

It's Just a Piece of Paper

Look at the three myths – and the truth – about living together

Pentecostal Evangel, August 9, 1992

Earl Creps, Ph.D.

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program
in Pentecostal Leadership

Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
Springfield, Missouri

ecreps@agseminary.edu
www.agts.edu

Abstract: Millions of people are cohabiting in the United States. They are motivated by a combination of fear, misunderstanding of marriage, and a genuine desire to develop the healthiest relationship possible. Living together seems like the best option to many, a way of testing a relationship before making the ultimate commitment. If only this were true. A marriage license is more than a piece of paper, and marriage is more than legalized cohabitation. This article makes the case for marriage based on experience, research, and Biblical teaching. Living together is simply an inferior relationship.

"It's voodoo; it's a piece of paper." That is one man's definition of a marriage license. He and his partner are one of 2.8 million American couples who are living together outside of the marriage relationship.

From extremely small beginnings cohabitation has developed into a force to be reckoned with. Approximately 4 percent of couples are what the Census Bureau labels POSSLQ: Partners of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters.

While this statistic does not sound impressive, consider it from a different angle: only 4 percent of unmarried adults may be sharing living quarters today, but 25 percent have done so at one time. With the number of these couples increasing four-fold between 1970 and 1990, one observer noted correctly that "living together without benefit of marriage is edging toward the mainstream."

For the average couple this relationship seems to offer three benefits: reduced risk of divorce, increased happiness in any future marriage, and more freedom for women. Sharon, who has a long-term living relationship with a man, put it this way: "I don't think

we all fit nicely into what society defines as marriage. Society is different today, so people should know about alternatives. The important thing should be what works, not being like everyone else."

While those who hold to the morality of the Bible find such statements shocking, the couples involved clearly do not. To them there are compelling reasons to set up housekeeping without being married.

Above all else, cohabiting couples are pragmatic: they build their relationship around what they believe will work, not around what they have been told is right.

Does it work? All too often this vital question is asked too late. As this question is answered, we will discuss three myths about living together.

- *Myth #1-Living together will reduce our chances of getting a divorce.*

Perhaps the most consistent trait of couples who live together is that the arrangement is temporary. In an extensive 1983 study Blumstein and Schwartz found that cohabitation is virtually never long-term, with almost all couples either getting married or breaking up. Less than 2 percent live together for longer than 10 years. There is little hope then of a lifetime relationship of this sort.

If these arrangements do not last, why do people get involved in them? Part of the answer lies in social trends--like increasing age at first marriage, low fertility rates, and young people living away from parents before marrying. In this climate couples now routinely share living quarters as an advanced form of courtship, in between dating and being engaged.

Unmarried couples are not looking for a marriage substitute so much as a life-style that allows them maximum time together with minimum inconvenience. Since many couples are sexually active, they see no reason not to move in. A fringe benefit is the chance to work out problems that might sabotage a future marriage.

Alan and Deborah, two young people who lived together for a year before marrying, describe their reasoning: "It fit the life-style we wanted--both of us could go to school and be together. It's the best way to get to know each other; we wouldn't wait until after we're married to find out problems."

With divorce claiming a million marriages a year, countless people turn to cohabitation simply out of fear. In the words of one man who chose partnership without marriage: "The idea of something lasting forever was beyond my comprehension."

The issue, however, is not that simple. While divorce is a trauma worth doing almost anything to avoid, it is not clear that living together prior to marriage provides any kind of divorce insurance.

Research conducted in foreign countries has provided mixed results on this question. However, Risman found in his 1981 study that American couples who lived together before marriage did not experience any more or less happiness than those who did not. The key variable was not cohabitation, but the traits and values of the individual couple themselves. Another survey of 13,000 people who lived together prior to marriage found them two times more likely to be divorced 10 years later than their counterparts who did not cohabit. Living together is no solution to the divorce problem.

Ironically, unmarried couples are not immune to the pain of divorce, simply because no marriage license is involved. After breaking off a 17- year relationship with an unmarried man, one woman lamented, "All that was missing was a piece of paper, but that does not make much difference in how it feels." Pain is pain, married or not.

Perhaps these couples need to hear some good news for a change. While too many new marriages do end in divorce, this does not mean that every other home in America will fall apart. Pollster Louis Harris called that idea "one of the most specious pieces of statistical nonsense ever perpetrated in modern times." Very few marriages fall into the "new" category. The truth is that only 1/8 of all marriages will be terminated by a divorce. Married couples in the 90s who are willing to work at it have an excellent chance of staying together.

- *Myth #2-Living together will increase our happiness if we marry.*

We hear a great deal these days about the abysmal state of the American family. A crisis atmosphere has developed. Young couples who plan to marry sometimes feel that cohabiting first is almost a necessity if they are to have any hope of true happiness. Better to work problems out now while things are still somewhat relaxed and flexible. One woman expressed this view: "Marriage just puts more pressure on a relationship."

