

# **Offering Evangelical Counsel To The Unmarried Living Together**

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*by David J. Beckman*

We've all undoubtedly faced the situation in which we were called upon to be God's spokesmen to unmarried couples living together. Perhaps you made an outreach call on a home in which the two separate names on the door became a dead giveaway. Maybe a couple visited your church and signed your guest book with two separate names at the same address. Perhaps an engaged couple was looking for a church in which to get married, and at your first meeting it was obvious that they were residing in the same house. Or, as in one particular case at the congregation I serve, you may have received a tuition check written from the account of a man and a woman with two different last names. Living together without being married is so commonplace in our society that nothing surprises us any longer. When people seeking a church home or a church school have no problem signing their names in such a way as to advertise their sinful domestic circumstances, we know we have a social and spiritual problem that is going to affect adversely the Christians whom we have been called to serve. Many of us perhaps have also had to counsel the member who got trapped in this type of lifestyle.

How broad is the problem? How do we handle it? Is there a "pat answer" to every particular circumstance? Should our approach vary somewhat from circumstance to circumstance, or is there a unified, God-ordained way to blast away at this soul-destroying sin? And what about the cases where there is room to believe that there may not be any sexual activity? Is an improper use of sexual intercourse the only thing that is wrong with unmarried people of the opposite sex living together? How does all of this fit into God's plan for man's sexual conduct? Some answers are easier to find than others. What's obvious is that we are dealing with a spiritual problem that is complicated and dangerous.

At the heart of the whole matter must lie our Christ-centered concern for sinners, whether those sinners are brand new prospects or long-term members. Our calling as Christ's ambassadors compels us always to offer evangelical counsel to any sinner whom the Lord leads into our sphere of influence. As living together becomes a more and more popular social custom, how appropriate it is for gospel-proclaiming pastors to sharpen their understanding of and their skills in

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### **I. Definitions And Statistics**

Society surely offers many different varieties of situations in which unmarried people of the opposite sex share a common dwelling. I'm not sure what college dormitories offer, but the arrangements must be significantly "looser" than they were 20 or 30 years ago. In the sunny land of retirement we can find more than a few versions of "Three is Company" for seniors. Boarders, housekeepers or friends sharing a residence in all innocence for economic reasons may present a situation that is not clearly offensive to the Christian community. I would not be surprised if someone who is sharper in history than I could prove that different God-fearing societies through the ages have made allowances for dwellings to be shared by males and females who were not married and were not blood relatives.

What we wish to investigate in this study, however, is the growing trend in which one unmarried man and one unmarried woman share a residence when they have a romantic interest in one another. That may also lead to a discussion of the propriety of a couple who wishes to do the same when they do not immediately have a romantic relationship, but nevertheless have a special interest in one another. The largest number of unmarried couples living together fall into the former category. Within this group sociologists have labeled three different subcategories.

One type is the engaged couple who lives together before the wedding ceremony actually occurs. In one sense this couple is married already, but not ceremonially, not publicly. A second type is the couple not officially engaged but who expect to marry and who live together to test their compatibility. Here living together is a trial marriage. A third group, probably the great majority who live together, are agnostic about future marriage or else definitely plan not to marry each other. One partner may view the other as a potential marriage partner; but the other partner doesn't share that view. Couples in this third group share a stated or unstated expectation of impermanence about their relationship<sup>1</sup>.

The tragic situation that some weak Christians get drawn into is subcategory three, where the "smoking flax" believer wants to get married to the partner whom he or she "loves," but where the intentions are not mutual because there is no mutual conviction to God's truth. Just exactly how many couples fit into this or any of the three subcategories is difficult to determine. In fact, just exactly how many couples live together before getting married or with no intentions of marrying is difficult to determine. In 1977 two sociologists from the University of Kentucky surveyed men between 20 and 30 years of age. 18% had lived with a woman, six months or longer. (Percentages were significantly higher when the six-month duration stipulation was removed.) Of that 18%, 64% lived with only one woman. Of the entire group surveyed only 5% were living with a woman at the time of the survey, while 52% were married and living with their spouses at the time. The sociologists drew the conclusion that living together was not as popular at that particular time as many had thought, and the men displayed rather traditional attitudes toward marriage and family over the long haul. 96% of those who had cohabited said they wanted to get married in the future. 99% of those who had not cohabited desired marriage in the future, and only 1% said they approved of raising children outside of marriage<sup>2</sup>.

The survey also disclosed some other information about those who cohabit that a pastor might find interesting. The report stated, "Men who had lived with a woman were more likely to have a counter-cultural lifestyle. They were more likely . . . to use illicit drugs, to live in communes, and to study astrology. They were also more likely to work for political candidates—and less likely to attend church."<sup>3</sup> Oh, the moral depravation of those who are interested in both astrology and politics and who choose not to attend church!!

