has to be sorted first?

It really puts the pastor between a rock and a hard place. If I do the former (carry on with a mild vote of disapproval) I compromise the Church’s standard and witness by ignoring biblical teaching. If I do the latter (make a stand) I run the risk of seeing the exit of this young couple, together with their offended families, from the church when everybody recognises that we can’t afford another departure from such a struggling congregation. It’s a recurring dilemma: principle or expediency?

The problem for the pastor, especially in rural communities where the church is still seen as a community reference point, is growing. Not only are more and more couples living together before marriage, but they are bolder about it than ever. Over the years the quietening of conscience (when they knew deep down that this wasn’t the done thing) is now replaced with a more brazen reaction and the retort comes back: “Well, do you expect us NOT to marry?” In typical defiance, the challenge is inverted and the pastor is put in the wrong for encouraging the couple to continue to “live in sin”. And I notice that I didn’t introduce that term (living in sin), they did!

For the pastor the way forward is not clear-cut. It is not as if a “gay” couple are coming to him asking him to bless a homosexual marriage. Following recent laws passed in the Victorian Parliament this scenario is not far away. Such a request can only have one answer!

However, the request for marriage while cohabiting produces various possibilities. How to respond varies according to circumstances and especially according to the attitude of the couple.

## **Young lovers: living together**

You probably realise the awkwardness you've created. But, you've decided, for now at least, that that's their problem, not yours! You say to me: "You don't understand!" and you say that you also face a huge dilemma. Your perspective may be something along these lines:

- you know of your parents' values system, that their principles are drawn from the Word of God;
- you used to adopt these yourself – at least in a borrowed sense while you "shared" in their Christian faith and leadership while at home;
- but you now stand alone and you are content to adopt a lifestyle pattern which seems to injure no-one and goes with the flow of a postmodern culture.

Christian marriage is a far better option. Cohabitation just doesn't measure up. Cohabitation does not contribute to the well being of society like marriage does. In fact it is a very private and individualistic arrangement with no societal benefit, no legal standing and in no way helps spread God's light in a dark world.

In essence, cohabitation is selfish. All that matters to the couple is the private agreement between them. There is no grateful acknowledgment of Mum and Dad and their 20 years' sacrifice; no thank you to the family unit; no example set for younger siblings; no message to the church or community that a new unit has begun and is of service and available to each. Clearly, there is no acknowledgment of the Lord and there can be no expected blessing on an arrangement that lies outside of God's revealed will for mankind.

# How do we respond? As a parent, or as a pastor?

## 1. Be fully convinced of Scripture's teaching

Does God really disapprove of cohabitation outside of marriage? Where, and why? Or is this just lingering "Victorian era" conservatism speaking?

God is not against sex between man and woman. Let us affirm strongly that husband and wife ought to warmly and frequently embrace the gift of sexual intercourse and enjoy together what is the most exquisite gift of God for us. Sex is good. It is a powerful fulfilment of two lives committed to each other in marriage.

What God is saying is that there must be safeguards on this powerful and exhilarating gift otherwise it can rage completely out of control. The Kangaroo Ground manse has a slow combustion fireplace in the lounge that on nights of bitter cold exudes a powerful surge of warmth throughout the front half of the home. Its warmth, when fully stoked, embraces the entire family when outside is appalling. However it's a force that must have safeguards. A fire is OK in the lounge room providing it is in the fireplace and not on the carpet!

There is no dedicated teaching in Scripture on this subject. There is no text we can show you to say that living together before marriage is wrong. But not every scenario or human dilemma is mentioned specifically in Scripture. We are assured that the whole tenor of God's teaching in Scripture makes it very clear that cohabitation before marriage is completely against God's standard. It is the assumed position of Scripture that sexual intimacy is for marriage alone.

Two matters are very clear.

- a) God intends sexual intercourse to be the final culminating act of a public commitment of a man and woman in marriage. The Genesis account (2:24,25) relates how man and woman should leave their parents and their former homes, make a commitment of union to each other (we call this marriage) and then become one flesh (sexual intimacy). This is what God

expects to be honoured and protected (“Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure ...” Hebrews 13:4). Here God calls the bed on which couples lie the “marriage bed”. In its day this Greek expression for marriage bed was a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The Bible is clear: sexual intimacy is to be kept pure by reserving it for marriage.