Does cohabiting take the pressure off? Lawrence Kurdek compared both types of couples and found that "married couples are generally happier with their relationship than their cohabiting counterparts." He noted that unmarried couples often view their relationship as experimental and thus have a lower level of emotional dependency on each other. In other words, happiness seems to depend on making a commitment *before* moving in.

In a 1986 study DeMars and Leslie found that couples who lived together before marriage scored lower on tests measuring communication and satisfaction in marriage. They were also less likely to stay in the marriage in times of trouble and were generally less satisfied with the relationship. It seems that those who were committed enough to wait for a marriage are more often committed to stay together.

Once again it is important to know the good news as well as the bad. American family life does indeed have a dark side that is rife with violence, pain, and brokenness. However, all is not lost. A 1989 Harris poll found that 94 percent of the respondents

were highly satisfied with their family relationships; 86 percent were satisfied with the support received from family members during a crisis; and 85 percent reported happy marriages. Cohabitation seems appealing only when marriage is sold short.

- *Myth #3-Living together will give women more freedom.*

Many women fear that marriage will trap them in permanent subservience to a man. The marital covenant in their view is one of the last vestiges of a patriarchal culture that thrives on dominating women. As one feminist remarked: "The whole thing is based on traditions that are abhorrent. It's all about ownership." Enough women have been treated badly to generate the rage that finds its outlet in this viewpoint.

Is avoiding the marital commitment the road to freedom? Very often the opposite is the case. For example, women with less than a high school education are three times more likely to live with a partner than those with a college education. Also, women without a religious preference are more likely to cohabit than those with a religious preference. Excluding students, one-fourth of women who are not in the labor force live with a partner, while only one-ninth of working women do so. The reason is that a high proportion of cohabiting women have children. They are also more sexually active and more likely to become pregnant than women who marry or live alone.

The less educated, less religious, less employable a woman is, the more likely she is to be living with someone. Thus cohabitation is strongly associated with female powerlessness. Perhaps the best illustration of this is that living together does not even offer physical protection for women. Drawing on a wide range of research, Eastwood Atwater indicated that about one-third of all unmarried people (dating, engaged, or living together) have been involved in physical aggression with the opposite sex.

Kim, one of the victims, described a typical scene. "He became so jealous. He started yelling. Then he shoved me up against the wall, and I pushed him away." The violence often escalates until one partner leaves or serious harm is done.

After moving in with a man, a woman can find that he reaps all the benefits while she carries most of the burdens. When the man tires of the relationship, he simply walks away--often leaving the woman alone with children.

Since this life-style is not based on any external standards, there is little to which the partners can hold each other accountable. The only ethic is happiness. If I am unhappy, what is to prevent me from being violent, unfaithful, or just leaving? Nothing. In this way the POSSLQ life can be a very damaging format for both men and women, sacrificing commitment for convenience.

The good news is that marriage based on biblical values is designed to enhance the freedom and dignity of all involved. A binding and exclusive commitment has a much better chance of screening out partners who wish only to take advantage of others.

Moreover, only the covenant of marriage requires the level of mutual dependence that a man and woman need to endure those times when happiness seems far away. With nothing held back and no options open, everyone works harder. Commitment is just the beginning, but it is the foundation on which everything else is built.

A wedding makes the statement to God that I want to have His very best for my family. The Bible tells us that God's best for couples is one man and one woman together for life within the covenant of marriage. (See Genesis 2:22-25; Matthew 19:4-6.)

Sexual love and the new life that can issue from it are precious gifts from our Creator, so precious in fact that they need to be reserved for one person with whom a binding life-covenant has been made. (See 1 Corinthians 7:2,9; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7.) Sharing these God-given gifts with that special person is one of the things that makes marriage sacred. (See Proverbs 5:15-20.)

Also our Heavenly Father knows these physical forces are simply too powerful to be toyed with. Without limits they run wild and cause tremendous destruction. (See Proverbs 6:20-35; Hebrews 13:4.) Millions of Americans have found this out the hard way. Ask any pregnant teenager or AIDS victim.

If you are a married person, ask yourself. Will my children see things in my home that will motivate them to choose marriage over living together in the 21st century? In a 1985 survey of teenagers, Jeanne Lindsey found that while almost all of them expected their future marriages will last a lifetime, 63 percent of the girls and 53 percent of the boys did not want a marriage like their parents. What will your kids want after watching you?

If you are an unmarried person, there is good news. Family life can indeed be happy and permanent. There is a loving God who can make it so. Don't settle for less than God's best. The reasons for living together just do not stand up to careful scrutiny. If you should choose to spend your life with a partner, God has made a wonderful way-- marriage.