



Thinking Through the Temptation of Cohabitation

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Men and women clearly need each other and naturally gravitate towards arrangements of mutual support and lives of shared intimacy. Because women are frequently the immediate guardians of the next generation, they have a particular need to ascertain if there will be steady support from a man prior to giving themselves sexually to him. The bond of marriage is ordered towards securing this critical element of ongoing commitment and support. Cohabitation, where a man and woman decide to live together and engage in sexual relations without marriage, raises a host of issues and concerns. Sex, of course, has a certain power all its own, and both sides may be tempted to play with it in ways that are potentially damaging, all the more so when they decide to cohabit.

One concern is that cohabitation can often become a rehearsal for various selfish patterns of behavior. It perpetuates an arrangement of convenience, popularly phrased as, "Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?" Even as many women try to tell themselves they are "preparing" for marriage by cohabiting with their partner, they may sense the trap of the "never ending audition" to be his wife, and become intuitively

aware of how they are being used. Cohabitation also invites the woman to focus on lesser concerns like saving on rent or garnering transient emotional attention from her partner by moving in with him and becoming sexually available.

Even as a woman becomes attuned to the power of sex from an early age, she can eventually fall prey to an easy mistake. Aware that sexual intimacy is also about bonding, she may suppose that by surrendering this deeply personal part of herself through cohabitation, she now has a "hook" into a man and his heart. While such an arrangement can trigger various platitudes, (that he "cares for her," "loves her", etc.), experience shows it doesn't typically help him reach the commitment reflected in those all-important words, "Will you marry me?"

Cohabitation, in fact, is a relationship that is defined by a holding back of commitment. The notion that it somehow allows both parties to "try out" a marriage beforehand is conveniently make-believe, a kind of "playing house," mostly because it's impossible to try out something permanent and irrevocable through something temporary

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and revocable. As Jennifer Roback Morse has described it,

“Cohabiting couples are likely to have one foot out the door, throughout the relationship. The members of a cohabiting couple practice holding back on one another. They rehearse not trusting.”

They don't develop the elements crucial to a successful marriage, but instead keep their options open so they can always beat a hasty retreat to the exit. Or as Chuck Colson has put it: "Cohabitation -- it's training for divorce." Many studies confirm that the divorce rate among those who cohabit prior to marriage is nearly double the rate of those who marry without prior cohabitation.

Some researchers believe that individuals who cohabit are more unconventional to begin with, being less committed to the institution of marriage overall and more open to the possibility of divorce. Others suspect something more insidious -- that living together slowly erodes people's ability to make a commitment by setting them up into patterns of behavior that work against succeeding in a long-term relationship.

Both may actually be true.

Various risks correlate strongly with cohabitation. Compared with a married woman, a cohabiting woman is roughly three times as likely to experience physical abuse, and about nine times more likely to be murdered. Children also tend to fare poorly when it comes to these live-in arrangements. Rates of serious child abuse have been found to be lowest in intact families; six times higher in step families; 20 times higher in cohabiting biological-parent families; and 33 times higher when the mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend who is not the biological father. Cohabiting homes see significantly more drug and alcohol abuse, and bring in less income than their married peers. Cohabitation is clearly bad for men, worse for women, and terrible for children.

“Marriage,” as Glenn Stanton notes, “is actually a very pro-woman institution. People don't fully realize what a raw deal for women cohabitation is. Women tend to bring more goods to the relationship—more work, more effort in tending to the relationship—but they get less satisfaction in terms of relational commitment and security.” While marriage doesn't automatically solve

every problem, it clearly offers a different and vastly better set of dynamics than cohabitation for all the parties involved.

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