

As Christians, we would readily agree that the inward commitment of a man and a woman to be spouse to each other is central to a God-honoring marriage. Paul, for example, speaks of the ideal marriage as one in which the husband loves his wife sacrificially and the wife returns his love in the form of submission (Eph.5:21-32). This New Testament understanding has its roots in the Old Testament. Inward commitment does form the basis of marriage. But the Bible also points out that in every area of life genuine commitment cannot stand alone. Rather, true inward commitment naturally comes to outward expression. James, for example, speaks about faith thus. "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead....Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" James 2:17-18. In the same way, the inward commitment of two persons for each other ought to find its proper outward expression. This most intimate male-female bond will be expressed in many ways, of course. But initially it ought to be sealed through a public act of commitment, the couple pledging their inward covenant to each other in the presence of witnesses. Sexual intercourse then becomes a pleasurable celebration of the commitment of the two partners, promised to each other in the wedding ceremony.

BUT WHY A WEDDING CEREMONY?

Why is the ceremony the proper outward expression of inward commitment? Despite the focus on inward commitment prevalent in our society, many people still acknowledge that a wedding ceremony is somehow important. In fact, as many as 50-60% of cohabiting couples eventually decide to "regularize" their relationship. And many couples then plan an elaborate ceremony with all the traditional trappings. Why is this? The wedding ceremony is a reminder of the public aspect of the bond between man and woman. Two people who enter this intimate relationship are more than merely "two consenting adults." Rather than being merely a private matter, wider society has an interest in the forming of this intimate bond. This is so, of course, because the union of a man and woman generally forms the context for the conception and raising of children, and thus remains the foundational building block of society. The wedding ceremony, with its publicly witnessed reciting of vows and its legally signed marriage certificate, is therefore an important public declaration that these two people have entered into the intimate bond of marriage.

Yet, our concern as Christians goes even deeper. It involves two additional aspects inherent in the wedding ceremony.

First, a public ceremony serves to solidify inward commitment. The declaration of fidelity to one another in the presence of witnesses can be a sobering experience. While it may be relatively easy to pledge ourselves to each other in private, voicing that same commitment in the presence of others suddenly makes us publicly accountable for our words and actions. At the same time, the public act of commitment to one's spouse and to the marriage relationship offers the couple an event to remember. When difficult times arise and the temptation to bail out overwhelms them, marriage partners can mentally return to their wedding day and remind themselves of the vows they spoke in the presence of witnesses. Such a bold reminder can provide a source of renewed strength to continue to be faithful to the covenant they share.

POINTING TOWARD GOD

The wedding ceremony is important for an even deeper reason. Marriage points beyond husband and wife to a greater reality, namely, to the covenant God seeks to enjoy with us. According to the Bible, God has chosen marriage as a picture of his union with us. The Old Testament prophets express God's desire that Israel be like a virgin bride who gives herself willingly, continually and exclusively to her husband Jer.2:2, so becoming his delight Isa.62:5. And the New Testament writers draw from the bond between husband and wife to help us understand the relationship between Christ and his people Eph 5:21-32. In fact, marriage points forward to the consummation of history and the glorious fellowship we will one day share in God's eternal community Rev.19:7,21:9-10;21:2. Why not merely live together? As a man and a woman enter into and then maintain the marital union, they offer an important, divinely-chosen picture of the great mystery of salvation. For this reason, the intimate bond of man and woman ought never to be entered lightly.

Bob and Joyce decided that the few dollars of rent money saved were not as important as the proper start they wanted to give to their life together. Bob moved back to his apartment. They were baptized and later married. And Bob and Joyce remain a glorious testimony to God's grace.

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WHY NOT JUST LIVE TOGETHER?



SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE



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The Bible clearly teaches that sexual intercourse must be reserved for marriage. Our culture, however says it's okay. In fact, even the laws are written so they make it easy for couples simply to live together without marrying.

So why not simply live together? Well, why not? To find an answer we need to think carefully about the Christian meaning of marriage.

Soon after visiting our church services, Joyce, a single mom engaged to Bob, committed her life to Christ. A few weeks later Bob did too. Our small congregation eagerly anticipated the baptism of the young couple in spring and their marriage ceremony in summer. One week before the scheduled baptisms, however, the church moderator informed me that Bob had moved in with Joyce. As pastor, the task fell to me to do something.