Other surveys have shown different statistics. The University of Wisconsin surveyed 13,000 people nationwide. The results showed that between 1965 and 1974 only 11% of the men and women surveyed lived together with someone of the opposite sex before marriage. Between 1980 and 1984 the percentage jumped to 44. The survey showed that in 1987 nearly 50% of all married Americans had lived with a person of the opposite sex while they were still single, though the duration of those relationships was not specified.<sup>4</sup> That figure does not include those who are still unmarried. A 1985 survey of only Lutheran couples indicated that 40% had lived together before marriage. Of divorced and remarried persons, 58% said they had cohabited before their most recent marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Many, however, will admit that the control groups that are surveyed do not present a totally accurate picture of the real statistics, and the findings are often warped by the personal bias of the investigator. Some who have tried to determine the effectiveness of cohabiting in respect to preparing the average couple for marriage have been frustrated with what the statistics show, and they have complained about "the dearth of reliable information."<sup>6</sup>

Yet it appears there is ample evidence to conclude that the statistics are on the rise. Some of those dirty statistics jump off the page and smear the name of our Lord. The Washington Post reported the case of a female vicar from Gettysburg Seminary who was dismissed from her post by her supervising pastor because she was living with a man to whom she was not married. "She insisted that her action was not wrong and defended her

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Scott, "Living Together," *The Journal of Pastoral Counseling* 18,1 (Spring-Summer, 1983), p 48.

<sup>2</sup> James Hassett, "A New Look At Living Together," *Psychology Today* 11,7 (December, 1977), pp 82-83.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p 83.

<sup>4</sup> Haven Bradford Gow, "Sexual Morality," *Christian News* (date unknown).

<sup>5</sup> "Events and People," *The Christian Century* 102,30 (October 9, 1985), p 889.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, *op. cit.*, p 48.

behavior with the claim that sexual promiscuity was generally accepted at the seminary.”<sup>7</sup> Though living together was rejected by this young lady’s bishop, it is commonly accepted and allowed in the Bible-doubting wing of the visible church. It is not at all unusual to read an observation such as this: “Clergy usually report that premarital counseling of engaged couples already living together is more specific and realistic: concrete data is available for marriage preparation.”<sup>8</sup> With such an attitude it is obvious that there is concrete in more places than in just the data.

It is interesting to note that in the exhaustive study of the marriage relationship done by the LC-MS in 1959, “Engagement and Marriage.” The subject of living together is not even treated. Previous to the 60’s living together apart from marriage was apparently not socially acceptable to the majority of average Americans. In spite of the fact that the last three decades have made living together socially acceptable, it is nevertheless inadvisable even from a purely sociological perspective. Considering the sociological reasons against living together may give us another tool by which we can prepare the soil for planting the seed of God’s holy Word.

## II. Social Reasons Against Living Together

Though many people think that their sexual behavior is their own private business, that simply is not the case. An intimate relationship between a man and woman affects not only the lives of the children they may bring into the world, but the lives of many people beyond the walls of their dwelling. A Roman Catholic commentator stated it this way:

Sexual partnership creates a web of social relationships that extends well beyond individual men and women. To the extent that “private relationships” fall to celebrate this—and marriage is the universal way of celebrating it—all such couples are deprived of the connectedness that gives life resonance and texture.<sup>9</sup>

There is, however, more to the matter than merely being deprived of life’s “connectedness.” in all the social connections that the unmarried cohabiting couple has with other people there are some destructive short circuits. Christians who have carefully analyzed the benefits of God’s gift of marriage see that gift as something that has a wholesome effect on all of society.

Marriage is the God-ordained foundation of society. Upon it rests the structure of our entire civilization. Whether or not a home life is happy affects not only the spouses involved, but their children, their parents, their relatives and their friends as well. Moreover, the church is affected, because what happens to any given home happens to a part of the community of saints at that place. The entire community is affected, because the stability of the community depends upon the stability of its families. As a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, so no community is stronger than the families of which it is constituted. The entire nation is involved. History shows that the decline of many great world powers occurred in direct proportion to the weakening of that nation’s home ties. When marriage and the home were no longer considered sacred, then the floodgates were opened for destructive moral and ethical standards to prevail, thus weakening the character and integrity of the nation.<sup>10</sup>

Living together outside of marriage is ignoring the blessings and directives which God has given for all of society. The society that ignores God’s blessings and directives invites God’s judgment. To anyone who can see beyond his own selfish desires and needs, it is obvious that living together apart from marriage can only have a destructive effect on the nation and the world.

Some sociologists have also concluded that living together apart from marriage has a destructive effect on the partners themselves. One of the most obvious “excuses” for living together is that it helps prepare a couple for marriage. That’s the old “you don’t buy a pair of pants till you try them on” argument. As logical as

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<sup>7</sup> John F. Brug, “A Crisis in Sexual Morality,” Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 85 (Summer, 1988), p 233.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, op. cit., p 48.

<sup>9</sup> Jull Loesch, “Unmarried Couples Shouldn’t Live Together,” U.S. Catholic, 50,7 (July, 1985), p 17.

