

SEXUAL PURITY AND COHABITATION

Heritage Christian Church (HCC) values the marriage union as God's intended basis for a life-long relationship between a man and a woman as well as for the nurturing of family life. But what is marriage according to the scriptures? God's definition is found in 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* (NIV). From this passage, four things become apparent:

- **Marriage is exclusive.** The Bible speaks of one man and one woman being joined together. No matter what the culture says: Not two men, or two women, but a man and a woman being united in Christ is God's ideal.
- **Marriage is to be publicly recognized.** This commitment is not a private thing but involves leaving father and mother and moving away from your family of origin to live together as a couple.
- **Marriage is to be permanent.** Note that it says the husband cleaves to his wife, not in a temporary relationship but in a lasting one. Jesus said, "What God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matthew 19:6) When we, merely out of our own selfishness, seek to divide what God joins together, we are rebelling against God!
- **Marriage is to be consummated by sexual intercourse.** For it is God's intention that the two become one flesh.

This union is more than just two bodies coming together. It is a joining of hearts or a union of spirits. It is a relationship that is very satisfying, especially when God is in the center.

If you do a quick read through the Song of Songs, it speaks about a married couple who enjoys a healthy sexual life, and it reminds us that

sex is supposed to be fun and enjoyable. God created sex and it is something to be appreciated and enjoyed in the context of marriage.

It is a well-known fact that physical intimacy within marriage is good for your emotional and physical wellbeing — it literally raises the endorphin levels to increase our feelings of happiness.

Why Wait Until Marriage?

The purpose of this document is to encourage single adults to embrace the biblical standard of sexual purity. Perhaps you are already starting to feel guilty as you think about the sexual encounters of the past. Some of those experiences may have been unwanted. One study reports that “one in five girls and one in ten to twenty boys will be sexually abused during their childhood. Other studies suggest that one in three girls and one in four to seven boys are sexually abused before turning eighteen years old.”¹ Also, many children had their innocence taken away by being exposed to pornographic material at an early age.

Sex outside of marriage can be defined as all forms of sexual activity including: homosexuality, premarital sex, bestiality, masturbation and lust. In Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus calls His followers to a higher standard than the surrounding culture. He states: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

According to Jesus, it is wise to avoid the physical act of adultery but it is also essential to avoid mental and emotional adultery as well.

The good news is this: If you have already been involved in premarital sex, according to 1 John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness* (NIV).

When we become followers of Christ, God forgives and cleanses us from all unrighteousness, but we cannot continue to sin and expect

God's richest blessings. We can experience God's best for our lives by committing ourselves to Him and choosing to follow His path.

Also, it is important to note that pornography is addicting and it reduces men, women and children to sexual commodities. In marriage, porn damages the self-esteem of your spouse. They wonder, "Why am I not enough for my partner?" Excessive interest in online porn strongly contributes to divorce. Jill Manning writes: "Research reveals systemic effects of internet pornography that are undermining an already vulnerable culture of marriage and family."²

There are a number of reasons to postpone sex until marriage.

1. God says, "it's not best for you."

Hebrews 13:4 says, "*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*" [emphasis added] In other words, marriage is a good thing and sex in marriage is pure and holy in the sight of God. But, sexually immorality is something that invites His judgment.

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. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 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 (Ephesians 5:3-6, NIV, emphasis added).

When Paul the apostle wrote these words, he used the Greek word "porneia" which is translated as "sexual immorality." Porneia is a general term that means any and every kind of illicit physical sexual activity. It seems to include adultery, fornication (or sex between unmarried couples), prostitution, homosexuality, and incest.

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 (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV).

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 Corinthians 6:18-20, NIV).

We are consistently told to avoid all forms of sexual immorality (Romans 1:24-25). The Old Testament also reveals that sex outside of marriage leads to devastating results (see Leviticus 18; Abram and Hagar, Genesis 21; David and Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11; Judah and Tamar, Genesis 38; King Abimelech and Sarah, Genesis 20).

The Bible says we're to be holy or totally set apart for God and His purposes. When we become sexually involved with someone that we're not married to, the scripture says we are sinning against God and we're sinning against our own bodies. We're also sinning against any future marriage partner that individual may choose.

