

STATEMENT ON COHABITATION

Biblical Marriage Relationship

The biblical picture of marriage is a formal commitment and covenant resulting in two people becoming one family that can only be separated by death (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5-6). This act of publicly leaving one's family (ceremony) and becoming "one flesh" involves sexual intercourse (1 Corinthians 6:12). Sex is intended to be enjoyed only within the marriage covenant. From an Old Testament perspective, scripture speaks out against sex outside of marriage 93 times, primarily ending with severe consequences (Leviticus 20:10-21; Exodus 20:14).

Similarly, in John 4:16-18 Jesus speaks of the issue of cohabitation directly. As Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, he referenced the fact that the man she lived with was not her husband. Based on his interaction with the woman, Jesus clearly did not approve of her living situation.

The theme of sexual purity is also repeated throughout Acts and the Epistles. In Acts 15:20, the apostle James instructs new believers to abstain from sexual immorality. Similarly, the author of Hebrews states that marriage must be honored among all and a person's sexual life should be kept pure (Hebrews 13:4). For further support, see Galatians 5:19, 1 Corinthians 6:13, 18; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

Cohabitation in our Society

Webster's Dictionary defines a cohabitating couple as one that lives together and is sexually active.¹ Both the percentage of couples living together and moral acceptance of cohabitation are increasing among evangelical Christians.² The primary reason is fear, derived from a divorce rate that has more than tripled in the last 50 years leaving two generations with a very real fear of broken homes and broken marriages.³ This leads couples to want to "test drive" living together without any formal commitment.

While on the surface it sounds like a good idea, the negative consequences of cohabitation are validated in secular studies. The Center for Disease Control indicates that 80% of all couples who live together and get married will end up divorced⁴. Couples that cohabitated before marriage were found to have less positive interactions (higher levels of unresolved conflict)⁵, which is a reliable predictor of the relationship's future success or failure.⁶ Among cohabitating couples domestic violence increases by five times the amount of

¹ Merriam-Webster Inc., *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2007).

² The Barna Group, *The Buster Report: A New Generation of Adults Bends Moral and Sexual Rules to Their Liking*, Oct. 31, 2006.

³ Bramlett MD and Mosher WD. Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States. National Center for Health Statistics. *Vital Health Stat.* 23(22). 2002. 26.

⁴ *ibid*, 56.

⁵ Kline, Stanley, Markman, Olmos-Gallo, St. Peters, Whitton and Prado, Timing is Everything: Pre-Engagement Cohabitation and Increased Risk for Poor Marital Outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 18. (2), 2004. 311-318.

⁶ John Mordechai Gottman and Nan Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 28.

married couples, as well as abuse, depression, financial hardship, and infidelity of partners greatly increase.⁷ Practically, an individual must be willing to invest a great amount of time, money, and other resources in a relationship that statistically only has a 20% chance of surviving.

Conclusion

Despite growing popularity and practice within the church and culture, we desire to submit to scripture. The findings of secular research notwithstanding, it is WCC's conviction that cohabitation is a biblically sinful decision for individuals and couples. If a couple decides to continue cohabitating, WCC will decline the use of a staff pastor for the marriage ceremony. We also ask that couples who are living together but not having sex to move into separate homes from one another. Scripture tells us to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18) and to place yourself in a living situation that you have the best chance for purity and separation from temptation (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5; Ephesians 5:3; Hebrews 13:4).

It is our observation that couples that honor the Lord in every aspect of their relationship, experience greater oneness, peace, and joy in marriage. If you are currently cohabitating or have questions about cohabitation, the following steps are available at WCC:

- 1) Participation in premarital class
- 2) Completion of the PREPARE inventory
- 3) Sessions with a mentor couple for premarital counseling

⁷ McManus, Michael and Harriet. *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Answers*. Howard Books, New York, NY, 2008, 41-57.