- b) Paul writes to the Ephesians: “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people.” (Romans 5:3). He also says to the Thessalonians: “It is God’s will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3,4). God expects self-control and for couples (no matter how dedicated to each other or how suitable they are for marriage) to exercise self-control for purity sake. With God’s standard of a holy life, he expects a Christian couple to pull away from all sexual intimacy until marriage. The same goes for an engaged couple. On the wedding day there should always be the whole of this undiscovered territory before them.

While much more can be said by way of Biblical teaching, this much is clear: that sexual intimacy is reserved solely for marriage and that God expects couples to exercise restraint and self control which is part of godliness and Christian character. Before we know how to respond or react to situations we face, we must be convinced of this standard. If there’s no conviction within the heart our response will be challenged and probably found wanting.

## **2. Make a clear stand in favour of marriage**

While recognising the complexity of the situation before you, do not be ambivalent. See clearly the difference between cohabitation and marriage.

This is the demarcation that's being deliberately muddied: that cohabitation of loving and committed couples is the same as marriage, therefore what's all the fuss?

Looking at our new book of services (*Worship!*) we read there the stated purposes of a Christian marriage:

*a) that husband and wife might always enjoy each other's companionship, help and support*

*b) for the proper expression of human sexuality*

*c) so that family life might continue and that children might be brought up in the love and security of a stable and happy home*

*d) so that human society might be healthy and have a firm foundation.*

Though these statements are not Scripture, they certainly reflect Scriptural teaching.

A couple who has not married, yet is cohabiting, has decided to adopt an imitation relationship that cannot produce outcomes that match those nobly stated purposes for marriage. The relationship may, in fact, produce outcomes harmful to them in the long run. Cohabitation cannot produce the same outcomes as marriage.

In spite of what may have been whispered or promised to each other privately, there is no safeguard of life-long companionship witnessed by a community, or even friends, to whom they are accountable. The joys of man and woman cohabiting are not the same as those experienced within the commitment of life companionship. When the "whole world" knows of your pledge to each other (in sickness and health, for richer and poorer, etc) the marriage commitment makes all the times of stress and even arguments, the trials and disappointments even sweeter when they are resolved in the light of an unbreakable commitment.

As discussed in the section above, Scripture emphasises that marriage is the right and proper setting for the full intimacy of sex between man and woman. Deep down couples know this to be true,

and reserving intimacy for marriage avoids the sense of guilt later on when they agree that they “went too far” and “crossed the boundaries”.

We should be clear that cohabitation is not an equivalent alternative to marriage. It is a very poor and faint imitation.

### **3. Be thoroughly consistent**

Whatever your response, and it’s not the purpose of this article to determine this, be sure that you are thoroughly consistent. The signals you give ought to be very clear.

#### **Parents:**

For the parent to insist that the couple sleep in separate rooms while “under my roof” is an understandable response. It is clear and makes a telling point. It’s a proper and a Christian response. The head of the household is, to some degree, responsible for all of what goes on in his home. It is important to make a stand, not the least for the sake of younger children still living at home.

However, while making this stand clearly (and for each occurrence), we must ensure that, while it lies within our power, we concurrently give genuine signals that:

- we love them as family members still, and
- we are open to listen to them, and to talk meaningfully with them.

We are wise not to make this the “Waterloo” battle, the defining moment of our relationship with them. While consistent in our response, we must demonstrate our openness to them and to the subject before us. Living together is not the unforgivable sin. Nor is it the only sin that we are dealing with daily as Christians. It just happens to be a very public sin that cause obvious embarrassment all round! We ought not give any suggestion that we are cutting off relationship with them as a couple. Nor do we want to say that our lives are perfect, or that our marriage is exemplary.

As parents we also can suggest to them that they marry soon (if the signs are that they are cohabiting prior to their intention of marriage). Again, the signals we give are important. We ought always to speak well of marriage for them, that this is the best for them. Though we have registered our disappointment with their living arrangements we can still anticipate warmly their wedding day, and constructively help them towards it. Cohabitation does not cancel their right to a happy wedding day nor a fulfilled marriage.

