

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

Cohabitation



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Cohabitation



More than twenty years ago, a study done by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University by sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead came to this conclusion, “Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women.”¹

What was true then is true today, but there is even more evidence of changing attitudes as well as additional social research on cohabitation. A survey by Pew

Research asked American adults when it was acceptable to live together. Two thirds (69%) said it was acceptable “even if they don’t plan to get married.” Another 16 percent said it was acceptable “only if they planned to get married.” Only 14 percent said it was “never acceptable.”

That may explain why living together has gone from rare to routine in the secular world, but also explains why so many Christian couples also see living together as acceptable. In the 1960s and 1970s, only about a half million couples were living together. One study from a few years ago, estimated that over 18 million Americans were cohabiting, and nearly a quarter of them were people over the age of 50 years old.²

More recent studies document that the “premarital cohabitation effect” still exists. Living together before marriage increases your likelihood of marital struggles and even divorce. Scott Stanley with the Institute for Family Studies acknowledges that it may be counterintuitive “that living together

would not improve one's odds for a successful marriage. And yet, whatever else is true, there is scant evidence to support this belief in a positive effect."³

Test-drive Relationships and Other Myths

No doubt you have heard couples justify cohabitation by arguing that they need to live together before marriage to see if they are compatible. First, that argument does not justify cohabitation. Second, it is fallacious since so many couples living together never plan to get married.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher wrote *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*.⁴ It not only makes the case for marriage; it also challenges contemporary assumptions about cohabitation.

The thesis of the book is simple. Back in the 1950s, the rules were clear: first love, next marriage, and only then the baby carriage. But the social tsunami of the 1960s changed everything. The pill, the sexual revolution, feminism, mothers in the workplace, no-fault

divorce, and the rise of illegitimate births changed our views of marriage and family. The authors marshal the evidence to show that marriage is a good thing.

Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that you should “try before you buy.” In fact, one of the oft-repeated questions justifying living together is “You wouldn’t buy a car without a test-drive, would you?”

The problem with such questions is they dehumanize the other person. If I decide not to buy a car, the car doesn’t feel rejected. When you test-drive your car, you don’t pack your personal luggage in the trunk. And rejecting a car model doesn’t bring emotional baggage into the next test-driving experience. The car doesn’t need psychological counseling so that it can trust the next car buyer. Frankly, test-driving a relationship is only positive if you are the driver.

Research has shown that those who cohabit tend to view marriage negatively because it involves the assumption of new responsibilities that

contrast with their former freedoms. On the other hand, those marrying through the conventional route of dating and courtship did not feel constrained by marriage but liberated by marriage.

Consider the contrast. A couple living together has nearly everything marriage has to offer (including sex) but few commitments or responsibilities. So, cohabiting people feel trapped when they enter marriage. They must assume huge new responsibilities while getting nothing they didn't already have.

Couples entering marriage through dating and courtship experience just the opposite, especially if they maintain their sexual purity. Marriage is the culmination of their relationship and provides the full depth of a relationship they have long anticipated.

Consequences of Cohabitation

Sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead warned that living together before marriage puts your future marriage in danger. Part of the reason for the danger is

the difference in perception. Men often enter the relationship with less intention to marry than do women. They may regard it more as a sexual opportunity without the ties of long-term commitment. Women, however, often see the living arrangement as a step toward eventual marriage.

People who live together in uncommitted relationships may be unwilling to work out problems. Since there is no long-term commitment, often it is easy to leave the current living arrangement and seek a less fractious relationship with a new partner.

In recent years, there has been the occasional study that suggests there are no significant problems for couples if they live together. But Scott Stanley dismisses those few studies because they fail to consider long-term problems. And he points to another recent study that does show an increased risk for divorce among those living together before marriage.⁵

One study based on the National Survey of Families and Households found that marriages which had prior

cohabitators were 46 percent more likely to divorce than marriages of non-cohabitators. The authors concluded from this study and from a review of previous studies that the risk of marital disruption following cohabitation “is beginning to take on the status of an empirical generalization.”⁶

Some have tried to argue that the correlation between cohabitation and divorce is artificial, since people willing to cohabit are more unconventional and less committed to marriage. In other words, cohabitation doesn't cause divorce but is merely associated with it because the same type of people are involved in both phenomena. Yet, even when this “selection effect” is carefully controlled statistically, a “cohabitation effect” remains.

