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Angel M. Rodriguez
Biblical Research Institute

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COME LIVE WITH ME

Is cohabitation an acceptable substitute for Christian marriage?

Living together is becoming increasingly acceptable as a substitute for Christian marriage in today's secular society. The term "cohabitation" is usually used to describe a short-term or long-term heterosexual relationship outside marriage. Since the term itself carries a negative connotation, many prefer to speak of a "relationship." Society, however, traditionally looked on cohabitation under whatever title as an indication of moral decadence—or, to put it without embellishment, fornication. That is no longer the case. Western society implicitly encourages the practice by penalizing married couples with high tax laws and reduced Social Security benefits for

widows or widowers who remarry. Explicitly, radio, television, movies, and print media promote and glamorize cohabitation as a valid alternative to traditional marriage.

The Biblical View

Christians have long understood that marriage was instituted by God himself, who called it "very good" (Gen. 1:31; 2:22-24). After creating Adam and Eve, God brought them together and defined not only the way they were to relate to each other, but how they were to fit within his

**Angel M. Rodriguez is Director of the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Silver Spring, Maryland.*

perfect creation. Therefore, a Christian marriage should reflect the original relationship God established between woman and man. Any claim for independence from the divine intention in marriage must be regarded as seriously suspect, for in the Edenic pattern, marriage is not an arrangement made between two individuals in isolation from God and their fellow human beings.

Scriptural marriage takes place in the sight of God and other persons in order to incorporate the elements of mutual responsibility and legitimacy (see John 2:1). Establishing a family was not a matter of individual discretion but an event that had an impact on society at large. This understanding is not popular in today's everyone-for-himself society.

Marriage Defined

Marriage establishes a relationship of ultimacy and permanency. It is not an experiment that will determine whether or not the couple will remain committed to each other. It is the expression of a love so pure and so deep that it can be expressed only in a lifelong commitment to each other. In this relationship, the spouse leaves mother and father in order to be united to the object of that love. This separation leads to a permanent unity grounded in love; a unity of mutual self-respect, com-

mitment, and permanency. In this union, sexual activity takes place as a "sacramental" expression of the unity of the couple; thus it is a precious act that unites lives rather than simply bodies.

An Evaluation

Based on the biblical concept of marriage, cohabitation is clearly incompatible with the God-given pattern, which includes the blessing of God and the formal approval of the community. Hence it is fundamentally a relationship for the present without concern for the future of the relationship. The "tie that binds" is significantly lessened in the cohabitation model of marriage. There is also a significant risk for emotional hurt and indelible scars. Make no mistake: No one can live for the present without future consequences. God's plan incorporates social and spiritual well-being within the marriage relationship.

Financial Follies?

But cannot one plead a special case for the elderly who have fallen in love but have chosen cohabitation rather than lose financial benefits? Perhaps, it is said, they are not sexually active and all they seek is companionship. Surely there is nothing wrong with friendship. And if two elderly good friends enjoy spending time together, they, and not others, are the one to deter-

mine whether friendship should include intimacy. So runs the argument—which ignores the fact that we are sexual beings until we die.

Several factors point to the undesirability of such a relationship. First, cohabitation devalues the quality of the relationship by giving priority not to their love for each other, but rather to their personal financial needs. Thus their commitment is not total but limited.

Second, true love must be willing to sacrifice itself, without reservation, for the loved one. This selflessness is a fundamental characteristic of Christian love as revealed in the life and ministry of Christ. Surely it is much more important than saving a few dollars by cohabiting.

Third, by their willingness to commit themselves to each other in marriage, though at some financial cost, elderly couples will be pointing youth to the path they should follow as they themselves enter into a loving relationship. This modeling of Christian values is a great need in the community at the beginning of

this 21st century.

Finally, church and social workers could well become involved with legislators in seeking to modify laws that make it difficult for the elderly to remarry because of the financial penalties that accompany such a decision.

The Best Option

So how should we relate to those who cohabit? Disapproving of a lifestyle does not negate our responsibility to love—and love, in this case, should point them to the blessings of union in Christian marriage. This may best be done by simply modeling the joys of a true Christian home. Honesty may compel us to admit, however, that even Christian marriages encounter challenging issues that sometimes precipitate divorce. But the problem is not in Christian marriage; rather it is in the un-Christian natures we often bring to marriage. Still, whatever their shortcomings, Christian homes are the best option for family formation and nurturing. □

