

ISSUES

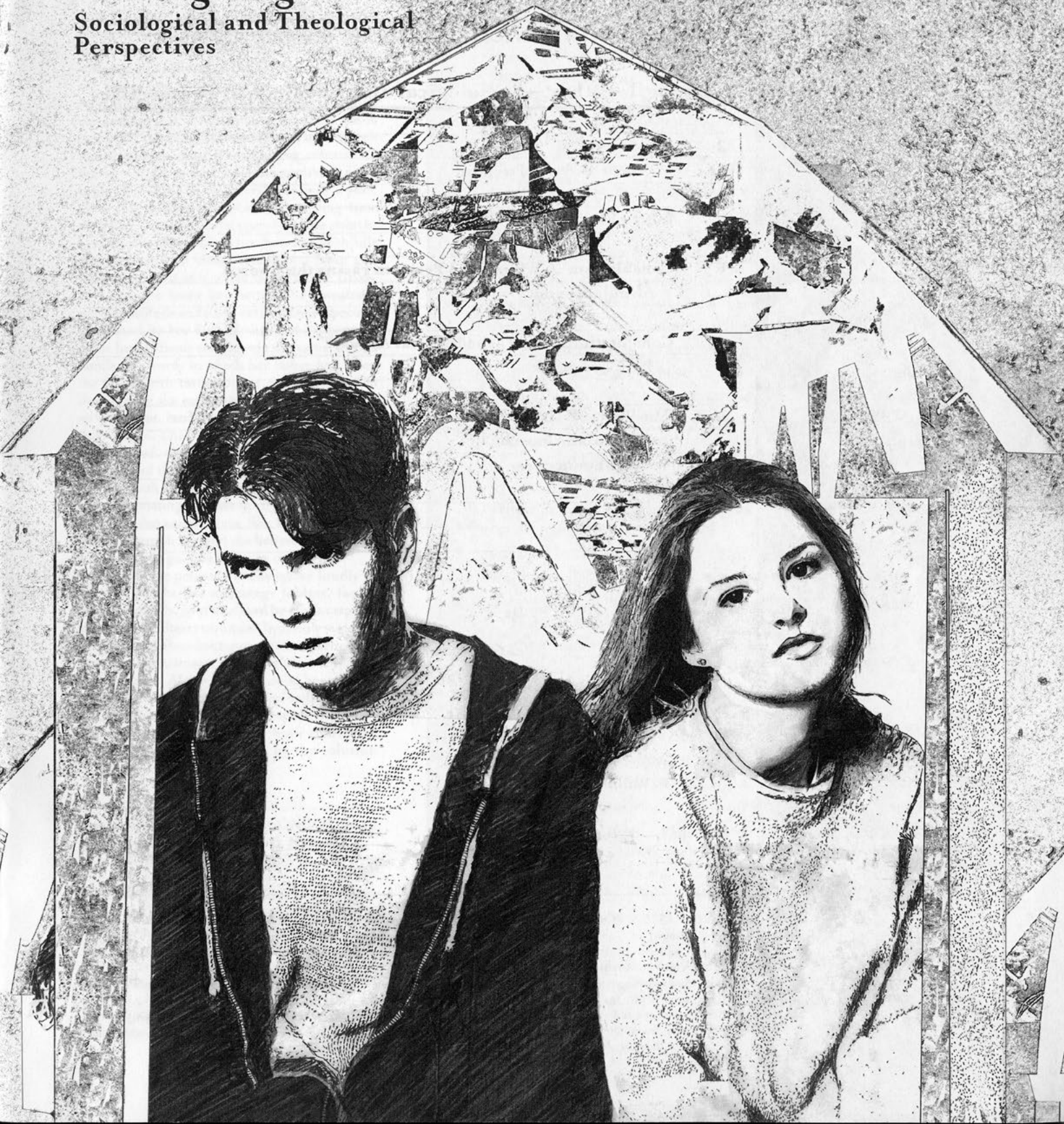
IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Fall 2002

Volume 36, No. 2

"Living Together"—

Sociological and Theological
Perspectives



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editorials

Cohabitation, A Viable Alternative to Marriage?

SEVERAL YEARS AGO following a Sunday service, a young woman in my congregation approached me for advice. As church ushers directed members to coffee and doughnuts in the narthex, she quickly slid into a pew and joined me. Because I am a mental health therapist who provides Christian counseling, it is not an unusual event for me to be sought out after Sunday services by a church member who wants a counseling referral or desires a quick consult on a life problem. I had been a member of my church for only a year, while this young woman had been a long-time member. During the first year at my new church, I could not help but notice how she faithfully attended services, always sitting in a front pew leaning forward as if to get closer to the Cross. As I came to know her better, she revealed a positive attitude and a zest for life. I was especially heartened by her faithfulness and exuberance given her difficult childhood: she came from a family of divorce in which her father had ruled the family with intimidation and violence. On that Sunday she explained to me that following an argument, her mother had kicked her out of their home. She then lost her job. Homeless, unemployed, and possessing little in savings, she had decided that her best option was to move in and live with her boyfriend. She acknowledged that cohabitating with her boyfriend was not part of God's plan and was a sin. She was experiencing financial problems, and she believed she had no other place to go. She began to cry.

This young person's needs spoke loudly to me that bright fall morning: jobless, facing mounting bills, overwhelmed by adult responsibilities, her heart wounded by family violence and parental abandonment, she sought healing through an intimate, live-in relationship with a young man. Alone and unsure of herself, she clung to the companionship and validation her boyfriend offered. Her tears spoke volumes: she was a conflicted person, both comforted but also rendered desperate by the solution of cohabitation.

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reflections

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT COHABITATION is not the best way for a man and woman to prepare for marriage. The divorce rate in the United States for couples who cohabitated before marriage is 50 percent higher than for couples who did not live together before marriage. Cohabitation is sinful and displeasing to God. Then why is it that many couples today, including Christians, live together before marriage?

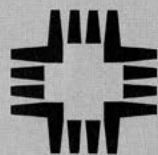
The purpose of this edition of *Issues in Christian Education* is to explore issues relating to cohabitation by Christians. Attention is given to a sociological analysis of living together, theological perspectives on marriage, and marriage education in congregations today. One of our pastors recently noted that only one of ten couples enrolled in a pre-marital counseling class listed different addresses. While the number of members of the church who are cohabitating is increasing, there is a silence in church literature, a seeming lack of an intentional response by the church, and an absence of educational efforts directed toward the significance of the state of marriage as intended by God.

