

# Cohabitation - A Biblical, Christian Worldview Perspective

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*Kerby Anderson takes a hard look from a biblical perspective at a common practice among Americans, cohabitation. Not only does he find it counter to biblical instruction for Christians, he finds that living together in a sexual relationship reduces the probability of a long lasting marriage later on.*



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“Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together experience for young men and women.” And those who live together before they get married are putting their future marriage in danger. Those are some of the conclusions by sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead in their study for the National Marriage Project. [{1}](#)

In this article we are going to talk about this social phenomenon of cohabitation. It used to be called “living in sin” or “shacking up.” Today, it has been replaced by more neutral terms like “living together” or “cohabitation.” For this article, I will use the term cohabitation since it is the generally accepted term in society and law. Cohabitation has been defined as “two unrelated persons of the opposite sex who share common living arrangements in a sexually intimate relationship without legal or religious sanction.” [{2}](#)

Cohabitation, as a lifestyle, is on the rise. Consider the significant growth in cohabitation rates in the last few decades. In 1960 and 1970, about a half million were living together. But by 1980 that number was 1.5 million. By 1990 the number was nearly three million. And by 2000 the number was almost five million. [{3}](#)

Researchers estimate that today as many as 50% of Americans cohabit at one time or another prior to marriage.<sup>{4}</sup> The stereotype of two young, childless people living together is not completely accurate; currently, some 40% of cohabiting relationships involve children.<sup>{5}</sup>

America also appears to be changing its attitude toward cohabitation. George Barna has reported that 60% of Americans believed that the best way to establish a successful marriage is to cohabit prior to marriage.<sup>{6}</sup> Another survey found that two thirds (66%) of high school senior boys agreed or mostly agreed with the statement “it is usually a good idea for a couple to live together before getting married in order to find out whether they really get along.”<sup>{7}</sup>

Cohabitation is not the same as marriage. It is not recognized as marriage by the state. And the participants are living together because it is their intent *not* to be married, at least for the time being.

Although some people will say that a cohabiting couple is “married in the eyes of God,” that is not true. They are not married in God’s eyes because they are living contrary to biblical statements about marriage. And they are not married in their own eyes because they have specifically decided *not* to marry.

Cohabitation is without a doubt changing the cultural landscape of our society. The proportion of first marriages preceded by cohabitation has increased ten-fold in the last few decades. And the increasing number of cohabiting couples sends a mixed message to our children. On the one hand, they hear parents and pastors proclaim the value of marriage. But on the other hand, they see a culture condoning cohabitation.

## **Cohabitation and Test-drive Relationships**

“I think we should live together before we get married to see if we are compatible.”

How many times have we heard that line? But many of the current assumptions about living together are incorrect.

Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher wrote *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially*.<sup>{8}</sup> It not only makes the case for marriage, it also challenges contemporary assumptions about cohabitation.

The thesis of the book is simple. Back in the 1950s, the rules were clear: first love, next marriage, and only then the baby carriage. But the social “tsunami” of the 1960s that struck changed everything. The Pill, the sexual revolution, gay pride, feminism, mothers in the workplace, no-fault divorce, and the rise of illegitimate births changed our views of marriage and family. The authors marshal the evidence to show that marriage is a good thing. As the subtitle says, married people are happier, healthier and better off financially.

Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that you should “try before you buy.” In fact, one of the oft-repeated questions justifying living together is: “You wouldn’t buy a car without a test drive would you?” The problem with such questions and slogans is they dehumanize the other person. If I decide not to buy a car (or a pair of shoes or whatever the inanimate object), the car doesn’t feel rejected. When you test-drive your car, you don’t pack your personal luggage in the trunk. And rejecting a car model doesn’t bring emotional baggage into the next test-driving experience. The car doesn’t need psychological counseling so that it can trust the next car buyer. Frankly, test-driving a relationship is only positive if you are the driver.

Research has shown that those who cohabit tend to view marriage negatively because it involved the assumption of new responsibilities that contrasted with their former freedoms. On the other hand, those marrying through the conventional route of dating and courtship did not feel constrained by marriage, but liberated by marriage.<sup>{9}</sup>

Consider the contrast. A couple living together has nearly everything marriage has to offer (including sex) but few commitments or responsibilities. So, cohabiting people feel trapped when they enter marriage. They must assume huge new responsibilities while getting nothing they didn't already have.

Couples entering marriage through dating and courtship experience just the opposite, especially if they maintain their sexual purity. Marriage is the culmination of their relationship and provides the full depth of a relationship they have long anticipated.

This is not to say that cohabitation guarantees marital failure nor that marriage through the conventional route guarantees marital success. There are exceptions to this rule, but a couple who live together before marriage stack the odds against themselves and their future marriage.

## **Cohabitation and Perceptions**

If you live together before you get married, you're putting your future marriage in danger. That's the conclusion of a recent report on cohabitation. America's five million cohabiting couples live together to save money, to test-run a marriage, or to stave off loneliness. But the practice can cause significant harm to a marriage.

Sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead released their study through the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University. Their study confirms earlier studies about the danger of cohabiting, and adds additional detail.

They found that cohabiting appears to be so counterproductive to long-lasting marriage that unmarried couples should avoid living together, especially if it involves children. They argue that living together is "a fragile family form" that poses increased risk to women and children.