## **Pastors:**

For pastors, we face several dilemmas which call for integrity and sensitivity. Integrity to God's standards and sensitivity towards the couple as people. Both can be pursued.

- a) We must register our disapproval of their disobedience to God's standards and their shunning of God's wisdom. God's standards are paramount to us.
- b) We must pause the procedure towards any further wedding arrangements until the matter has been addressed openly. We must never agree too quickly to wedding arrangements, and never over the phone, in case we find ourselves having to compromise God's standards in order simply to be true to our word.
- c) We must decide on an appropriate course of action.
  - i) If we refuse to take them any further, we have made our point (emphasising integrity to God's Word) but they will leave the church, probably with their families, and find another minister to do it (is that being sensitive to them?). Is this a proper response? God's Word indicates that cohabitation is wrong; not marriage.
  - ii) If we insist that they must separate and remain both separate and celibate before marriage (integrity to the Word), we may also claim sensitivity to them, though they

probably would not agree! The questions arises: “Does this make us feel like policemen? How do we know if they are remaining celibate? Is the deal off if they don’t stay apart?”

- iii) If we advise that they must bring the wedding forward to one month from now, we are giving the signal of disapproval for cohabitation, and the value of marriage (integrity), but are making life very difficult for the family’s wedding plans at the reception centre (sensitivity?). Yet, with this response, you are insisting that because of the violation of God’s standards, the couple and the family are to make adjustments in recognition of this and settle for something less than the full traditional and festive wedding.
- iv) If we agree to go ahead, after registering our disapproval, with the expected wedding plans, where, in the minds of everyone who knows their living arrangements, is integrity to God’s Word? What signals do we send to the community? To the couple’s younger brothers and sisters? To the church youth group?
- v) If we go ahead with the wedding (with or without separation, as you determine) what statement is made with reference to cohabitation vs. marriage?
  - A public statement in church the Sunday before by yourself, so that the believing community understands your position (and possibly expressing also the couple’s regret?)
  - Public confession of sin and declaration of repentance by the couple before the church on the Sunday?\*
  - Reference to the issue in your preamble to the wedding service, or perhaps in a carefully worded prayer to indicate acknowledgement of where this couple has come from?

\* Does this then make cohabitation a worse sin than, say, gossip over the phone, thinking evil of someone, or

coveting your neighbour's Playstation? They never had to make a public confession of sin!

We must decide something! And we must be consistent and clear. We cannot afford to send ambivalent messages. Cohabitation weakens and devalues marriage, and we are not in favour of tolerating it. So we must say something that says this.

David Easton concludes: "Enabling people to hear both God's word of judgment and of grace is no easy matter, as Paul himself admits: 'Who is equal to such a task?'" (p. 15).

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# Family experiences

(Anonymous)

The dull pain that hit was real, crushing and numbing. As parents our personal dreams for our lovely 19 year old daughter were shattered as she told us she was pregnant - unmarried and pregnant.

This wasn't the way we had envisaged becoming grandparents first time around. Her father's initial reaction is permanently imprinted on the minds of these two as his pain exploded in anger (the only emotion to camouflage the pain) when they told us. We as her mum and dad soul searched together and wept. We were hurting; parents in pain.

Deep down in our hearts we were aware of the cost to them of coming and telling us face to face. Our dear daughter was heavy with the guilt of the humiliation that she put on us. She was conscious that she had compromised the core Christian values that undergirded our family life and grieved her Saviour.

From the outset through the pain I needed our daughter to be reassured *that she was loved, that that love could not be threatened.*

For all involved we would feel losses. It's an odd statement to make when a new life is anticipated but I believe we needed time to grieve. The dream of our daughter to fulfill a career that she worked hard at entering was a significant loss. Failure in parenting that we perceived and took on ourselves. I felt that I didn't measure up as a mum. My husband wanted to resign immediately from everything in ministry that he was involved in. At that time he hadn't entered Theological College for ordination into pastoral ministry. That excited

anticipation of telling the world that you are going to be grandparents for the first time was lost in the circumstances.

