



Cohabitation

A position paper by The Elders of Sacred City

Introduction

The first question for many might be, “Why are the Elders stating a position on cohabitation?” It is our desire at Sacred City Church to provide theological clarity to our congregants. As living together outside of marriage becomes increasingly common in our society, it becomes increasingly important for disciples to understand how the Gospel of Jesus Christ informs how we approach, speak into and redeem for the glory of God difficult topics. This paper aims to clarify the Biblical teaching on cohabitation so that all who come to Sacred City can better understand God’s clear design for marriage. We will start by briefly defining ‘cohabitation’ before making the Biblical case against cohabitation.

Defining “Cohabitation”

The word cohabitation comes from the Latin *cohabitare* combining the root verb ‘*habitare*’ -to live, inhabit, dwell attached to the prefix ‘*co*’-with, together. As a descriptive term, cohabitation gained prominence in the mid 15th century specifically to describe, “a state of living together as husband and wife without the benefit of marriage”¹ and often carries with it an implicit assumption of an unmarried sexual relationship. Couples who are cohabitating are living together as though they have entered into the marriage covenant without having made the commitment before God and one another. To cohabit is to claim the rewards of marriage without assuming the full responsibility, accountability and blessings of the covenant commitment. This position paper seeks to examine the Word of God to better understand the spiritual dangers of cohabitation.

God’s Plan for Marriage

The majority culture argues that cohabitation is a helpful ‘trial run’ for marriage. According to this worldview, living together before being married helps a couple to decide whether or not it is wise for them to ‘make a permanent commitment’. In reality, cohabitation is a way for a couple to claim the benefits of marriage separately from the Marriage Covenant established by God. To the Christian, marriage holds a place of great importance throughout the Scriptures. Genesis 2:24 states, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” Later in Matthew 19:2-9 when questioned on divorce and remarriage, Jesus responds, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” The clear witness of Scripture is that from the very beginning, God intended for a man and a woman to enter together into an inseparable marriage covenant. If the plan from the very beginning was for a couple to be married, what does the Bible have to say about unmarried individuals living together outside of the marriage covenant?

Dangers of Cohabitation

1. Seeking the Benefits Outside of the Covenant

John chapter 4 details the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well in Samaria. After requesting water that she would never thirst again, “Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” (John 4:16-18) The Samaritan woman had lived under the

¹“Cohabitation (n.)” *Index*, www.etymonline.com/word/cohabitation?ref=etymonline_crossreference.

protection of marriage in the past, but was now cohabitating with a man to whom she was not married. This woman was seeking the benefits (food, shelter, security, physical and emotional companionship) that she had experienced previously, but was this time seeking them outside of the clear pathway established by God. There are a number of spiritual dangers that occur when individuals reach out to claim the benefits of marriage without the protection of the covenant.

Seeking the benefits of marriage outside of the covenant commitment makes a mockery of God's plan for marriage. Couples are opened up to all of the benefits of marriage apart from the legal exchanging of wedding vows before God and family. Couples cohabitating have no true obligation to one another beyond the immediate desires of each party because they have not been joined together by God (Matthew 19:2-9). There is no commitment before God and family to choose to love and serve one another as Christ served the church, to stand fast during difficult seasons or to turn one another back towards Christ. Though unmarried couples might promise to do some or all of these things, they are promising in and of themselves instead of out of the transforming power of Jesus. An agreement to cohabit and any promises made therein hold the same amount of weight as a pinky promise made on a grade school playground. Not only is cohabitation dishonoring God's plan for marriage, but couples living and sleeping together are intentionally committing sexual immorality with one another.

2. Defiling the Marriage Bed

Hebrews 13:4 urges us to, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." What does the author of Hebrews mean by defiling the marriage bed? Pastor and commentator Kent Hughes explains²,

Indispensable, of course, to the honor of marriage is purity, and thus the text adds, "and the marriage bed kept pure" (v. 4b). "Bed" is used here as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, and in demanding that it be kept "pure" "our author is referring in sacrificial terms to married chastity."³ The bed—the sexual relationship—is an altar, so to speak, where a pure offering of a couple's lives is made to each other and to God.

This was radical stuff in the pagan context—and Christians lived it out. When Pliny was sent by the Roman Emperor Trajan to govern the province of Bithynia and looked for charges against the Christians, he had to report back that on the Lord's Day, "They bound themselves by oath, not for any criminal end, but to avoid theft or adultery, never to break their word...."⁴ Christian sexual morality was unique in the pagan world and a source of wonder. And it has become increasingly so today in a world that considers adultery irrelevant, purity abnormal, and sex a "right" (however and with whomever one may get it) and that has invented the egregious term "recreational sex."

We Christians are called to be outrageously pure—to be a source of wonder and even derision to this glandular world.

