

Membership Guidelines For Co-Habiting Couples

The ministry of Jesus as documented in the Gospels portrays Him frequently spending time with those who were considered by the religious establishment as outside the realm of God's love and outside the boundaries of their religious communities. Luke 15:1 reminds us that "*tax collectors' and 'sinners' were gathering around to hear him.*" When the religious community criticized Jesus' association with those who practiced lifestyles considered shameful, Jesus responded with three successive parables demonstrating that God takes extraordinary measures to seek and save those who are lost.

In Matthew 9:9f Jesus was criticized for eating with tax collectors and other notorious sinners. When asked why he would associate with such people, He responded, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*" Jesus made clear by the associations He chose that God deeply loves all people, which confirms our belief that our church should be open to all people for worship, instruction and care. We are called to welcome with open arms all people who need to hear God's message of love and forgiveness.

Yet Jesus also maintained high standards for those who would believe and follow him by saying such things as, "*Go and sin no more,*" and "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*" When we become followers of Jesus Christ, our sinful lifestyles are intended to pass away as the newness of the Christ life establishes itself and the Holy Spirit transforms our sinful hearts. When people desire to express their commitment to Christ through church membership, this higher standard of Jesus for followers especially comes into focus.

In EFCCL's new By-laws, one of the qualifications for membership says this: "**Confess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their only Savior and give evidence by their conduct that they are living in fellowship with Him.**"

As Elders and Pastors, we believe that we must not condone sin and must hold up a Biblical standard of righteousness for our people. We consider those who make the commitment of membership to have a sacred responsibility to model the Christ life. Among the lifestyles in our culture that seems to be attaining broader acceptance is that of co-habitation of a man and woman apart from marriage. Yet such a lifestyle does not conform to biblical guidelines of conduct that would give evidence of living in fellowship with Christ and of modeling the Christ life.

Two passages of Scripture from 1 Thessalonians are especially helpful in addressing this issue. 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 that they are relating physically in the privacy of their home as if they were

married. Yet, because they are not married, the Bible declares such physical relations as “fornication” or “sexual immorality” and a violation of God’s will and desire for the blessed relationship of a man and a woman.

The second passage is 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 which reads, *“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 wronging and taking advantage of each other as well as subjecting themselves to God’s stern warnings and potential discipline if they don’t re-align themselves to His will.

In 1 Corinthians 6:18-20, we are further commanded to *“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.”*

Given these Scriptural teachings, it is the established policy of the Elders of the Evangelical Free Church of Crystal Lake to withhold membership from applicants who are co-habiting but who are not married. It would be the earnest and loving desire of our Elders and Pastors that such believers separate from such living and/or sexual arrangements in heart-felt repentance and re-focus upon God’s will for their lifestyle testimony. If indeed God is calling them to a lifetime marital commitment, then they are very much encouraged, after such separation, to begin pre-marital counseling with one of our pastors with the hope and desire that as a church family, we can celebrate God’s blessed gift of the covenant of a committed, Christ-centered marriage that will bring glory to His name.

Though this may seem like a “hard teaching,” as 1 Thessalonians 4:8 reminds us, *“...he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”*

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