<sup>10</sup> W. J. Fields, *Unity in Marriage* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p 29.

that argument may sound to some, it doesn't hold up under the scrutiny of honest psychology. "In . . . subtle ways [living together can] undermine a person's ability to enter the full responsibilities and joys of marriage."<sup>11</sup>

There are good reasons why one can make that assessment. If a person grows accustomed to a "living together" mindset, he has conditioned himself in a negative way in regard to the types of relationships he develops with other people. Getting used to the idea of having a "no strings attached" relationship with the person with whom one is supposed to have the closest bond certainly robs a person of any ability to make a deep and lasting commitment. Commitment and sharing, two vital ingredients in a successful marriage, lack any real depth in a living together relationship. Cohabitation by its very nature of non-commitment cannot have "the same uninhibited, uncalculating, open-ended qualities of marital sharing, which the framework of permanency makes possible."<sup>12</sup>

Even if a couple views its cohabitation as a warmup for marriage, their living arrangements are still counterproductive.

Trial marriage is a contradiction in terms. The only way a marriage works is when each spouse wants the marriage to work. Each couple who succeeds in marriage has chosen to marry and continues to choose this partner and this relationship and not some other partner or relationship. Successful marriage requires wanting this marriage; it involves a decision, a choosing, an ongoing act of willingness.<sup>13</sup>

Living together apart from the commitment of marriage, therefore, teaches a person decision, to make no choice, to show no willingness to commit one's life to another person.

Another argument for living together is that it gives two partners a chance to test their sexual compatibility. This argument not only ignores a clear command from God, but it also doesn't hold up on the psychiatrist's couch (no Freudian slip intended!). Psychiatrists and secular marriage counselors say plainly that practicing the sex act before marriage does not make for better married sex. Rather they point out that the quality of sexual love between spouses is an excellent litmus test of their whole relationship. Sexual intercourse ... is judged by psychological norms of experience of intimacy.... Growth in sexual competence like all growth needs a framework of security and permanence. A tree that is constantly transplanted will probably wither.<sup>14</sup>

Occasionally one more "logical" argument is espoused to defend the practice of living together. That argument is the provision society has made for the common law marriage.

Common law marriage as such would not be a sin against the will of God, if two people have made to one another before God a permanent commitment that is recognized by the state and does not offend the Christian community. However, since 1968 that is impossible to do in the state of Florida, for since then the only common law marriage that is recognized is that of a couple who lived together for at least seven years prior to that date. The laws of our state, then, not only fail to recognize common law marriage, but they also provide no legal safeguards to protect the rights of partner and/or children in a case of cohabitation, though cohabitation itself is not illegal. The only time state statutes are violated in a living together arrangement involves certain isolated cases of grossly offensive adultery, for "living in an open state of adultery shall cause a person to be guilty of a misdemeanor of the second degree. Such offensive adultery must be open and notorious."<sup>15</sup> The charges usually only stick when a minor child is adversely affected by the living arrangements.

As pastors we are called to serve God's people with Word and Sacrament, and we provide a service to the state by marrying people. Marriage has been given by God to man for the good of society apart from official church pronouncements and regulations. "Since a breakdown of this institution affects all of society adversely, the government has the responsibility of exercising control over marriage matters through its legislative and

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<sup>11</sup>Scott, op. cit., p 47.

<sup>12</sup>Scott, op. cit., p 50.

<sup>13</sup>Scott, op. cit., p 51.

<sup>14</sup>Scott, op. cit., pp 52-53.

<sup>15</sup>Florida Statute 798.01 Purvis vs. State of Florida, 1979

judicial functions.”<sup>16</sup> In serving God and the state through our involvement in Christian marriage, we rejoice that the state has abolished any recognition of common law marriage, but we lament the fact that cohabitation and adultery are labeled as “acceptable” by the manner in which our laws are written and applied.

An honest sociological assessment, therefore, even apart from a religious bias, must conclude that living together apart from the permanency of marriage is detrimental to all parties and does not help an individual or a couple develop future marriage skills. Living together is bad for an individual because it helps destroy his ability to give of himself in an unselfish, unconditional commitment. It is bad for one’s partner because it creates an environment of constant uncertainty. It is bad for a couple’s offspring because it robs them of the security they need. It is bad for the community, the nation and the world because it erodes the foundation upon which God has built society—marriage and the God-fearing family. Sociologists have therefore concluded “that cohabitation is not a determinant of whether or not you will be successful marriage partners.”<sup>17</sup> They even discovered and admitted that “married people who had cohabited, either with each other or with someone else, were much more likely to divorce than people who never had cohabited.”<sup>18</sup> When one considers what makes marriage successful—developing through permanent commitment an ability to trust, forgive, communicate and be faithful—it becomes obvious that living together apart from marriage develops habits and characteristics that have the opposite effect. As one commentator put it, “As a school for marriage, cohabitation may not deserve accreditation.”<sup>19</sup>

As evangelical counselors, therefore, we have plenty of ammunition to point out to the mission prospect the folly of a living together arrangement from merely a sociological viewpoint. But we have not been called to be strictly secular counselors. We have been called to proclaim God’s Word to man. Therefore our most powerful weapon in combating sin will always be the Word. To offer truly evangelical counsel to the unmarried living together we go to the Scriptures.

