

Cohabitation: Biblical and Ethical Concerns

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I. Introduction

The practice of cohabitation is becoming more and more common in the Western world as a substitute for Christian marriage in a secular society. The term "cohabitation" is usually defined as a short or long-term heterosexual relationship outside marriage. Since the term itself carries in our society a negative or pejorative connotation there is a tendency to replace it with a new and more technical one, namely, "partnering." The topic itself is complex and difficult to address, but we should be willing to explore it. The practice of cohabitation was usually understood to be an indication of moral social decadence and was considered to be a case of fornication, but that is no longer the case. Western society is accepting it as a modern type of marriage that society itself encourages by penalizing married couples through high tax laws and by reducing the social security benefits of widows or widowers who remarry. Besides, cohabitation is promoted and even glamorized by the communication systems of Western society as a valid alternative to the traditional understanding of marriage.

II. Aspects of the Biblical View of Marriage

In order to evaluate the subject under discussion we have to examine the biblical understanding of marriage and then determine whether cohabitation is or is not compatible with it.

A. Instituted by God: It is the common Christian belief that marriage was instituted by God Himself and that it was very good (Gen 1:31; 2:22-24). He regulated the function or operation of everything He created in order to ensure their proper function and interaction with the rest of the created world (e.g., 1:4, 12, 17-18). After creating Adam and Eve God

brought them together and defined the way they were to relate to each other (3:24). Therefore, for Christians, marriage should be a reflection of the original relationship that God established between woman and man, whom He created for marriage. Any claim for independence from the divine intention for marriage is to be seriously suspect.

B. Communal Witness: Marriage is not an arrangement made between two individuals in isolation from God and other human beings. In the Scriptures marriage is something that takes place in the sight of God and other persons in order to introduce in the relationship the element of mutual responsibility and legitimacy. Originally, Adam and Eve were united in the presence of God Himself. Since then the union of two persons in matrimony has been a community event (e.g., John 2:1). Establishing a family was not considered to be a matter of individual discretion but an event that had an impact on society at large. This understanding is not popular in a culture that praises individualism as almost the ultimate good, but it is important in a society that seeks to preserve its values and integrity.

C. Permanent Commitment: The union effected in marriage establishes a relationship of ultimacy and permanency. In the Bible marriage is not an experiment by which it is to be determined whether or not the couple will remain fully committed to each other. It is the expression of a love that is so pure and so deep that is willing to express itself in a life-long commitment to the other. In this new relationship the spouse leaves mother and father in order to be united to the object of that love (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:6). There is a separation that leads into a new type of permanent unity grounded in love. It is within that unity of mutual self-respect, commitment and permanency that sexual activity takes place as a "sacramental" expression of the existential unity of the couple. That precious act unites lives and not simply bodies.

III. Marriage and Cohabitation: An Evaluation

A. Incompatibility: Based on the biblical concept of marriage cohabitation is clearly a practice incompatible with it. Cohabitation is basically a union of two persons without seeking the blessing of God and the formal approval of the community. Hence, it is fundamentally a relationship for the present without any or little concern for the future of the relationship. The element of mutual commitment in that relationship is significantly less than in a Christian marriage and often becomes an occasion for fear on the part of one of the partners. There is also in this type of relationship a significant risk for emotional hurt that leaves behind indelible scars. No one should pretend that she or he can only live for the present without taking into consideration the future and God's intentions for our social and spiritual well-being within the marriage relationship.

B. Special Case of the Elderly: It is a little more difficult to evaluate the case of elderly persons who have fallen in love but who have chosen to live in cohabitation in order not to lose some financial benefits. At times it is suggested that they are not sexually active and that all they are seeking is companionship. The implication is that under certain circumstances cohabitation may be acceptable. This line of argumentation tends to overlook the fact that we are sexual beings until we die.

Obviously, there is absolutely nothing wrong with friendship. If two elderly persons are good friends and enjoy spending time together no one has the right to raise the question of cohabitation. The couple is the one who has to establish the moment when the relationship becomes intimate, moving it from level of friendship to cohabitation. If that happens it is important for them to keep in mind several things that, in addition to those mentioned above, point to the undesirability of the relationship.

First, in that case cohabitation devalues the quality of the relationship by giving priority to their own personal financial needs over against their love for each other. The commitment is

not total but rather limited. There is a barrier that their love does not seem to be able to overcome and that, to some extent, keeps them apart. There is no fulness in their unity.

Second, true love must be willing to sacrifice itself for the loved one. This is a fundamental characteristic of Christian love as revealed in the life and ministry of Christ. That type of love shows itself in a willingness to commit oneself truly and completely to the other without reservation. This is spiritually and emotionally much more important than saving a few dollars.

Third, through their willingness to commit themselves to each other at some financial cost, elderly couples will be showing to younger generations the path they should follow as they themselves enter into a loving relationship with someone else. This modeling of Christian values is a great need in the Christian community at the beginning of the 21st century.

Finally, it would be useful for church and social leaders to become actively involved with legislators in an effort to modify laws that make it difficult for elderly persons to remarry because of the financial implications of that decision. Society should show sincere concern for the well-being of its elderly members by enacting laws that will facilitate their emotional and financial security.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, church members should do all they can to help couples living in cohabitation to be united in Christian marriage. We should love and care for them in spite of the fact that we cannot approve their life-style. Most of them simply do not know yet the beauty of a true Christian home. We acknowledge that Christian homes often encounter difficult challenges and that, more often than we like it, some of them end in divorce, but they still are the best option for family formation and nurturing. In most cases cohabitation is an expression of some spiritual problem. Then, what is needed is a re-commitment to Jesus that would make it possible for the individual to commit himself or herself to another person.