Part of the reason for the danger is the difference in perception. Men often enter

the relationship with less intention to marry than do women. They may regard it more as a sexual opportunity without the ties of long-term commitment. Women, however, often see the living arrangement as a step toward eventual marriage. So while the women may believe they are headed for marriage, the man has other ideas. Some men actually resent the women they live with and view them as easy. Such a woman is not his idea of a faithful marriage partner.

People who live together in uncommitted relationships may be unwilling to work out problems. Since there is no long-term commitment, often it is easy to leave the current living arrangement and seek less fractious relationships with a new partner.

The ten-fold increase in cohabitation in the last few decades is staggering. The reasons for the growth are many: fewer taboos against premarital sex, earlier sexual maturity, later marriage, adequate income to live apart from their families.

Whatever the reasons for cohabiting, this study documents the dangers. Couples who live together are more likely to divorce than those who don't. They are less happy and score lower on well-being indices, including sexual satisfaction. And cohabiting couples are often poorer than married couples.

Even if millions are doing it, living together is a bad idea. As we will see later, there are clear biblical prohibitions against premarital sex. But apart from these biblical pronouncements are the ominous sociological predictions of failure when a couple considers cohabitation rather than marriage. The latest research backs up what the Bible has said for millennia. If you want a good marriage, don't do what society says. Do what the Bible teaches us to do.

## **Consequences of Cohabitation**

Contrary to conventional wisdom, cohabitation can be harmful to marriage as well as to the couples and their children. One study based on the National Survey of Families and Households found that marriages which had prior cohabitators were

46% more likely to divorce than marriages of noncohabitators. The authors concluded from this study and from a review of previous studies that the risk of marital disruption following cohabitation “is beginning to take on the status of an empirical generalization.”[{10}](#)

Some have tried to argue that the correlation between cohabitation and divorce is artificial since people willing to cohabit are more unconventional and less committed to marriage. In other words, cohabitation doesn’t cause divorce but is merely associated with it because the same type of people are involved in both phenomena. Yet, even when this “selection effect” is carefully controlled statistically, a “cohabitation effect” remains.

Marriages are held together by a common commitment which is absent in most, if not all, cohabiting relationships. Partners who live together value autonomy over commitment and tend not to be as committed as married couples in their dedication to the continuation of the relationship.[{11}](#)

One study found that “living with a romantic partner prior to marriage was associated with more negative and less positive problem solving support and behavior during marriage.” The reason is simple. Since there is less certainty of a long-term commitment, “there may be less motivation for cohabiting partners to develop their conflict resolution and support skills.”[{12}](#)

Couples living together, however, miss out on more than just the benefits of marriage. Annual rates of depression among cohabiting couples are more than three times higher than they are among married couples.[{13}](#) Those who cohabit are much more likely to be unhappy in marriage and much more likely to think about divorce.[{14}](#)

Women in cohabiting relationships are more than twice as likely than married women to suffer physical and sexual abuse.[{15}](#) Another study found that women in cohabiting relationships are nine times more likely to be killed by their partner than are women in marital relationships.[{16}](#)

Cohabitation is especially harmful to children. First, several studies have found that children currently living with a mother and her unmarried partner have significantly more behavior problems and lower academic performance than children in intact families.<sup>{17}</sup> Second, there is the risk that the couple will break up creating even more social and personal difficulties. Third, many of these children were not born in the present union but in a previous union of one of the adult partners (usually the mother). Living in a house with a mother and an unmarried boyfriend is tenuous at best. Legal claims to child support and other sources of family income are absent.

## **Cohabitation and the Bible**

So far, we have been talking about the social and psychological consequences of cohabitation. Let's turn now to a biblical perspective.

The Bible teaches that the act of sexual intercourse can have a strong bonding effect on two people. When done within the bounds of marriage, the man and the woman become one flesh (Eph. 5:31). But sexual intercourse outside of marriage also has consequences. Writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul said that when a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her (1 Cor. 6:16).

The context of the discussion arose from a problem within the church. A man in the church was having sexual relations with his father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1-3). Paul calls this relationship sinful. First, it was incestuous, which was condemned by the Old Testament (Lev. 18:8, Deut. 22:30). Second, there was no marital union, but instead an example of cohabitation. Paul's admonition to us is to flee sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18).

Sexual immorality is condemned in about 25 passages in the New Testament. The Greek word is *porneia*, a word which includes all forms of illicit sexual intercourse. Jesus taught, "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil

thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:21-23).

Paul said, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:3-5).

Marriage is God's plan. Marriage provides intimate companionship for life (Gen. 2:18). It provides a context for the procreation and nurture of children (Eph. 6:1-2). And finally, marriage provides a godly outlet for sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:2).

In the New Testament, believers are warned against persistent sin, including sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The church is to keep believers accountable for their behavior. Believers are to judge themselves, lest they fall into God's hands (1 Cor 11:31-32). Sexual sin should not even be named among believers (Eph. 5:3).

Living together outside of marriage not only violates biblical commands but it puts a couple and their future marriage at risk. In this article, I have collected a number of sobering statistics about the impact cohabitation can have on you and your relationship. If you want a good marriage, don't do what society says, do what the Bible teaches us to do.

## Notes

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