

“How to Respond to...”

PREMARITAL SEX & LIVING TOGETHER

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Introductory thought:

Today, more than 2/3 of married couples in the U.S. say that they lived together before getting married (one study suggests 89%). Increasingly, men and women choose to have sexual intercourse and live together outside of marriage. Because living together is so common today, like taking God's name in vain, little thought is given about it. And as society basically demands acceptance of premarital sex as well as living together outside of marriage, how does one know how to respond without knowing how God responds to it?

Start with a basic question: “What is Marriage?”

God's Word defines marriage as the lifelong, 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:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” [Genesis 2:24]

“Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.”

[1 Corinthians 7:2; cf. also Matthew 19:5-6; Ephesians 5:31]

“Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” [Hebrews 13:4]

Marriage is such a blessing that God pictures it to Christ's relationship with His bride - the Church of all believers (Eph. 5:22-33).

But why is it wrong to “live together” without being married?

“This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness (sexual sins), to work all uncleanness with greediness.” [Ephesians 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 sinful [John 4:16-18]. And the 6th Commandment clearly lays down God's law, "*Thou shalt not commit adultery,*" which means "*We should fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed, and each love and honor his spouse.*" (Luther's Small Catechism) All of this is another way of stating God's obvious command: Men and women are not to act or live together as husband and wife, unless they *actually are* husband and wife. This is as true for 80-year-olds as for 18-year-olds. God's Word is very clear in its condemnation of sexual activity outside of marriage.

"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God." [1 Corinthians 6:9-10]

"But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints." [Ephesians 5:3]

"Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told [you] in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." [Galatians 5:19-21]

Why is living together outside of marriage a serious problem?

Because God's Word clearly shows that it is sinful for couples to live together without marriage, people who continue in such a lifestyle have taken on a behavior and an attitude that God rejects and condemns as sin. They are choosing a course of unrepentance that eventually leads to eternal punishment. This type of attitude and lifestyle is often rightly called "a soul destroying sin."

"For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who had rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" [Hebrews 10:26-28]

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord [is] the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness." [1 Thessalonians 4:3-7]

Who are YOU to judge?

Many claim that, "Sex is a *natural desire* that has to be satisfied." We at times may have a *natural desire* to eat a whole box of chocolates, abuse alcohol or drugs to escape stress, or end someone's life who has dreadfully wronged us. Does that justify our actions or make them OK since it was a *natural desire*? The Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, who were surrounded by an insanely self-indulgent society, saying that *"the mind set on the flesh is death... and is hostile [an enemy] to God."* [Romans 8:6-7] Rather, Paul wrote to *"set your mind on the Spirit"* as we see Joseph did in [Genesis 39:9], when responding to the temptation to have sex outside of marriage:

"How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Many *Christians* will even quote the Bible to prevent themselves from "being judged," saying that Jesus displayed great forgiveness to the adulterous woman and even told her accusers: *"He who is without sin, cast the first stone."* A seemingly good argument that however, deflects from the sinful adultery itself and misses what Jesus went on to say to *the adulterous woman...*

"Go now and leave your life of sin." [cf. John 8:3-11]

As "Ambassadors for Christ" [2 Corinthians 5:20] and as His living examples, Christians have the responsibility to not only consider, but proclaim the truth of God's Word about all situations, including sexual conduct. The Christian who follows God's Word or speaks against it is being faithful to the Word of God, not judgmental.

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

Secular research even demonstrates 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. 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 & Divorce ('92), 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 & the Modern Union," *American Sociological Review*, ('98), 53:127-138]

The old adage, "Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" certainly fits the appeal for cohabitation. Even in view of the common "But we're committed," or "But we're engaged" type of responses, the sincerity still falls short of God's union and approval.

How can a couple living together resolve the sinful situation?

A couple living together without marriage needs to take concrete steps to end the sin immediately. This ultimately shows true signs of repentance and sorrow for their current behavior and lifestyle. Living together "without having sex" is an unloving temptation not only to each other, but an unloving example still being made to the public. Rather, the couple may choose to separate with no plans for marriage, choose to separate until they are married--hopefully soon, or choose to be married immediately (since they have already claimed such high levels of commitment).

Strong encouragement for marriage instruction should be made before and perhaps even after their wedding. This is also because some couples may choose to be married by an officer of the court. 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.

"Let all things be done decently and in order." [1 Corinthians 14:40]

What are some solutions to the ever growing problem?

- Christian families need to know what is right and wrong and talk about it. Early on, parents need to speak with their children about God's expectations in regard to marriage. Silence is not an option in view of the rising pressures within our society.
- Christian congregations need to study God's Word on this issue often and not ignore the problem, but deal with it faithfully.
- Pastors and congregations will want to work lovingly with couples caught up in this sin, praying that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts and lives of those involved in this life-style in order that He would soften their hardened hearts against God's Word.
- Couples who repent need to hear God's comfort and direction:
"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse 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.