One study found that “living with a romantic partner prior to marriage was associated with more negative and less positive problem-solving support and behavior during marriage.” The reason is simple. Since there is less certainty of a long-term commitment, “there may be less motivation for cohabiting

partners to develop their conflict resolution and support skills.”⁷

Couples living together, however, miss out on more than just the benefits of marriage. Annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times higher than they are among married couples.⁸ Those who cohabit are much more likely to be unhappy in marriage and much more likely to think about divorce.⁹

Cohabitation is especially harmful to children. First, several studies have found that children currently living with a mother and her unmarried partner have significantly more behavior problems and lower academic performance than children in intact families.¹⁰ Second, there is the risk that the couple will break up, creating even more social and personal difficulties. Third, many of these children were not born in the present union but in a previous union of one of the adult partners (usually the mother). Living in a house with a mother and an unmarried boyfriend is tenuous at best.

Cohabitation and the Bible

God designed sexual intimacy to occur exclusively within the sacred commitment of marriage (Genesis 2:21-24). When we trust God's design, we can honor marriage (Hebrews 13:4).

The Bible teaches that the act of sexual intercourse can have a strong bonding effect on two people. Ephesians 5:31 says: "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh."

Sexual intercourse outside of marriage also has consequences. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul said that when a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her (1 Corinthians 6:16). In 1 Corinthians 6:18 he says we are to flee sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality is condemned in about 25 passages in the New Testament. The Greek word is *porneia*, a word which includes all forms of illicit sexual intercourse. Paul taught in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you

should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.”

Marriage is God’s plan. Marriage provides intimate companionship for life (Genesis 2:18). It provides a context for the procreation and nurture of children (Ephesians 6:1-2). And finally, marriage provides a godly outlet for sexual desire (1 Corinthians 7:2).

Living together outside of marriage not only violates biblical commands but it puts a couple and their future marriage at risk. If you want a good marriage, don’t do what society says. Do what the Bible teaches us to do.

Additional Resources

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Jeff Van Goethem, *Living Together: A Guide to Counseling Unmarried Couples*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004.

Glenn Stanton, *The Ring Makes All the*

Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage, Chicago: Moody Press, 2011.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially* (New York: Random House, 2000).

¹David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage," *The National Marriage Project*, the Next Generation Series, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, January 1999.

²Patricia Reaney, "More Americans 50 Years and Over are Cohabiting, Research Shows," Reuters, April 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-cohabitation/more-americans-50-years-and-over-are-cohabiting-research-shows-idUSKBNI782RI>

³Scott Stanley, "Premarital Cohabitation Is Still Associated with Greater Odds of Divorce," *Institute for Family Studies*, October 17, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/premarital-cohabitation-is-still-associated-with-greater-odds-of-divorce>.

⁴Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially* (New York: Random House, 2000).

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⁶Alfred DeMaris and K. Vaninadha Rao, "Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability in the

United States: A Reassessment," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992), 178-190.

⁷Catherine L. Cohan and Stacey Kleinbaum, "Toward A Greater Understanding of the Cohabitation Effect: Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Communication," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2002), 180-192.

⁸Lee Robins and Darrel Reiger, *Psychiatric Disorders in America* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 72.

⁹Andrew Greeley, *Faithful Attraction* (New York: Tom Doherty, 1991), 206.

¹⁰Elizabeth Thompson, T. L. Hanson, and S.S. McLanahan, "Family Structure and Child Well-Being: Economic Resources versus Parental Behaviors," *Social Forces* 71 (1994), 221-242.



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