

Living Together Before Marriage

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True to the name, The Christian Center for Culture, Morality and Bioethics, the following is offered as moral commentary. Recently asked to speak on the topic of couples living together before marriage I here offer the following summation:

First of all, I understand "living together" to refer to that arrangement where there is sex before marriage on a continuous basis with someone you like or love and may or may not intend to marry. This is to be distinguished on the one hand, from the one-time "getting carried away in a moment of passion" and on the other, the promiscuity freely practiced with several partners. Biblically, all such practice, including living together, is called fornication. There is something in the issue of "living together" however that is uniquely disturbing, especially on the part of Christians, simply because it mimics, but does not honor, marriage. Indeed, the arrangement violates the very meaning, substance and institution of marriage.

Living together, in this second half of the twentieth century, is probably as much occasioned by the loss of a Christian understanding of marriage as it is by the absence of parental obligation to teach children the meaning of modesty. The parental word has often been reduced to an exhortation to "use protection" or merely to "be careful." How much the reluctance of parents to talk about this issue is due to their own history of being "sexually active" is difficult to assess. Underlying guilt, embarrassment and ignorance of the spiritual significance of the matter is, no doubt, another contributor.

There are some generalizations that can be made about the negative results of living together such as: living together seems to be based more on liking each other than loving each other and sexual intimacy turns out to be a poor risk factor for long-term marriage. In living together there is ultimately a separation of the physical from the relational. Society has reduced sex to physiology at the expense of its meaning in relationship. The woman is usually the one who suffers most from living together before marriage. Abortion, perhaps a contractual condition of their living together, infertility resulting from sexually transmitted disease, and "being used" by men, may scar a woman for years until and unless she is able to work through these issues in counseling.

Relationships after living together change with marriage. This is due in part to the fact that in living together neither party is compelled to work through the issues required to sustain the relationship since each is free to walk away if things don't turn out. The attitude does not prepare people for successful marriages. Attempts to redefine marriage inclusive of gay/lesbian marriages, serial marriages, and other

accommodations to the culture of narcissism leave no way of seeing what marriage is that cannot also be experienced by living together. The key to understanding what is morally wrong with living together lies in its contrast to the biblical understanding of the meaning of marriage as the One Flesh union between a man and woman, portrayed in Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5. In Ephesians, Paul identifies marriage as an icon of our relationship with God. An icon in Microsoft language is "clicked on" to open the window so we can see the reality behind it. The biblical model that God intends for us in building a life-long union is an icon that reveals the nature of the faithfulness of God in relationship to his faithful people. What marriage is, living together is not.

Luther wrote of marriage,

A Sacrament is a sacred sign of something spiritual, holy, heavenly, and eternal, just as the water of baptism, when the priest pours it over the child, means that the holy, divine, eternal grace is poured into the soul and body of that child at the same time, and cleanses him from his original sin.... In the same way the estate of marriage is a sacrament. It is an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest, holiest, worthiest, and noblest thing that has ever existed or ever will exist:[namely] the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. The holy apostle Paul says that as man and wife united in the estate of matrimony are two in one flesh, so God and man are united in the one person Christ, and so Christ and Christendom are one body. It is indeed a wonderful sacrament, as Paul says [Eph.5:32], that the estate of marriage truly signifies such a great reality.