

## **Counseling Couples Living Outside of Marriage**

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The topic which has been assigned to me I interpret as seeking advice on how to counsel couples who are living outside of marriage.

I am a poor prospect from whom to seek advice because counseling is not one of my strengths and because I have a poor record when it comes to counseling couples living outside of marriage.

By far the largest number of cases of cohabitation (the legal term used in the statutes of the State of Wisconsin when referring to couples living together outside of marriage) within my congregation do not come to my attention until just prior to a marriage, when wedding arrangements are being made, or until the birth of a child. At such times it is next to impossible to involve the couple in extensive counseling. About all that can be accomplished is that the individual or individuals who are members of the congregation recognize and confess their disobedience to the will of God and are assured of forgiveness in Christ Jesus, which is followed by the admonition, "go and sin no more."

In the several cases where it has been possible to counsel those who were cohabiting, I have had both negative and positive results.

One case involved an individual, a woman, who had recently become a member of the congregation through the Religious Information Class. We suspect that membership was desired so that her child could be enrolled in our day school. She had been informed of the will of God in the Religious Information Class. She was present when all parents were told pointedly that the enrollment of any child living where cohabitation was taking place would be terminated. The live-in situation came to light when the "boy friend" began to interfere with discipline in school. The woman was spoken to and informed that the enrollment of her child would be terminated if there was no change in the cohabitation. It was hoped that her desire to have the child in school was stronger than her desire to have a live-in situation. It was suspected that the woman was looking for help to get out of the cohabitation. However, several days later a telephone call was received from an attorney, threatening legal action for "punishing the child for the sins of the adults." Needless to say, our legalistic approach to counseling the cohabiter accomplished nothing beneficial and only made us apprehensive when dealing with such cases. A few days later the woman withdrew from membership in the congregation, so the case came to an end. However, we suspect that the woman did not accept nor appreciate the will of God regarding cohabitation.

Another case of cohabitation which had a happier ending as far as we are able to determine also came in connection with school enrollment. The woman in this case was not a member of the congregation. Neither was her "friend." The live-in situation came to light in the consultation prior to enrollment of the child. When the enrollment was denied because of the cohabitation, the woman of her own free will terminated the relationship with her "friend," promised to attend the Religious Information Class and enrolled her child in school. In this case the woman, admittedly on her part, needed and welcomed the strong approach. At this juncture it appears as though the case will come to a happy conclusion, faithful church activity and marriage, because the woman had a strong appreciation for the Word of God, even though she had ignored that Word for a time.

The conclusion which I draw from these and other cases of cohabitation is that pastoral counseling in such cases, as is also true with counseling in any other type of case, will accomplish little until the individual who needs counseling comes to respect God and His Word. If we are going to legitimize cohabitation by failing to identify it as sin, contrary to the will of God, we contribute to the current concept that marriage is a social development and that “cohabitation will eventually be viewed both legally and morally acceptable.”<sup>i</sup>

As you can sense I have some strong opinions about cohabitation and even though I am not truly qualified to speak on the subject: “Counseling Couples Living Outside of Marriage”, I welcome the opportunity to have my say.

When a Christian or Christian couple willing or under pressure for that matter enters non-marital cohabitation, something is wrong, deeply and radically wrong. The individual or individuals have in effect established themselves as their own god and have knowingly or unwittingly rejected the authority of God. They will not recognize God as the Maker and Creator of all. They fail to see that God has anything to say about sex and sexual relations. They reject God’s authority to establish, regulate and bless marriage and sexual relations. They in effect take the attitude that no one, not even God, is going to tell me what to do. Beside that the cohabiter cannot trust the promise of God nor rely on His blessing. “He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord.” Proverbs 18:22. Those who ignore the directive of God concerning cohabitation want to maintain control of their own lives and hence reject the authority of God. It should not surprise us that people who cohabit, even those whom we have led into the Word of God, reject the authority of God. “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” Philippians 3:19.