For those of us who follow Christ, it is God's plan for us to walk in sexual purity. The great writer, C.S. Lewis once said, "*There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.'*"³

2. Sex before marriage hinders the development of sacrificial love.

When sex becomes the focal point of your dating relationship, the other aspects of love get minimized or depleted — they won't develop

properly. The fact is, you can base your relationship on lust, or on genuine, sacrificial love. The problem with lust is, it is never satisfied! It always leaves you wanting more and it causes you to be consumed with your own selfish desires, not what is best for your partner.

The foundation for a good marriage is two people, whose identities are firmly established in Christ, giving the gift of sacrificial love and genuine friendship to each other.

3. It undermines trust.

If you can't control your sexual urges before you get married, how will your partner have any confidence that you won't stray sexually, after the wedding has occurred?

The Bible says that the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. When dating, it is best to have the self control to channel the passion and romance that you are feeling into non-sexual connections.

4. The risk of pregnancy.

There is always the risk of pregnancy before you're prepared to have kids. And, of course, when a new life is conceived you immediately become responsible for another human being!

Marriage and Family Pastor, Ron Hitchcock, reports: "The out-of-wedlock rate for pregnancy is more than 35% of births today. More than one-half of all women under the age of 30 who had children in America in 2007 were unmarried. Out-of-wedlock pregnancies are linked to virtually every social pathology that we battle as a society. There is a direct correlation between out-of-wedlock pregnancy, poverty, drug use and dropping out of school."⁴

5. The problem of STD's.

By maintaining sexual purity, you protect yourself from the twenty-eight known sexually transmitted diseases as well as the many strains

of HIV. Your partner may not even know that he or she is a carrier of these diseases.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Condoms offer much but not total protection against sexually transmitted diseases. Consistent and correct use of the male latex condom reduces the risk of sexually transmitted disease (STD) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) transmission. However, condom use cannot provide absolute protection against any STD."⁵ It is also important to note that some sexually transmitted diseases can cause infertility and cancer.

6. You're robbing your partner.

One of the greatest gifts that we can give a marriage partner is the gift of our virginity. Isn't it best to reserve that gift for the one you will marry?

7. The issue of comparison.

Sex outside of marriage often brings guilt and, if the relationship breaks up, there is heartache, frustration, and regret. If you enter into marriage having had one or more previous partners, you cannot help but compare your new spouse to the other relationships.

Even when you're making love with your spouse, you can easily have flashbacks of experiences with former partners. Such mental pictures are hard to shake and they are very distracting to the marriage. In fact, sometimes those former encounters are even glamorized in our minds and they can cause a lot of dissatisfaction with your present situation.

Unfortunately, there is one more thing that occurs — your husband or wife cannot help but wonder if they are sexually as satisfying as previous partners. Even if you say, "Honey, you're the greatest lover of all," your mate is still tempted to wonder if you're just saying it to make him or her feel better or because it's really true.

8. An example to your kids.

If you and your partner are blessed with kids some day and you couldn't wait to have sex until marriage, then how can you expect them to? In effect, you lose the moral authority to counsel your kids in that direction, if you yourselves weren't able to pull it off.

Children benefit from parents that are fully committed to the biblical values of marriage and family life.

9. A better chance of success.

The common perception among many people today is that living together before marriage is a "training ground" for future marriage. Many believe that cohabiting is the best way to become prepared to marry and stay married. However, the evidence indicates quite the opposite. In fact, a strong argument can be made that cohabitation prior to marriage actually reduces your chances for successful marriage!

Sex-Related Questions

How far can we go sexually?

It is important to honor God in your singleness and to embrace His plans for you as a couple. When dating, it is best not to remove any clothes and not to touch or stimulate each other's private parts to produce arousal. The point is, we have to be willing to forego some pleasure now as we prepare for a better future. In the heat of the moment, it is hard to restrain yourself from sexual activity. Instead, we need to call on God's grace to sustain us and help us stay away from sinful situations.

How will we know if we are compatible sexually if we don't try it out before we are married?

