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COUPLES LIVING TOGETHER OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

Some Biblical Principles

If a man and woman are considering living together as a couple without having taken legal and public wedding vows, my counsel is grounded upon the convictions stated below. Wisdom is needed concerning when and how these matters are communicated, but this biblical content informs my counsel.

1. Marriage is a life-long commitment between one man and one woman (“as long as we both shall live”). It is a “covenant of companionship” in which they vow to “leave” all competing relationships (i.e., marriage is the primary relationship second only to God), and to “cleave” (a binding commitment), and to “weave” (being “one flesh” – sexual intimacy and a growing unity in all of life).

Genesis 2:24 For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. 25 The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Matthew 19:6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

Questions to ask: What is the level of your commitment to each other? Does it exclude all other suitors? Will you stay in this relationship even if you reach a point that don't feel “in love”?

2. Marriage is a public commitment, not done in secret. Other people witness the couple's solemn vows in which a new family unit is formed. Believers “walk in the light,” not in darkness where the devil works. If a couple attempts to hide the facts, there is usually sin and guilt involved.

Ruth 4:10 I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess... as my wife.... Today you are witnesses!"

John 2:1 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

1 John 1:6 If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Questions to ask: If you live together without being married according to the practices of your church and the laws of the state, would you have to hide any information from any person or any organization (e.g., parents, friends, government agencies)? Are you tempted to deceive others, either by speaking untruths or by failing to speak truth (withholding information others have a right to know)?

3. Marriage is a legal commitment. Because it is a creation ordinance (instituted before Adam and Eve fell into sin) made for the benefit of humankind, civil governments have a legitimate right and responsibility to protect and regulate it.

Genesis 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Romans 13:1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities....4 For he is God's servant to do you good.

Questions to ask: Are you handling your relationship in such a way that you are blameless before God and people? Are you living in such a way that you cannot be legitimately accused of violating legitimate civil laws? An example could be avoiding marriage because of potential tax penalties.

4. For Christians, marriage is a church commitment. Professing believers ought to be members of a particular church, living under the spiritual oversight of particular church leaders. When ethical gray areas arise because confusion about how to apply timeless biblical principles within changing times and cultures, believers should seek the counsel of their spiritual “overseers” and generally should follow that counsel unless there is clear biblical reason not to do so.

1 Corinthians 7:39 ...She is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Questions to ask: Are you a member of a biblical church? Have you sought out godly counsel about your relationship from your spiritual leaders and weighed that counsel in light of Scripture? Or are you avoiding counsel from those you suspect will disagree with your opinions?

5. Marriage is a commitment ordered by God. The moral Law of God—the Ten Commandments, summarized in the two great commandments and expanded in the New Testament—expresses God’s will for humankind. The Law cannot save us, but it provides our timeless standard and our direction.

Psalms 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Exodus 20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

Luke 10:27 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Ephesians 5:3 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....³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Question to ask: Does your relationship conform to the moral Law of God in both attitude and action, both negatively (avoiding sin) and positively (actively doing what is right)?

6. Marriage is a commitment that must glorify God. Believers must make their decisions in light of their highest priority—to honor and glorify God, living as “ambassadors of Christ.” At its very heart, marriage expresses the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

2 Corinthians 5:20 We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

Ephesians 5:31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Question to ask: Regarding our decision whether or not to live together, what will be the likely long-term impact upon our relationship? What will be the impact on other people? Will both believers and unbelievers be drawn to Christ by our attitudes and actions?