Numerous reasons have been posited for the major increase in cohabitation: 1) It is a trial marriage, attempting to make certain that the future husband and wife are compatible before actually marrying; 2) A pastor has suggested we are today living in a period of "cultural cluelessness," verified by some Christians who claim no one told them cohabitation was wrong, somewhat akin to our U. S. armed services policy of "Don't ask, Don't tell"; 3) A sociologist has labeled cohabitation as a form of "playing house"; 4) A counselor was told by someone seeking help, "I know it's wrong, but it's just something I do"; 5) It was reported at a recent wedding that one of the relatives stated, "She'll make a nice first wife for Jason."

Indeed, the blame for rampant cohabitation can be placed on the participants themselves, their parents and families, pastors, teachers, the church, and network television where shows implicitly advocating premarital sex outnumber by eight to one programs promoting sex during marriage by a male and female.

May this edition of *Issues* enlighten our readers to the gravity of the problem of cohabitation, including members of our Lutheran congregations. I also pray that you will be encouraged and strengthened in your resolve, if married, to let you and your spouse shine brightly by example to others of God's great gift of marriage, emphasizing in Jesus Christ what each of us contributes to a God-pleasing union of husband and wife, instead of what a partner can get out of marriage. Without question, living together before marriage does not work. Finally, following contrition, forgiveness is a free gift from our God. He never "draws a line in the sand" with humans on one side and God declaring from the other side, "This time you have gone too far."

Orville C. Walz, President



As exemplified in the case of my young friend, there are many critical needs that drive the decision to cohabitate with another adult. For some, cohabitation serves as a pilot study for marriage. Although there are few guarantees in life, such people require first-hand evidence that committed and formalized relationships might work for them. For others, the single life—although offering independence and freedom—fails to meet their emotional and physical intimacy needs. Middle-aged adults, wearied by past marital failures, may choose cohabitation, hoping they can spare themselves additional pain and disillusionment. Sometimes the choice of cohabitation reflects some people's needs to safely box or compartmentalize their identities. A few months ago, I met a Christian woman who was cohabitating and professing comfort with her choice. Responding to my caring challenge, she became frustrated as she addressed the gaping disconnect between her professed belief and her behavior. At a loss for a good explanation, she finally threw up her hands, exclaiming, "I know it's wrong—but it's just something I do!"

It is my experience that people, whether they are Christians or not, turn to cohabitation as a self-protective measure, albeit a faulty one. I also believe people choose cohabitation because they have been hurt, and as victims of sin, turn to relational sin as a means of remedying their original wound. People living in this fallen world do struggle and search to find sufficient, life-sustaining resources, answers, and hope. Despite our desperate trail blazing, we often fail in our quest. With our hearts hardened and our ears closed to God, we again and again choose the wrong map in charting our course to salvation.

As I reflect on the troubling allure of cohabitation, I am reminded of Jesus Christ's encounter at the well with the Samaritan woman. Although Jesus had not met her before, he knew all about her life and her sin of cohabitation. Yet before he informed her of all that he knew, he offered her relief: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks this water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14). Jesus presented this woman, mired in sin, the ultimate resource and solution: the Holy Spirit—all fulfilling, all life-giving, all eternal. As we respond to the practice of cohabitation, Christ's model is powerfully instructive. As we confront the sin of living together, we must also acknowledge the pain of the person and embrace that same part of the person that possesses the potential to be touched and transformed by Christ. Like Christ, we, too, must generously offer the wonderful gifts of the Lord, holding nothing back.

As Christians encounter the sin of cohabitation, we should also address our own relational sin. As Christ himself spoke, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). As

we display deep concern for cohabitating couples, Christians should equally reflect on the true state of their own relationships, especially marriages. Do we honor and respect our spouse? Do we strive to communicate and work through our differences as a married couple? Together do we celebrate the blessings of life that are ours? Do we let go of our slate of resentments and forgive each other? Do we place our marriage at the foot of the Cross? As Christians allow their marriages to be refreshed with new life by Christ, that uplifted and purified bond becomes living water to those who desire faith, hope, and love. Christian marriage can shine brightly like a beacon, drawing seekers to its example and its gifts. Relational like Christ Himself, Christian marriage touches the lives of other people, acting as a conduit for the Lord, pouring the Holy Spirit into the lives of many people. Marriage then is an instrument of the Lord. In his book titled *Connecting: A Radical New Vision*, Larry Crabb, a Christian counselor and a psychologist, writes:

Powerful people can see the hidden life that is already poured into another by God and . . . they pour out what is deepest and truest and noblest within them into the soul of another; and they do it with a clear vision of what that other person could become as the life of Christ is nourished and released within.

When I was a child in the late sixties and early seventies, the idea and practice of cohabitation, although new and largely untested, seemed a viable alternative to marriage for many in the secular world. Three decades later the practice of cohabitation has become a routine and normative practice in our society. Nonetheless, now having reached middle age, my personal and professional experiences tell me that the seemingly bright promise of cohabitation has become deeply tarnished. In my circles, I listen to innumerable people tell their life stories, and resoundingly I hear the same message: "Living together doesn't work." The decade and century are still young, and Christians have the time and the opportunity to offer people something better. As Christians let us provide the ultimate alternative: let us offer the Living Water of God, and let us shine with brightness and warmth in the beauty and promise of Christian marriage.

Rachel Ann Murray
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Don't Ask, Don't Tell

SHE SAT ACROSS FROM ME, a teenager from a neighboring parish, pregnant, alone, scared and ashamed to face her own pastor. Coming to the end of her story but not her tears, she blurted, "Nobody ever told me that it's wrong for two people to live together without being married."

Rationalization? Excuse? Passing the blame? Perhaps. Yet I can't help but wonder if she wasn't saying something else. Knowing her pastor to be a conscientious and godly shepherd, I was certain he had covered the subject of cohabitation and related subjects in confirmation classes. More than likely, she had heard his words, but our culture had drowned them out almost as soon as they were spoken.

Polls indicate that many people, including those who call themselves Christians, do not believe that cohabitation is morally wrong, or they are unsure. After all, high-profile celebrities, who define what it means to be successful and who are role models for millions of kids growing up, are doing it. Many college students do it; even some politicians. And television talk shows take it for granted.

Pop-culture icons like Madonna and basketball greats like Larry Johnson are setting the standard. The result, as Barbara DaFoe Whitehead of Rutgers University points out, is that we are living in a period of "cultural cluelessness." Cohabitation has lost its stigma as we 21st Century moderns set sail upon uncharted waters. How has this come about?

Vow-shy twenty-somethings, as well as their younger and older counterparts, aren't hearing the truth about cohabitation because next to nothing is being said about it, even in the church; at least not by all of us, all the time, consistently, almost matter-of-factly.

When I was growing up, it was not unusual for my dad or especially my mother to say, "We don't do that in this family. Maybe someone else lives like that, but we don't!" I admit the possibility that I may be missing something, but I am not often hearing such statements in the Christian family, in its Lutheran branch, or in our nuclear families, which are, in fact, the little church.