Our daughter had become involved with a guy who was separated but not yet divorced so even although they obviously cared deeply for each other marriage wasn't a current option. Consequences resulting from wrong choices can be so complicated.

The Lord sustained us through those dark days, teaching us more deeply the grace and forgiveness we all needed as we set about restoring relationships. We thanked our Heavenly Father as from the beginning we knew they would never consider abortion. Together they were willing to talk through their decisions with us, ask advice and respect the stands we took. The closeness of family was there from the first word. There was no time needed to accept the situation. Concern and support surrounded us in an enveloping security.

Dear and trusted friends including our Pastor and his wife were there for us all in so many caring and practical ways including praying with us and sharing in our pain.

The greatest spiritual lesson that God worked through in my life was that of understanding and showing absolute unconditional love. The intervening 11 years have proved a real blessing to us as we have seen a marriage built on a strong foundation and a very generous love. Knowing that before God each of us has acknowledged our failures, accepted forgiveness and walked on gives us wonderfully open and responsive relationships to each other.

Now there are four beautiful children in that family, each exuding their own joy and personality but that first little girl, diagnosed at four with a moderately severe intellectual disability, teaches us lessons of trust and faith constantly. This year has seen through her husband's generosity of time the opportunity for our daughter to enter university fulltime to pick up the threads of that career given up so long ago.

There was pain in walking through this experience as a family, but our faithful God walked with us and encouraged us as He counselled, comforted and healed us and assured us of His Presence.

# Worth the wait!

Susie Shellenberger<sup>1</sup>

Ever feel as if you're the only one in the whole world who's saving yourself for marriage? You're NOT!

A few weeks before her 13th birthday, Shauna Menefee started dropping some hints about what she wanted. "A ring would be really cool," she told her parents.

They not only picked up her hint but drove her to the jewellery store and let her pick out the ring! "It was really fun," Shauna remembers. "We looked at several, but I kept coming back to this pretty gold one. It had a heart in the middle that really caught my eye." Shauna's parents purchased the ring, wrapped it and kept it hidden for two weeks.

The big day finally arrived, and Shauna and her parents headed out for an evening of fine dining. After the meal arrived, her dad began to talk about her birthday gift. "Shauna, you picked out a beautiful ring. And though you didn't know this, it's a very special ring.

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<sup>1</sup> "Worth the Wait", by Susie Shellenberger, Brio magazine, April 1994. Copyright ©1994. All rights reserved. International copyright secured. Used with permission of Focus on the Family.

“We’re going to call it a chastity ring,” her mum said. “Let it be a symbol of your commitment to God to remain (sexually) abstinent until you’re married.” “I had already decided to maintain my sexual purity,” Shauna says. “But as I slipped this special ring on my finger, it deepened my heart’s desire to become all that God wants me to be.”

“Sometimes,” she says, “when I catch myself daydreaming in class, I start fiddling with my ring - you know, twisting it around and around. And I smile deep inside, knowing that someday I’ll present this very ring to my husband on our wedding night as a symbol of the most important gift I can give him - my virginity.

“I realise that lots of young people are involved in sexual relationships,” Shauna says, “but to say ‘everybody’s doing it’ just isn’t real life. I’m not doing it. My closest friends aren’t doing it. Not everyone is doing it! And to fall for that lie is just plain stupid. God has a much higher calling on our lives.”

# Preparing for the best

Steve Williams

My wife, Jean, and I, have been involved in working with university students together for a number of years. We are working at RMIT as Presbyterian Home Missionary Tertiary Workers. Obviously most of our ministry is to students in their late teens and early twenties. As you can imagine, given the stage of life of these students, sex and relationships are issues that we need to address regularly.

Although we are linked with the Presbyterian Church as Home Missionaries, we work with an interdenominational organisation called AFES (Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students). That means that we work with students from a whole range of different church backgrounds, as well as those who have no church backgrounds at all. As you might guess, we encounter an incredible range of views when it comes to sex and relationships.

Despite that, we believe that God has clearly set out his blueprint for what it means to be human in the Bible. This includes a great deal of teaching on relationships and sexuality. We seek to help students

think through what the Bible is teaching on these issues. This isn't always easy. It usually involves coming to a radically different position to their university friends. Sometimes it means questioning the things taught by their families or home churches.