Ron Hitchcock states: "It is a myth to say that men and women won't be compatible sexually. Men and women do respond differently and

with different intensity to sex. But, it is not a compatibility issue — compatibility is a learned process. Physical intimacy is a gift from God and it becomes more appreciated the longer the couple is together. Fulfilling sex is not based on frequency, intensity or youth as the American culture dictates. Sex is a gift in marriage that does not diminish with time, but only becomes better and mutually beneficial.”⁶

We are in love and in a committed relationship. Isn't it okay that we have premarital sex in this context?

God's standard is to reserve sex for marriage. Furthermore, a couple is not married just because they express a commitment to each other. To be legally married you have to be declared husband and wife by someone with a license to marry and the paperwork has to be turned in to the county court.

We have already been sexually intimate so it is too late. We might as well continue on in what we're doing.

Would you make this statement about any other sin?

- I have already lied — it is too late to change.
- I have already stolen something, so I might as well keep on doing it.

Your future spouse belongs to God and He wants you to love him or her with His holy love. It is essential to repent or turn away from sinful behavior, trusting Christ to not only forgive us but to also give us the power to make better choices in the future. Please don't make the mistake of giving in to sexual pressure and then assuming that sexual purity is a hopeless cause.

I have strong sexual desires in my dating relationship toward my fiancé/boyfriend/girlfriend. Does God see this as normal?

Certainly, as you grow together as a couple, it is normal to have sexual desires. The question is, will we selfishly give in to our desires and do something that dishonors the Lord, or will we walk blamelessly before Him in purity and truth?

We need to stay close to God and draw on the power of His Spirit to overcome sexual temptation. It is necessary to take time for God each day in Bible study and prayer to strengthen our spiritual lives. And, for most of us, to win this battle, we will need one or more persons to hold us accountable.

What about Cohabitation?

Heritage Christian Church defines a cohabiting couple as a man and woman living together without legal or religious sanction. Many couples are cohabiting these days and we believe it is important for us to address this issue.

God is wise and He knows that a marriage creates a more stable and nurturing environment for both couples and children than a live-in relationship. At Heritage, we urge each couple to seek God's best in their relationship — to put Him first. The Bible says that God's love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control are available to both husband and wife as we live in union with His Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

In contrast, a cohabiting relationship will struggle to sustain itself due to the high value that the couple places on *independence* rather than *interdependence*. A Christ-centered marriage with God's approval is always more stable than a relationship without Him involved. What a wonderful blessing to have access to God's unlimited resources and to know that your relationship can continue to grow over time. In contrast, cohabiting couples are much less stable and rarely last.

Hitchcock states: "Abstinence before marriage will allow couples to establish their sexual identities in God. They will be less likely to carry the devastating affects of sexual brokenness into their marriage."⁷

Reasons and Responses Regarding Cohabitation

Couples have personal reasons and unique circumstances that guide their decision to cohabit. Some of these couples have become homeowners or co-signers on a lease agreement. Others have become

parents together or they are co-parenting children from former relationships. The following rationale is often used to justify cohabitation:

1. *Testing compatibility: "We want to be sure that a cohabiting relationship is successful before we get married (and therefore avoid a divorce)."*

In groundbreaking research that examined the effects of cohabitation on the long-term quality of marriage, the Alabama Policy Institute (API) conducted a study of more than 1,300 married couples. The results are eye-opening. The study shows that the longer a couple cohabits before marriage, the less satisfied they are with their marriage.

John Hill, API's director of research, said, "Specifically, couples who cohabit before marriage tend to be more depressed, more dependent and are more likely to believe their relationship will end as compared with married couples who did not cohabit." The API study indicates that in times of stress and conflict couples who cohabit are more likely to handle their conflicts with heated arguing, hitting and throwing.⁸

USA TODAY reports: "Cohabitation has increased so rapidly that the data about it haven't kept pace with the growing numbers, researchers say. The latest U.S. Census for 2008 reported 13.6 million unmarried, heterosexual couples living together. Researchers say 50% to 60% of couples who marry today lived together first; some note that 70% of young adults will cohabit. Most couples who live together either marry or break up within two years."⁹

In March of 2010, the New York Times cited a study done by The National Center for Health Statistics, which did extensive research and found that "couples who live together before they get married are less likely to stay married."¹⁰ In other words, the divorce rate is typically higher for cohabiting couples who later marry.

Dr. Patrick Schneider comments, "One-sixth of cohabiting couples stay together for only three years; one in ten survives five or more years"

and “the rate of divorce among those who cohabit prior to marriage is nearly double that of couples who marry without prior cohabitation.”¹¹

A cohabiting couple does not operate on the same commitment level as a married relationship. In a Christian marriage, couples make vows and pledges to honor God and to remain faithful to their spouses until death. These vows make up a covenant of marriage and are made before God, family, friends and the couple’s community of faith. In addition to a covenant, each marrying couple agrees to the conditions of a civil contract at their wedding. The civil contract requires them to share finances, debt, assets, parenting responsibilities, etc.

A cohabiting relationship, on the other hand, operates according to a cause and effect mentality. If it works, the partner remains; if one’s needs are met, he or she is willing to continue investing in the relationship. Responsibility, accountability and financial security are absent from this type of relationship. One partner can leave if they wish or be asked to leave at any time. Therefore, cohabitation is not a true test of marriage since the very thing that makes marriage successful — a lifelong commitment — is missing.

2. Economic advantages: "We need to live together (or remain living together) for financial reasons."

The following financial scenarios often motivate couples to live together:

- Couples desire to minimize their monthly expenses by pooling their resources.
- Couples become dependent on each other’s finances and it makes it difficult to move apart even when their relationship is unhealthy. Simply put, their finances are enmeshed with one another.
- Couples cohabit for estate planning purposes.
- In cases where seniors are living together outside of marriage, sometimes the reason is to take advantage of tax laws or perhaps to continue receiving social security.

While economics may play a major role in a couple’s decision to move in together, we should not allow economic pressures to override God’s

plan for our lives. Often it leads to couples becoming dependent on each other's finances and being unable to make a decision to move apart, even if their relationship is unhealthy. God desires to bless us in ways that are so much greater than simple economics. Even before they are married, couples need to pursue a lifestyle that will meet their spiritual, relational and family needs. A cohabiting relationship is a short-term response to a long-term need.

3. Companionship: "I don't like being alone."

Our culture has placed a high priority on flexibility and independence in a relationship. Ironically, these values only increase the loneliness that many are trying to avoid by living with someone. Each party has a natural desire to love and be loved. Unfortunately, these deep desires can only be fulfilled through a genuine commitment to one another, not by maintaining one's independence.

Couples learn to love more deeply only when they pledge themselves to a marriage covenant "for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, 'till death us do part." In a cohabiting relationship, the couple is not willing to engage on that deep of level, at least not yet. So, when adversity comes, it is not uncommon for those relationships to be torn apart.

The truth is, according to Waite and Gallagher, many cohabiters "value independence more than married partners and have more individual freedom."¹² This leads to lower levels of relational satisfaction, more depression, less financial support from their live-in partner and an increase in the risk of unfaithfulness and abuse of themselves and their children.

4. "We are not sleeping together, so it is okay. It can't be wrong to live together if we are not having sex."

Sex is clearly a temptation for most cohabiting couples and the scriptures mentioned above reveal the high value that God puts on sexual purity. He is not trying to steal our joy — He knows what is best for our lives and He wants to protect us from heartache and pain. Our

church is prepared to help couples experience the blessing of walking in obedience to God and His Word.

Christians who abstain sexually while in a cohabiting relationship are nonetheless creating a contradictory picture of a God-honoring relationship. In First Thessalonians 4:3, Paul the apostle says: *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit* (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, NIV).

Then, in the very next chapter, Paul says, "*abstain from all appearance of evil*" (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV).

First Corinthians 10:31-33 reads, "*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God — even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.*"

Outsiders won't assume that the cohabiting relationship is platonic — they assume that you're sleeping together. And when that happens, the couple is being a negative witness for Christ since cohabiting is a contradiction to the faith and practices of the church. As the text says, our goal should be to glorify God by acting for the good of others, so that they can be saved and to avoid those things that would cause another Christian to stumble into sin.

5. *"It is better for the children for us to be living together. He/She will end up becoming their mother/father anyway" and/or "It is just the thing to do these days".*

First, it is *not* better for the children! When kids are young, they may seem to be okay with their parents' significant other living under the same roof, but they will question it when they get older. If a parent wishes to instruct his or her children in the spiritual values of Christianity, it is important to make every effort to live by those values even when they seem impractical.