With a bit of apprehension I dialed Joyce's telephone number. Bob's voice came on the line. Could I come over for a chat? Joyce was out, but Bob would be happy to see me. In our face-to-face conversation, Bob revealed their rationale for moving in together was simple: they could save his rent money, which would give them a bit of extra cash to start their life together. Joyce and Bob did not see anything wrong with living together. After all, they were engaged. They would be married in a few months anyway. What difference did it make? In contrast to Joyce and Bob's intention, however, many couples move in together-even have children-without any immediate marriage plans.

SOCIETY SAYS YES

According to Statistics Canada, nearly half of the babies born in Quebec in 1993 were the offspring of women not legally married, the highest rate for such births in Canada. And, whether simply living together or not, nearly 3/4 of Canadian college age young adults are sexually active. For unmarried high school drop-outs, it is even higher. The marriage rate for Canada, moreover, now stands at around 5.8 per thousand population, at about the lowest level it's been since such statistics have been gathered.

Clearly, many people in our society no longer view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, but as an alternative. Why this change? Many researchers suggest that people born since the mid-60's appear to be wary of long term commitments. So they simply live together. Others of us may do it because we have grown used to having now what we want.

Perhaps there is still something of the appeal of the illicit-enjoying the privileges of marriage without going through the legal hoops. Still others may have come to believe everyone is really doing it. Or perhaps it is simply a desire for intimacy with someone that leads some to cohabit without marrying.

Is this the way for us to respond? Is living together merely another form of marriage? What does the Bible say about this topic?

Before addressing this question, we must point out that many social scientist are convinced that cohabiting poses several potential difficulties and therefore that marriage remains the better alternative. Cohabiting relationships are less stable over time than marital relationships. A 1991 study found that 40% of cohabitating unions disrupt before marriage. In fact, because the level of commitment of cohabiting couples is weaker, it is easier for a relatively small problem to drive them apart. And yet because the emotional attachment may be as strong as for married couple, the break-up can be as painful as with a divorce. A 1992 study found that couples who had cohabited prior to marriage reported greater marital conflict and poorer communication than married couples who had never cohabited. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that marriages that began as cohabitating unions have a 50% higher disruption rate than those that did not.

One sobering study found that live-in relationships are more likely to be plagued by abuse and violence than marital relationships. In another survey 40% of cohabiting women reported being forced to endure a type of sex they disliked. And the lower level of commitment to sexual exclusivity places them at a higher than average risk to contract sexually transmitted diseases.

BIBLE'S CLEAR TEACHING

These findings are important. But as Christians, we are more concerned to determine what the Bible says about marriage and cohabitation. The foundational biblical principal can be stated quite simply. The Bible clearly teaches that sexual intercourse must be reserved for marriage. God intends that marriage be the sole context for the sex act. Hence, the biblical writers repeatedly warn against engaging in sexual intercourse outside the context of marriage. (1Cor.6:9,18) But this raises a crucial question. What actually constitutes marriage? Are not cohabiting couples as good as married? Our response must begin

with the Old Testament. People in ancient Hebrew society-the world from the Patriarchs to Jesus-had a quite different understanding of marriage that is widely taught today. To the Hebrews, marriage was not only a private commitment between a man and a woman. It was also a public or social arrangement.

For this reason, the entire community shared in the festivities, which could last a week or longer (Judg.14:12;Gen. 29:28). Within the duration of this protracted celebration, the couple would generally consummate their marriage as a sign to the community that they were husband and wife. In Hebrew society, therefore, marriage involved three elements: the commitment of the man and the woman to be spouse to the other, the public expression of the commitment through the wedding ceremony and the consummation of the commitment in the sex act.

THE BIBLE'S PROFOUND WISDOM

The modern focus on the individual and the elevation of the ideal of romantic love have largely eroded this ancient model. Rather than viewing marriage as a public matter, many people today see it strictly as the domain of two consenting persons. For the foundation of marriage, these people look solely to the private, inward commitment of a man and a woman who are in love. And where such commitment is present, proponents quickly add, the expression of this commitment through the sex act is entirely appropriate.

The modern, privatized understanding of marriage leads almost inevitably to the oft-repeated question, What difference does a piece of paper make? Why worry about a ceremony?