## **Marriage**

Very few university students are married, so usually their immediate concern is with what the Bible has to say about dating or courtship (or 'going out' as Australians usually say!). But the Bible never really addresses this issue. Because people got married much younger in Bible times, it was never really an issue. At the end of childhood, people got married. There was no big gap between childhood and marriage, where people had to work out what was the appropriate way to relate.

So given that, does the Bible actually address modern pre-marrieds? It does, but it only does it indirectly. In order to understand how the Bible is addressing modern Australian teenagers or university students, we need to understand what the Bible has to say about marriage. For marriage is *the* basic relationship (the first relationship between Adam and Eve, was a married relationship). The married relationship provides the pattern for all our relating to the opposite sex.

## **The Message of the Old Testament**

When you examine Genesis 2:15-25, you discover that marriage is God's great solution to 'aloneness'. The only one who can truly satisfy the desire for companionship, is a member of the opposite sex. We see that God's plan for marriage is that it is between one man and one woman. And between that one man and one woman, there is a profound and lifelong union. As a result, the couple become independent from their families, as they become a new unity. Although Genesis does not directly address this, by implication homosexual relationships or relationships between more than one sexual partner are rejected.

Malachi 2:10-16 also teaches us some important principles about marriage. Here we discover that God hates divorce. Marriage is meant to be an exclusive and lifelong relationship. You can imagine Aunt Bertha or Uncle Cecil choking on their outlines, if this passage was read out at a wedding!

We also discover that one of the goals of marriage is to produce godly offspring. This too is greatly at odds with the way most young people think about their future marriages, even those with Christian backgrounds! But as surprising as this may seem, it's really just bringing out what was said from the beginning (see Genesis 1:26-28). Those who are unwilling to have children and raise them in the faith, probably should consider *not* getting married at all!

## **The Message of the New Testament**

When you come to the New Testament, you discover that it builds on the Old Testament picture of marriage. Drawing on Genesis 2-3, Paul explains in Ephesians 5:22-33 how the man is the head of the woman, and the woman submits to her husband in everything. But with authority comes responsibility, so the husband is called to follow the incredible example of Christ, by laying down his life for her, putting her interests ahead of his own, and by loving her as his own body in everything.

## **Choosing a Girlfriend or Boyfriend**

One of our assumptions in teaching students, is that marriage is God's design for us when it comes to intimate relationships between the sexes. That's why, if you take the Bible seriously, having a boyfriend or girlfriend isn't just a fun experiment. It's actually a way of preparing for marriage.

In other words, young Christians need to choose carefully who they 'go out with', just as they would choose carefully who they marry. So the Bible ends up having a great deal to say about how you choose a girlfriend or boyfriend. On the basis of Genesis and Malachi, you would choose someone who believes that marriage is

for life, and who is committed to having children and raising them in the faith. On the basis of Ephesians, you would choose someone who understands God's unique purposes for men and women. If you're a bloke, you would look for a girl who will happily submit to you. If you're a girl, you would look for a bloke who will provide spiritual leadership and lovingly sacrifice his own interests for you.

## **Relating to a Girlfriend or Boyfriend**

The same principles apply for those who are already going out with someone, but are not yet married. Couples need to discuss the sort of principles they find in the Bible about marriage. Where there is no real intention to eventually get married, couples should break off their relationship. Where there is no commitment to a lifelong partnership, or to having children (where it's medically possible) and then raising them Christianly, then they are better off breaking up.

It's also important for boyfriend and girlfriends to prepare for their future responsibilities as husbands and wives. So blokes need to develop their spiritual leadership now, leading their girlfriends in prayer, and learning to teach and encourage them now. Girls need to learn cheerful submission now, supporting and encouraging their boyfriends in spiritual leadership.

## **Missionary Dating?**

The Bible is incredibly clear about the fact that believers should marry believers (see Exodus 34:15-16; Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 1 Kings 11:1-6; 1 Corinthians 7:39). Unfortunately many young Christians fall into the trap of going out with non-Christians. Although some might think this will bring their partners to Christ, it's far more common for Christians to be led astray themselves. The principle of not marrying someone who is not a Christian also applies to who you choose to go out with, since dating is preparation for marriage. Young Christians need to be very careful against making this mistake.

