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Does Marriage Still Matter?

By Richard M. Davidson

Increasingly in many societies marriage between a man and a woman is looked upon as optional, with some considering cohabitation to be a reasonable alternative. Cohabitation may be defined as a sexual-emotional relationship “in which two unmarried persons of the opposite sex share a living facility without a legal contract.”¹ In 1960 less than half a million American couples were cohabiting; but by the year 2000, the number had increased more than 1000%, to over 9.7 million people living with a different-sex unmarried partner (8.2% of all American couples).² More than two-thirds of all married couples in the U.S. now say that they lived together before getting married.³ Cohabitation is even more prevalent in places such as Canada, Scandinavian countries, and France.⁴ Once almost universally condemned, cohabitation has largely lost its stigma and has become a common practice in most Westernized countries.

There are three basic kinds of cohabitation, involving various reasons why unmarried couples live together:⁵ (1) temporary or casual cohabitation, as a form of dating; (2) cohabitation as a “trial run” for marriage, to test compatibility and/or solidify financial security; and (3) longer-term cohabitation that functions as a substitute for marriage.

When cohabitation became more popular in the early 1970s, social scientists predicted that the practice would strengthen marriage by providing experience in intimacy.⁶ However, numerous scientific studies since the late 1970s have yielded consistent and substantive evidence for the opposite effect: premarital cohabitation is correlated with increased marital instability, higher risk of future divorce, and lower marital adjustment. Compared to those who married, cohabitators are statistically less happy with their relationship, less faithful to their partners, and less committed to and stable in their relationship. Cohabiting women are particularly vulnerable, with greater risk of physical abuse than in marriage. Children born to cohabiting parents are also more likely to suffer from physical abuse as well as general neglect.⁷ The present article does not focus upon scientific research per se, but rather evaluates the practice of cohabitation and its effects in the light of Scripture.

An Evaluation of Cohabitation in Light of Biblical Foundations

For Bible-believing Christians, all practices related to sexuality and marriage must be assessed with reference to God’s original design for sexual relationships recorded at the beginning of the biblical canon (Gen 1-2), which constitutes the foundation for the rest of the biblical witness on human sexuality.⁸ In this section we will contrast each component of the divine design for sexual relationships with the practice of cohabitation.

Genesis 2:24 provides a profound summary of God’s will for sexual relationships: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” The introductory “therefore” [Hebrew *‘al-ken*] indicates that the relationship of Adam and Eve is upheld as the pattern for all future human sexual relationships.⁹ This passage sets forth three essential steps when a man and a woman want to join their lives together, all of which are generally disregarded in the practice of cohabitation.

1. **Publically recognized exclusivity.** According to Gen 2:24, both man and woman¹⁰ are to “leave” (Hebrew *‘azav*)—to make a public break from those ties that would encroach upon the independence and freedom of the relationship, and to form an exclusive family unit publically recognized and respected by the couple’s families, the community of faith, and the society at large.

In contrast, those who cohabit are primarily concerned with their own private desires and disregard the divine mandate to publically “leave” in a way recognized and respected by their families, church, and society. The directive of exclusivity is often compromised by cohabitation: statistics reveal that cohabitators are less

sexually exclusive than married persons, and the married who cohabited before marriage are less sexually faithful to their partner both before and after marriage.¹¹

2. **Permanent, public, covenant commitment.** According to Gen 2:24, the man is to be “joined” (Hebrew *dabaq*) to his wife. In the OT this verb is regularly used as a technical covenant term for the permanent bond of Israel to the Lord.¹² In Gen 2 it clearly indicates a covenant context, i.e., a mutual commitment of the couple expressed as marriage vows in a formal covenant ceremony, paralleling the “oath of solidarity” and language of “covenant partnership” expressed by Adam to Eve in the presence of Yahweh as witness and officiant at their wedding.¹³ Throughout the rest of Scripture many passages refer to marriage as a permanent covenant bond between husband and wife, ratified in the context of a public wedding ceremony and marriage vows.¹⁴

By contrast, cohabitation is only provisional and, for the present, lacking the essential element of a public, permanent, covenant commitment (“till death do us part”) between partners. Thus it is not surprising that premarital cohabitation is statistically correlated with increased marital instability and a higher risk of future divorce.