The witness of Scripture teaches a Christian sexual ethic of sex within the confines of marriage and total commitment to personal sexual purity. A commitment before marriage to abstain in order to keep the bed pure and a commitment after marriage to remain faithful only to one's spouse. These commitments often sound legalistic until the Christian remembers that marriage points to Jesus' commitment to His Church. These commitments become good news to our ears when we realize that the message of Christian marriage declares, "We are two sinners saved by the Grace of Jesus Christ. We want to join together and honor one another and God with our whole lives because 1. It is only by the Grace of God that we can love and serve one another sacrificially and 2. Because our marriage points to the perfect sacrificial love with which Christ laid down His life for the Church. Marriage and the fight for sexual purity is good news because it points us to the perfect reality of

²Hughes, R. Kent. *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*. Vol. 2. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993. Print. Preaching the Word.

God's Grace. With the Christian's fight for sexual purity in mind, we come to our next danger: cohabitation sets couples up for failure in the fight for purity.

3. Fleeing from Sexual Immorality

In 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, the Apostle Paul urges the Christian to flee from sexual immorality because one who is sexually immoral sins against their own flesh. If Christians sin against their own flesh when they are sexually immoral and if—as the Bible teaches—married couples are no longer two, but one flesh then we can conclude that sexual immorality is a sin against the self, against the Savior and against the future spouse. Next, Paul reminds us that our bodies are a temple to the Holy Spirit and that we do not belong to ourselves. Rather, all who are in Christ have been bought with a steep price: the blood of the Lamb. Christians are called to glorify God in our bodies and *flee* from sexual immorality. It is because of this steep sacrifice that Christians are not only called to flee from it, but are also equipped with the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit enabling us to find success and conviction in the fight against sexual immorality.

Instead of encouraging and empowering this fight against sexual immorality, cohabitation puts couples into difficult situations. A couple sleeping together in the same bed are either ignorant of or ignoring Paul's pastoral plea to *flee* sexual immorality. To flee is 'to run away from a place or situation of danger'³. Christians are not called just to move away from sexual immorality and situations that tempt them sexually, but to run *away* from the sin and *towards* our Savior. To flee sexual immorality requires the intentional separation of a person from that which tempts them to sin sexually. Jesus teaches on lust in Matthew 5:27-30 saying that a person tempted to lust should separate themselves from that which tempts them. Jesus doesn't encourage the crowds to cover their eye if they are tempted to sin, he says to tear it out and throw it away. He doesn't tell them to bind up their hand so that it cannot be used in sin, he tells them to cut it off and throw it away. Our Lord uses these examples not as literal guides for physical dismemberment, but to give examples for how seriously the Christian should seek the strength to avoid lust. How can a Christian distance themselves from lust (tear out your eye, cut off your hand) if they are living, sleeping, changing and showering in the same space? The professing Christian who is living unmarried with their partner and sleeping in the same bed is ignoring God's call to flee sexual immorality and embracing worldly wisdom. The Apostle John warns Christians against worldly love in 1 John 2:15-17, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."

There is grace and forgiveness in the Gospel for sinners saved by the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is victory and power to be found in the battle against temptation and lust, but living in a situation where temptation abounds without a plan to fight in the redeeming power of God is setting yourself—and your partner—up for failure, shame and disappointment.

4. Inviting Reproach on Christian Witness

Finally, cohabitation invites reproach on professing Christians as they live life on mission. Christian couples living together outside of the marriage covenant will be less equipped to defend the Christian sexual ethic (Hebrews 13:4, Matthew 5:27-18), the covenant of marriage (Mark 10:6-9) and the union of Christ with His *bride*, the Church (Revelation 19:7, 21:9-11; Isaiah 54:5). Ultimately,

³"Flee." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flee.

Biblical marriage points towards the great marriage covenant between the Son of God and His Church. Cohabiting couples open themselves up to charges of hypocrisy even as they bear witness to the sweet work of Jesus in His life, death, resurrection and ascension. Christ's call is for His Church is to be holy and set apart (Romans 12:1, Leviticus 19:2) not simply for the sake of legalistic obedience, but in order to enter into the fullness of who God created each of us to be in relationship to Him. What a strong witness to the power of the Gospel it would be for those in our cities to see Christian couples convicted that cohabitation is jumping ahead of God's established pathway for marriage and family building!

Sacred City's Position on Cohabitation

With this Biblical basis in mind, it is our position at Sacred City Church to encourage a couple's complete physical separation before marriage. In the interest of Christians remaining above reproach and couples standing united in the fight for purity, we encourage a man and woman to either live in separate homes leading up to their marriage or to move their wedding date up to accommodate their desire to come together. At a bare minimum, in order to aid in the fight against lust, to flee sexual immorality and to keep the marriage bed undefiled, couples should take up residence in separate rooms of the home (ie; the woman in the main bedroom and the man in the spare bedroom). Couples, likewise, are encouraged to reach out to their Missional Community Leaders for ways that the MC can help come alongside the couple leading up to their wedding (ie; allowing the man to stay in a spare room, helping to pay for lodgings, helping the couple move up the wedding, providing accountability to couples who remain living in the same residence, but in separate rooms). Through this policy, the Elders at Sacred City Church hope to help equip couples to build strong, Christ-centered marriages that glorify God and witness to the beauty and sweetness of God's design for marriage.