

When Cohabitees ask for help



Many Christian counselling organisations or private counsellors will by now have been asked for help by a cohabiting couple. Those who make contact are most likely to be either couples considering marriage but having some difficulties, or couples in medium to long term cohabitation. First we look at some background.

Reasons for Cohabitation

A recent study of reasons couples give for cohabiting (by Popenoe and Whitehead) came up with several. Firstly, a couple "hope to find out more about the habits, character and fidelity of a partner". Secondly, they wish to test compatibility. Thirdly they desire to avoid getting "trapped in an unhappy marriage". Other reasons given include saving money on rent, especially for a deposit on a house, and "working on personal issues".

The unadmitted reason, especially for men, is to enter a sexual relationship without the responsibility of lifelong commitment. This leads to a situation in some cohabitations where the woman wishes to marry but the man keeps postponing the decision. Other couples have however agreed to cohabit as an alternative to marriage, whether as a rebellion against convention or to save what is envisaged as a vastly expensive wedding, or supposedly to make parting easier than divorce, should it be necessary.

Cohabitation's Unhappy Consequences

There is now much research comparing cohabitation with marriage. A good deal has been collected in books by Waite and Gallagher, and by Morgan. A summary of the latter can be downloaded from the website www.civitas.org.uk Almost every issue of One Plus One's Bulletin contains news of further research which adds to the unfavourable evidence.

Research shows that married men earn more than cohabiting men and are more successful in their careers. Men and women cohabitees are more likely to be unfaithful than those who are married. Cohabitants have more health problems than married people. Violence is more likely in a cohabiting household. Cohabitants are more likely to break up. When those who have been cohabiting marry each other, they are more likely to divorce later, especially if it is not the first cohabitation for at least one of the couple.

Children suffer badly through cohabitation. Parents are far more likely to split up. Children will do less well at school and in work later, be more likely to be involved in truancy, drugs and crime, and have a lower chance of having a lifelong happy marriage themselves.

It is a great pity that these researches do not receive more publicity. That would help to counter the continuous presentation of people in public life with their "partners", which has made cohabitation a norm.

God's Plan: Marriage

Cohabitation is not presented in the Bible as an acceptable second-best. God's plan is that sex should be kept for marriage and that marriage be a lifelong relationship. He knows best.

People need to follow their Maker's instructions. The results of research described above underline that He is wiser than today's opinion formers. Biblical teaching on marriage flows from Genesis 2.24, reaffirmed by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 19.5: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh".(NIV) The order is "...leave ...be united ...become one flesh". The Hebrew translated "be united" means literally to stick together. So it is not surprising that Jesus added: "So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate". There is much more on chastity in the Bible, which is summarised in the resource "Chastity – The Teaching of The Bible" on this website.

The act which was regarded as marriage changed during Biblical times. In Genesis 24.66, Isaac simply took Rebekah into his tent. In John 2, as in the parables in Matthew 22 and 25, marriage included a feast. Likewise today marriage is celebrated in different cultures in different ways, but it is clear in any culture what constitutes a marriage and what does not. The Bible itself knows nothing of drifting into marriage, and nor do most other cultures.

Slipping Standards

Sadly even some Christians' standards are slipping, and they are viewing cohabitation as an acceptable second-best to marriage. Living together has been described by some as "Biblical marriage", but as it lacks the key element of commitment it is certainly not marriage. There is of course a particular pressure to compromise in one of those ways when one's own relations cohabit.

Selwyn Hughes addressed this area helpfully at the Association of Christian Counsellors' (ACC) 2001 Conference. He said: "The distinctions between right and wrong today are (generally speaking) becoming blurred....What is needed in the field of counselling today is an organisation of believers committed to Scripture, inspired by the Spirit of God, who will stand against the culture and will not be swept along by it. I pray that ACC will be that organisation If (it) does not allow the Bible to speak and be the final referee in everything, then it will eventually lose its sharpness and become an organisation of good people, but not Godly people.... Most of all, you will lose favour with God. "Do not let the world squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within". (Romans 12.2 J B Phillips)"

He went on to remind the Conference of the illustration of the frog which was put in hot water and leapt out, but when he was put in cool water which was slowly warmed, he stayed put until he was boiled alive.

The Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah: "Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them", (Jeremiah 15.19). Some will remember the verse given to Eric Liddell in "Chariots of Fire": The Lord said: "Those who honour me, I will honour", (1 Samuel 2.30)

The new ACC Statement of Ethics and Practice repeats from the old Statement that the ACC recognises the authority of Scripture in all areas of belief and practice (4.4.1). We need to heed the Word of God on chastity and marriage.

Other Damaging Consequences

There are other consequences of the acceptance of cohabitation as an allowable second-best. It is the acceptance that men and women can break up and start again with as many partners as they think necessary, until they find the "right" one. However, whenever a cohabitation breaks up it leaves a trail of emotional damage. Sexual intercourse is designed to develop emotional bonds between a married couple. The more that a sexual bond is made and then broken, the less an individual becomes able to sustain a long term relationship.

Current liberal attitudes are also responsible for the recent mushrooming of sexually transmitted infections. The liberal response to that is to stress the use of condoms. That will reduce the risk of infection, but it will certainly not eliminate it.