### III. Scripture’s Reasons Against Living Together

The Sin of Fornication As stated earlier, most cases of the unmarried living together involve two people of the opposite sex who establish a residence together because of a romantic attraction to one another. Without having done any thorough investigation, it is undoubtedly a safe assumption that in the vast majority of these cases total sexual expression is a natural part of the arrangement. It involves sexual intercourse apart from marriage.

Total sexual expression apart from marriage is something we have always believed is wrong and sinful. Yet not all Christians come under the influence of a spiritual leader who still has that conviction. I remember speaking with a young unmarried lady in Antigua who was pregnant for the third time. In discussing the sin of fornication she said that her Anglican priest had told her that having sex with one person whom you love, even if you are not married, is not fornication. And every once in a while we read in the religious news that a priest, pastor or other clergyman has a new view on sexual expression. The trend among Bible doubters seems to be that as long as two people are faithful to one another (at least for a time), they can express their physical love in any way they want apart from biblical restrictions. This attitude is bound to catch on! Catch on, that is, unless it is blown away by Scripture.

What the Greek New Testament condemns as sinful is *porneia*. *Porneia* does not necessarily have one restricted meaning, but is a general word that covers all different types of immorality. [Perhaps that’s the reason for the rather weak translation for Mt 19:9 in the New international Version (“marital unfaithfulness”).] If a clergyman were convinced that *porneia* did not include the full physical expression of faithful love between two

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<sup>16</sup>Armin W. Schuetze & Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), p 264.

<sup>17</sup>U.S. Catholic (July 1085), p 21.

<sup>18</sup>GOW, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup>Scott, op, cit , p 55.

unmarried people, he would have no problem justifying premarital sex. Baker's Dictionary of Theology (1960) defines *porneia* as follows:

In its more restricted sense fornication [*porneia*] denotes voluntary sexual communion between an unmarried person and one of the opposite sex. In a wider sense, *porneia* signifies unlawful cohabitation of either sex with a married person. In its widest sense *porneia* denotes immorality in general, as every kind of sexual transgression.<sup>20</sup>

We note that unmarried people are included in all of the shades of meaning. The Bible treats sexual intercourse by any unmarried person as a form of *porneia*. In Genesis 2 the Lord God brought the woman to the man and joined them in marriage and declared through Moses that all partners joined in marriage are "one flesh." This is the foundation for all of the New Testament's pronouncements on morality. Jesus' words in Matthew 19 underscore this view of marriage and sexual expression, for He states that a sexual union outside of the marriage relationship is a reason for the marriage partner to terminate the relationship, since the sin has already dissolved the bond in the eyes of God. Paul also underscores this in a graphic way in I Cor 6:16, where he writes, "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.'" Obviously it is not prostitution alone that Paul is condemning, but the joining of oneself in a sexual union to anyone except one's marriage partner.

The first biblical reason against the unmarried living together, therefore is that the full use of sexual expression apart from the bond of marriage is condemned in Scripture as the sin of fornication.

Marriage, God's Gift Yet God understands that man and woman are made to express their sexual feelings. God is responsible for that, and He had the perfect plan. The plan always has and always will be marriage with its unchanging holy purposes.

Though there seems to be a current trend that is popularizing to a greater degree the traditional marriage (or is it just the traditional wedding?), marriage has not fared too well in the last couple of decades. The content of popular music can often be used as a barometer for social attitudes. In the early 60's it was "goin' to the chapel and we're gonna get married." By the early 70's Glen Campbell's "Gentle On My Mind" depicted marriage as a hopeless trap, implying that a piece of legal paper would ruin a couple's relationship, and that the real beauty of that relationship would be retained if the man kept his sleeping bag rolled up behind the couch so he could take off any time he felt any pressure. He just wanted to keep his woman "gentle on his mind." Carly Simon and Jacob Brackman painted traditional married life in even bleaker colors in "That's The Way I've Always Heard it Should Be":

You say that we can keep our love alive,  
Babe all I know is what I see.  
The couples cling and claw  
And drown in love's debris.  
You say we'll soar like two birds through the clouds,  
But soon you'll cage me on your shelf.  
I'll never learn to be just me first by myself.  
Well, ok, it's time we moved in together  
And raise a family of our own, you and me.  
Well, that's the way I've always heard it should be:  
You want to marry me, we'll marry. We'll marry.<sup>21</sup>

How sad it is that God's precious gift to mankind gets such a bad wrap by those who don't understand it, who don't believe in it and who haven't experienced it in all its beauty. Evangelical counselors will counter the trend to live together by presenting the real beauty of marriage in respect to its purposes and its essence.

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<sup>20</sup>Herbert J. Miles, *Sexual Understanding Before Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p 204.

<sup>21</sup>Reprinted with permission of Warner Bros. Music, inc. in Dr. James C. Dobson's Love For a Lifetime (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1987), pp 21-22.

Marriage's Definition, Purposes and Essence A definition of marriage based on Genesis 2 and Matthew 19 would be as follows:

Marriage, ordained by God, is the personal and sexual union of one man and one woman in a continuing relationship of mutual love and service based on fidelity to each other. This living together and supplementing each other is a gift of God; not obligatory; yet good, honorable, God-pleasing, belonging to God's order of creation.<sup>22</sup>

Living together in total union and in a permanent commitment of love, faithfulness and service to one another is the very definition of marriage. We dare not isolate any one part of marriage and let that become an end in itself. We see that even more clearly as we look at marriage's three holy purposes.