3. **Sexual intercourse only within a marriage relationship.** According to Gen 2:24, after the public wedding ceremony and marriage vows the man and woman are to “become one flesh.” This “one-flesh” union, referring primarily to sexual intercourse (see 1 Cor 6:16), by itself does not constitute marriage (see Exod 22:16-17), but is the means of consummating the marriage *after* the legal “joining” (the marriage covenant ceremony). Throughout Scripture, the Edenic design of legitimate sexual intercourse only within marriage is upheld as the divine norm.¹⁵

In stark contrast, at the heart of cohabitation is the premise that the unmarried couple is free to engage in sexual intercourse outside the boundaries of the marriage covenant relationship. In cohabitation there is passion without commitment. “Cohabitation engages a life-uniting act without a life-uniting intent. Such a lifestyle proves to be destructive of inner integrity of human personality.”¹⁶ The one who engages in sex outside of marriage “sins against his own body” (1 Cor 6:18).

Besides the three basic steps in divinely-ordained sexual relationships as set forth in Gen 2:24, other facets of the divine blueprint for sexuality relevant to the issue of cohabitation are found in Gen 1-2, which may be summarized and contrasted with the practice of cohabitation and its negative effects (as documented in the research of social scientists cited above):

4. **Equality and dignity of the marriage partners.** God provided Adam an *‘ezer kenegdo*—an “equal counterpart” or “equal partner” (2:18). Throughout Scripture this equal partnership in marriage, and the elevated status of women, is upheld as God’s ideal (e.g., Eph 5:21-33).¹⁷

Given the availability of convenient sex for cohabiting males, without lasting commitment or legal protection of their female partner in the cohabitation, it is not surprising that cohabiting women are at greater risk of abandonment and physical abuse than those who are married.

5. **Wholesome and secure relationship without shame or fear.** Within the boundaries of marriage, Adam and Eve were free to be vulnerable before each other without shame or fear: “they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed before each other”¹⁸ (Gen 2:25). This implies a secure relationship where husband and wife can be safe in each other’s unconditional love and acceptance.

Cohabitation does not usually provide that safe and secure environment where the partners can be vulnerable to each other without fear or shame. Lacking a permanent commitment, there is instability in the cohabiting relationship that often engenders insecurity and anxiety.

6. **Blessing and responsibility of children.** Within the stability and commitment of marriage, Adam and Eve were blessed to bring forth children: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). “Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain. . .” (Gen 4:1). The special added blessing of children was a sacred

responsibility, in which children were to be cared for and provided for within a committed and stable environment (Eph 6:1-4).

By contrast, children born to cohabiting parents are often at a great disadvantage: “Commitment and stability are at the core of children’s needs; yet, in a great proportion of cohabitations, these two requirements are absent.”¹⁹

7. A sacred marriage relationship hallowed by God. God Himself sanctified marriage by His presence as the divine Officiant at the first wedding (Gen 2:22-24). Marriage and the Sabbath come down to us as the two sacred institutions established by God in Eden.

By contrast, the practice of cohabitation has totally secularized the sexual-emotional relationship, stripping it of any sacred safeguarding by the sanctifying presence of God. The foundations of the sacred institution of marriage are steadily eroded as cohabitation replaces the “sacred ties that bind” with secular unions devoid of God’s special blessing.

Viewed in light of biblical standards for sexual ethics, the practice of cohabitation either rejects or misses the mark in all major dimensions of the divine plan for sexual relationships. At the most fundamental level, cohabitators disregard the divine “therefore” in Gen 2:24, exercising autonomy to follow their own desires apart from the divine will.

Response of the Community of Faith to Cohabitation

While Pentateuchal legislation does not directly address the practice of cohabitation, it does deal with the foundational premise upon which cohabitation is based—the right for men and women to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Although pre-marital sexual intercourse did not carry the same severe punishment as many other sexual offenses, it nonetheless was taken seriously. The penalty included (1) a heavy fine that the man (who presumably initiated the sexual relationship and deprived the woman of her virginity) must pay to the woman’s father, and (2) the requirement that the couple face the consequences of their action by marrying with no possibility of future divorce (Deut 22:28-29), unless the father of the woman considered that such a marriage would be unwise, in which case they did not marry but the man paid the dowry to the woman’s father as if they had married (Exod 22:16-17).²⁰ The force of this legislation was to discourage pre-marital sex, and to transition those who engaged in it into marriage (if advisable), with stipulations to insure the stability and permanence of their married relationship.

The only possible OT cases of actual cohabitation similar to current practice are the unions formed by Israelite leaders with pagan women upon Israel’s return from the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 9-10 and Neh 13:23-30).²¹ These unions were probably not regular legal marriages, but a kind of “live-in arrangement” or “cohabitation which may eventuate in formal marriage.”²² The swift and severe reactions of Ezra and Nehemiah against these sexual unions probably stem from the fact that they not only constituted cohabitation, but also involved divorce of previous wives without due cause, and (especially) that they involved uniting with women who were practicing idolaters (in blatant disregard of Deut 7:1-5). One possible NT example of cohabitation is found in 1 Cor 5:1, but the relationship there described was also incestuous.