Neither should it surprise us that they have rejected the Word of God. It’s no secret that people who have a live-in situation generally think that things have changed, that God in the Bible was speaking to a generation long gone and forgotten, that the Bible doesn’t apply today. “After all everyone’s doing it. Everyone can’t be wrong.” Who of us hasn’t heard that sort of defense coming from those who know guilt but try to justify their actions. The rejection of the authority of the Holy Scriptures goes hand-in-hand with the rejection of the authority of God. “He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.” John 8:47.

Another fault to be found in those who cohabit is the lack of humility, a grandiose opinion of self. That becomes evident in the excuses which are offered to justify cohabitation: “We can’t afford to get married.” “He won’t.” “We want to be sure of our relationship before we commit ourselves to one another.” It makes no difference whether the person offering the excuse is toward the end of his or her life or toward the beginning. He or she is saying: “I want my cake and eat it too.” “I’m looking out for myself.” “I love me.” “God opposes the proud.” I Peter 5:5.

Since those who cohabit reject the authority of God and/or refuse to recognize the authority of Scripture and/or are self-centered, it would seem as though counseling must begin with a generous and judicious application of God’s Law. There is no other way to bring them to recognize the error of their way and to respect the authority of God. What is missing in society and in the thinking of many of the people whom we are called upon to counsel is the concept which is expressed so frequently and forcefully in Scripture, especially in the Psalms: “God is the King of all the earth.” Psalm 47:7.

When God the Holy Spirit in His grace and through the power of the divine Word moves those who are living outside the will of God to recognize the authority of God, then counseling

can begin in earnest with the prospect of accomplishing something beneficial. In fact, when the authority of God is recognized, what is done in counseling, its approach, its technique, its order of sequence, is of little consequence.

That which follows is a number of items which might be discussed in counseling couples living outside of marriage.

It would be of great value for those cohabiting to recognize that God Himself has established the permanency of the male/female relationship and that that permanency requires commitment to ones sexual partner whether inside or outside of that which is traditionally called, "the bonds of marriage." It would seem to me that a rather exhaustive study of Genesis 2:24 is in place: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

Everything that God says about sexual relations and marriage is premised upon His declaration that by the sexual act a man and a woman become one flesh. The Lord Jesus supported that commentary in Matthew, chapter 19: "'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.'" The male/female relationship is a permanent relationship. It cannot be broken. It is permanent. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that sexual partners are to be committed to each other for all their time on earth. Such commitment is recognized by godless individuals within the legal system of the State of Wisconsin. "To many, marriage is not what it used to be: the ease with which one can enter or exit from marriage makes it analogous to cohabitation. The courts have been urged to consider marriage and cohabitation as functionally equivalent, and to afford a cohabiter rights as though he or she were a spouse"<sup>ii</sup> That quotation finds its way to these pages only to demonstrate that regardless of the point from which sexual relations is viewed it carries with it the responsibility and obligation of commitment.

Obviously the live-in situation lacks commitment. The very nature of cohabitation is the misguided concept that it frees sexual partners from commitment and gives them the freedom to "escape" from the relationship without "injury" when and if it is deemed wise to terminate the relationship. The legal system of the State of Wisconsin has difficulty with that concept and therefore has not changed the law, because it cannot find ways to protect the cohabiter, especially the woman, from "injury," emotional, monetary, social. "Criminal prohibitions, such as those existing in Wisconsin, have not deterred many people from choosing cohabitation either as an experimental experience prior to marriage or as a substitute for marriage. As the number of people cohabiting has increased, it is not surprising that more people have appealed to the legal system for resolution of certain *conflicts* that will *inevitably* arise from such relationship."<sup>iii</sup> (Emphasis added)

It goes almost without saying that the legal system of the State of Wisconsin cannot see and is not concerned about the "conflicts" which God sees in cohabiting and which moved Him to establish the permanency of sexual relations. I am referring to such things as the devaluation of the family and the home and particularly the detrimental affect which that has for children, their physical and especially their spiritual welfare, the consequences of failing to "lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed" and the guilt which follows disobedience of God's will. Cohabitation scoffs at and mocks the wisdom of God, which moved Him to attach permanency to sexual relations. "They will become one flesh." Genesis 2:24.

“Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” Hebrews 13:4.

Those who cohabit also eliminate respect, mutual respect, from their relationship. Cohabitation by its very nature, as I demonstrated above, is self-centered and self-serving. It uses the relationship until it is no longer satisfying or serves no purpose. Then the relationship together with the sexual partner is discarded. I see only greed and self-gratification in cohabitation. I fail to see any respect, which God expects to find in sexual partners. “Each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” Ephesians 5:33.

Without respect there can be no permanent relationship for the cohabiter. Without respect the relationship in the live-in situation will fail and that can only bring injury, guilt and unhappiness, not only in this life but in that which is to come. “Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” Ephesians 5:5.

Cohabitation should also be viewed in the light of God’s commandments.

It is possible that cohabitation may not be a violation of the Sixth Commandment, if those who cohabit are not promiscuous in sexual relations and “forsaking all others...keep...only unto her/him so long as...both shall live.” However, in view of Hebrews 13:4, I have difficulty seeing that cohabitation is not contrary to God’s Sixth Commandment. “Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the *sexually immoral*.” (Emphasis added.)

Cohabitation without doubt violates the Fourth Commandment, because it is disobedience to God’s representatives in the home, the church and the state.

It is impossible for me to imagine that parents, even parents of children who have left home, will put their stamp of approval on the “life style” which their cohabiting children has chosen, especially when they realize the hurt, conflict and injury to which their children expose themselves. It is impossible for me to imagine that Christian parents will condone the cohabitation of their child or children. “Children, obey your parents *in everything*, for this pleases the Lord.” Colossians 3:20. (Emphasis added.) Cohabitation is a violation of the Fourth Commandment.

Cohabitation also is disobedience to God’s representative, the church. I am not using the word, church, in the sense of earthly organization but in the sense of communion of believers. Any group of believers in Christ who knows and follows the Scriptures and understands that God has attached permanency to sexual relations cannot and will not remain silent when individuals from its midst choose to cohabit. “Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share his guilt.” Leviticus 19:14. Cohabitation is a violation of the Fourth Commandment.

Cohabitation most emphatically violates the law of the State of Wisconsin. “In Wisconsin, cohabitation is punishable by a maximum of 9 months in prison and/or a \$10,000 fine.<sup>iv</sup> Technically, the only live-in relationship which is permitted is formal marriage; there are no legal alternatives.<sup>v</sup> There have been several unsuccessful attempts in Wisconsin during the past decade to repeal the statute making cohabitation a crime. (1967, 1973, 1975, 1979) The legislators were confronted with a situation in which the positive law no longer neatly conformed to practices and attitudes of a substantial number of people within their communities. Although various groups have sought repeal of the statute through formal legislative methods, legislators have resisted the pressure placed on them, in part because they viewed themselves as having a

special role to play in regard to the community's response to cohabitation. Some legislators believe that although the norm which expressed through the criminal law stands at odds with what many people are doing, the dominate forces in their communities still believe that cohabitation should be discouraged."<sup>vi</sup> The only thing the legislators have accomplished is in 1977 to increase the penalty for cohabiting from a fine, which ranged from a minimum of \$70 to a maximum of \$300 (established in 1839) to a maximum fine of \$10,000 and/or a maximum of 9 months in jail. The resistance of the legislators to remove cohabitation from the criminal code has nothing to do with morals or scruples or religious values. It stems from votes and more precisely from the fear that there will be a lack of votes when the time for re-election comes. In fairness it should also be stated that a factor which exists in the resistance to remove cohabitation from the criminal code is that Wisconsin legislators can find little or no difference between the obligations of sexual partners to each other and the obligation of married partners to each other. So in spite of the fact that 48 counties in the State of Wisconsin from 1974 to 1979 failed to prosecute under the law and in spite of the fact that there is considerable pressure within the legal system to change the law, the law remains the law and cohabitation remains a criminal act in the State of Wisconsin. That very likely will change. The Lord only knows when, but at the present time cohabitation is illegal and "immoral" under the criminal code of the State of Wisconsin. "He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted...For he is God's servant to do your good." Romans 13:2, 4. Cohabitation still remains a violation of God's Fourth Commandment.