The threefold purpose of marriage is something very familiar to us. We often label these three purposes as (1) companionship, (2) procreation of children and (3) channel for sexual purity. "Human Sexuality," a pamphlet published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod expands the labeling of those purposes by referring to them as (1) the relation of man and woman in mutual love (Gen 2:18); (2) the procreation of children (Gen 1,28); and (3) the partial remedy for sinful lust (1 Cor 7:2).<sup>23</sup> As we look briefly at each of these three purposes, we see that living together distorts the divine arrangement for the permanent and complete male-female relationship.

Perhaps "companionship" is a little weak as a description of the first purpose of marriage. That word could be watered down to mean little more than the benefits one derives from man's best friend. When God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Gen 2:18), He was not merely making an observation on how a void could be filled in Adam's life. The Lord was stating his holy will for mankind's future happiness. He was stating how his precious gift to Adam would establish the full and complete relationship of love between one man and one woman. He gave them to each other so that they could give themselves to each other. He created their sexuality as a vital part of their holy image so that they could use their sexuality in total selfless giving to each other. Their giving of themselves to one another in sexual union was to be "a union in which the self is naked before the other. . . . it is knowledge of the self and the other as sexual beings united with one another in this most intimate union of giving and receiving."<sup>24</sup> Man's and woman's selfless giving to one another in sexual union, therefore, becomes a symbol of the selfless, sacrificial and intimate nature of all other aspects of their relationship. The first purpose of marriage, therefore, is to completely mesh a male life and a female life together so that they are one in every respect, and not just sexually.

It is this writer's opinion that "the relation of man and woman in mutual love" as the first purpose of marriage puts a greater emphasis on total selfless giving than it does on mere sexual giving. This seems to have a lot to say to the man and woman who want to share a residence alone but who claim they have no sexual interest in one another. God brought one man and one woman together for a union of total giving. Can a couple have a shared dwelling and a shared life in some respects, but not commit themselves to a shared life in every respect?

The second purpose of marriage is the procreation of children. We saw in the first part of this paper that only 1% of those surveyed in 1977 approved of raising children outside the bond of marriage. I'm sure that today's statistics would look somewhat worse than that. Our Lutheran Elementary School has been affected by that type of circumstance in at least three cases involving "mission prospects" in the last three years. (Two are out and one we're still working on.) You would think that common sense even apart from faith in God's Word would dictate that children should not be raised in a "no strings attached" environment that lacks the security of permanent commitment, but sinful man doesn't appear to have a whole lot of common sense. In a delightful little book called Seven Things Children Need, a Mennonite pastor describes those seven things as significance,

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<sup>22</sup>Oscar E. Feucht, ed., *Engagement and Marriage*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p 22.

<sup>23</sup>"Human Sexuality," Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (Sept., 1981), p 10.

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, p 15.

security, acceptance, love, praise, discipline and God.<sup>25</sup> A child of unmarried parents can only be scarred emotionally when he sees that he is not significant enough, accepted enough and loved enough for Mom and Dad to commit themselves to a permanent relationship. How shallow the security, the praise and the discipline if there is not an unconditional sense of cohesiveness in the home. God and His Word are obviously also ignored in such circumstances. When unmarried couples living together choose to raise children in that type of environment, the emotional, psychological and spiritual scars which their sin produces are passed on to the next generation.

The third purpose of marriage is to provide a partial remedy for sinful lust (1 Cor 7:2). If God understands that it is difficult for sinners to control their sexual appetites and has given us marriage as the proper manner in which to control that emotional and physiological need, then satisfying one's sexual appetites without the intention of making a permanent, unconditional commitment makes one guilty of the sin of fornication. "Precisely because marriage is intended to help us control our sexual desires, there can be no much thing as a trial marriage."<sup>26</sup> Living together for the purpose of sexual expression becomes a matter of "I pledge you my faithfulness as long as we both shall lust!"

All three of marriage's purposes, therefore, underscore marriage's essence—committed love. There can not be proper companionship (the relation of man and woman in mutual love) between a man and woman without committed love. Children are not to be brought into the world without committed love. And there is no proper release for a person's sexual desires without committed love. When one explores Scripture's use of "love," one not only sees that commitment, permanency and faithfulness are vital ingredients to married love, but one also sees that living together apart from marriage cannot be genuine biblical love at all.

We are familiar with the three Greek words for the three different kinds of love. A simple and effective explanation of these three kinds of love is: *eros*—"getting love," *philia*—"sharing love," and *agape*—"giving and serving love."<sup>27</sup> Palmer Gedde discusses the three Greek words for love in his book *One Plus One*. He explains that a successful male-female relationship has to involve both people not only arriving at an understanding of all three forms of love, but also striving to imitate *agape* love. If one is not willing to commit himself to his partner in unconditional and permanent faithfulness, then that person's "love" is not the giving and serving love, but it is merely a temporary sharing and a selfish getting. In the Northwestern Lutheran's question and answer column Paul Kelm wrote concerning an unmarried couple living together, "They cannot truly love one another when they refuse the commitment God attaches to sexual love."<sup>28</sup> With no God-fearing *agape*, *philia* and *eros* become sinful and self-centered.