What should be done, if the relationship has already begun? Should the relationship keep going? I think the clear answer is 'No!'

Because you've made one mistake, is no reason for making an even bigger mistake by marrying a non-Christian. Breaking up is never easy. That's why the sooner it happens, the better. The longer couples remain together, the harder it becomes to break up, particularly for those couples who have been physically intimate with each other. Sexual involvement creates a deep bonding between two people.

## **God's Purposes for Sex**

But that leads us into a discussion of God's purposes for our sexuality. Again it's important to go back to creation, in order to see how God set things up. In the opening chapter of the Bible (Genesis 1:26-28) we discover again the important place that children have. One of the primary reasons for our God-given sexuality is to have children.

Now university students *do* find this difficult. As you can imagine, it's a time of life when career looms large. Although they're keen to think explore their sexuality, they're not so keen to think about children and families. Let's be honest, babies and children are incredibly demanding, and they tend to disrupt your average career, financial security and social life. It's probably why the age at which university educated couples begin to have children, gets higher and higher (it's currently in the mid-30s). You sometimes even hear of couples who plan not to have kids at all.

But if having children is one of God's reasons for sex, then it needs to be part of our planning for marriage, no matter how disruptive it may be to our life plans. Those who don't want to have kids, shouldn't get married. And if they're not going to get married, then they shouldn't go out with someone in the first place.

Now this obviously doesn't mean infertile people shouldn't experience sexuality or marriage. For as we see in Genesis 2:21-25, sex has another aim: union and fellowship. Sex makes a couple one flesh. It bonds and glues them together spiritually, mentally and

emotionally. We don't really understand how or why it does this, but we know that it does. It's a wonderful mystery!

## Functional Sex?

But while important and accurate, we haven't yet fully explained God's gift of sexuality. So far, we seem to have a fairly functional view of sex. But surely sex is supposed to be fun as well! That is indeed what we find. The Bible embraces our bodies and our sexuality in ways that can sometime almost be embarrassing (see Proverbs 5:17-20; Deuteronomy 24:5; and anything from the Song of Songs!).

Sex is great. God made it, therefore it's good. But it's not only good, it's intensely pleasurable. Often those who aren't Christians can portray Christians and the Bible as anti-pleasure and anti-sex. But the Bible clearly explains how God has made us as sexual beings. We don't have to pretend not to be sexual. We don't have to be surprised or embarrassed when we have sexual feelings, for that is how God has made us. When we express our sexuality within a married relationship, it is satisfying, exciting, and enjoyable. According to the Bible, sex within marriage is beautiful, pleasurable and wonderful. There's plenty of reason for young people to wait until they get married!

## Sexual Sin

But God's good purposes for sexuality are often twisted or rejected. Youth culture shows like *Friends* can be highly enjoyable, but they certainly give us a distorted picture of sexuality. Sex is often portrayed as casual, selfish, a way to meet *my* needs, even a way to manipulate people (as in some of the super-soaps like *Melrose Place*). Fornication, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, prostitution, serial polygamy, are all seen as valid sexual alternatives. It's not too hard to see some of the damaging consequences of this view of sexuality.

It's often hard to resist the lies of the world about sin. And the lies which young people hear about sex are probably some of the strongest and loudest lies of all. That's why it's so important to keep

pointing out the real nature and effects of sin in this area of our lives. The Bible speaks often enough against sexual sin for us to realise that it is anti-God. But we don't always remember how profoundly anti-social sexual sin is. Passages like Romans 13:8-10 remind us that sexual sin is unloving, no matter how loving it may feel at the time. Sexual sin destroys relationships, marriages, families and the individuals within them.

But that is not the full extent of the problem. Sexual sin is anti-self as well. According to 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, this sin affects us more than any other sin will affect us. Although all sin is equal in God's sight, when you're physically intimate with someone other than your husband or wife, you not only sin against them, but against yourself. For what you do with your body, you do with yourself. More than that, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. You wouldn't have sex with your boyfriend or girlfriend right in front of your parents. But all too often, young Christians commit sexual sin right in front of their Heavenly Father!