If the gravity of their offense against God's representatives in the family, church and state is pointed out to couples living outside of marriage and if they still have a measure of respect for the authority of God and His Word, it would seem to me that the Fourth Commandment is a powerful tool to be used while counseling those who accept a live-in relationship.

Cohabitation is also a violation of the Second Commandment in the sense that it is hypocrisy. It is an attempt to say something that is not true. It is an attempt to give the impression that the couple has not deviated from the norm of society and to give the impression that they are committed to each other, when in fact the opposite is true. Cohabitation is rebellion against family, church, society. The common and trite defense: "We don't need a little piece of paper nor a ceremony for our relationship," exposes that rebellion. Cohabitation for many is admittedly an experimental experience to determine whether a permanent relationship is possible. There is no commitment in the live-in situation and to give the impression that there is hypocrisy. "Woe to you...hypocrites." Matthew 23:13.

Cohabitation is also a violation of the Eighth Commandment by which the Lord God imposes truthfulness upon His people and all people. Cohabitation, as I demonstrated before and in spite of the defense which is mounted for it, is a lie, a lie that is being lived, "No lie comes from the truth" I John 2:21.

There is sufficient material that may be used in counseling couples living outside of marriage. In summary the pastoral counselor would do well to ask the cohabiter 1) to review his relationship with God and to determine whether he recognizes the authority of God and His Word, 2) to review the permanency inherent in sexual relations and the benefits which under God accrue from chastity and 3) to contemplate how cohabitation violates the holy will of God. The pastoral counselor, speaking from experience in counseling others, may also warn the cohabiter about guilt, the enormous and consuming guilt, which the sins of youth frequently bring to people in the declining years of their lives.

Dr. Luther in *On Marriage Matters*, 1530, made this statement: “Yet this lying together in secret in anticipation of betrothal cannot be reckoned as whoredom, for it takes place in the name and with the intention of marriage, which spirit, intention or name whoredom does not have. Therefore, there is a great difference between whoredom and lying together in secret with the intention of betrothed marriage.”<sup>vii</sup> Luther’s statement has been used to justify pre-marital sex and even in the defense of cohabitation, but, if one takes the time to read *On Marriage Matters*, he finds that Luther in the quotation cited above is merely defining premarital sex on the part of a betrothed couple as not being fornication. Luther is by no means defending nor condoning pre-marital nor extra-marital sexual relations. He calls such relations a “mistake” and the man who indulges in them a “loose fellow” and the whole affair “a great and shameful scandal in the name and under the appearance of marriage.” No matter how appealing it may be to sinful flesh pre-marital sex on the part of betrothed couples and cohabitation cannot be justified. They are and always will be contrary to the will of God and hence sin.

In *On Marriage Matters* Dr. Luther makes a strong defense of “public betrothal,” the marriage ceremony. Pastoral counselors do well to follow Luther’s example and at this point in time to defend God’s holy estate of marriage from the attacks and corruption which sinful flesh and godless influences are attempting to bring to it.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. *Wisconsin Law Review*, Volume 1981, Number 2, page 276.

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. *Wisconsin Law Review*, Volume 1981, Number 2, page 317.

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. *Wisconsin Law Review*, Volume 1981, Number 2, page 331.

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. *Wisconsin Statue*, Number 944.20(3), 939.51(3) (1979-80)

<sup>v</sup> Cf. *Zablocki vs. Redhail*, 434 U.S. 374, 386 (1978)

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. *Wisconsin Law Review*, Volume 1981, Number 2, pages 278-9.

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. *Luther’s Works*, Volume 46, page 293.