

Living Together Without Marriage

Increasingly, men and women choose to live as husband and wife without being married. This paper will answer some questions asked about living together.

What is marriage?

We learn from the Word of God that marriage is the life-long, exclusive union of one man and one woman, as husband and wife. Marriage is a part of God's creation. Thus, we read in God's Word, the Bible: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen.2:24; cf. Matt. 19:5-6; Eph. 5:31).

Elsewhere we read, "Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). And, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4). Marriage is such a precious blessing that God inspired the Apostle Paul to describe marriage as a picture of Christ's relationship with His bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33).

Why is it wrong for a couple to live together without marriage?

Simply stated, a couple that lives together as man and wife without being married is sinning. God's Word is clear: "You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ...Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more" (Eph. 4:17-19). Our Lord Jesus Christ once helped a woman living with a man who was not her husband to recognize that what she was doing was wrong (John 4:16-18).

Lutheran Christians believe that the sixth commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," means, "We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do; and husband and wife love and honor each other" (*Luther's Small Catechism* [CPH: 1986], p. 10).

All of this is another way of stating the obvious: Men and women are not to live together as husband and wife, unless they actually are husband and wife. This is as true for 80-year-olds as it is for 18-year-olds.

Why does the church care about what two consenting adults do?

The church cares because God cares. The Lord's Word is very clear in its condemnation of sexual activity outside of marriage. Consider these passages:

"Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers. . . will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

"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" (Eph. 5:3).

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery. . . . I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21).

Why is living together such a serious problem?

Because God's Word clearly shows that it is sinful for couples to live together without marriage, people who persist in behavior that God rejects and condemns as sin are choosing a course that may lead to eternal punishment. God's Word is clear: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left" (Heb. 10:26).

And again, we read: "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. . . . The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thess. 4:3-7).

Isn't the church being 'judgmental'?

The church is declaring the truth of God's Word. On behalf of Christ and His people, pastors have the responsibility to speak clearly to couples living together and to proclaim the Word of God to them, both Law and Gospel. It is never easy for a pastor, or a congregation, to deal with couples who are living together without marriage. It is important for both pastors and congregations to deal with these situations pastorally and faithfully, in a caring manner. Couples, and their parents, are tempted to say, "So what? Everyone else is doing it; and besides, we live in changing times." In proclaiming the truth of God's Word about these situations, the church is being faithful, not judgmental.

Shouldn't a couple find out if they are compatible?

Secular research has demonstrated that living together without marriage results in a relationship that is less stable and less fulfilling than marriage. Furthermore, couples who live together have a much higher risk of divorce when they finally do marry. Living together is a bad idea, even from a purely human perspective.

One study notes, "Those who cohabit before marriage have substantially higher divorce rates than those who do not; the recorded differentials range from 50 percent to 100 percent higher" ("The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce"[1992], *Demography*, 29:357-374). Studies conducted at Yale and Columbia Universities found that "the dissolution rate for women who cohabit premaritally with their future spouse is, on average, nearly 80 percent higher than the rates of those who do not" ("Commitment and the Modern Union," *American Sociological Review*, [1988], 53:127-138).

How does the church deal with these situations?

The church, and the church's pastors, will inform couples living together without marriage that what they are doing is sinful. These conversations will take place in a loving manner; but in faithfulness to the Word of God, such conversations need to take place. These situations cannot be ignored or over-looked. It may be necessary to place unmarried couples living together under church discipline in order to help them realize the seriousness of the situation.

This response may offend people. They may become angry at the church, or the church's pastor. Sometimes an entire family is upset when a situation they have ignored is finally dealt with. The Word of God has a way of cutting through all issues and exposing our sinfulness. That is the work of the Law of God, which shows us our sin.

Offending people is certainly not the church's goal, nor is it the church's desire only to have people recognize their sin. The church wants people to see their sin, so that they may see their Savior. The proclamation of the Gospel is the church's highest priority. The church proclaims the Law of God so that people are able to hear and believe the good news that "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). The church wants people to hear and believe the Gospel, for only the Gospel has the power to change lives and behavior for the better.

How can a couple living together resolve the situation?

A couple living together without marriage needs to take concrete steps to end the situation. They may choose to separate, with no plans for marriage. They may choose to separate until they are married—hopefully soon.

It is important that they make a commitment to marriage counseling before their wedding, and perhaps also after their wedding. Some couples may choose to be married by an officer of the court. This is a completely valid marriage in the view of the church. Couples choosing this option are encouraged to have their marriage publicly recognized by the church as well. No matter what the decision, they will want to seek their pastor's counsel.

What is the ultimate solution to this problem?

There are many solutions we can identify. Christian families need to understand what is right and wrong. Early on, parents need to speak with their children about God's expectations in regard to marriage.

Pastors and congregations will want to work patiently and lovingly with couples caught up in this sin. Concerned Christian congregations need to pray that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts and lives of those involved in this lifestyle in order to break down their resistance to God's Word. Christian congregations must not ignore the problem, but must deal with it faithfully. Congregations need to speak about this matter.

Couples that recognize their sin need to hear God's comforting word of promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). If they choose to be married, they should do so with joyful confidence in God's forgiveness and His blessing on their marriage.

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