

## **Living Together Before Marriage** **What Christians need to understand about Cohabitation**

By Rev. Donald W. Lare

Between 1960 and 2006, the number of unmarried couples in America increased more than twelvefold – and the increase is continuing. Unmarried cohabitation—the status of couples who are sexual partners, not married to each other, and sharing a household—is particularly common among the young. Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none 50 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

The common myth of our day is that "living together" before marriage reduces the risk of divorce. But instead, statistics indicate that it substantially *increases* the likelihood of divorce - *by 50-80%* - once they marry!<sup>2</sup> Researchers are finding that out of every 100 couples who choose to "live together", 60 will eventually marry, *and only 15 will still be together 10 years later!*<sup>3</sup> That is in stark contrast to those who choose to marry and not cohabit first, where at least 55 (and some figures I've seen indicate closer to 75) out of 100 first marriages will last for a lifetime!

Highly regarded sociologists David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead summarize their years of research on cohabitation in this way:<sup>4</sup>

“... a careful review of the available social science evidence suggests that living together is not a good way to prepare for marriage or to avoid divorce. What’s more, it shows that the rise in cohabitation is not a positive family trend. Cohabiting unions tend to weaken the institution of marriage and pose special risks for women and children. Specifically, the research indicates that:

- Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage.
- Living together outside of marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women, and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children.
- Unmarried couples have lower levels of happiness and wellbeing than married couples.

So, there is a growing body of evidence - from statistics and the secular social sciences - that indicates "living together" before marriage (or as a substitute for marriage) is extremely detrimental to marriage satisfaction and is a major contributor to the erosion of the family in our society.

However, as a Christian and as a pastor, what disturbs me more is the number of Christians who have accepted cohabitation as a lifestyle suitable for Christians, without considering God’s Holy Word and His Will concerning intimacy between a man and a woman.

Marriage, or Holy Matrimony, is the first human institution created and ordained by God. Therefore, I believe very strongly in the *sacred* vows of *holy* matrimony. As a pastor, my desire is to help Christian couples not only *understand* the holy covenant they will make before God at the marriage altar – but also how to *keep* those sacred vows in marriage. As a part of that desire and commitment, I have adopted a “Wedding Policy” for those I will marry, based on three key tenants:

First, I believe that God intends for a man and a woman to live together only as husband and wife, in the sanctity of a marital relationship.

Second, I believe that the wedding service is an act of Christian worship.

Third, I believe that God only intends for sexual relationships to be experienced only within the bonds of heterosexual marriage.

**Therefore, I am compelled by God's Word, Christian conscience, and the ultimate good of those who ask me to marry them, to adopt a policy (attached) of not marrying couples that are "living together" – i.e co-habiting.** *However, I am very willing to talk with couples about this policy and what they may do to be married by me in the church to which I am appointed.*

My Wedding Policy is not intended to say that a *non-Christian* couple who are living together and want to get married cannot or should not. There are numerous public officials and justices-of-the-peace in any community who are willing and able to perform civil marriages - most without even the need for pre-marital counseling. And as for facilities, there are numerous public facilities, social halls, wedding chapels, and outdoor settings that would put many churches to shame with their beauty and accommodations. Frankly, I don't know why a non-Christian couple would want to get married in a church! I would think that they would feel as uncomfortable and out-of-place in a church as a Christian should at a strip joint or crack house!

And as for a Christian couple who choose to live together, I am *not* saying they *cannot* be married in the church. On the contrary, **my aim in the wedding policy is to encourage such couples to understand God's plan for a life-long marriage, and how they can be set free from the burden of sin and guilt they bear.** And those who profess to be Christians and choose to live together before marriage *do* feel guilt over living together. If not, they have slipped so far into sin that they are no longer sensitive to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin in their lives, and are in grave danger of losing their salvation (the unforgiveable sin)! Taking that "baggage" into a marriage is a recipe for heartache and marital disaster!

**What my policy offers is a way for such a couple to be married in the Church, before God, and not have to begin their marriage with a burden of guilt and shame!** And the Way is to follow the biblical pattern of forgiveness and restoration from any sin: *admitting* one's sin to God, *repenting* of that sin, then *receiving* the forgiveness which Christ offers. I might add that biblical repentance means being sorry enough for my sin that I'm willing to quit, i.e. turn away from that sin *from that moment forward*. (See Jesus' response to the woman caught in adultery - John 8:11). Only then can that couple know true forgiveness of their past, release from its guilt, and the new beginning which Christ offers. Additionally, by following this biblical standard, the Church and pastor can participate in the marriage, as God's representatives, with Christian integrity. Such an approach forms an even stronger bond (a spiritual one) between the couple, the pastor, and the church.

Some of my colleagues in the ministry do marry those who live together. And for my first 17 years, as a pastor, I did marry couples who were "living together" - if they would agree to required pre-marital counseling. *It is for those 17 years, I now realize, that I will have to stand before God and give an account!* Though I never felt comfortable officiating at such weddings, I tried to appease my conscience by telling myself that perhaps I could reach these couples for Christ, or at least plant a seed. But out of all the marriages I performed in that time - and the countless hours of pre-marital counseling - I'm not aware of any who have come to faith in Christ, or even been drawn closer to the church, as a result. Perhaps the fault is mine – that I am just not effective in leading people to Christ. But I know my experience has been the same as numerous other pastors, from personal conversations and various articles I've read over the years.

