

*Is Cohabitation an Option for God's People—Or for Anyone Else?*  
Rev. Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

Cohabitation is being chosen over marriage by a large and rapidly growing number of people today, especially but not only by young adults. One reason they give is to avoid the pain of divorce, since most of them have been significantly impacted by their parents' discord and/or divorce.

That reason is by far the most often cited rationale people use for cohabiting instead of marrying. Other reasons they give for living with their "significant other" before getting married, e.g., convenience (9%) and saving rent (5%), don't even come close to the most cited but weakest value of testing compatibility (84%). According to careful research by the Barna Group, "By far, the reason cohabiting couples are shacking up is in order to test the waters before taking the plunge."<sup>1</sup>

They think they that they'll try living together, but without the commitment of marriage (and especially without God's blessing), thinking errantly that they'll find out before marriage if such a relationship is "workable" for them. But unsurprisingly it does not work out well and as they expect, or at least hope. As will be seen below, the negative effects of cohabitation revealed in the strong social science studies now available led researcher Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D. to conclude, "cohabitation is not to marriage what spring training is to baseball."<sup>2</sup>

Couples living together have increased over twelve times since 1960, and now over half of all entering a first marriage do so by first living together in contrast to virtually none 50 years ago. Between 1960 and 2,006 there occurred close to a 1,000% increase in the number of cohabiting couples living with children.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, cohabitation is not being done by everyone. Popenoe and Whitehead clarify the demographics.

Cohabitation in America—especially cohabitation as an alternative to marriage—is more common among Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and disadvantaged white women. It is also more common among those who are less religious than their peers, those who have been divorced, and those who have experienced parental divorce, fatherlessness, or high levels of marital discord during childhood.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Group, "Majority of Americans Now Believe in Cohabitation," [https://barna.org/research/family-kids/research-release/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation?utm\\_source=Barna+Update+List&utm\\_campaign=573151e2e6-Cohabitation+2016&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_8560a0e52e-573151e2e6-172028445&mc\\_cid=573151e2e6&mc\\_eid=5a38b91ac5#.V22wAjWAY8B](https://barna.org/research/family-kids/research-release/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation?utm_source=Barna+Update+List&utm_campaign=573151e2e6-Cohabitation+2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8560a0e52e-573151e2e6-172028445&mc_cid=573151e2e6&mc_eid=5a38b91ac5#.V22wAjWAY8B) (Accessed 6/24/16)

<sup>2</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, "Does Cohabitation Protect Against Divorce?" *CitizenLink*, March 21, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> David Popenoe "The Future of Marriage in America," a report on the massive and groundbreaking research project with Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/TEXTSOOU2007.HTM> (Accessed 02/22/08)

<sup>4</sup> Popenoe and Whitehead, "Unmarried Cohabitation," <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/SOOU.htm>. 5/22/00.

The Bible is the most important guide on this subject, and many passages apply (e.g., Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5-6, Ephesians 5:3). Cohabitation is one form of fornication, part of the sexual immorality (Greek, *porneia*) of which Paul informs the Ephesian church there should not even be a hint among them and is improper for the people God has called to be holy.

Scientific data come in the form of statistics, including their analysis and application, and in the form of anecdotal findings. The former, when obtained from a carefully designed and carried out study by the head, the cognitive domain, are generalizable; the latter, while not generalizable are strong indicators of what is possible and in fact of what does occur. Anecdotes also have the ability to tap deeply into the affective domain, the heart, that motivates people's decisions and actions.

Following in the text box below is one example of what takes place in cohabitation as reported by a man who engaged in it and encountered its lack of fulfillment, satisfaction, security, and its destructive effects. He now is a Christian and has the strength and courage to speak the truth to help others avoid the pain he and those involved with him have undergone and, *sadly, continue to experience*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Zadig, "Just like being married (or is it?)" *The Church Herald*, September 16, 1977, pp. 14-15. Reprinted from *HIS* magazine, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. 1977.

You'd think it would be ideal: all the sexual problems solved and a friend to talk to. But sex soon loses its mysterious, tantalizing glow and takes a back seat to the everyday getting along that two people must do to live together. But...[i]t was something else that undermined our relationship and will undermine every other relationship like it: We had made no commitment to each other.

I will never forget the night she turned to me and told me she loved me. It was a hopeful statement, almost a question, and she waited for my response. I opened my mouth, but I couldn't speak. I wanted to answer her but knew I would be going further than I intended. I said nothing, yet in my silence I had answered her, and she knew it.

We never spoke of it again, but after that evening our relationship drifted. We cared for each other...but we had no commitment and that night merely brought it out into the open.

Commitment is the issue. You can't say to someone, "I love you. Let's live together and see what happens." On those terms, either of you can split at a moment's notice. As a result you never really can be yourself or feel free to disagree without fear of losing the other person. You can never have the liberty to share your deepest feelings. You have to hold back. The relationship doesn't get a chance to grow because it is based on a conditional acceptance which is the cover for the self-gratification of two people indulging themselves in what they politely term a meaningful relationship.

Real commitment, on the other hand, says, "I am willing to spend my life with you to see you grow." "For better or for worse...."

Love may have some cold spots, and it alone will never be enough to hold two people together. It's commitment that carries them over difficult times. Commitment is what God intended between a man and a woman. That is why he set up marriage—to express a lifelong commitment.

God intends for all of us to enter into relationships as whole people. That's why he says we shouldn't play with sex or live together outside marriage. We inevitably tear away from the "one flesh" relationship and leave pieces of ourselves behind. In a very real sense we rob our future spouse...it is a psychological robbery that the lack of sexual virginity, male or female, signifies. You will never be able to retrieve that part of your affections carelessly squandered in the past. Sometime, you will have to look your partner in the eyes and say, "I'm sorry, but there's a part of me you will never be able to have."

Such an apology is very real. I had to do it. Even though God has forgiven me in Christ, the past still exists. I still remember, and memory can be devastating. There is a part of me that my wife will never have. Someone else has it. I know it. I feel it, even after six years. Often I'm aware of it in crowds. I see someone pass who reminds me of June [Michael's live-in first partner] and something within me jumps. There is a pull and a tug where a part of me should be. I can never own or share it again.

All this that Michael reports applies also to his first partner, June, and to her husband. How many people have irretrievably lost something precious as a result of cohabitation! Here we have one example of why God tells us to look not only to our own interests but to the interests of others, having the same attitude as Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:3-5) This and much other pain is what God in his love for us made possible to avoid by obeying his commands to shun all forms of sex outside of marriage. (E.g., 1 Corinthians 6:9) Remember this poignant story if the research data below are not persuasive enough.

A massive volume of empirical research documents what occurs when God's Word is obeyed and disobeyed. Consider just this sampling from careful scientific studies about cohabitation. Contrasted with married couples, study after study show those who live together instead of marrying report the following:

- **Less satisfaction and pleasure in their lives.** The National Institute for Healthcare Research reports that couples who marry after living together disclose less satisfaction in their marriage than married couples who did not live together prior to marriage.<sup>6</sup>
- **Significantly less security in their relationship, which negatively affects their peace of mind,** since they've not committed to remain together permanently.
- **Sexual anxiety rather than sexual freedom.**

UCLA researchers Stuart Perlman and Paul Abrahamson report that the less permanent living arrangement of cohabitation is characterized more by sexual anxiety than sexual freedom. They found that the absence of an enduring commitment hinders sexual satisfaction.<sup>7</sup>

- **Less healthy mentally and physically.**
  - A highly respected study conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports that women who cohabit had rates of depression more than five times higher than women who are married. Cohabiting couples are significantly more inclined to engage in alcohol and drug abuse, heavy smoking, and other behaviors counterproductive to their health. They're more than twice as likely to experience any form of mental illness than are people who are married. Analysis of the research literature suggests that “[m]uch of this depression could be linked to greater feelings of insecurity in cohabiting relationships.”<sup>8</sup>
  - An NIH study of 350 widows and widowers, found that “Greater psychological well-being was highly correlated with being remarried or in a new romance 25 months

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<sup>6</sup> “Recent studies on the family,” *AFA Journal*, September 1998, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> “Recent studies on the family,” *AFA Journal*, September 1998, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, “How Healthy are Cohabiting Relationships?” *CitizenLink*, March 20, 2003.

after the spouse's death.”<sup>9</sup> This study provides further evidence that marriage provides many benefits and blessings that cohabitation fails to produce.

Nevertheless, for Christians, as the Apostle Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 7, it is good for a person to remain unmarried, so he or she can serve the Lord more than is possible when married. However, the ability to do so involves a gift and a calling for some that is not given to all. Furthermore, those believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ who remain unmarried are never to engage in cohabitation or any form of sexual relations outside of marriage. (Cf., e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; 7:2 and passim)

- **Much less well off financially.**

- Sociologists and other social scientists have discovered these two outcomes consistently for decades. For one, sociologist Melanie Heath writes in her book, *One Marriage Under God: The Campaign To Promote Marriage in America*, “‘Married people’—for whatever reason—“are happier, healthier and better off financially.”<sup>10</sup>
- Careful social science studies strongly and consistently show that marriage, not cohabitation, is a wealth-building institution. Children are especially affected in negative ways financially. The National Marriage Project found that the poverty rate for children in cohabiting households is 31% contrasted with the poverty rate of six percent in married households.

- **Do not communicate as well.**

- **Higher levels of conflict and are almost twice as likely to breakup within 10 years, contrasted with all first marriages.** Two-fifths of cohabiters do not continue for more than a year; only a third last two years; only one in 10 remain together after five years; and the median is just 1.3 years. *Ironically, instead of avoiding the pain of divorce, when cohabiting couples split up, an emotional trauma comparable to that of divorce occurs, and psychological scars remain.*

- **Abuse one another more frequently and more violently than those who are married.**

- The women are almost five times as likely to suffer severe violence, including rape. Canadian and U.S. studies reveal that women are nine times more likely to be killed by live-in partners than are married women. The National Crime Victimization Survey reported that 65% of all violent crimes committed against women by their “intimate partners” were perpetrated by either a boyfriend or an ex-husband contrasted with nine percent committed by husbands.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Amy Dickinson, “Widower ponders the ticktock of moving on,” *Reporter-Herald*, June 20, 2021, p. 8C.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Cal Thomas, “Coolidge in 2016,” *Reporter-Herald*, November 12, 2014, p. 4A.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Wing, “The Truth About Domestic violence in Marital Versus Cohabitational Relationships,” *CitizenLink*, July 8, 2004.

- Michael McManus, author of *The Marriage Savers*, citing a study by the Justice Department, “Female Victims of Violent Crime,” states that a cohabiting woman is 56 times more likely than a wife to be assaulted. Analyzing the data, he reasons that men respect wives, not live-in lovers.<sup>12</sup>
- Children also suffer violence in cohabiting situations. The safest environment for a child is in a family with a mother and a father and where the family has always been intact. Child abuse is six times higher in the second safest family environment, a blended family where the child’s mother has remarried. Cohabitation is a major factor in child abuse. Child abuse is 33 times higher if a child is living with his or her mother who is cohabiting with a man.<sup>13</sup>
- **Women who cohabit are significantly more likely to commit suicide than are married women.**<sup>14</sup>
- **Cohabitors engage in much higher levels of unfaithfulness to their partner than do those who are married.** The women are eight times more likely to cheat on their partner, and the men are close to four times more likely to be unfaithful, than are men and women who are married. Those who cohabit are less likely to marry and much less faithful if marriage does occur. Infidelity is very likely to occur in marriages where a partner has cohabited.
  - A study by John D. Cunningham and John K. Antill of Macquarie University in Australia reports only 30% of cohabiting couples married, and of those who did, wives who had cohabited show less commitment to their present partner, and husbands who had cohabited prior to marriage were less likely to be employed full-time. The wives had less restrictive conditions on having sex with men other than their current husbands. The husbands were also more likely to have jobs with lower status. Cohabiting couples showed more orientation toward autonomy and less to attachment; they’re more likely to be promiscuous. This orientation does not bode well for “being there for you” when the tough times come in the future, e.g., illness, disability, extended job loss, when there’s no commitment “to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge myself truly with all my heart.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Michael McManus, “How to avoid a bad marriage,” *AFA Journal*, July 1993, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.circleofmoms.com/moms-against-child-abuse-and-sexual-pedophiles/child-abuse-statistics-197095> (Accessed 5/18/15) See also Laura Schlessinger, “Society is doomed: Rule by the morality of the lowest common denominator,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 6, 1998, Section 13, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Steve Doughty, “Being unmarried ‘makes a woman a higher suicide risk,’ Daily Mail, February 29, 2008 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-522428/Being-unmarried-makes-woman-higher-suicide-risk.html>. (Accessed 5/10/15)

<sup>15</sup> These comforting and reassuring words the bride and groom historically have vowed to each other before God and the witnesses they’ve invited to their wedding, that meet one of the most important human needs, the need to love and to belong, are from the “Order of Service for the Solemnization of Marriage,” *The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America together with The Psalter*, Geritt T. Vander Lugt, Editor (New York: The Board of Education,

- A study published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* disclosed findings of sociologists at the University of California, Irvine, that

“[t]he odds of a recent infidelity...were more than twice as high for cohabiters than for married persons” ( $p < 0.01$ ). Since cohabiters’ predilection to betray their partners stands out even in statistical models which control for differences in personal values, the researchers reason that “cohabiters’ lower investments in their unions, not their less conventional values, accounted for their greater risk of infidelity...” [Further they found that] belated wedlock does not end the relatively common betrayals among such couples. The researchers’ data reveal that even after taking into account the nontraditional values generally linked to cohabitation, “living together before marriage raised the net odds of marital infidelity by 39% ( $p < 0.05$ ).”

*The Family in America* reports that what these sociologists have found is that “what cohabitation best prepares couples to do is not to make wedding vows but rather to break them.”<sup>16</sup>

- **Higher rates of marital separation and divorce, which foster a diminished view of marriage as an institution.**

- Living together before marriage *increases* the likelihood the couple will divorce if they marry. Marital dissolution reaches a nearly 80 percent higher rate than among those who have not lived together before marriage, according to research conducted at Yale and Columbia University, which was published in the *American Sociological Review*.<sup>17</sup>
- Studies in the U.S., Canada, the Netherlands, and Sweden reveal that *cohabitation increases rather than decreases the risk of marital breakup*. To cite just one of many studies revealing this reality, a study of nearly 7,000 couples by two University of Wisconsin sociologists discovered that couples who cohabit prior to marriage are twice as likely to divorce within 10 years as those who did not live together prior to their wedding. One of the researchers, Larry Bumpass, who once held to the idea that cohabiting was a good method for discovering incompatibility before marriage, is now convinced that cohabitation directly contributes to divorce. He correctly reasons that the partners in cohabiting couples have less claim on each other.

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1968), p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> *The Family in America, New Research*, July 2000. Source: Judith Treas and Deirdre Giesen, “Sexual infidelity Among Married and Cohabiting Americans,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 [2000]: 48-60.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, “Does Cohabitation Protect Against Divorce?” *CitizenLink*, March 21, 2003.

- The above data and other research, such as a study done at Pennsylvania State University by sociologists William G. Axinn and Jennifer S. Barber, show that just the opposite of attracting couples to marriage, cohabitation is correlated with an increasing hostility toward wedlock and child-rearing. *The Family in America* interprets the report as indicating that

[t]he power of cohabitation to harden young people against marriage and child-rearing stands out clearly. [The study’s findings enable] the researchers to document the fact that “cohabitations significantly alter attitudes toward family formation in early adulthood.”<sup>18</sup>

We are not surprised by these data. When God commands us not to do something, he does so because he loves us and he knows the unpleasant and even devastating results we would experience if we were to do what he forbids. True science describes the results when his commands are disobeyed.

The church and the parents among its membership don’t need any more incentive than this report for motivation to engage their young adults and others in their decision-making process on this subject. Parents and church leaders, professional and volunteer (e.g., elders and teachers) should do all they can to lovingly explain these truths from God’s special revelation (in the Bible) and in his general revelation (in careful science). They should “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) and do all they can to help their young adults choose the Lord’s way and prepare for marriage according to his commands and other teaching in his Word that will result in fulfillment, joy, and an abundant life (John 10:10 NASB) rather than choosing cohabitation, the way to disappointment, discouragement, and destruction.

We cannot remain silent. Remember that we do not live in a spiritually neutral milieu. We are engaged in a cosmic battle with the forces of evil whose purpose is to take glory away from God and lead his people astray; we must teach this reality. Otherwise people will be floundering around on the battlefield in the darkness and without any armor, and they won’t be equipped with what they need to win this battle anywhere else.

- **Much less inclined to worship and to do so with any regularity, which leads to further problems.**
- **Poorer relationships with their parents and in-laws.**
- **Harm their children.** Voluminous studies show the life changing and severe effects on their children. The children of cohabiters, in contrast to their counterparts in intact family settings with a married mother and father, are:

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<sup>18</sup> “Learning to Hate Family Living,” *The Family in America, New Research*, April 1998.

- Significantly more likely to exhibit problem behaviors at home and at school.
- Less physically and mentally healthy.
- Much more likely to live in poverty.
- Exhibiting much lower academic performance.
- Much more likely to be physically and sexually abused and subjected to violence, especially when the children are from previous unions, as are the significant majority (63% according to one estimate). The *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* reports that children living with a caretaker other than their parents are at greater risk of being mistreated, and a study published in *Pediatrics* states that children living in a household with a non-parent are eight times more likely to die of maltreatment than children living with both parents. The National Marriage Project reports that the most unsafe of all family environments is such a cohabiting situation.<sup>19</sup>
- Tending to experience worse outcomes in their lives.
- Much more inclined to experience the life-long negative effects of divorce. The severely damaging effects of divorce are well documented.<sup>20</sup> Three quarters of children of cohabiters will see their parent and partner break up prior to age 16, whereas only a third (and much less for those whose parents are mature Christians) of children living with their parents in an intact family household will see their parents divorce.<sup>21</sup>

We must make this information known, beginning in our families, in our church congregations and denominational organizations, and in the broader social media, print and online. To take God's children into such households is unconscionable!

- **Other relational harms** in contrast with married spouses are reported.<sup>22</sup>
  - More negative and less positive problem solving and support behaviors compared to spouses who have not cohabited.
  - Decrease in problem solving skills.
  - More individualistic attitudes and values that are counterproductive to healthy marital attitudes.

***Gender differences should be considered carefully.***

Marriage offers unparalleled blessings for both genders and special benefits for women.<sup>23</sup> Yet is

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<sup>19</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, "Cohabitation and Children," *CitizenLink*, April 14, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix B for a sample.

<sup>21</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, "Cohabitation and Children," *CitizenLink*, April 14, 2003

<sup>22</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, "Does Cohabitation Protect Against Divorce?" *CitizenLink*, March 21, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> See Edward D. Seely, "[Guidelines for Selecting a Marriage Partner \(Unabridged Version\)](https://www.fromacorn12.com)" on the Marriage page of my Website at [www.fromacorn12.com](http://www.fromacorn12.com) and on <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/>. This essay has been

not surprising that women and men view cohabitation differently. Indeed, the differences stem from core differences in the way men and women think about love and sex as well as other matters. Psychologist Meg Jay reports the following results of research on gender differences.

Women are more likely to view cohabitation as a step toward marriage, while men are more likely to see it as a way to test a relationship or postpone commitment, and this gender asymmetry is associated with negative interactions and lower levels of commitment even after the relationship progresses to marriage [which rarely occurs]. One thing men and women do agree on, however, is that their standards for a live-in partner are lower than they are for a spouse. [But that doesn't satisfy either. One of Meg's female clients told her that] "I felt like I was on this multiyear, never-ending audition to be his wife," she said.<sup>24</sup>

An adage you may have heard somewhat oversimplifies, but contains an insightful observation concerning, differing gender perspectives on the issue before us. "Women give sex for love; men give love for sex." One of the fundamental problems herein however is an inadequate understanding by both genders of what constitutes real love. Most don't understand love in the way God presents it in his Word.

Countless men, consciously or unconsciously, buy into a male concept expressed in a crass and repulsive analogy, albeit which accurately discloses the way numerous men think, that is expressed this way: "Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" Too many women are unaware of, or ignore to their lasting detriment, this mindset and let their heart overrule their head. When the woman gives a guy what he wants without tangible and life-long assurance of his commitment, she loses her most effective asset and leverage, and she loses what she most wants in this matter. His incentive and motivation to marry is significantly lessened.