The acceptance of cohabitation also encourages couples to get into bed at an early stage, without getting to know each other. It is sex early and think later. In "Love Must Be Tough", chapter 16, Dobson describes twelve steps in the gradual bonding process of a man and a woman, of which the last is sex. A couple should proceed slowly. Rushing the steps by beginning to kiss too early, or

starting sex when you fall in love, often leads to breakdown later on. Love needs to be tested to discover whether or not it is merely infatuation. Chastity before marriage and an unhurried period of engagement should give a couple time to make sure they are right for each other. Today's couples also have the excellent advantage of being able to do a pre-marital questionnaire (inventory), PREPARE (see below), which will help them discover so much more about other.

Downward Spiral

At the moment Britain, together with some other Western nations, is caught in a spiral, in which increasing rates of cohabitation, and consequent increasing rates of relationship breakdown before or after marriage, are having a knock-on effect for the next generation. Fewer children are experiencing a stable upbringing, which in turn is leading to more relationship breakdown in the next generation. What can we do to help break out of this, and what can we do to help those who are having difficulties in their relationship?

Restoring the M Word

The words "marriage", "husband", "wife", "spouse" are all gradually being dropped in public life and being replaced by "couple", "relationship", "partner". **Christians and Christian organisations need to resist this firmly.** Counselling organisations can do this by continuing to include the word "marriage" in the list of areas in which they offer help, rather than including it under the rather more general heading "relationships" (and certainly not under the heading "couples"). It would be good if counselling organisations could go further and become involved in prevention (as some are) as well as in cure, i.e. running marriage enhancement courses, as well as offering counselling. The "Marriage Enhancement" resource on this website describes a variety of ways of offering enhancement, e.g. The Marriage Course from Holy Trinity Brompton.

Helping Cohabitees in Difficulties.

When a cohabiting couple ask for help with their relationship, as Christian counsellors our hope ought to be not only that we can give them that help, but that we can encourage them towards making the lasting commitment that God desires of them in marriage. However, in some cases, when there are no children of the partnership, or where there is domestic violence, our hope may be to encourage them to see that separation, at least for a time, is the best course for them.

The definition of Christian counselling in the ACC's "Ethics and Practice" is "that activity which seeks to help people towards constructive change and growth in any or every aspect of their lives, through a caring relationship and within agreed relational boundaries, carried out by a counsellor who has a Christian world view, values and assumptions".

That definition encompasses a range of different ways of helping a cohabiting couple. Helping them to listen to each other, and to understand each other, and to discover and address root causes, and to see what each can do to improve the relationship and to solve particular difficulties is basic, as is helping each to see how they can help their partner to enjoy the relationship and thus strengthen it.

However, I do not think we have been well served by the emphasis of some counsellor trainers on "non-directive counselling". I agree with Sheldon and Ames that there is no such thing. Indeed, the ACC definition above does not exclude giving advice, guidance and even direction, as well as counselling, if this "would help people towards constructive change and growth".

That is not to suggest that the subject of marriage should be raised in the first or second counselling sessions, unless the clients themselves raise it. If they are simply wanting help with their "relationship", they may be put off from returning for further sessions.

But the issue of commitment will probably come up before long in some shape or form. Lack of commitment will often be one of the causes of their present problems. Another cause may be the desire for the lasting commitment of marriage by one (more often the woman) and not the other. This means that a decision not to raise the subject of marriage in counselling is akin to tying one hand behind one's back.

Sometimes a counsellor has said: "I don't impose my values on my clients". However, it is not a matter of imposing, but of encouraging a couple to find the best way forward. When the Lord Jesus met the cohabiting woman at the well (John 4) He drew her attention to what was wrong in her life, albeit as part of demonstrating His Messiahship. We need to follow His example. Also if we fail to point a couple towards considering marriage, we give the impression that we accept their relationship as all right for them.

None of this is to suggest that marriage in itself will solve the problems in their relationship - marriage is no magic wand. Indeed, a couple who have been cohabiting need extra help in marriage preparation, particularly in making the shift from provisional commitment to lasting commitment. Some but not all marriage preparation courses recognise this.

It is, however, important to build the caring relationship between counsellor(s) and clients, to which the ACC definition refers, before introducing the subject of marriage, if the subject will not be welcome to one or both of the clients. It may need several counselling sessions before that point is reached.

Use of a Questionnaire

As when helping a married couple, counsellors will usually find it helpful to use the ENRICH Questionnaire (inventory) provided by PREPARE/ENRICH. This will help both the cohabiting couple and the counsellor(s) discover the couple's issues much more quickly than most forms of counselling. PREPARE/ENRICH run training days in different parts of the country, as needed. See their website www.prepare-enrich.co.uk for news of them. The use of an ENRICH questionnaire will help a couple to resolve issues on their own, as well as reducing counselling sessions. This will enable counsellors to shorten their waiting lists and to help more couples.

In Conclusion

May the Lord guide us as we seek to help cohabitees in a way that is truly helpful to them, and which is honouring to Him, and which helps to turn the tide of moral breakdown in our nation.

Edward Pratt

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