

## Cohabitation: What is at stake?

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**I** like metaphors. They help us reach for the intangibles behind the numbers. Yesterday a colleague sent a message about the impact on his family of the recent flooding in Iowa. His sister-in-law had gone to her elderly mother's house at 11 p.m. as water was beginning to fill the basement. By 5 a.m., it was coming into the first floor of the house. My colleague's brother tried to drive to the house then, but it was too late. He parked on high ground and walked through the relentlessly deepening water. By the time he reached the house, the water was waist-deep. He and his wife and her mother were stranded there until 7 a.m., when they crawled out a second-story window onto the roof and into a waiting boat.

The 2005 U.S. census reported that 4.85 million couples were cohabiting, up more than 1,000 percent from 1960, when there

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were 439,000 such couples. More than two-thirds of married couples in the USA now say they lived together before marriage. And while the cohabiting population spans all ages, the average age of those who cohabit is between twenty-five and thirty-four.

When I was a young adult, my community regarded people who chose to "shack up" as morally deficient. They were the exception—hippies or rebellious types who thumbed their noses at church and family. Now a quick scan

of people I know who are cohabiting, or have done so recently, includes a daughter of a seminary colleague, a daughter of a trustee, a male former colleague, a former student, a nephew, a daughter of a local pastor, and various young adult friends.

Comparing this dramatic increase in cohabitation to a flood has its limitations. For one thing, the flood image seems to pre-judge as negative the impact of this rapid increase in numbers of

unmarried couples living together. Floods are generally seen as destructive, but opinions vary about the long-term impact of men and women living together out of wedlock.

What intrigues me about the flood metaphor is the way the water rises almost imperceptibly, yet rapidly and pervasively, effecting massive change. The rising water is ignored at the community's peril. My sense is that we've managed to avoid looking at the dramatic rise in cohabitation, hardly stopping to fathom its impact on our communities. Is there peril? If so, who or what is at risk?

### **The broader context of cohabitation**

Carrie Miles, an organizational consultant for troubled workplaces, has found that clients are eager to rush to solutions when the most important task is to slow down enough to accurately define the problem and its causes. She observes that the past hundred years have brought massive change to the vital human institutions of love, sex, marriage, and family, particularly in the developed West. Some of these changes have been positive, but many are proving to be destructive of marriage, the well-being of children, and the happiness of individuals. Miles continues with the observation that in jumping too quickly to solutions, liberal Christians have usually prescribed more freedom, and conservative Christians have attempted to shore up the old sexual morality and gender norms. In the process, churches have lost credibility—either by too easily accommodating social change or by too reactively resisting it.<sup>1</sup>

What does this observation have to do with cohabitation? Cohabitation is sometimes used to refer to men and women who simply share the same living space but are not sexually intimate. It is also used to refer to the casual sex and “hook-up” culture of many university coed dorms. But for the purposes of this article, I'll work with the common understanding reflected in this Wikipedia definition: cohabitation is an emotionally and physically intimate relationship that includes a common living place and exists without legal or religious sanction. An article in *USA Today* (July 2005) suggested that cohabitation is replacing dating and has become a regularized way to test the marital waters. There's also evidence that “serial cohabitation,” living with one

and then another partner, is increasing. Researchers suggest that many singles see cohabitating as inevitable, matter of course.

Many authorities observe that unmarried cohabitation has become a major social phenomenon in recent decades, and that few changes in marriage and family patterns are more dramatic. Reasons for cohabiting vary widely, as do levels of commitment associated with it. Among the reasons cited are these: People are delaying marriage, waiting an average of fifteen years after puberty. The culture at large increasingly views living together as a

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normal transitional stage between singleness and marriage; the earlier stigma is largely gone. As noted above, young people want to test relationships before entering marriage, and the wide use of contraceptives effectively separates sex from reproduction.

Additionally, some people are fearful of commitment, because of the failed marriages they've observed; more and more people grow up in families that have experienced multiple divorces and remarriages, so they conclude that love is fleeting. Criticism of marriage abounds; many see it as imposing

unpleasant limitations. The media communicate an emphasis on the values of autonomy and freedom, often favoring self-gratification over responsibility to others in community.

Practical considerations may also factor among reasons to cohabit. Consolidating two households into one has financial benefits, while the costs associated with a wedding and establishing a household as a married couple may seem prohibitive. The merging of families, now often involving stepchildren and complex family dynamics, is a daunting undertaking. Economic and social marginalization of groups of people seems to increase the proportion of those opting for cohabitation rather than marriage.