That tangible and life-long assurance for believers in Christ includes a wedding in the church in accord with divine authority "before God and these witnesses...until death," as the historic liturgy states, witnesses who will testify to the bride's and groom's commitment to God and to each other and support and encourage them throughout their marriage. Many other tangible assurances are built into church weddings, including but not limited to, the vows each member of the couple makes to the other before God, our infinitely highest authority and the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), and the assembled witnesses including, as the liturgy specifies, to sacrificially love the other, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...to love...comfort...honor...and keep [to the other only], in sickness and in health, and forsaking every other, keep to [his wife or her husband], as long as they both shall live...to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto [I] pledge myself truly, with all [my] heart." Prayer for the couple, led by a faithful and righteous pastor, called by God and affirmed by the church, is offered with powerful effects

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excerpted from Appendix A of the unabridged version of the guidelines.

<sup>24</sup> Meg Jay, "The Downside of Cohabiting Before Marriage," April 14, 2012,

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/opinion/sunday/the-downside-of-cohabiting-before-marriage.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/15/opinion/sunday/the-downside-of-cohabiting-before-marriage.html?_r=0).

(Accessed 5/8/15)

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(James 5:16). Rings that are exchanged are daily reminders of these commitments before God and his church. Can you see, as presented in the “[Guidelines for Selecting a Marriage Partner \(Unabridged Version\)](#),” why God requires that his people only marry a believer in and follower of our only Savior and Lord Jesus Christ? Of course, the couple needs to always attend to and never neglect the historic means of maturing in Christ, also discussed in the guidelines, in order to be receptive to and act on the Lord’s blessing upon their life-long marriage.

For both Christian and secular couples, the tangible assurance also involves an authoritative wedding license issued by the state that has strong legal support and benefits. The cohabiting couple has no such tangible assurance; indeed, they have nothing of the sort at all, which especially harms the most vulnerable member of the couple. Thus, both genders lose in choosing to cohabit before marrying. But women lose more.

### ***Marriage stabilizes society; cohabitation leads to societal instability.***

Where marriages dwindle in number and in strength, society sees increases in crime, suicide, poor health, poverty, and academic failure. Yet Popenhoe and Whitehead and others see indicators of positive trends. Furthermore they reiterate the observations of social scientists, philosophers, historians, and many others when they write of the institution of marriage being the basis of a stable society.

Marriage is a fundamental social institution. It is central to the nurture and raising of children. It is the “social glue” that reliably attaches fathers to children. It contributes to the physical, emotional and economic health of men, women and children, and thus to the nation as a whole. It is also one of the most highly prized of all human relationships and a central life goal of most Americans.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, it is unwise to try to redefine marriage and to replace it with man-made alternatives that do not satisfy and that even harm the people engaging these counterfeit “marriages.” As Rev. William H. Genne, former director of the Commission on Marriage and Family of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, wrote in response to the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead’s attempt to redefine and propose an alternative to traditional marriage,

Rather than seek to legalize the immature relationship...Dr. Mead would do better to look at the preparation for marriage which we are offering our young people.... Let us help them understand and appreciate this gift of their Creator and let us help them mature into manhood and womanhood before offering them a counterfeit marriage.<sup>26</sup>

Mead quotes another clergyman, William Phelps Thompson, stated clerk of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church. Thompson clarified the importance of grappling with the matter from within the realistic Biblical understanding.

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<sup>25</sup> Popenhoe and Whitehead, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/SOOU.htm>. 5/22/00

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Margaret Mead, “A Continuing Dialogue on Marriage: Why Just ‘Living Together’ Won’t Work,” *Redbook Magazine*, April 1968, p. 48.

The Christian Church recognizes that in marriage and parenthood, as indeed in all of life, human performance will always fall short of the Christian ideal. The solution is not to abandon the ideal for something approximating human performance. Rather, with spiritual guidance, church members will strive more nearly to attain the ideal.<sup>27</sup>

Thompson and Genne were responding to Mead, who, as Mitchelson and many others, was committing the naturalistic fallacy and trying to reason from *is* to *ought*, thinking that since so many are cohabiting, we ought to legitimize it. Of course that is a logical fallacy, and it fails to take into account many other vital factors, starting with God and his revealed will in the Bible. Since God's commands are always in accord with his holiness and the holiness he requires of those who would be his people, they are also in human beings' best interest.

Those whose interests are best protected by marriage are women. The most thoughtful and careful of them "get it." Women, who see sex as a much more profound and complex experience than men, wrote the following to Mead:

A young engaged girl wrote: "Some people fall in and out of love every few months. I know this because my girl friends do, and it makes me sick to hear them and everyone else call it love, because it isn't. If love doesn't last forever, then it isn't love...."

...a writer from Westbury, New York, commented: "Sex is not a shoe to be tried on, and if it does not fit, try another."

A very young wife...wrote: Life was never meant to be easy here on earth and there is no easy way to make a marriage work. But with love and God's grace we *can* make our marriages work....<sup>28</sup>

In the light of these data from careful social science studies, one cannot find any support for the idea that cohabitation will help couples accomplish their objectives and avoid the pain they are trying to escape. Rather, the contrary is true; the very experiences they're trying to avoid when rejecting marriage are exactly what they encounter by choosing to cohabit.