## **How far is too far?**

The Bible makes it clear that sex outside of marriage is wrong. But does that mean that all sexual intimacy is forbidden? What are couples allowed to do before they get married? Or to put it another way, how far is too far? One of the main difficulties with answering this question, is the question itself. It's the sort of question a Pharisee or lawbreaker asks. How far can I go, before the action becomes forbidden? How close to the edge am I allowed to go? There may be a concern for obedience, namely not crossing a line, but it's not obedience from the heart.

Surely the keen Christian wants to serve God in righteousness and holiness. He doesn't start by asking how far he can go, along the path of disobedience. He is more concerned with how far his obedience can go. He's more concerned with what he can do for God and others, not what he can get away with.

But the question still remains. Given that we have many young couples in a culture like ours, who remain unmarried for quite some time, then surely we need to provide some direction and guidance. So how far should the Christian go? Well, not very far at all. Given that sex is for marriage, then sexual arousal also is for marriage. They go together. Obviously you can be aroused without having sex, by why would you deliberately play around with this? Unless of course, you're not really convinced that sex is for marriage. There are no rules. Just be cautious and conservative.

A bit of good common sense helps us out here as well. Average university student are in their sexual prime, and so they are fairly sexually charged. As a result, young couples (and older couples!) need to take precautions. Things like trying to avoid being alone in the same room or house, let alone sleeping in the same room (even in separate beds). It's important to remember that cars are for transport, not for just sitting in. It's probably wise to do your relationship building out in the open: walking, sitting in crowded places, mixing with friends. Women need to be careful in how they dress, if they're really concerned for the holiness of their boyfriends. Men need to be very careful in what they do and initiate, if they're really concerned with the welfare and holiness of their girlfriends.

## **Dealing with Failure**

But what happens to those who've made mistakes in this area, as many have? Is it too late for them? Have they wrecked things forever? Can they ever have a healthy marriage and sex life in the future? Have they committed the unforgivable sin? Can they ever deal with their feelings of guilt?

It *is* true that sexual sin affects us in ways that other sins do not. And it *is* true that sexual sin can have a profound and lasting affect on us. But we need to remember that it is no worse in God's eyes than other sins. It is no more unforgivable than sins like greed or slander. Christ bore all our sins in his body on the cross: past, present

and future (Hebrews 7:27). It's important for Christians to accept the freedom and healing which come from this forgiveness.

## **Sexual Purity**

But sexual purity isn't just what we do with our bodies, it's also what we do with our minds and words. We need to be very much on our guard, given the impurity of our world. It's not easy, we are surrounded by so much sexual stimuli: dirty jokes, smutty conversations, suggestive TV shows, erotic scenes in movies, pictures in magazines, provocative dressing.

It's especially important for young people to develop godly habits in their thinking on sexual matters. The average university student has great temptation *and* opportunities to stumble in this area. We need to be careful. Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27-30) about *dwelling* on inappropriate desires. For that is when the desire turns to lust and becomes sinful. We need to be careful about taking that second or third look. We need to be ruthless in avoiding temptation; situations which we have learnt from experience can lead us into sin.

We also learn from Philippians 4:8-9 about the importance of being proactive. It's not simply a matter of trying to resist sexual temptation, and of emptying your mind of such thoughts or images. We need to actually fill our minds with wholesome alternatives. Perhaps we can do this, by reading and meditating on the Bible, or by praying for others' salvation.

But despite the need for discipline and vigilance, it's important that we don't make people feel guilty for having sexual feelings or for feeling sexually responsiveness. We've actually been made by God to have sexual feelings and be sexually responsive. Simply by themselves, such things just remind us that we're in good working order. It's like feeling guilty for being hungry or thirsty. The issue isn't whether you have such feelings or reactions, it's what happens next, it's what you do with them.

In many ways, ministering to young people like university students, is probably no different to ministering to anyone, when it comes to topics like these. It's important to help people to see the extensive teaching that God provides for us on marriage, courtship and sexuality in the Bible. It may be that young, highly-sexed and unmarried people struggle with these issues, in a way they might not later in life. But like all of us, they need guidance, understanding, and challenging to live God's way out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ.