

## MARRIAGE AND CO-HABITATING: EFCCL'S POLICY

We are living in an era in which the sacred covenant of marriage, as created and designed by Almighty God, is getting a bum wrap. A recent Pew Research Center study revealed that **39 pct. of Americans now think that marriage is an obsolete institution.** Yet as the Church of Jesus Christ, we cannot allow the fickle swayings of man to supersede the clear and unwavering teachings of Scripture.

God's Word tells us that marriage is a covenant relationship – a life-long commitment made between a man and a woman in the presence of God and their families and friends by which they devote themselves entirely and exclusively to each other (Prov 2:17, Mal 2:14). Genesis 2:24 tells us this relationship is one of holding fast to each other – of adhering to and sticking together no matter how difficult the challenges or how severe the obstacles.

In recent decades, co-habitation has gradually become culturally acceptable to a growing segment of U.S. population. People of all ages are being misled into believing they can take a “test drive” in this sacred relationship and have an easy and inexpensive “off-ramp” if it doesn't work out. Such attitudes and behaviors grossly distort God's blessed design for the marriage covenant and give license to what Scripture specifically calls “sexual immorality” or “marital unfaithfulness” (Matthew 19:9, Mark 7:21).

Co-habitation bypasses the vows and commitments expressed in the accountability structure of a marriage ceremony. It tends to focus upon the physical and the sexual part of a relationship, thus blocking the emotional covenant that God intended should link a man and woman together for life and make them so intensely valuable to each other that they mutually treasure and cherish their partner. Only will marriage itself communicate the specialness that God designed to set two lovers apart unto each other from every other person on the face of the earth. It is His gift of a sacred soul-mate companionship to those who will follow His will and His pathway.

Because there is no marriage license to legally tie a co-habiting couple together and create pressure for them to work through difficulties, co-habitation also poses the practical issue of entanglement of possessions, finances and even children such that the easy escape by one or the other partner may potentially lead to horrifying consequences for the other partner.

As believers in Jesus Christ, co-habitation should never be viewed as a viable option that God would bless. We are instructed in Ephesians 5:1-3, *“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.”*

Two passages of Scripture from 1 Thessalonians are especially helpful in addressing this issue of co-habitation. 1 Thessalonians 5:22, as phrased in the King James Version,

commands us, “*Abstain from all appearance of evil.*” The New American Standard Version words it this way: “*Abstain from every form of evil.*” The New International Version says, “*Avoid every kind of evil.*” When a couple is co-habiting, there is an appearance and a perception issue, whether it is reality inside that home or not. It would be commonly assumed by families, friends and neighbors that they are relating physically to each other in the privacy of their home as if they were married. If they profess to be Christians, they are therefore openly sharing a testimony that betrays God’s laws and God’s will.

The second passage, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, tells us, “*It is God’s will that you should be holy; 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.*” Clearly this passage declares that God’s standard is sexual purity and the siren is sounded that two Christians who become sexually involved outside the bounds of marriage are fundamentally wronging and taking advantage of each other. Furthermore they are subjecting themselves to God’s stern warnings and potential discipline if they don’t re-align themselves to His will. God’s blessing cannot be upon them!

Oftentimes we are confronted with arguments from co-habiting couples that they are not sexually involved but rather are living together for the sake of convenience or to save money or to mutually support and provide companionship for each other. While at face value these may seem like plausible possibilities, they nevertheless present the perception issue and a testimony that gives more than a hint of sexual immorality. And such a relationship runs against the grain of God’s clear teaching that followers of Christ should “*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).

It is vitally important that as the spiritual leaders of EFCCL, we reclaim a biblical moral vision for the marriage covenant, which is intended to bear image of the sacred relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church. Therefore it is the expressed policy of the Elder Board to forbid EFCCL’s pastors from officiating at weddings of those who persist in co-habiting until the time of their marriage. In the desire to express God’s mercy, however, the officiating pastor is urged to work patiently and lovingly with the couple to walk a journey of reconciliation with God and with each other that would include the following God-honoring steps: (1) Finding a solution to their living arrangement such that co-habitation ceases and the door is opened to a fresh start in their relationship; (2) Repentance that seeks both God’s and each other’s forgiveness; (3) Physical separation until the night of their wedding; and (4) Pre-marital counseling that can lead forward to a marriage that God can shower with His blessing.

Should a couple be willing to take these steps, it would allow our entire church family to joyfully celebrate with them God's blessed gift of the covenant of a committed, Christ-centered marriage that will bring glory to His name.

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