The church today can learn lessons from the biblical perspective on sexuality and marriage as well as from examples in the Bible of sexual practice that possibly involved cohabitation. We must uphold the biblical mandate that disapproves of any emotional-sexual relationship outside the institution of marriage. At the same time, in the spirit of the Pentateuchal legislation (and the gospel of Jesus Christ!), we need to act redemptively, encouraging cohabiting couples to accept the divine plan for sexual unions and, if such seems prudent, to move into a marriage relationship or refrain from cohabiting and from sexual activity outside of marriage. Scripture

calls for a balanced approach by the church: to maintain the biblical standards while ministering with grace to the offenders.

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¹Charles Lee Cole, "Cohabitation in Social Context," in *Marriage and Alternatives: Exploring Intimate Relationships* (ed. Roger W. Libby and Robert N. Whitehurst; Glenview, Ill.: Scott-Foresman, 1977), 67; see *ibid.*, 64-67 for other similar definitions.

²Pamela J. Smock and Sanjiv Gupta, "Cohabitation in Contemporary North America," in *Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation on Families, Children, and Social Policy* (ed. Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter; Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 55; Census 2000 Special Reports, "Married Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000," 2 (cited 5 May 2009); online: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/censr-5.pdf>.

³Marie Hartwell-Walker, "Cohabitation: Issues that Affect Intimacy," 8 April 2008, n.p. (cited 5 May 2009); online: <http://www.psychcentral.com/lib/2008/cohabitation-issues-that-affect-intimacy/>.

⁴Anne-Marie Ambert, "Cohabitation and Marriage: How are They Related?" (Contemporary Family Trends; The Vanier Institute of the Family, September 2005), 7 (cited 5 May 2009); online: <http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/cohabitation.html>. In the year 2000 the proportion of cohabiting couples was 30% in Sweden, 29.8% in Quebec (Canada), 24.5% in Norway, and 17.5% in France.

⁵See, e.g., Judith K. Balswick and Jack O. Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 130-134.

⁶See studies cited in Balswick and Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality*, 134-135.

⁷See esp. the discussion and studies cited in Ambert, "Cohabitation and Marriage," 8-16. The validity of these studies is now being questioned in some recent research and by supporters of cohabitation (see, e.g., Michael G. Lawler, "Quaestio Disputata—Cohabitation: Past and Present Reality," *Theological Studies* 65 [2004]:623-629, and information found at the website www.unmarried.org), but the general scientific consensus still supports the validity of research pointing to the overall negative effects of cohabitation as compared with marriage.

⁸For the exegetical basis of a theology of sexuality and marriage in Gen 1-2, see the author's *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), 15-54 (chapter 1; accessible without cost online at www.hendrickson.com).

⁹See Robert B. Lawton, "Genesis 2:24: Trite or Tragic?" *JBL* 105 (1986): 97-98; and Angelo Tosato, "On Genesis 2:24," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 389-409.

¹⁰The text explicitly mentions only the man leaving, but the implication is that both are to "leave," because in the culture of biblical times it was already assumed that the woman left her father's house (Gen 24:58, 67; Ps 45:13-15; Song 3:6-11; Matt 25:1-13).

¹¹Ambert, "Cohabitation and Marriage," 13-14.

¹²See, e.g., Deut 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; Josh 22:5; 23:8.

¹³See Walter Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gen 2:23a)," *CBQ* 32 (1970): 532-542; and John K. Tarwater, "The Covenantal Nature of Marriage in the Order of Creation in Genesis 1 and 2" (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002).

¹⁴See, e.g., Gen 24:67; 29:22-25; Ps 45; Prov 2:17; Song 4:1-5:1; Isa 54:5, 10; Jer 7:34; 16:9; Ezek 16:8, 59, 60, 62; Hos 2:2, 16-20; Mal 2:14; Matt 25:1-13. For discussion, see esp. Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 280-312.

¹⁵E.g., Gen 29:23-25; Song 4:12; 6:9; Deut 22:13-21, 28-29 (cf. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 356-361, 567).

¹⁶Miroslav Kiš, "Seventh-day Adventist Position on Cohabitation," Biblical Research Institute, 2001, p. 2 (cited 7 May 2009); online: <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/CohabitationandSDA.htm>.

¹⁷See discussion in Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 213-295.

¹⁸The Hebrew original is in the reflexive form: "not ashamed before one another."

¹⁹Ambert, "Cohabitation and Marriage," 16.

²⁰See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 359-361.

²¹See *ibid.*, 320-324, 417.

²²Allen Guenther, "A Typology of Israelite Marriage: Kinship, Socio-Economic, and Religious Factors," *JSOT* 29 (2005): 402, 405. Cf. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 322 n. 64.

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