Glenn Stanton quotes researchers Alan Booth and David Johnson regarding their conclusion as to the basic premise of cohabiters. "On the basis of the analysis provided so far, we must reject that argument that cohabitation provides superior training for marriage or improves mate-selection."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Margaret Mead, "A Continuing Dialogue on Marriage: Why Just 'Living Together' Won't Work," p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Margaret Mead, "A Continuing Dialogue on Marriage: Why Just 'Living Together' Won't Work," p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, "Does Cohabitation Protect Against Divorce?" *CitizenLink*, March 21, 2003. Quotation from Alan Booth and David Johnson, "Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Success," *Journal of Family Issues* 9 (1988):

## *What can the church do?*

The church with its mission to proclaim the Word of God has the most trustworthy message on the subject of marriage and its counterfeit, cohabitation. The scientific literature and my experience confirm that young adults long to hear a strong message affirming the Biblical teaching and the related science and have the opportunity to discuss these matters. This is especially true for the women, who have the most to lose and who enter cohabiting relationships with contrasting expectations from those of the men. In classes I've taught on marriage the students' attention is riveted when we discuss these facts, and they're astonished but express relief, joy, and hope for themselves when I tell them I was married to the same woman for 48½ years until she died. They're unaware of the many such marriages today.

The church has not only a great opportunity, but a profound moral obligation, to teach God's will concerning marriage and to contrast it with the "marriage" counterfeit, cohabitation. We need to teach these truths from God's Word, and their benefits, to all generations, and we need to begin with children in the family<sup>30</sup> and in church education programs, before they become teenagers<sup>31</sup> and involved in romantic relationships, for careful and disturbing research informs us that a majority of people in the United States today believe in cohabitation (65%). More than half (57%) of all adults have lived with a girl or boyfriend. A very sad statistic shows that of that 57% of adults who have cohabited outside of marriage, 59% of those are practicing church members. The Barna Group defines "practicing church members" as "those who attend a religious service at least once a month, who say their faith is very important in their lives and self-identify as a Christian."<sup>32</sup> The Barna report did offer some encouraging findings pertaining to young adults in the Millennial generation (defined as those born between 1984—2000). Of the 57% of adults who are currently or have previously cohabited, 47% of Millennials are among those groups who are less likely than average to cohabit.

Clearly, we are confronting a cultural phenomenon that is growing and involves all age groups. Barna reports that "Even a growing number of parents—nearly half of Gen-Xers and Boomers, and more than half of Millennials—want and expect their children to live with a significant other before getting married."<sup>33</sup> We need to address this matter with all generations, including

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Deuteronomy 4:9 (which includes parents and grandparents); 6:4-7; Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14-4:5.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, parents, grandparents, and church education programs should continue to do so throughout the teenage years and in adult education as well, but such instruction needs to begin with children in age-appropriate ways.

<sup>32</sup> All the statistics and the quote in this paragraph are from the research report, "Majority of Americans Now Believe in Cohabitation," Barna Group, [https://barna.org/research/family-kids/research-release/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation?utm\\_source=Barna+Update+List&utm\\_campaign=573151e2e6-Cohabitation 2016&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_8560a0e52e-573151e2e6-172028445&mc\\_cid=573151e2e6&mc\\_eid=5a38b91ac5#.V22wAjWAY8B](https://barna.org/research/family-kids/research-release/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation?utm_source=Barna+Update+List&utm_campaign=573151e2e6-Cohabitation%2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8560a0e52e-573151e2e6-172028445&mc_cid=573151e2e6&mc_eid=5a38b91ac5#.V22wAjWAY8B) (Accessed 6/24/16)

<sup>33</sup> "Majority of Americans Now Believe in Cohabitation," Barna Group, [https://barna.org/research/family-kids/research-release/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation?utm\\_source=Barna+Update+List&utm\\_campaign=573151e2e6-Cohabitation 2016&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_8560a0e52e-573151e2e6-172028445&mc\\_cid=573151e2e6&mc\\_eid=5a38b91ac5#.V22wAjWAY8B](https://barna.org/research/family-kids/research-release/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation?utm_source=Barna+Update+List&utm_campaign=573151e2e6-Cohabitation%2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8560a0e52e-573151e2e6-172028445&mc_cid=573151e2e6&mc_eid=5a38b91ac5#.V22wAjWAY8B) (Accessed 6/24/16)

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grandparents, in the church and use all instructional means available, including sermons.

We must begin by informing the church where this counterproductive idea comes from, where all ideas, read lies, that oppose God's will and harm his people come from; as Jesus explained they come from the father of lies, the devil himself. (John 8:44) The church needs to do this informing at home in the family and in the congregation from the pulpit, in the classroom, in youth ministry, in small groups, in seminars, in forums, and in special programs. A premarriage education program that includes employing and explaining an established premarital inventory such as the one above in the main part of this paper, and others such as "Prepare," should be implemented. Where done, these programs have prevented many divorces and strengthened the subsequent marriages. One church reports that half who take the course decide not to marry, but of those who do marry, the divorce rate is below 10%!<sup>34</sup> So as you and your prospective spouse contemplate marriage don't fail to enroll in such a course that your pastor recommends.