To be sure, parents here and there confront the issue, but many (the majority?) do not, feeling little support from the church. When a mother of several teenagers recently thrust at me the question, "Who's preaching sermons or talking about cohabitation in a Law/Gospel context?" I honestly had to answer, "Not many."

Yes, I know pastors, Christian educators, youth ministers, and other ministers of the church who brave an honest, Scriptural assessment of this growing trend. Some of them even go one-to-one, eyeball-to-eyeball about the subject with students. Nonetheless, if you start asking around, you might get the idea that when it comes to "shacking up," a "Don't ask, don't tell" policy is in effect.

And, yes, surely church leaders and congregational boards are addressing the issue as they address issues like wedding policies, assimilation of people into the family of Christ, the spiritual formation of the young and the discipleship of adults. Elders of one church even adopted a policy requiring that couples must stop living together before they may be married before the altar of God. But is such leadership widespread and consistent?

Would anyone get the idea that Christians are committed, not only to talking, but also to doing whatever it takes for families to become and remain whole and healthy?

Martin Luther calls the church "the house of the mouth." The Lord Jesus warns His bride neither to add to nor to take away from the Word given to us (Revelation 22:18-19), but to build on all His words (Matthew 7:14ff). Our church has done just this, with significant effect, with regard to sanctity of life issues. Let's do the same concerning relationship and family life issues, including sexual ethics and marriage.

Jesus shows us how. One day He met a woman five times married who was, at the time, living with a man who was not her husband (John 4). First, He established a relationship of respect and trust with her, and only then did He speak directly and truthfully, yet gently, to the matter of her empty life. It turned her life and the lives of the people of her village in a new direction, God's direction.

We can do the same: parents, doing their part, backed up by their ordained and commissioned church leaders, with 100 percent support from lay leaders, all speaking about the dire consequences when we live outside of God's will. Let's be telling one another and whoever else will listen to the full message of the Scriptures about cohabitation: It's sinful, being what the Bible calls "fornication"; it does not create an alternative family style; it is not a trial marriage. Let's hear honest and comprehensive reports of the findings of the social and health sciences about the destructive effects of cohabitation on women and children and on society. Let's speak the truth, all of it, in love.

And, above all, let's speak the Gospel of the second chance, as Arnold Kuntz calls it, to those who are clueless about the sinfulness and the dangers of cohabitation, as the Old Testament churchman, Micah, spoke to his generation about pertinent issues of his day. Micah pulled no punches. His words were strong, confronting and direct. Yet never, never did he say that you can come to the end of God's love. You can never encounter a line drawn in the sand with God on the other side declaring, "This time you've gone too far."

"Who is a God like you," Micah marvels, "who pardons sin and forgives the transgression. . . . You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. You will have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18-19). The troubled teenager needs to hear this. So do older couples, living together outside of marriage because of economics; and the countless number of people who have parceled themselves out, piece by piece, to all takers; and the rest of us.

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Playing House

WHETHER IT IS ONE-HALF or two-thirds of American couples who live together before they are married, the number is as much as eight times higher than in the 'free love' era of the late '60s and early '70s. Such a change in a fundamental structure of American life demands study, and study it has received. Within the past two years, major research projects at the University of Chicago, Penn State, and Rutgers University have led to a single conclusion: *the longer you have lived together before getting married, the shorter the time you will live together after you are married.* For those of us who value romance, desire a stable two-parent home for our children, or want to avoid a lonely old age, then, cohabitation seems like a distinctly bad idea. Add to this the Bible's unambiguous call to faithfulness and sexual purity, and you might wonder why anyone you know would even consider such a losing proposition.

As couples present themselves for pre-marital counseling, the depressing norm seems to be that they are unashamed of their pre-conjugal cohabitation and unaware that it would even be an issue. They tell me that living together is one of the stages each couple expects to go through on the way to lifelong commitment. Since the beginning of June, therefore, one of the required homework assignments for each of my couples has been a visit to marriage.rutgers.edu, where they can read for themselves how destructive cohabitation can be to a relationship. (It is even more devastating to women and children in households where the adults never marry. Poverty and domestic abuse are each at least three times more likely in non-conjugal cohabitations than they are in marriage.) Sadly, even when couples agree with the research findings, no one moves out. When I ask them why they persist in their peril, when God's commands, sociological evidence, and scholarly research all tell them that living together is wrong, the couples furnish me with answers I have been hearing since I became a pastor in 1986. Do any of them sound familiar?

We are saving a lot of money: one apartment, one utility bill, etc. That money will come in handy later on.

The God-pleasing route is rarely the easiest or the cheapest. This is not the first generation in which faithfulness to God has had a price. Besides, is it wise to save money on the rent by endangering the relationship?

Living together is like a dress rehearsal for marriage. We just need to try each other out.

Marriage is simply different from living together. Anyone can be on best behavior for a while, maybe even for years, but no one will be able to pull it off "until death do we part." One of the primary tasks of marriage is to create a safe place for conflict, something cohabiting couples rarely accomplish. A main focus of many couples who cohabit is keeping the other person from walking out, and effective approaches to communication and

conflict resolution sometimes fail to develop. Patterns which develop while "playing house" can leave a couple ill equipped for handling the real problems that crop up in the several decades of a marriage.

We don't want to be making a mistake.

Then don't start with one. And don't fool yourself into thinking that this is one of those areas where "practice makes perfect." Being married differs from living together in content, context, and kind. The most significant difference is this: unlike cohabitation, marriage has the blessing of God.

I'm an adult, and no one has the right to tell me what to do with my body.

Some people say that since sex is part of adult life, it is not appropriate for God to determine how and where you will get it. He should not have created us with a sex drive or a need for love if he was going to get picky about how we would use them. What if we said the same thing about another aspect of adult life, such as personal income? No one would deny that bringing money home is a normal ingredient of adulthood. Should we then say that it is not appropriate for God to determine where and by what means you get the money? "Well, yes," you might say, "but there is a commandment about stealing." That's true . . . and it is just as valid as the commandment which precedes it.

We're not ready for marriage yet.

Yes, uniting two lives, while taking responsibility for any other lives that result from this union, is serious work. In a way, it is just as serious as driving, performing surgery, or operating a firearm. Don't try it without a license!

But we love each other!

I just want the security.

Re-read the second half of the first paragraph of this article, and then tell me again what living together has to do with love or security. The primary ingredient of love is commitment, and in that commitment there is security. Love puts the other person first, seeks the good of the other, and serves the other in ways great and small. And since God is love, love which defies God is no love at all.

The time has come for anyone who is invited to move in with someone before marriage to say to the other person, "Don't ask me to defy the commands of my God just so we can pretend to be content with half-way measures. If you love me, value me. Commit to me. If you are not sure you want to marry, I can honor that, but I also ask that you would honor me. You're going to have to do better than wanting to play house."