In their *New York Times* bestseller *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, Judith Wallerstein and her coauthors observe that our divorce culture has fundamentally changed the nature of courtship. Courtship's goals are not clear, because people tend to fear rather than expect commitment. They try to avoid facing their fear of commitment by moving in together and pretending it's not

for keeps. Cohabitation feels safer than legal marriage because escape is easier.<sup>2</sup>

Amid the complexity of the topic we can identify at least five patterns of cohabitation: (1) a temporary, casual arrangement of convenience for economic reasons or for protection; (2) an extension of an affectionate, steady relationship meant to continue as long as it's enjoyable; (3) a trial marriage for couples considering making their relationship permanent; (4) a temporary alternative to marriage for people who plan to marry when it is professionally or economically feasible; and (5) a permanent or semipermanent alternative to marriage.<sup>3</sup>

### **What have we learned about cohabitation's impact?**

Most studies show that cohabitation is associated with negative effects on marriage and the family. Researchers do not know whether the link between cohabitation and these other factors is causal, but they have observed correlations between cohabitation and other dynamics that keep people from entering into and maintaining stable marital relationships.<sup>4</sup> Scarcely half of couples

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in first-time cohabitations will ever marry; the overall percentage of those who marry is much lower when it includes those who cohabit more than once. People who cohabit and later marry are 50 percent more likely to get a divorce than are couples who don't live together prior to marriage. Cohabiting couples tend to find it more challenging to negotiate things such as finances, recreational choices, and household chores—hardly

surprising, given that autonomy and freedom are values contributing to the decision to cohabit. Cohabitors struggle with stability and happiness; these couples don't have the support structures, medical benefits, and tax breaks that married people enjoy.

Studies also show that "the practice of cohabitation reduced religious attendance among young adults, while marriage (without previous cohabitation) tended to increase religious involvement."<sup>5</sup> Cohabiting couples report higher levels of conflict, domestic violence, abuse, and infidelity than married partners do. More than a third of cohabiting couples share their homes with

children under fifteen, and compared to a parent, a live-in partner is far more likely to abuse children living in the household.

Cohabitors tend to have inappropriately high expectations of marriage, which can lead to disillusionment in the face of ordinary challenges. These couples report lower satisfaction after they do marry, perhaps because they think they've worked out everything and any further challenges are the fault of marriage. Cohabitors who marry tend to be less effective at conflict resolution, either out of fear of upsetting an uncommitted relationship or because they don't feel the need to protect a temporary relationship. The attitudes, issues, and patterns that predispose people to cohabit in the first place may also put them at high risk for divorce when they do choose to marry. And the cohabitation experience itself can create bad habits that may sabotage a marriage; premarital counseling of a cohabiting couple should address these.

What about Mennonites and cohabitation? According to *Road Signs for the Journey*, recent research indicates that compared with families of other faith traditions, Mennonite Church USA families are more intact.<sup>6</sup> When members were asked their opinions about 26 behaviors, Mennonites were most likely to agree that certain sexual behaviors are wrong; their responses indicate little consensus on the rightness or wrongness of the other listed issues.

While not addressing cohabitation specifically, the research shows that attitudes about premarital sex have changed dramatically, even more than attitudes about homosexuality. In 1972, 84 percent of Mennonites said that premarital sex is always wrong; only 74 percent today responded that premarital sex is always wrong. Meanwhile, opposition to adultery has increased since 1972, when 86 percent of members said it was always wrong, compared to 94 percent today. Kanagy notes that these statistics are similar to those reported by other U.S. Protestants.

Pastoral counselors Richard Olson and Joe Leonard observe that no studies of cohabitation have turned up evidence that it contributes to a better marriage. Instead, studies conclude that it leads to "greater marital instability." Olsen and Leonard do note that possible exceptions are "single-instance" cohabitants (those who cohabited only with the person they eventually married); they may be on a par with noncohabitants.<sup>7</sup> Some research suggests that if cohabitation is limited to a person's future spouse,

the couple is at no elevated risk of divorce, and that cohabiting couples who receive premarital education or counseling may significantly reduce their risk of divorce.

### **How do we respond theologically?**

The church has lacked a compelling vision of the sexual good life. We have said: “Bottle it up. Don’t talk about it. Be moral police for God.” A recent national study of sex and religion indicates that the sexual message most religious youth are getting is: “Don’t do it until you’re married,” which doesn’t go nearly far enough.<sup>8</sup> We have largely failed to tell our story in ways that describe what is good and beautiful about marital fidelity. From my reading I’ve distilled some compelling reasons to marry rather than cohabit:<sup>9</sup>

Marriage—a public celebration of love and commitment—is a community-building act; cohabitation is not. A biblical vision for marriage is a covenant of lifelong faithfulness modeled on God’s faithfulness. Such a covenant must be made in public, because a private or ambiguous arrangement is fragile. Covenantal fidelity assumes marriage is deeper and wiser than anyone who enters into it. It is a precious gift from the tradition, held within community.