Other Scriptural Issues There is always the possibility that we will come across a case in which two people of the opposite sex are living together, and they claim to have no sexual interest in one another and have separate bedrooms in the dwelling. (The one case I had of this kind resulted in a marriage shortly after they vehemently claimed their innocence!) If these two people stay out of one another's bedroom, does that in itself make their living arrangements acceptable to God and his people?

In respect to what the Bible says about the first purpose of marriage, I believe this hypothetical "sexless" couple would be standing on pretty shaky ground in justifying their living together. We stated earlier that when God gave marriage to mankind in order to establish the proper relation of man and woman in mutual love, He brought them together so that they might give themselves to one another totally and in every respect. If a couple chooses to give themselves to one another emotionally, psychologically, socially, materially and financially, but not sexually, aren't they attempting to claim for their relationship many other aspects of marriage apart from a loving commitment of faithfulness in the marriage bond? Perhaps we cannot quote chapter and verse to prove that this "sexless" arrangement violates the Sixth Commandment, but this author

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<sup>25</sup> John M. Drescher, *Seven Things Children Need* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976).

<sup>26</sup> "Human Sexuality," *op. cit.*, p 21.

<sup>27</sup> Fields, *op. cit.*, pp 18-20.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Kelm, "I Would Like To Know," *Northwestern Lutheran* (date and page unknown).



feels that in principle that type of living arrangement militates against God's intentions for the man-woman relationship.

The clear scriptural principle that would urge the above-mentioned couple not to live together has to do with causing offense. When there are so many couples living together who do violate the Sixth Commandment, and whose purpose in moving in together is in defiance of society's established marriage practices, a Christian cannot begin to give the impression that he is doing the same. Again, assuming there is no sexual sin, if there is such an emotional bond between a Christian man and woman that they do not want to move into separate dwellings, then they should be married. If there is no such emotional bond, then they should separate to remove offense. The "separate bedroom" arrangement is cause for offense because there are so many living together in a sinful way sexually.

In a book called God, Sex and You, M. O. Vincent gives some good advice for the Christian to follow in order to guard against causing offense. The four points, along with related thoughts and passages, which he urges the Christian to remember on the basis of God's Word are:<sup>29</sup>

1. *Consideration for others.*

I Cor 8:9 "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak."

I Cor 10:23,31 "Everything is permissible"—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive. . . . So whether you eat or drink of whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'

Consideration for others will not permit me to give the impression I am living the same way the sinful world lives.

2. *Liberty, not license.* Genuine Christian liberty is exercised in obedience to God, in loving service to our neighbors in godly self-control.

3. *Sensitivity to the situation.* Be aware of how one's actions may be interpreted by others.

I Thes 5:22 'Avoid every kind of evil.' (KJV: 'Abstain from all appearance of evil.' Luther: "Meidet alien boesen Schein.")

I Cor 6:19,20 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.'

4. *Careful judgment.* Our daily prayer is "Lead us not into temptation."

I Cor 6:18 "Flee from sexual immorality."

Joseph gives us the example of careful judgment in how to deal with temptation. There is great folly in moving in with a person of the opposite sex, thinking that a platonic relationship can continue when lives mesh through common interests and activities, and natural God-given sexual feelings are aroused. Was it Luther who said you don't put fire and straw close together without expecting a fire?

#### IV. Offering "Evangelical Counsel"

With these facts and these biblical principles in hand, one would hope that it would be quite easy to offer the proper counsel in situations where two unmarried people of the opposite sex are living together. Yet we all know that there is no such case that can be labeled "easy to handle." As we grow in our understanding of the principles, so also we need to grow in our ability to offer counsel that is truly evangelical. To enhance our ability to offer evangelical counsel, it would be good for us to review both of these biblical terms.

Anyone or anything that is "evangelical" (*euangelidzo*) has as its heart and soul the desire to proclaim Christ's atoning sacrifice, which has made the complete payment for all sin, and his resurrection, which empowers baptism to bring us to new life. Evangelical also implies that the one redeemed by Christ's blood and empowered by Christ's resurrection will daily rise to new life with sincere repentance and a desire to glorify Christ, for we are not our own, as Paul reminds us, but we are "bought at a price." (1 Cor 6:20) Christ "died for

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<sup>29</sup>M. O. Vincent, *God, Sex and You* (Philadelphia: Holman, 1971).

all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (2 Cor 5:15)

Evangelical concern is not to overlook sin for the sake of keeping people interested in one’s congregation and/or Christian school. And evangelical concern is not looking for fruits of faith when the gospel has not been given a chance to bear fruit. Evangelical concern is to give people every opportunity to come to Christ in faith and to respond in faith by glorifying Christ, but when rejection of Christ and his Word becomes apparent, evangelical concern will pronounce the Judgment of God’s Law with all of its stinging severity. Evangelical concern is patiently trying to reach each one in his present circumstances with the condemning law and the saving gospel, with the goal that a nurtured believer will bear fruit that glorifies Christ.