What I've come to realize is, I believe, the reason why so few who live together before marriage do make a commitment to Christ and have successful marriages. *It's because so many churches and pastors have simply conformed to the sinful ways of our culture, instead of being the "light" which God has called us to be* - transforming the darkness of our world (see Romans 12:1-2).

What God has been showing me, over the past decade - through His Word, the history of the Christian Church, personal experiences of myself and other pastors, as well as results of numerous social science studies (by both Christian and secular researchers) is this: **God will not bless sin. He cannot! Because if God blesses sin, He ceases to be a Holy God!**

Time and time again, the people of ancient Israel asked God, in effect, to bless their sin. They "lived together" with peoples God told them to have no part of. They claimed to worship God while also worshipping other gods and idols and, *as a result, God could not bless them*. Instead, they experienced the negative consequences of their own sinful choices. And not only were there *personal* consequences - there were also *societal* consequences. The moral and spiritual fabric of the nation was weakened, families were torn apart by divorce and pre-marital/extra-marital affairs (example: the woman at the well, in John 4, who had been married 5 times and was living with another man when Jesus met her) - and eventually the nation fell apart and/or was over run by conquering armies.

Likewise, **when a church or a pastor knowingly participates in a Christian wedding in which a couple who claim to be Christians are living together - unrepentant and unwilling to turn away from their sinful lifestyle by separating until the marriage - then we are, in essence, asking God to bless sin. And He will not!** Is it any wonder, then, that so few who are living together, and get married in a church, have successful marriages? Is it any wonder that more than 90% of the churches in America are not growing? God simply will not bless sin! He cannot! *And when we, as God's people, try to invoke His blessing on sin, then we become the ultimate hypocrite* - and we destroy our witness for Christ in the world!

The scriptures I base my beliefs on - about not marrying Christians who are living together and unwilling to repent - really fall in two groups:

### 1) "Living together" (apart from marriage) is a sin.

First, let me define what I mean by "living together" (i.e. cohabitation). It is a man and woman who are not married choosing to live together in the same house, have an on-going sexual relationship, but without the commitment of marriage. "Living together" with a member of the opposite sex outside of the marriage covenant is included in the biblical word "fornication" (KJV) or "sexual immorality" (RSV, NIV and most other modern translations) The original Greek word is *porneia* - the root of our word "pornography". In its broader definition, *porneia* includes any voluntary sexual relationship between a man and woman who are not married to each other (which also includes adultery). Since the Bible usually uses another word - *moicheia* - when adultery is specifically being referred to, *porneia* (fornication) generally refers to sexual intercourse between two *unmarried* people. The word "fornication" (or its various derivatives) is found some 44 times in the Bible - *and always in a negative way*.

In the Old Testament (2 Chr 21:11, Ezek 16:15, 26, 29), the Lord uses the negative image of sexual fornication (which is obviously already recognized as a sin by the people) to point out Israel's spiritual sin - giving themselves to other nations and gods, instead of giving themselves solely to God. The New Testament use of fornication, on the other hand, refers almost exclusively to sexual immorality.

Fornication is strongly condemned as sin by Jesus (Matt. 15:19-20; Mark 7:21-23); by James and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:21, 29; 21:25); by Paul (Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:1,9-11; 6:9-20; 7:2; 10:8; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3); the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 12:16; 13:4); Jude (Jude 1:7); John (Rev. 9:21); and Christ on the Throne (Rev. 2:14, 20-21).

One can at least empathize with an unmarried couple who, though not intending to have sexual intercourse, give into temptation in a moment of passion and "go too far". *But "living together" involves a conscious decision to regularly and repeatedly defy God's law prohibiting sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage.* And, as Hebrews 10:26-27 emphatically points out, such a decision makes one an "enemy of God" for which no sacrifice for sin is left!

## **2) Christians - and especially pastors - should not participate in the sins of others.**

In the Old Testament, when God's people entered the Promised Land, God repeatedly warned them *not* to associate with the pagan people who were in the land *or even participate in their practices and rituals.* In fact, God ordered the Hebrews to cast them out of the land they were entering. God had good reason for this mandate. He knew how deadly the influence of immorality and idol worship would be to His people in terms of their relationship with Him, within marriage and family life, and in their society as a whole. When God's people failed to obey Him in this, not only did they experience the devastating effects of these sins (including sexual immorality), they also found themselves alienated from God, for they had already rejected Him!

But for me, the clearest mandate of God, regarding a pastor or church not participating in the Christian marriage of a couple who are living together, comes through the Apostle Paul, as the Holy Spirit inspired him to write to churches not unlike in America today - where sexual immorality is rampant both outside and inside the church.