Second, children suffer more than adults from the effects of a divorce. When parents bring their significant others into the home they run the risk of creating an emotional attachment to someone who is not fully committed to them. Youngsters are very susceptible to the devastation of growing attached to someone only to have that person walk out of their lives. Emotionally speaking, it feels like a divorce!

Third, everyone is *not* doing it. While there are more people than ever cohabiting, many are choosing to live apart until marriage. All relationships go through times of testing and strain, and the fact is, it is always better to have the blessing of God and the help of His Spirit rather than to operate independently. The Lord wants to fill our lives with His presence and peace, but we must cooperate with His plan.

Cohabiting couples do not live in isolation. Their choices are a witness to whether the source of their love is rooted in human effort alone or rooted in something greater, namely, the divine love of God!

6. Love: "We are in love and we are going to be married anyway."

A cohabiting relationship is contradictory to the definition of love that we find in biblical passages such as in First Corinthians 13: *"love is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud. Love does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

God does not want His children to settle for anything less than His definition of married love. Couples who choose to cohabit are essentially saying to each other, "I may one day love you enough to

marry you and may one day love you according to First Corinthians 13, but until then you must be willing to settle for something less than that.”

Choosing to live apart from your significant other until you are legally married is a choice to love like God teaches us to love. You never have to look back with regret when you honor the Lord and put Him first in your relationship. He wants us to know His love and to learn how to share that love in the context of a committed relationship.

At Heritage Christian Church our goal is to support couples in their quest to have the best possible relationship and we believe, when it comes to living together, it is best to wait until marriage.

For all cohabiting couples: Please read the guidelines mentioned below and feel free to contact the Family Life ministry of HCC with questions. Our prayer is that you will know you are loved and that we’re here to assist you as you discern God’s will regarding marriage.

Marital Guidelines for Cohabiting Couples

Cohabiting couples can be married at Heritage Christian Church by adhering to these guidelines:

1. Agree to live apart from each other and to abstain from sexual contact before marriage.
2. Choose to go through the pre-marital process of Heritage. For more information, please see *The Marriage Ministry of Heritage* document.

A rare exception to these guidelines is permitted in extreme circumstances at a pastor’s discretion. For example, if a cohabiting couple has produced dependent children, it may not be wise to separate. Certainly it is not good to have couples split up (until marriage) if their only alternative is to live in an unsafe environment with dangerous relatives or friends.

If a couple is below the poverty line or if they own a house together, these are the kinds of practical issues that should be prayerfully sorted out with a pastor, perhaps in consultation with a Christian counselor.

To sum up, God loves us dearly and He wants what is best for our lives. We can never go wrong when we go His way!

¹ Jason Nance and Philip Daniel, "Protecting Students from Abuse: Public School District Liability for Student Sexual Abuse Under State Child Abuse Reporting Laws," *Journal of Law and Education* (Jan. 2007): Vol. 36, Iss. 1, pg 33.

2 Jill Manning, "Pornography's Impact on Marriage and the Family," *The Heritage Foundation* (28 December 2008). <http://www.heritage.org/research/family/tst111405a.cfm?renderforprint=1>.

3 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971).

4 Ron Hitchcock, found in *Abstinence and Sexual Purity*, citing a talk from Pastor Rich Nathan, "Becoming Sexually Wise," (19 October 2008)

5 Male Latex Condoms and Sexually Transmitted Diseases. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Online. 12 March 2009. <http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/brief.html>

6 Ron Hitchcock, *Abstinence and Sexual Purity*, 2010.

7 Ron Hitchcock, *Abstinence and Sexual Purity*, 2010.

8 Hill, John R, Evans, Sharon G., "Effects of Cohabitation Length on Personal and Relational Well Being," *Alabama Policy Institute Vol. API Study, Number . August, 2006*. Page(s) 1-13.

9 http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-07-08-living-together_N.htm

10 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/03/us/03marry.html>

11 Dr. Patrick Schneider, *LifeSite News*, <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2007/oct/07100902.html>, Oct. 9, 2007, citing Bennett, W.J., *The Broken Hearth: Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family*, 2001.

¹² Waite, L & Gallagher, M. "The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially." 2000 New York: Doubleday.