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ALVIN J. SCHMIDT

Cohabitation: A Widespread Problem Facing the Church

“EVERYTHING THAT IS NAILED DOWN is coming loose.” These words in Doreen Wallace’s novel, *Green Acres*, sum up much of what is happening in our society today. They point to our society’s high divorce rate, the high crime figures, the

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high rate of illegitimate births, the 36-year-old legalization of abortion, the growing acceptance of homosexuality, the rejection of moral absolutes, and the currently widespread practice of cohabitation. The latter is the focus of the present article, particularly as it confronts and affects the life of numerous Christians in the church today.

Nature of the Problem

MANY PEOPLE know that a lot of unmarried people (young adults who have never been married, divorced, and widowed individuals) are cohabiting, but one wonders whether they know to what extent this behavior, contrary to the Sixth Commandment, is occurring today? During the last decade or so, I have sometimes asked pastors in various districts of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod about what percent of the couples who come to them to be married are cohabiting. They usually say, “About 50 percent.” In fact, this is also what recent research reveals. Pamela Smock, a sociologist, reports (*Annual Review of Sociology, 2000*) that about 50 percent of the couples who were married in the mid-1990s were cohabiting, behavior that a generation ago was facetiously referred to as “playing house.” In the early 1960s the cohabitation figure stood at ten percent.

The high percentage of cohabitators is bad enough, but there is more. Smock’s research shows that 35 percent of them give birth to children, hence bringing children into a context (“family”) where marriage is dishonored and where the Sixth Commandment is seen as non-existent. Studies also show that when cohabitators do get married, they experience a significantly higher divorce rate (about 50 percent higher) than those who did not cohabit before marriage. The latter shows that the common rationalization, “We want to see if we are compatible before we get married,” is an empty rationalization! Cohabiting does not make couples less prone to divorce, but more so.

The question is sometimes asked why cohabitators have a higher divorce rate. While the evidence is not totally conclusive, cohabitators by their behavior are obviously more nonconformist. Thus, they not only go against society’s mores with regard to cohabitation, but they are

also more likely to take society’s expectation of marriage as a life-long commitment less seriously. So when they do marry, it is not a major embarrassment to flaunt one of society’s longstanding cultural norms, or for that matter, the biblical imperative: “What God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:5). There are other corollaries as well. For instance, they are more liberal in their religious beliefs, less likely to come from the same denominational background, and they are more supportive of non-traditional male-female roles.

Secular/Neo-Pagan Culture’s Impact

A NUMBER OF REASONS have been suggested why cohabitation has become so widespread. One, there has been massive moral decay in our society. Two, part of this moral decay is the precipitous decline in honoring God’s Ten Commandments. With regard to cohabitation, it is the Sixth Commandment (“You Shall Not Commit Adultery”) that is summarily ignored. The Ten Commandments have become Ten Suggestions, as Ted Koppel of “Night Line” has said. Three, many no longer want to make long-term marital commitments, often because too many young people have seen such commitments shattered by their parents who divorced and left them in the lurch when they were growing up. Four, many, especially since the 1960s, have lost faith in society’s social institutions, including marriage. Five, the birth control pill enables the single woman to cohabit without the fear of becoming pregnant. Six, the woman’s liberation movement has freed women from being dependent on a man for economic support; in the present-day modern economy she can now support herself. Seven, in some instances cohabitation (often among older individuals, either widowed or divorced) takes place because marriage would terminate a monthly stipend that accrues from the beneficiary plan(s) of a previous marriage. For instance, pension benefits, Social Security payments, or estate income may be reduced or cancelled when a person remarries. Such income often trumps the Sixth Commandment.

In the last generation or so our society not only has become increasingly secular, but it has been promoting many neo-pagan values,



beliefs, and practices. These are often propagated in the public schools and even more commonly unleashed by the ubiquitous television set with its numerous programs that directly or indirectly counter Christian values and beliefs. This has especially been true since the 1960s when relativism took root as countless teachers and textbooks began teaching students that truth was relative, and thus the minds of countless children and their behavior have been seriously affected. Complementing this phenomenon, the mass media have been telling everyone to be tolerant regardless of how anti-Christian the behavior might be. This message has also influenced many parents who now are often reluctant or unsure to say it is wrong and sinful for their son or daughter to live together sexually with someone that he or she has been dating for some time. So the son or daughter rents an apartment and enjoys many benefits of married life, however, without any God-pleasing responsibilities and increasingly also without any shame. The parents may even stay overnight when they come to visit their cohabiting son or daughter. Recently, I heard of a Lutheran father and mother who bought a high school graduation present of two plane tickets for their daughter and her boyfriend so both could go on a Florida vacation, knowing that their daughter and her boyfriend would be staying in the same motel room. Clearly, with respect to cohabitation, there is little or no social stigma left, much less seeing it as sinful behavior. The Sixth Commandment seems to have evaporated, even in the eyes of some who profess to be Christians. The biblical passage in Hebrews 13:4, "But fornicators and adulterers God will judge," is apparently of no concern. Nor do St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, where he puts fornicators in the same class as idolators and thieves and says that they will not "inherit the kingdom of God," seem to have any spiritual impact.

The secular/neo-pagan culture not only has influenced many of our young Christian adults to opt for living together without marriage and their parents who tolerate this sinful behavior on the part of their son or daughter, but it has also affected many pastors. Some pastors know that members in the congregation are cohabiting, but do nothing about it. In some

instances, I know of pastors who knowingly even permit a cohabitor to come to the Lord's Supper without telling that person to cease cohabiting or the Sacrament will be withheld. In other instances, a cohabiting couple comes to the pastor to announce their wedding plans, and in the process he learns they both have the same address. He and the couple agree upon a date for the wedding ceremony, but he does not demand that the couple repent and cease living together as a condition for his performing the wedding. And sometimes when a pastor does tell the cohabiting members he will not condone their living in sin by saying he will withhold communion from them unless they repent and cease living together, he meets resistance from some congregational members, and worse, a faithful pastor sometimes even receives static from some who are on the board of elders.

Obviously, our society's neo-pagan culture is having powerful anti-Christian effects on many members in the church. Not only are the biblical passages cited above, together with the Sixth Commandment, frequently ignored, but so is Christ's admonition: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Given that it is not legal or culturally acceptable for a cohabiting couple to refer to each other as husband, wife, or spouse, cohabitation has contributed to the increasing and unfortunate use of the word "partner." The media, in their effort to tolerate and accept formerly unconventional behavior, such as cohabitation, today have virtually eliminated the words husband, wife, and spouse when advertising given items, for example, beds or mattresses. Now these and many other items are publicized as being "for you and your partner." Thus cohabitation not only is undermining the legal value and religious sanctity of marriage, but it is also contributing to the expunging of distinctively marital concepts that hark back to Adam and Eve.

Sometimes the question arises whether a young Christian couple may not live together if they discipline themselves not to engage in sex and truly wait until they get married in the not-too-distant future. While such behavior is theoretically possible, it is not common that many young people, in whom the sex drive is very much alive, can consistently live together



on a daily basis and not succumb to temptation. Moreover, even if a couple were not to engage in sex, there is the matter of offense that living together gives to other Christians. St. Paul said, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13). A devout Christian couple will take seriously the matter of not giving offense to fellow believers. And, in addition to the matter of giving offense, few people will believe that a cohabiting couple is not living together sexually. Thus, the matter of offense is always present.

What Can Be Done?

PASTORS NEED TO PREACH and Lutheran teachers need to teach (in day schools and Sunday schools) more concertedly than ever that Christians, whether as young single adults or as divorced singles, must not conform to the ways of the secular world as cohabitators do. St. Paul told the Christians in Rome: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable will of God" (Romans 12:2). These words apply to every Christian, and they leave no room for cohabitation.

All pastors must impress upon the hearts and minds of their catechumens in confirmation classes the seriousness of the Sixth Commandment. Not only do they need to emphasize that it is sinful to engage in sex outside of marriage, but that God also blesses those who keep His Commandments. Both of these points (truths) can be reinforced by Luther's words in his "The Close of the Commandments," where he says: "God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore,

we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments" (*Small Catechism*). These words remind us that the motive for honoring any of God's Commandments must not be divorced from God's promise of grace and blessing.

To take a firm, unequivocal stand against cohabitation, of course, is not easy, given the propensity of human beings (including pastors) who want to be liked by people. Some pastors may even think it is legalistic to take a firm stand against cohabitation which, of course, it is not. It would only be legalistic if God's promises of "grace and every blessing" (noted above) for keeping His Commandments are ignored in the admonition not to cohabit. Moreover, as Lutherans, we know it is necessary to apply the Law to bring about repentance and a change of behavior before the Gospel may be extended, and if these are not forthcoming, some words of St. Paul again are important to remember. Addressing the matter of sexual deviancy in the Corinthian church, he declared, "I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother who is sexually immoral . . ." (1 Corinthians 5:11). Such was Paul's approach. Such must also be the approach of Lutheran pastors today.

Pastors also need to support one another when a fellow pastor takes a firm, biblical stand against cohabitation. Supportive pastors will not consent to performing the wedding of a cohabiting couple that has been "turned down" by one of their brethren. Pastors would do well to formulate a formal policy, at least on the circuit level, so that a neighboring brother's defense of the Sixth Commandment is not undermined. (I happen to be a member of a circuit that recently has formulated such a policy.)

Finally, for added spiritual encouragement, every pastor and teacher should remember yet another of St. Paul's statements. He did not say that they, as stewards of the mysteries of God, had to be brilliant or people-pleasers, but rather, "It is required in stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). To teach and preach against the sin of cohabitation is being a faithful steward. May God bless the efforts of faithful stewards.



PAUL VASCONCELLOS

Cohabitation! "What's the Big Deal Anyway?"

IN THE SPRING OF 2002, "Sexuality and the Family" was a course offered at Concordia University, Nebraska. Thirty-four of the 35 students in the course were upper level undergraduates, and 87 percent were Lutheran. The

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topics for one week were "pre-marital sex" and "cohabitation." The author of this article conducted an informal survey before beginning the discussion on living together. The question was: "When was the last time you heard a pastor talk about premarital sex and/or cohabitation in his sermon?" Of the 32 students who responded, ten indicated "never," 14 said they "don't remember," and eight replied "sometime within the last year." It should be noted that four of the eight indicated that it was the university chaplain who addressed the topic.

Isn't this interesting! Why are preachers not addressing these subjects on a regular basis? Surely it is not because they are unaware of what is going on! This author has spoken to many pastors who complain about the fact that most of the couples they marry today have some history of living together. It reminds me of an excellent article, written by one of our own well-known Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod pastors, who titled his article, "Sex! Why Is Everyone Talking About It Except the Church?" (Sonnenberg, 1998). What's going on? Why are we not addressing these sins of sexual misconduct on a *regular* basis when it is so pervasive in our society? Why are we ignoring this immorality, this paganism, this blatant disobedience to the revealed will of God? And as far as this author is concerned, he hears many sermons from various pastors in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and while not faulting their doctrine, he many times leaves the church service asking, "But what is the relevancy of the Word to what's going on in my life, and in the lives of the people in the congregation, the community, and the society?" There is a plethora of communication on these subjects regularly in books, magazines, movies, and television, and the images they convey about human sexual behavior are for the most part anti-biblical, anti-Christian. Whose "gospel" is being heard and believed by the people in our church anyway? Don't we get it? It's this very lack of attention of church officials and preachers to the concrete daily lives of people that sends them outside the institutional church to have their spiritual thirst quenched elsewhere. Should it surprise us, then, that in small group discussions on the subject of living together, one particular group in the

class referred to earlier asked in their plenary report, "What's the big deal anyway?"

This article is addressing Christians, both in name only and in name and in fact. The "big deal" is about Holy Scripture, which, for the Christian, is to be the only source and norm for faith and life in the Church. The "big deal" is about justification and sanctification, and a Christian cannot have one without the other. Here's the "big deal." We must teach and preach a clear, consistent and constant biblical message on marriage!

Creation

WE FIND THESE great theological themes in Scripture: creation, fall, covenant, promise, Christ, church, and eschatological hope and fulfillment. Sin, judgment, and grace, or, if you will, the Law and the Promises, are the two messages of the Word of God to us in and through Holy Scripture (*Apology IV*, 5–6).

When we turn to Genesis 1–2, we surely must ask, "What is God's creative intention?" We see, among other things, that men and women are different sexual beings, and that they were created equal in the "image of God," and that they were created for union. Genesis 2:24–25 tells us that God intended one man and one woman to be joined together. Genesis 3 tells us of the corruption of God's good creation and of His creative intention. We see the picture of deception, domination, blame and shame, the tragic results of the Fall.

Genesis 3:15 to Genesis 12 and the rest of the Old Testament present the great drama of God's redemption which will ultimately restore His creation as He, in the first place, intended it to be. This redemption will be accomplished through Jesus Christ.

Christ is the realization of God's intention for humanity, for He is both true God and true Man. He is the Eternal Creation Word who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth (John 1:1–2, 14). And what does the Word say about marriage? He celebrates it as good (John 2:1–11). He affirms monogamy and permanence (Mark 10:2–9), and he lifts up an equal responsibility for the marriage (Mark 10:11–12). He stands in clear opposition to domination and/or deception between men and women, for sin distorts

God's creative intention (Matthew 5:27–30). Certainly in the Gospel of Jesus one can see God's intention in creation being realized through the redemption.

In Acts and the rest of the New Testament, one sees the constant message of sin, judgment and grace. This is seen, for example, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which the apostle points to the distortions of God's creative intention. Here Paul speaks the Law, offers grace, and presents a picture of what it means to be a new creation in Christ. He affirms heterosexual (not homosexual) marriage (7:3), within which there is sexual mutuality (vv. 3–4). There is an intended mutual self-donation. Of course, he does not absolutize marriage. He also allows for celibacy, if one has that gift (vv. 7, 17). He certainly is critical of divorce (vv. 10–11), but does acknowledge some exceptions (vv. 12–16). But, again, there is also the affirmation of a mutual commitment to permanency (vv. 10–11).

In the biblical picture we see what God's creative intention is. Men and women are both created by God in His image and are equal. They are sexually different but equal personally. They find their sexual expression within the context of a heterosexual marriage, not outside of it. This heterosexual marriage is both permanent and mutual, and both are responsible for the continuation of their marriage and how they relate in their marriage as they live before God. This picture and these overall themes provide the context for reading and interpreting other texts referring to marriage, such as Ephesians 5:22–33, Colossians 3:18–19, and 1 Peter 3:1–7. The foundation of marriage is Baptism, which calls us to a new way of living and a new way of relating (Romans 6:14; Galatians 3:27–28). In the redemption God reorders our lives so that we think in terms of truth, not deception; equality, not domination; forgiveness, not guilt; affirmation, not shame. In Christ marriage takes on a whole new meaning, especially as two people are a new creation in Christ. Indeed, in the Scriptures, marriage is most distinguishable. It distinguishes for a special union; it distinguishes for the possibility of procreation; and it distinguishes itself from every other relationship between the sexes. Further, the basis and context of marriage explain why obedience to the

will of God, God's creative intention, is so important for it. Marriage can work only as it conforms to the purpose and work of Him who created and established it. What this means is that commitment to God comes first. Commitment to God must have priority over every other commitment. We must repeat in our own life what Jesus said about His life, "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Primary commitment to God does not compete with a legitimate commitment to marriage. It's a matter of priorities. In other words, Jesus puts marriage, as all other human relationships, under a proper First Commandment relationship with God (Matthew 22:34-38). Marriage is good indeed, but it is not "the one thing needful" (Luke 10:42).

Redemption

JESUS HAS COME to bring a new freedom, not divorce or living together or sexual immorality, but for marriage. He does not give a new and stricter law to His disciples, laying on them a burden they cannot carry. Instead, He opens up for them the possibility of doing willingly and effectively that which previously, even out of the strictest sense of duty, they could not do, or could do only with great difficulty and at great cost. How does He do this?

We have to look at His work of redemption and restoration. He does two things: He bears the cost of human unfaithfulness, and He breaks its power. In these two ways He wins, or wins back, to Himself a people that can finally be united to Him in endless union. He also makes it possible for this people to realize to some degree on earth this creaturely copy of this union in human marriage.

First, He bears the cost or carries the penalty of sin, of all our sinful thoughts, words, and acts, including the sins we commit in our marriages. He dies on the Cross so that we can stand before God pardoned, forgiven, justified. He brings liberation from the past and freedom for the new present and the new future.

What does this mean for marriage? It can and should make all the difference! Forgiveness! Hence, we do not need to carry around the burden of grudges, fears, jealousies, hurts, resentments, and hostilities which wreck havoc on so many marriages.

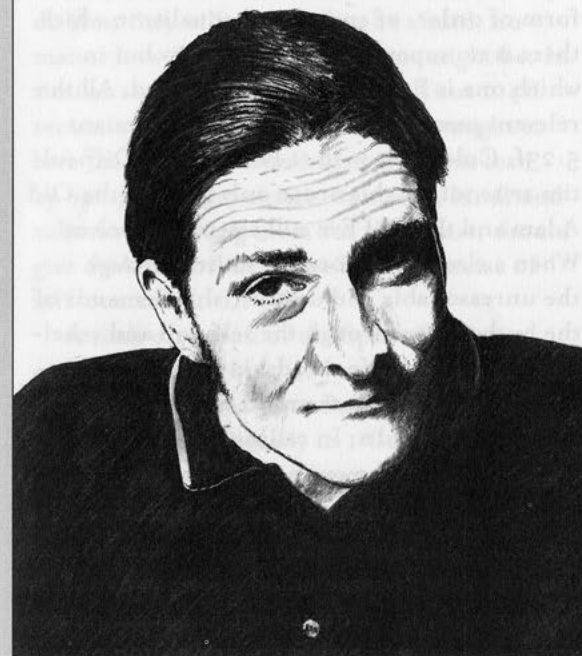
Forgiveness opens the door to the future. If the divine Son has carried the cost and penalty of our sin, sin is a defeated foe. Yet it can still be a powerful one. It will not let go easily. A single incident of emotional reconciliation in the light of the Cross will not solve every problem of marriage or of any other human relationship. New sources of hurt and irritation will constantly arise. New acts of pride, willfulness, folly, and selfishness will bring new distortions and new crises to the marital union. Yet these can no longer inflict lasting or mortal wounds on marriage partners who know that as forgiven sinners they must also forgive one another. Living with God's reconciliation as a constant fact in human life means living with *mutual* reconciliation as a constant fact. This makes indissoluble union a practical and attainable goal even for the sinner. The need for a concession to hard-heartedness will no longer arise, for the sinners are forgiven sinners. Even if a serious rift should occur, even if one partner should relapse into an unforgiving attitude, this does not mean that forgiveness has to fail on both sides. Forgiven sinners may sometimes ignore or forget the implication of their own forgiveness, but if they truly know themselves as forgiven sinners they cannot ultimately refuse forgiveness. That is why a new future opens up for *Christian* marriage.

When Jesus was buried and then rose again the third day, not only did our old life go down to death and burial with Him, but we the sinners were also raised to newness of life in Him. This is the message of Jesus: Life must be lost for His sake if it is to be saved (Mark 8:35); a new life is given (John 3:3ff) and a transition from death to life takes place in Him (John 5:24). This is the message of Paul: "As Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in the newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Our entry into the fullness of this newness of life will come only at the resurrection of the dead, when this physical body yields to the spiritual body and this perishable nature puts on the imperishable. Nevertheless, the newness of life is already a reality because God counts His people to be alive in and with the Risen Jesus. Living between the entry into this new life in faith and its fulfillment at the resurrection, we are to live as those who are



alive to God, to live the new being in Him. We are to live the life of renewal, or, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, of new creation.

Now we must work out this truth in daily conduct, as God expects and requires of us. In our marriages, for example, we are now new husbands and new wives. The former things have gone; all things are made new. Living as God's children adopted by Him because we are in His Son, we no longer find it important to get and to dominate; we are called in Christ to self-donation, to give more and to serve more. In other words, contrary to the modern pagan attitude, that is, "What am I going to get out of



it?" the question in Christ becomes, "What am I going to put into this marriage?"

Have we the power really to live out this renewal as those who in Christ are dead to sin and alive to God? In ourselves we certainly do not. God Himself, however, has provided us with the necessary power for renewal. He has done this through His Word and Sacraments and through the faith which it engenders. Indeed, as God the Holy Spirit, He Himself is the power.

Sanctification

IN ROMANS 7:6 Paul states, "We serve . . . in the new life of the Spirit." The Holy Spirit, the giver of life, makes us new people in and with the rising again of Christ. The law of the new life is that of the Spirit of Life (Romans 8:2). Living according to the Spirit, we set our minds on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5). Led by the Spirit we are God's children and enjoy already a foretaste of the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8:14, 21). Freedom from the old self and freedom to live the new life in Christ is given to us to exercise in every tangled relationship of life. It is ours to exercise in marriage as we follow the directions of the Holy Spirit and experience for ourselves His regenerating and life-renewing ministry.

One direction, given by the apostle Paul, is that incest has no more place in the Christian church and family than it had in ancient Israel (1 Corinthians 5:1). The Holy Spirit will lead God's people away from this kind of relationship and not into it.

A second direction, also given by Paul, concerns adultery and fornication (two categories of sin which are descriptive of most "living together" arrangements today). In this respect the apostle specifically endorses the Sixth Commandment, which receives similar endorsement in the New Testament passages as well (Matthew 5:27; 19:18; Romans 13:9). Adultery as the act of non-Christians, or even as the temporary relapse of Christians, differs widely from a willful continuation in adultery on the part of believers. The Holy Spirit does not lead into adultery but away from it. Hence the new life in Christ for which the Spirit empowers us will be one in which adultery has no place, but faithfulness to the marriage

covenant does have a place. The same applies to fornication: "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (1 Corinthians 6:13). The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). The new man and the new woman in Christ have a freedom for true and constructive joy and fulfillment in marriage. The renewal by the Spirit for the Christian takes the following form: "That each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in passion of lust like heathen who do not know God . . . For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness" (1 Thessalonians 4:4f, 7). Led and inwardly impelled by the Spirit, the new man and the new woman can and should achieve a union of true love, not of conventionalized lust (as in "living together").

In a third direction Christians are plainly told to marry only Christians. Paul addresses the Corinthians bluntly: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). In the verses that follow, he gives the reason in a series of vivid rhetorical questions: What partnership is there between good and bad; what fellowship between light and darkness; what accord between Christ and Belial; what agreement between the temple of God and idols? In contrast to God's creative, redemptive and sanctifying intention, would not Paul be asking the same rhetorical questions of the *modern Corinthians* in our congregations? Would not Paul be asking these same questions of people in our congregations who are living together, or who are contemplating the same?

A fourth direction of the Spirit has to do with Christian marriage itself. Two points are included here. First, marriage is good. Hebrews puts this forthrightly: "Let marriage be held in honor among all" (13:4). Part of this honoring consists in keeping the marriage bed undefiled and avoiding adultery. In the situation after the Fall, Paul discerns an additional and more negative reason for marriage. "Because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife (not "live-in girlfriend") and each woman her own husband" (not "live-in boyfriend") (1 Corinthians 7:2). Nor should Christian husbands and wives ever feel that they ought to withhold conjugal rights from one another. They may do this by common consent for lim-

ited periods, but in marrying they have given their bodies to one another (7:3ff).

This leads to the second point. While marriage is good, it is not obligatory. Celibacy, too, is an option for Christians and should be prayerfully considered and respected (1 Corinthians 7:8, 25ff).

A fifth direction of the Spirit relates to the mutual obligations of husbands and wives. Three passages deal with this perspective: Ephesians 5:21ff; Colossians 3:18ff; and 1 Peter 3:1-7. Developed in these portions of the Scriptures are four main points which are all important for Christian marriage if it is to be lived in the power of the Holy Spirit as part of the new life in Christ.

First, all Christians, whether male or female, share equally in the gift of salvation and eternal life that comes through Jesus Christ. Husbands and wives, as Peter beautifully phrases it, are joint heirs of the grace of life (3:7).

Second, husbands and wives both fall under the supreme principle of Christian life, that is, a life of service. Christ Himself, the Head of the Church, did not come "to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). All His followers are pledged to the same course.

Third, differentiation still occurs within the common salvation and mutual service. Within marriage the differentiation of men and women, or husbands and wives, takes the form of order, of an ordered equality in which there is no superiority or inferiority but in which one is first and the other second. All the relevant passages make this point (Ephesians 5:23f; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1ff). Difficulties arise within this order only because the Old Adam and the Old Eve still assert themselves. When a clash of will occurs, either through the unreasonable and unjustifiable demands of the husband or through the self-will and rebelliousness of the wife, headship seems to be tyranny and subjection seems to be servitude, so that conflict results. In calling for headship and submission, however, the direction of the Spirit is neither endorsing tyranny nor enjoining servitude. The Spirit is directing the couple to the new life of Christ in which differentiation remains but only on the premise of reconciliation with God, of equality of salvation and

service, and of mutual forgiveness and discipleship. It is a direction to order, an order of equality and love.

Fourth, the direction indicates that while husband and wife serve one another, different aspects of service are to be stressed in the light of the ongoing distinction. The husband is especially to love his wife. He must do this as he loves his own body. This means that he is to nourish and cherish her (Ephesians 5:28f). Love of this kind excludes harshness (Colossians 3:19). On the positive side, it demands considerateness (1 Peter 3:7). It also means that honor must be shown to the wife. In her position as the equal second partner in marriage, she is to be accorded full dignity by her husband, as the equal first partner. The wife, for her part, should express her love by showing to her husband the subjection which denotes respect (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18). The reverent and chaste behavior of the wife commends the Gospel, and God values highly the inner adornment of a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Peter 3:1ff). The final recommendation in 1 Peter 3:6, like the initial one in 3:1f, suggests that this aspect of the direction applies particularly to wives who have been converted but whose husbands are still non-Christians. These wives have a chance to win their husbands to faith, but they will do so best, not by bossing or nagging them, but by showing forth the servant-spirit of Christ in their lives. When they do this, they will not need to be afraid, no matter how difficult the situation might be. In similar testimony to the Gospel, Titus 2:4ff recommends that younger wives be taught to love their husbands and to express this love by being sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive. Young men, for their part, should give evidence of their love by the exercise of self-control (2:6).