The course should include a mentoring program that matches a couple with a mature husband and wife who've been successfully married many years. Consistent with the Biblical teaching about encouraging one another, the Greek word for which also involves admonition, and the caring of the church that also involves accountability (2 Timothy 3:16), such a program involves the young couple keeping in touch with the older couple. Such love and caring are able to produce the following exchange, reported by Michael McManus.

couples taking [the course] must sign an agreement with tough demands: They will finish the eight-session, four-month course, even if the relationship breaks, they will not discuss engagement, will be mutually exclusive in dating, will limit time together, and will not be sexually active. In fact, if they go beyond French kissing, they must agree to call the instructor!

My wife Harriet and I, who mentored two couples, got such a phone call one Saturday. "We went further than we should have last night," said the young man. "We are disappointed with ourselves, but we feel good about calling. It is good that the church has someone to hold us accountable."<sup>35</sup>

Why did the young man say that? Was he serious? Yes, because he and his special girl realize *the church cares about them and their physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health!* From what they've learned in this course they're eyes are open; they know what they're up against, but they have the all-sufficient help of God, directly in their lives and indirectly through the body of Christ, the church.

McManus adds,

Every church should train mentor couples to help. A young woman we mentored said, "It was invaluable to have Harriet involved. I needed to have my view and perspective validated by another woman that I respected." Her fiancé added:

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<sup>34</sup> Michael McManus, "How to avoid a bad marriage," *AFA Journal*, July 1993, p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Michael McManus, "How to avoid a bad marriage," *AFA Journal*, July 1993, p. 21.

“Any church will have a lot of happy, well-grounded couples who are the best resource of a church to save marriages.”<sup>36</sup>

We need to teach and heavily emphasize the positive values of God’s plan for marriage and not just list all the overwhelming, though rarely disclosed, negative results of cohabitation. Certainly people, most of whom are unaware of the negatives, need to be informed of these stark realities. But what is most important is to explain God’s plan (marriage is his idea and will) and why it is most fulfilling and beneficial to the couple, to their family, to the church, and to society.

As parents, grandparents, teachers and pastors we need to explain these realities in ongoing dialogues well before young people engage in romantic relationships. As David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead wrote in their report for The National Marriage Project at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey,<sup>37</sup> “it is especially important for [young adults] to know what contributes to marital success and what may threaten it. Yet many young people do not know the basic facts about cohabitation and its risks. Nor are parents, teachers, clergy and others who instruct the young in matters of sex, love and marriage well acquainted with the social science evidence.” In a recent update they conclude that **“no positive contribution of cohabitation to marriage has ever been found.”** [Emphasis mine]

Of course that result is to be expected. When God tells us not to do something, it is for our own good. Therefore, we would expect to see empirical observation of the benefits of following God’s law, and we do see that in a vast amount of research that has been carefully done according to the established scientific method. In their report Popenoe and Whitehead write the following.

The belief that living together before marriage is a useful way “to find out whether you really get along,” and thus a way to avoid a bad marriage and an eventual divorce, is now widespread among young people. But the available data on the effects of cohabitation contradict this belief. There is no evidence that those who decide to cohabit before marriage will have a stronger marriage than those who don’t live together, and some evidence to suggest that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage.<sup>38</sup>

The church needs to teach these truths from God’s special and general revelation. Our children, young adults, their parents, and all others won’t hear it from anywhere else. The church is the repository of the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and of all other good news, including the Biblical truths regarding marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. We must inform our children, young people, and adults that the high rates of divorce, are unwarranted reasons for considering cohabitation. In fact, anything against God’s Word should not even be considered.

Pertaining to divorce statistics, we need to help children, young people, and adults to look more carefully and with discernment, to analyze the causes and related factors in order to understand

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<sup>36</sup> Michael McManus, “How to avoid a bad marriage,” p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> The National Marriage Project is now at the University of Virginia.

<sup>38</sup> Popenhoe and Whitehead, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/SOOU.htm>. 5/22/00

them. These statistics are not at all determinative, especially for God's people. Evangelist Billy Graham cited these significant statistics contrary to those of the general population and even some Christians who are divorcing: Where couples simply go to church together, the divorce rate is one out of forty; where couples go to church together, read the Bible and pray together, the divorce rate is one in four hundred!

### ***Expose the unseen but very real cause of the problem.***

As mentioned above and must be emphasized again and again: we cannot remain silent. Constantly keep in mind that we do not live in a spiritually neutral milieu. Jesus said, "Watch!" (Matthew 24:4, 5) We are engaged in a cosmic battle with the forces of evil, and we must teach this reality. (Ephesians 6:10-18; Revelation 12-20) Otherwise people will be floundering around on the battlefield in the darkness and without any armor, and they won't be equipped with what they need to win this battle anywhere else. Many are clueless. How can anyone send someone he or she loves out to any battlefield without protection?!

The big problem with the forces of evil and their false prophets is that they present themselves and their counterfeit alternatives as attractive. "Here's what you need!" they sing out. "This'll help you avoid pain and find ecstasy!" "Have all the sex you want! When you get tired of one, go for another." But if they haven't been warned, the couple falls into the trap, and it's only then that they realize reality is just the opposite, as God's general and special revelation both disclose.

