

Is God okay with unmarried Christians living together in a romantic relationship (*aka cohabitation*)?

By Terran Williams

My answer in short: absolutely not. Let me explain why.

Sex is worth the wait.

The Scriptures are amazingly clear that sex outside of the marriage covenant is totally 'not okay' with God. I Corinthians 7:2 states, "Because of fornication, each man should have his own wife and each woman should have her own husband." The fornication referred to is 'sex between two unmarried persons'. The admonition is clear regarding fornication in this passage and in many others. (I Thess.4:3; Col.3:5; Gal. 5:19; II Cor.12: 21; Matt. 15:19). It is abundantly evident that God's will for humankind is to abstain from any kind of fornication. Paul addresses the topic by offering the solution of marriage to avoid it. Fornication and its consequences are included in the lists of sins we are to avoid in Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21-23; I Cor. 6: 9; Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 21:8; Heb. 13:4; Jude 7; I Tim. 1:10; Eph. 5:5; Rom. 1:28-29; and Lev. 19:20. In the Song of Songs, the desire for sexual intercourse is restrained until after marriage has taken place. (1:1-3:5) During the courtship, there is a normal longing for the other person, but restraint is also required. The book assumes that sex is to be enjoyed only within the bonds of marriage.

To see why casual sex is forbidden, and why covenant sex is to be celebrated - listen to the mp3 of a talk I did. Go to www.friends-first.com and click on 'sex in the city' and then on 'casual versus covenantal sex'.

But as more and more people in our culture cohabit, it seems that more and more Christians follow their example. Four reasons are given to explain why they believe cohabitation is sometimes acceptable. Let me express these four reasons in the form of statements ...

A. *'We see ourselves as married in our heart and in the eyes of God, therefore it's fine to live together and to be involved in a sexual relationship.'*

B. *'We're soon to be married and we live together (for a whole bunch of convenient reasons) with the intention of abstaining from sex until then.'*

C. *'But the Bible is outdated in this regard. Even if the Bible indirectly speaks against cohabitation, times have changed and it is now an outdated and therefore unhelpful rule'.*

D. *'Circumstances make it totally necessary to live together, so God must understand.'*

But there is much wisdom in God's Word that will help us respond to these four thoughts...

A. 'But, we're married in our hearts'.

It's not enough to be married 'in your hearts but not legally' for three reasons ...

1) *Marriage, in both biblical times and now is set into motion at a specific time and is marked by a public event.*

Matthew 22:8-14 and 25:1-13 seem to indicate that marriage happened at a given time and place. The wedding feast was ready and the guests were being invited. Although the point of the story is not the official beginning of a marriage, it is evident the beginning of the publicly-recognized relationship was not an undetermined time, nor was initiated by two individuals moving in together. The very fact this story is included in scripture gives credibility to the public marriage event and union of marriage.

2) *The Bible indirectly upholds the government's role in certifying a marriage.*

Matthew 22:21 (as well as Mark 12:17 and Luke 20:25) all state, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." The government (the Caesar of our day) requires a marriage license and accompanying ceremony of some kind, and witnesses to be legally recognized as a binding union possessing all the legal rights of such a union. Since this is a civil requirement, we are obligated by law as citizens to obey it.

3) *God has a very high view of marriage, and wants us to also have a very high view of marriage.*

Hebrews 13:4 says, 'Marriage should be honoured by all.' God invented marriage. The second chapter of the Bible poetically describes the first marriage (Genesis 2:18-25). We live in a culture where marriage is increasingly seen as an outdated institution. Cohabitation has grown in the wake of this increasingly low view of marriage in our culture. If we as Christians cohabit, it sends a clear message to our culture, 'You're right. Marriage is not that important.' In our actions we agree with the very culture that increasingly rejects and distorts what God values (see Isaiah 5:20).

B. 'But, we're living together without having sex'.

It is not acceptable to live together even though you intend to abstain from sex for several reasons...

1) Living together makes sexual temptation that much greater.

Romans 13:14 says, 'Do not make provision for the sinful nature.' This means that we should avoid those circumstances that are likely to cause us to sin. When two people who are physically attracted to each other choose to live together they put themselves in a place of great temptation. 2 Timothy 2:22 says that we should flee the desires of our youth. Jesus, in Matthew 6:13, teaches us to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation' - and it is a form of hypocrisy to pray that, and yet at the same time to make a lifestyle choice that leads you right into temptation.

2) Living together makes people think that you are sexually involved.

Ephesians 5:3 says, 'Let there not even be a hint of sexual immorality among you - because these are improper for God's holy people.' This verse is saying that we should be careful about what people think about us.

A few verses later gives the reason: 'Be very careful then how you live - not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.' Notice that Paul is saying that we need to make wise decisions, and to think carefully about our lifestyles and our choices, because there are people watching us, and we either credit or discredit the name of Christ by what they perceive in our lives.

But some may say, 'I don't care what people think.' As Christians we should care what people think, not because we're afraid of them, but because we love them. Often, non-Christians intuitively know that we, as God's people, should live in a certain way, and when we fail to live like that - it undermines Christ's credibility, and the chance of them ever putting their trust in Christ.

Some people may respond to both of the above points by saying, 'Well, we can control ourselves. And we are open with everyone that we don't sleep together.' To these people I respond with point 3...

3) When Christians do live together - and elders endorse it - it sets a precedent for other Christians to live together too.

As Christians involved in a church, we do not live our lives disconnected from other Christians. We are called 'the body of Christ' because our lives have an impact on other Christian lives. We are called by Christ to love each other, which means being willing to embrace inconvenience at times, for the good of others. It is true that there may be the rare (or should I say 'very rare') situation where everyone knows that two Christians living together are not sleeping together. So let's assume that the elders who

oversee this couple allow a certain couple with remarkable self-control to go on living together unchallenged. If elders do this, they will lose their authority to tell other unmarried couples to not live together who really cannot control themselves. A precedent has been set. People will say, 'But you let them stay together, why can't we too.' Romans 14:13 calls this 'putting a stumbling block in front of your weaker brother.' But love should cause us to say, 'I will not live together for the sake of those weaker than me in the body of Christ.'

4) *Living together before marriage undermines the 'specialness' of the marriage covenant.*

Wise Christians should not ask, 'How far can I go without sinning?' but rather 'How much can I keep special?' 1 Corinthians 13:4 reminds us that love is patient. This means that love will cause us to be willing to wait, to embrace temporary inconvenience for the sake of long-lasting joy that is soon to come.

Sharing a bed is clearly a marriage blessing (see Hebrews 13:4 which speaks of the marriage bed which should not be defiled through compromise). But some will then say, 'We'll live in separate rooms.' My answer is 'speak to any Christian couple who moved in together as they got married and they will say, 'Living together is a form of profound intimacy and union in itself - and it is closely associated with the privilege of being able to have sex with each other.'" Let's explore this thought more in the next point ...

5) *Marriage throughout the Bible speaks of a radical transition - not a gradual one.*

Genesis 2:24 says, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife and the two will become one.' Here we have a picture a person moving out of their previous abode, and moving in with their new wife/husband and consummating this union with sex. Jesus repeats this teaching in Matthew 19:5,6 and so does Paul in Ephesians 5:20.

The word that best describes marriage is 'union'. It speaks of how two separate entities 'become one'. It does not speak of a slow fusion - although the psychological fusion can happen slowly. It speaks of how spiritually and physically the two become one.

Sex is the *secret* symbol of the oneness the couple share, whereas living together is the *public* symbol of this new oneness to all - which is why Genesis 2:24 ephasizes that in order for the two to become one in marriage, they need to move in together.

C. 'But, some of the Bible's moral instructions are outdated'.

Some people argue that times have changed, and therefore we cannot accept much of the Bible's so-called wisdom.

In response, I affirm that none of God's instructions in God's Word - properly understood, of course - are arbitrary. They are all God's way of guiding us into what is best for us. We can't really break God's commands - but we can break ourselves by ignoring his commands.

The question to explore is, 'Has the rise in cohabitation in the Western world been good or bad for people?' Not-so-surprising, many non-Christian researchers have done extensive research on this question and the results are unbelievably clear: *Cohabitation - though being convenient in the short-term - hurts people and society in the long-term.*

Civitus, The Institute for the Study of Civil Society, reveals some interesting facts about the impact of cohabitation on people and society. (see Here are some facts (with references found at the end of this 'article') ...

1) Cohabiting relationships are fragile. They are always more likely to break up than marriages entered into at the same time, regardless of age or income. On average, cohabitations last less than two years before breaking up or converting to marriage. Less than four per cent of cohabitations last for ten years or more.² Cohabiting also influences later marriages. The more often and the longer that men and women cohabit, the more likely they are to divorce later.³

2) Both men and women in cohabiting relationships are more likely to be unfaithful to their partners than married people.⁴

3) At all socio-economic levels, cohabiting couples accumulate less wealth than married couples.⁵ Married men earn 10 to 40 percent more than single or cohabiting men, and they are more successful in their careers, particularly when they become fathers.⁶ Married women without children earn about the same as childless single or cohabiting women. All women who take time out of employment to have children lose some earning power—whether they are married or not.⁷ However, cohabiting and lone mothers often lack access to the father's income, making it more difficult to balance their caring responsibilities with their careers.

4) Cohabitants have more health problems than married people, probably because cohabitants put up with behaviour in their partners which husbands and wives would discourage, particularly regarding smoking, alcohol and substance abuse.⁸ Cohabitants are also much more likely to suffer from depression than married people.⁹

5) Women in cohabiting relationships are more likely than wives to be abused. In one study, marital status was the strongest predictor of abuse—ahead of race, age, education or housing conditions.¹⁰

6) Children born to cohabiting parents are more likely to experience a series of disruptions in their family life, which can have negative consequences for their emotional and educational development. Children living with cohabiting couples do less well at school and are more likely to suffer from emotional problems than children of married couples.¹¹

The above research powerfully confirms that God's instruction (about sex and living together being the privilege of the married) really are for our good.

D. 'But, circumstances make it necessary to live together.'

I really understand how economic circumstances can put a lot of pressure on two people to live together, but it simply does not make it acceptable.

We are not meant to live our lives out of what is convenient but out of what we're convinced of. Conviction not pragmatism (when practical factors are primary in our decision-making) is required of Christians.

God is not so cruel as to tell you to do something without enabling you to also do it. There is a saying: 'where God guides he provides'. He is a loving Father. The real issue behind our obedience is whether we trust him. We need to believe that when God tells us to do something, he has our best in mind. And that when he tells us to step out, he will also catch us.

And hopefully your shepherds are not so cruel as to tell you to do something without also enabling you to do it. If you simply cannot move out for financial reasons then go speak to one of the shepherds in your church. And ask them for help. They will probably mobilize some people in the community to be of assistance.

In conclusion...

If we are to take seriously Christ's leadership over our lives, then cohabitation is not acceptable. And, although not cohabiting may be inconvenient or costly in some ways, the costs of not living together are far outweighed by the costs of living together unmarried, for all the reasons given in this article.

Cohabitation hurts us, hurts the one we love, hurts our relationship with God, hurts the people who witness our lives, and hurts the society we live in. And that's why God forbids it - he lovingly wants what's best for us.

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