The biblical message about marriage is romantic and poetic. In honoring God, we are freed to trust each other without fear. Love may fail at times, and then people just take a deep breath and stay married because they *are* married. And when they come through, their marriages are more firmly rooted in love.

The fire of sex is so powerful, precious, and godly that it either gives life or it takes away life. What is wrong with sex outside of marriage for a Christian is not so much that it breaks a commandment but that it is a “schizophrenic act”; by its nature, sex speaks of *total* giving, trust, and commitment. What do we dare reveal, if in a few weeks or a few years our partner may be intimate with another? Only within a relationship of complete trust can we make love and remain whole. Real sexual desire can’t be satisfied on the cheap, any more than real hunger can be satisfied with fast food. That is why sexually active relationships must be faithful ones. Without the confidence that promises will be kept, love must always be on guard.

A good marriage is a work of art, disciplined by practices sustained within communities. Casual sex is like careless tech-

nique in art and music. Listening to great musicians, one can hear the beauty that fidelity engenders.

### **How do we respond pastorally?**

How do we encourage couples to bring depth and stability to their relationships in the context of a covenanting community?

We need to be more honest with one another about cohabitation. We owe our children a clear word that no social scientific evidence shows that cohabitation improves marriage. But more than that, young people need to hear stories from married people who know what sexual goodness is and how we have worked with our sexual issues. Cohabitation must be on the table in premarital counseling, say Olson and Leonard. What have you learned about yourself and your partner? What do you hope will change as you marry? What have you been reluctant to talk about before the wedding? What new promises are you ready to make with each other?

For those who have been sexually active, the most important question, says Lauren Winner in *Real Sex*, is, what are you doing now? Not, have you sinned in the past? but, how are you dealing with it? How has Christ redeemed you? And perhaps most importantly, how can we together as a community of faith live into God's vision for shalom?<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Today individual choice is given such pride of place that a couple is virtually free “to sleep with whom they please, and to marry and divorce when and whom they please. . . . The psychic costs of such behavior, and its self-defeating consequences, are becoming clear.”<sup>11</sup> Most disturbing is that when we lose sight of the community's stake in marriage, those who can least cope with the harmful fallout are the weak, poor, uneducated, and young. They are those most at risk amid the flood of changes around sexual mores in our culture.

Lauren Winner, who reclaimed sexual chastity (as she calls it) after promiscuity, says frankly that in the New Testament, sex beyond the boundaries of marriage is “simply off limits.” To have sex outside those bounds is to commit an offense against the body of Christ, which we who have been baptized are members of.<sup>12</sup>

Our calling as Christians is not to impose our practices on those who don't consider themselves part of the body of Christ but to live lives of sexual fidelity and tell stories of the redemption, joy, romance, poetry, and love that permeate God-honoring sex and marriage.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 29, 150–51, 289.

<sup>3</sup> Eleanor D. Macklin and Roger Harvey Rubin, *Contemporary Families and Alternative Lifestyles: Handbook on Research and Theory* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983); cited in Herbert Anderson and Robert Cotton Fite, *Becoming Married* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 105.

<sup>4</sup> Many of these observations are drawn from contributions in the reader edited by Kieran Scott and Michael Warren, *Perspectives on Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); also, Lisa Graham McMinn, *Sexuality and Holy Longing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Julie Hanlon Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003); David Gushee, *Getting Marriage Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Conrad Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Richard P. Olson and Joe H. Leonard, *A New Day for Family Ministry* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996), 128.

<sup>8</sup> Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 207.

<sup>9</sup> The following observations are distilled from these authors: Jo McGowan, "Marriage Versus Living Together," in *Perspectives on Marriage*, ed. Scott and Warren, 85–86; Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 368–69; Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 123–27; Catherine Wallace, *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives* (New York: Random House, 1989), 17–19, 25, 56, 59; Miles, *The Redemption of Love*, 191–92; Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 199.

<sup>10</sup> Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Stone, "Passionate Attachments in the West in Historical Perspective," in *Perspectives on Marriage*, ed. Scott and Warren, 133.

<sup>12</sup> Winner, *Real Sex*, 124.

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