In English the term “counsel” simply means to offer advice as a result of consultation, from the Latin *consulere*. Legalistic advice would have as its only goal to point out to the sinner what the counselor thinks is wrong with the counselee, and all bridges that might enhance further communication would be destroyed. As an evangelical counselor, however, the pastor will want to go back to the Greek New Testament for a much deeper and richer understanding of the concept. To counsel is to do the work of a counselor. It is to imitate the work of the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. His work is *parakaleo* to call to one’s side and offer divine truth. It’s the work of a concerned brother or sister in the faith. To counsel, then, is to have Christ-centered concern for a sinner with whom one desires to share the divine truth of God’s Word, in respect to the law and the gospel. It is not to drive the sinner away harshly, but it is to try to draw the sinner to you so that the warmth of God’s love in Christ may be recognized, the Spirit may work faith, and that faith may be strengthened.

The master of evangelical counsel to the unmarried living together is the Master himself. Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well in John 4 is the quintessence of evangelical counsel. Jesus is not repulsed at her immorality. He rather crosses social and racial barriers and asks a strange woman who was a Samaritan for a drink. When she expresses surprise at his request and could very easily have drawn a false conclusion concerning his interest in her, He presents himself as “the gift of God” who has “living water” to offer her. Jesus used a set of circumstances and a common concern to draw her toward his spiritual truth. When she doesn’t understand He patiently gives a further explanation. When she is dull to the spiritual and tends to dwell only on the material, Jesus gently introduces her sin by inviting her to “Go, call your husband and come back.” When she tries to cover up her sin, He gently and matter-of-factly points out to her what she had done, and He eases his way out of the harsh preaching of the law with the “complimentary” statement, “What you have just said is quite true.” When she tries to “argue religion,” He brings her back to the main point—her personal spiritual relationship with the one true God. When she comes back to that, He holds out to a penitent sinner the full truth of the gospel—“I who speak to you am he.”

That is evangelical counsel at its best. The counselor is not immediately offended, but He attempts to build a bridge for communication. He neither preaches hellfire nor whitewashes sin, but He gently leads the counselee into stating plainly and openly how she was offending God. He doesn’t dwell on the repulsiveness of the sin, but seeks to draw her to forgiveness which will inspire righteous living. He doesn’t get sidetracked, but keeps bringing her back to what He has to offer.

Evangelical counsel, therefore, accepts the person as a sinner without accepting his sin. Evangelical counsel does everything possible to let the law work repentance and the gospel work faith. Evangelical counsel will not allow a personal repulsion of this particular sin on the part of the counselor give the impression to the counselee that he or she has committed the one unforgiveable sin. Evangelical counsel will not slam a door so that a sinner is barred from finding the entrance to forgiveness. Evangelical counsel will not throw a dying, fruitless tree on the fire before patient watering can be tried. Nor will evangelical counsel ignore a hopelessly diseased tree so that its spiritual canker will destroy the entire grove.

As I researched the subject of this paper I came across three examples of how another WELS congregation and its pastor handled cases of unmarried couples living together as it affected the congregation’s elementary school. The congregation’s position on the situation could be summarized in the pastor’s words,

“It’s against God’s Law and against Wisconsin’s laws. It offends us and we won’t tolerate it.”<sup>30</sup> In the first case an application for enrollment was rejected upon finding out that the responsible guardians were not married. In the other two cases the children’s enrollment was terminated immediately upon discovering that the parents were living together. This “hard-nosed” approach was met with two different responses. In one case the woman broke up with the man, took instructions and became a member. In the other case the congregation faced the threat of a lawsuit, but it never materialized.

Perhaps we are being somewhat unfair and unjustly critical without knowing the whole situation, but on the surface this policy seems as though it may come close to a “Clint Eastwood approach” lacking in evangelical concern.

Without trying to hold ourselves up as a perfect model, we could cite three different examples that we have also faced in recent years. In the case of the first two, the children were enrolled on a one-year “probationary” basis (as are all new non-member students), even though we had strong suspicions at the time that the mother was living with a man. We required the mothers to go through a four-week introduction to the Christian faith, in which the commandments were treated briefly and the case for Christian morality could be presented (along with a basic overview of the Word, the way to salvation and the purpose of the church). In both cases the mothers were counseled by both the pastor and principal after their living arrangements became obvious. In both cases the evangelism team visited the home and tried to present law and gospel to the man and the woman. And in both cases the pastor visited the couples in their homes and urged them to evaluate their personal relationship with God and get married if they intended to stay together.

In both of these first two cases, all the encouragements from the Word over a period of one year were met with rejection, coupled with the fact that no interest in the worship life of the congregation was shown. During the summer following that “probationary” year the children’s enrollment was terminated at a meeting with the mother by pastor and principal, at which the reason given for the termination was the sinful relationship and the offense it was causing. The third case involves a current situation in which a WELS member was told by her former pastor that she would not be transferred to our congregation unless she married the man, even though her daughter was accepted into our school. After counseling with her upon her arrival, the marriage was arranged for the following week.