But now I am writing you that *you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.* With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you." (1 Cor. 5: 11-13 NIV – italics, mine)

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you *were.* But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God... Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. *Flee from sexual immorality.* All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Cor 6:9-11, 16-20 NIV - italics, mine)

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people... For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person--such a man is an idolater--has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. *Therefore do not be partners with them.* (Eph 5:3,5-7 NIV – italics, mine)

And one of the clearest teachings for pastors on this matter comes from Paul's instructions to a young pastor named Timothy in 1 Tim 5:21-22 (NIV - italics, mine)...

I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. *Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.*

While this passage refers most directly to the selection and ordination of new pastors, I believe it also applies to any situation in which a pastor solemnizes vows, *as God's representative*, made by fellow believers - *such as in a Christian marriage ceremony*. Pastors are held to a higher standard in this matter, than the laity, by virtue of their ordination! And that is why pastors, especially, need to be very careful to "not be partners with them (i.e. the unrepentant)" in the making of sacred vows - such as Christian marriage or the sacrament of baptism and church membership.

This is not to say that pastors should separate themselves from sinners. Our call is to reach all people with the love of Christ. Jesus didn't separate himself from sinners – in fact, he even ate with them. But we never see him inviting them into the Temple or becoming a "partner with them" by participating with them in immorality or sacred vows. Instead, He challenged them with the clear truth of God's Word and, when they were willing to repent, offered them God's forgiveness, grace and love.

In Jesus' day and in Jewish society, there was little need to define what was sin or not sin - because the Jewish faith had made that perfectly clear by their adherence to God's laws. So the tax collector, or the Samaritan woman at the well, or the woman caught in adultery didn't need Jesus telling them what was sin or not sin - they already knew it! *And so should every Christian!*

Unfortunately, that is no longer true in our society today. With prayer and Bible reading removed from our schools, the Ten Commandments removed from public places, and attempts to strip "under God" from our nation's Pledge of Allegiance, young people today are growing up in a moral vacuum unlike any we have known before in America. *How will today's generation know there are some "absolutes" unless we, the Church, take a stand for them? How will they know what sin is unless we lovingly tell them - and seek to refrain from sin ourselves? How will young people today know there's a far better environment to have an intimate, ongoing relationship with a member of the opposite sex - or to have and raise children in - than "living together" unless the Church shows them by word and deed - including through its public policies?*

The problem is that the Church has not been as pro-active as we should have been, in recent years. We've largely failed to educate our own children, youth and parents in the dangers of following the world's ways regarding sexual relations and family life, and the blessings of following God's ways. Once that was left up to parents teaching their children in the home. But because so few did, and because churches didn't step in, that responsibility has been delegated to the schools - where Christian moral values are not taught. My hope is that my marriage policy will help spur us to doing what we should have been doing all along, as a Church.

But let me also add that teaching and preaching the truth regarding sexual relations outside of marriage - and then failing to "practice what we preach" (through appropriate church policies and our own actions) - is hypocrisy of the worst kind! To keep from being called "hypocrites", most churches have simply stopped preaching and teaching the truth regarding sexual relations outside of marriage. *And I believe that's why the Church has lost its impact on the morals of our society!* The real answer is for the Church to *reclaim* the teaching of God's commandments - *and start living by them ourselves!*

Jesus indeed condemned the Pharisees for setting up and preaching about policies that they didn't seek to practice. And we stand under that same condemnation if we preach and teach against having sexual relations outside of marriage, but then don't back it up by requiring true repentance (including physical separation and abstaining from sexual intercourse until the wedding) before performing a Christian marriage. That's exactly why such a marriage policy is needed - and needs to be adhered to - so we strive not to be the hypocrites that we (and probably most churches and pastors) have been in the past.

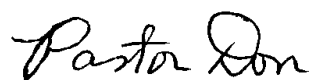
Admittedly, a "policy" will not keep a person from sinning. But one cannot be "set free" by the truth unless one "knows the truth" of God. That's what God's Ten Commandments were intended to convey. And that's what my wedding policy is intended to be - a statement of God's truth to ourselves within the church, and to the world around us.

Yes, we will all sin – and, thank God, He sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay the price for our sins. But as the writer of Hebrews points out:

*If we deliberately keep on sinning* after we have received the knowledge of the truth, *no sacrifice for sins is left*, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. (Heb 10:26-27 NIV)

Again, God's Word is clear: "Living together" is wrong! Like adultery, it is a blantant, very public defiance of God's laws regarding human sexual relationships. This is why I believe "living together", or the acceptance of such a lifestyle, is especially dangerous for the Christian - and why pastors and the Church need to speak out strongly against it in our teaching, preaching, lifestyle, and wedding policies!

In Christian love,



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<sup>1</sup> David Popenoe, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2007: The Social Health of Marriage in America*, The National Marriage Project, Rutgers State University of New Jersey, July, 2007, pg. 19. Internet access: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2007.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, *Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Postmodern Society*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press, 1997, pg. 58-97 (quoted in *Family News from Dr. James Dobson*, Focus on the Family, September, 2002, pg. 2).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.marriagesavers.org/sitems/Resources/Articles/Art001ChristianDeclaration.htm>

<sup>4</sup> David Popenoe, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage*, pg. 3. Internet access: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/swlt2.pdf>