

What does the New Testament Say about Unmarried Couples Living Together?

- Conventional wisdom:
 - The practice of “living together” has been considered normal for some time, although before 1970, it was socially inappropriate.
 - A popular idea is that living together is fine, just get married before having children.
- Inappropriate responses from the doctrines of various churches
 - Some churches banish such couples, which makes teaching difficult.
 - Most lump “living together” with “sexual immorality” without investigating what the original author would have included under such a general heading.
 - Many churches adopt a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy, which works if you don’t have connectedness between Christians.
- What is marriage?
 - Until the state started taxing marriage (marriage licenses), the generally accepted documentation was from a church.
 - After the Protestant Reformation, this became more confusing.
 - As the US expanded westward, church endorsements were often unavailable.
 - In many countries today, only the government license is recognized as valid.
 - Many have believed that a couple was married when they had intercourse, with or without a license, which leads to more confusion.
 - None of these ideas have anything to do with the New Testament.
- Marriage in the first century
 - The Roman Empire encompasses many cultures, so many practices existed.
 - In general, marriages were arranged, not romantic.
 - In the “civilized” parts of the empire, they had government marriage licenses.
 - Marriage was a contract consenting to live together.
 - Divorce was as easy as marriage, needing only seven witnesses.
 - Living together was not common for contractual reasons (dowry, property, inheritance), generally not morality reasons, although there were cultural exceptions.
 - Sex before marriage was viewed differently by different cultures in the Empire. The Roman and Greek cultures did not care. Jewish culture did.
- New Testament passages that address marriage
 - Ephesians 5:22 – 33
 - The purpose of marriage between two Christians is to illustrate the relationship of Jesus and His church.
 - This does not address unmarried couples (living together), a married couple neither of whom are Christians, or a married couple in which only one is a Christian.
 - 1 Peter 3:1 – 7
 - Peter addresses primarily marriages with one Christian, how the other partner may be converted.
 - This passage does not address unmarried couples.
 - No New Testament passage mentions the desire for children as a reason for marriage.
- The only New Testament passage that addresses this issue: 1 Corinthians 7

- (7, 32 – 35) Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that married people have responsibilities, so they are limited in how much time and effort they can devote to the Kingdom of God. In some cultures, marriage was culturally necessary.
- (1 – 6, 9) Paul recognized that men and women have sexual desires. The proper place to express those desires is in marriage. Sex is normal, appropriate, and a part of life for most people. But, it has its place: in marriage.
- (28, 36 – 38) Cultural stigma may be attached to being single (especially in Jewish culture), so marriage may be easier, but still not necessary.
- (8 – 9, 39 – 40) Widows are encouraged to stay single. But if their sexual desires were strong, then they should marry again; just pick a Christian, not a pagan.
- Why?
 - This chapter is in a section (chapters 5 through 7) on public perceptions that could hinder the spread of the gospel.
 - This section contains the line, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.” (6:12) The point of Paul’s teaching in this section is not right or wrong. The point is whether it builds up and whether I’m just deceiving myself into thinking that my favorite practice doesn’t control me (“I can quit drinking whenever I want.”)
 - (6, 25 – 26, 32, 35, 36) Paul just wants to avoid pitfalls. Keeping sexual desire inside the context of marriage avoids problems for the individuals involved and makes them better able to spread the gospel.
 - Cultural perception should be considered.
- What are the pitfalls?
 - Bart Simpson, “Marriage? I’m not ready for marriage. That’s a three-year commitment.”
 - If the couple living together has a mutual commitment, the only difference is the government endorsement. Why not broaden the appeal of the gospel by demonstrating how relationships are supposed to work (Ephesians 5)? I’ll buy the license.
 - I see no difference between several live-in arrangements and several divorces except that the lawyers get more money. Both show a lack of commitment. If you say you are committed, do what committed people do; get the license.
 - Is there really a reason to wait? If sexual desire is not a component, then don’t live together. If sexual desire is present, then get married. It’s not rocket science.