As each of us attempts to offer evangelical counsel in the cases we will face in the future, few will probably fall under the convenient category of “school enrollment policy,” and few will lend themselves to a convenient, pat solution. As evangelical counselors we will be called upon to guide and direct a sinner with the revealed Word of God and the related principles we have learned. If this essay has helped to clarify those principles and to refine our use of them, then it has served its intended purpose.

Briefly stated, the principles are as follows: (1) most cases of “living together” involve sexual sin; (2) there are psychological and social reasons why couples should not live together as a “warm up” for marriage; (3) the Scriptures condemn as sinful any type of sexual relationship outside of marriage; (4) marriage is God’s gift to man and woman and is the proper way for a man and a woman to establish a total relationship of commitment, faithfulness and love; (5) the Christian wants to take every precaution not to give offense by involving himself in a situation that looks very much like the world’s sin; and (6) the evangelical counselor wants to keep as his goal in dealing with those living together apart from marriage to lead them to repentance, faith in Christ and a godly life that flows from faith in Christ.

Those are the principles that guide us in offering evangelical counsel to the unmarried living together. Now let’s refine our use of them.

In each of the following situations you are the evangelical counselor of unmarried people of the opposite sex who are living together. For each case state (1) whether or not you feel that the circumstances described are

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<sup>30</sup>Marvin E. Otterstatter, “Counseling Couples Living Outside of Marriage,” delivered at joint Milwaukee pastoral conference November 19, 1984.

a clear violation of God's will, (2) the principles that will guide you in your discussion with the people involved, and (3) the advice that you will give to these people under their present circumstances.

**Situation #1:** A young lady is a member of your congregation and recently transferred from a WELS congregation up north. She only attends church once in a while. You discover that she is at a new address and has a new phone number. You call her on the phone and a man answers. You visit her home and it becomes obvious that the two are living in the house together alone. When you arrive they are sitting in the living room together—she is folding the laundry and he is watching T.V. In the course of the conversation, in which you gently probe concerning their living arrangements, they tell you that they have separate bedrooms and they feel there is nothing wrong with what they are doing. They compare their arrangements to a boarding house and tell you that the reason they moved in together was that her apartment had been broken into and she was so emotionally rattled that this man, whom she met at work and who was recently widowed, wanted to take her in and offer her protection in exchange for a type of maid service. They also share a close companionship and vacation together alone. The man is gruff and unchurched, not at all interested in what you have to offer, and is already a little put out about the gentle insinuations made by your probing.

**Situation #2:** A retired widow and a widower both transfer into your congregation at about the same time. They have moved in together, and on your first home visit they assure you that they have no sexual relationship and they sleep in separate bedrooms, even though they spend much of their days and evenings together and are living every other aspect of their lives as a couple through their common interests, activities, etc. When you ask them if they have ever considered getting married, they both say they are not interested in marrying again. (You have a strong suspicion that there may be financial reasons behind their decision, but you're not sure.)

**Situation #3:** A young man whose parents have been dead for quite some time is your member and has just returned home from the service. He comes to your office and tells you that he is thinking about getting married to the young lady that he just brought to church for the first time. After finding out that he and the young lady are living together, you meet with the young man alone and ask him to explain why he is involved in this type of situation. He explains to you that he started dating this girl when he was in the service. She had been raised in a non-Christian broken home and had lived in a terrible situation with her alcoholic step-mother in the town where the base was located. When he left the service she followed him home. She has no job, no money, she knows no one, and she has no place to live. He said she could move into his apartment along with her two-year child from a previous relationship. She wants to marry him very badly, but he wants to be sure she is going to be a Lutheran Christian before he commits himself to marrying her. He asks you when your next adult instruction class begins, as he would like to bring her. He also inquires as to when the youngster would be able to attend Sunday School.

**Situation #4:** A young lady visits your church and tells you that she has a Lutheran background from up north, but she is not of our synod. She nevertheless likes your church and seems very interested in becoming a member. When you visit her apartment you discover that she is living with a man. You talk to her privately and she tells you that she met John through her work. She works in social services and met him when he was released from the county jail to go through a court-required drug treatment program. As she worked with John they became very good friends. He has no place else to go since he finished the treatment program, and he still needs strong encouragement and help in starting his life over. You suggest that perhaps it would be a better idea for John to live with some of his buddies, but she says that all of his buddies would drag him back into his former destructive lifestyle. He has no one to depend on but her, and he has no job and no money. And besides, she says, they have become very close and enjoy one another's company, even though they do not have a sexual relationship. She plans on inviting him to come to church with her next Sunday.

**Situation #5:** The mother of a very good church family asks to speak with you in your office one Sunday after church. She tearfully tells you how upset she is that her daughter, who is attending the local junior college, has moved into an apartment where both guys and girls are living. She says she and her husband are very much opposed to this, but they can't get through to their daughter because she stubbornly refuses to see anything wrong with it. You go to visit the daughter and discover that she and one other girl share one bedroom and three guys share the other bedroom. She explains that they feel safer with these arrangements because several girls have been attacked in the last year. She is the only one in the apartment with a strong church background, but her attendance has slacked off since school started.

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