The church today needs to do what the Apostle Paul did.

<sup>12</sup>And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

<sup>13</sup>For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup>And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup>It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. (2 Corinthians 11:12-15)

We thus know where the evil comes from. As William Hendricksen explains in his excellent commentary on the Book of Revelation, *More than Conquerors*, there is a great turning point in the Apocalypse at chapter 12. The first eleven chapters have depicted the enormous evils in the world; then beginning with chapter 12 the Holy Spirit discloses through the Apostle John what lies behind all the evil. The Spirit gives us "eyes to see" and the calling to proclaim what we see.

As a physician does with a disease, we have to address the source not just the symptom. Blood in urine has to be traced back to the source of the flow, and a cancerous lesion is discovered, which must be removed for restoration of health. As important as this is to do in the physical realm, it is infinitely more important in the spiritual realm. Where is all this abortion, adultery, murder, substance abuse and addiction, same-sex "marriage," and cohabitation coming from? Pertaining to the subject before us, cohabitation is the cancer; the painful infidelity, violence,

dissolution of relationships, and other manifestations of cohabitation are the symptoms, serious in themselves, but to be effectively addressed the cause must be identified and removed.

Concurrently in this case, the unseen spiritual malady, due to Satan and his demonic followers with their attacks (the oppression, hammering away at God's people, influencing and drawing uninformed, undiscerning, unprepared, and receptive people away from God and his Word and will) is the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. It is only when we're informed as to what is going on and maturing in our relationship with Jesus Christ, that we can see the light, come to our senses, grasp the required resources, and engage the battle; with Christ's omnipotent power (Ephesians 1:18-23) we win! Ignoring Christ, and the spiritual warfare all around us, we lose—badly! It's like wandering into a battle zone with a ball, a glove, a bat and some others, blissfully expecting to play a game of baseball, unaware that there are missiles heading toward us.

With patient love we need to engage church young adults and others who are unaware of what is going on (the eyes of their hearts need opening [Ephesians 1:18]), so they can see what is leading them astray. When they can be informed, with much prayer, about their identity in Christ and that they belong to him and are called by him to be holy to him for the greatest mission in life and eternity—to be in the service of God, the Owner of the universe—then a much more powerful incentive to do what is right in God's sight can emerge.

To employ another analogy, one Jesus used, we cannot allow the Good Shepherd's precious sheep to wander outside the zone of safety without being connected to the vigilant oversight of the Shepherd and his undershepherd, and where they'll be vulnerable to the wolves in sheep's clothing. (Matthew 7:15 ff.) And this is the commission Jesus gave us, to care for his sheep! (John 21:15-17) Those of us who are undershepherds, pastors, teachers, and elders, will answer to him as to how well we did caring for his sheep, including pursuing the one(s) having gone astray. (Matthew 18:12; James 3:1)

Moreover, we must always keep in mind that the institution of marriage is not man's idea; it is God's. As God's people we must remember who we are and our calling from God to be holy to him. Since he is the sovereign and omnipotent owner and ruler of the universe, we always have hope and his all-sufficient help, especially as we trust and obey him. We must honor him.

Steve Watters explains how to honor God to a parent whose son has decided to move in with his girlfriend.

If your son and his girlfriend want to honor God, they shouldn't move in together. Of course this probably won't be what they want to hear, and it might seem impractical, but God will honor you for telling them the truth and honor them if they do what's right.<sup>39</sup>

Parents and church leaders should not always assume the couple will fight you if you

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<sup>39</sup> Steve Watters, "From Steve Watters Q and A," Focus on the Family, March 2008, p. 15. Acquaint them with or remind them of John 15:8, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (NIV) Of course the bearing much fruit involves obeying God's will.

speak up, as the church has been told to do (e.g., 2 Timothy 3:16), especially if they are true believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. They may just be doing it because “everybody else is doing it” (which, of course is neither true nor a logical reason to do so), and sometimes the couple, especially the woman, is silently, secretly, hoping that someone or something will intervene to help them change course. This is especially true if a solid explanation from God’s Word is given.

For one example, I spoke with an older couple who even had their wedding date planned, and the man told me that he was moving into his fiancé’s house to save money on rent until the wedding day, which was about three months away. He assured me that they wouldn’t be sleeping together, no sex at all before their wedding, and that he would be sleeping on a couch on her porch, not even in the main part of the house. Of course I know that people don’t always tell the truth about such matters, but having known this man for a number of years I believed him, but I said that their neighbors wouldn’t see it that way. Moreover, knowing he and his fiancé are Christians, they would be sending the wrong message to their neighbors. I reminded him of such passages from God’s Word as 1 Timothy 5:7, “be above reproach,” so your witness for Christ Jesus is neither mitigated nor impugned. He agreed and found another place to live out of his love for the Lord.

Furthermore, God has given us stewardship responsibilities in his work to which he has called us to participate with him in his redemptive purposes. In the light of the above empirical research showing what people experience who cohabit, how can anyone who loves someone who is considering cohabitation ignore or affirm much less encourage that loved one to proceed in such a relationship? We must inform people, model holy living according to God’s will, and pray in order to preserve the well-being of our families, churches, and society.