A sixth direction of the Spirit firmly endorses the teaching of Jesus that Christian marriage be permanent. Paul states this very clearly and categorically in 1 Corinthians 7:10ff: "The wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife." Behind this direction stands the authority of the Lord: "I give charge, not I but the Lord." The injunction thus

repeats and interprets Christ's own saying about divorce in the Gospels.

A seventh and final direction offers special instruction to the bishops (presbyters) and deacons of the church. Both the bishop (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6) and the deacon (1 Timothy 3:12) must be the husband of one wife. These ministers should set for all others an example of a solid and lasting marital commitment.

Living together, "What's the big deal anyway?" This is the "big deal." Jesus said, "If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31). You see, living together, according to most cohabitation arrangements and understandings today, is not living the truth, the truth of God, but is living a lie. Further, the "big deal" is in the Kingdom of God petition that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us to pray: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." "What's the big deal anyway?" Friend, it is all summed up in this word: discipleship.

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ROGER SONNENBERG

"The Worst of Times, The Best of Times": The Best of Times for the Christian Church

CHARLES DICKENS in his classic novel, *The Tale of Two Cities*, writes these paradoxical lines: "It is the best of times, it is the worst of times." In many respects it is "the worst of times" for families. More and more families seem to be unraveling at the seams. More children than at any time in the history of America are living in single parent homes. Gays and lesbians are publicly exchanging "marriage" vows. The rate of cohabitation has increased, multiplying the risk of domestic violence for women and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children.

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Commitment has been redefined to mean, "as long as we love one another." Many children, hoping to avoid the difficulties they saw in their parents' marriages, are bypassing marriage in favor of living together outside of marriage. What once was called "living in sin" is now an advocated practice among many people. One study indicates that 89 percent of all couples live together before marriage. And yet those who live together and then marry have a 53 percent higher rate of divorce than those who have not cohabited together. They have lower levels of marital interaction and higher levels of disagreement. Though more couples cohabit in order to avoid the stress and expense of a divorce if the relationship doesn't work out, studies show cohabiting couples experience as much if not more stress when they break up than if they had been married. Often there are financial repercussions beyond what they would experience had they been married (especially for women).

Why So Silent?

U. S. News and World Report (May 19, 1997, pp. 57-58) scolded the Church in an article by David Whitman, who wrote:

The clergy, once loquacious on the topic of premarital "sin," are equally subdued. "Have you ever heard a sermon on 'living together'?" asks religious columnist Michael McManus in his 1995 book, *Marriage Savers*. Condemnation of adult premarital sex has virtually vanished from religious preaching, even in the homilies of Catholic priests. "In the pulpits there has been a backing away from moralizing about sex before marriage," says Bishop James McHugh, the bishop of Camden, N.J.

The writer asks the question, "Why?" Why such reticence in talking about such an important subject? Some would suggest that the church has simply given up on teaching something that most of the secular world condones. For example, studies indicate that prime-time network television shows implicitly advocate premarital sex by airing up to eight depictions of premarital sex for each one of sex between married couples. By not saying anything the church quietly endorses cohabitation, lest it offend the majority of people sitting in the pews.

The question of "Why?" the church has remained silent becomes especially significant when one considers the fact that studies show there are fewer things more important to children than the fact that they have parents who stay married. In the best selling book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (Hyperion, New York, 2000), Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee discovered children of divorce are adversely affected for years, even far into adulthood. Another study shows that the most important factor in keeping children from engaging in at-risk behavior is a healthy father/mother relationship.

A Better Question: "So What?"

PERHAPS THE QUESTION isn't "Why?" but rather "So what?" So what does the church need to do in a time like this? In what ways is it "the best of times" for the church? It is "the best of times" for the Church to share of the One who truly gives "abundant life"—Jesus Christ (John 10:10). It is "the best of times" for the Church to proclaim good news of hope through the sharing of God's Word. It is the opportunity to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13,14).

"The Best of Times to Proclaim Truths"

UPON ATTENDING A WEDDING, my wife commented that hardly anyone in attendance seemed to know the Lord's Prayer. She seemed to be a lone voice in prayer among the hundreds who had come to celebrate. This comes as little surprise when we consider the fact that we live in a "post-modern" age, an age when Judeo-Christian teachings are unknown and strangers to many people. In a large adult informational class, designed to teach the tenets of the Christian faith, I was not surprised to hear several of the participants express shock in learning that "living together before marriage" is considered a sin. They had grown up believing that living together before marriage was simply part of the courtship process necessary for a happy marriage. They were unaware of the wisdom of God's Word on this subject, seen, for example, in Paul's instruction in Ephesians:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ . . . Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it

is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. (Ephesians 4:15; 5:13-17).

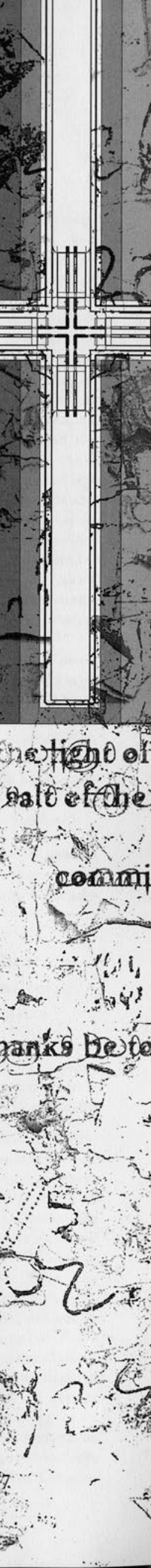
"Speaking the truth in love," means sharing truths about cohabitation from God's perspective as well as the truths learned from empirical research:

- Cohabitation is not the best way to prepare for marriage;
- Cohabitation increases the odds of divorce upon marriage;
- Cohabitation can be detrimental in many ways to those in the relationship;
- Cohabitation is "sinful" and displeasing to God.

When Princess Diana was tragically killed in a car accident, tabloids throughout England begged the Queen to speak, to say something to comfort the people who mourned so deeply. One headline read, "Speak Mum . . . Speak to Us." In every counseling office, at every divorce hearing, every child of divorce cries out, "Speak to us . . . help us . . . we're hurting." We need to let the children of divorce, who find themselves so afraid of marriage due to their own parents' divorces, know that living together won't secure for themselves happy marriages. Living together unmarried won't right the wrong of the divorce revolution. It only becomes another wrong that hurts and scars those involved.

It is "the best of times" not only to speak the truths about cohabitation but also truths about the blessing of marriage and its purpose. This teaching should be done across the entire lifespan, meaning from cradle to grave. My wife began teaching our son the importance of marrying a Christian wife from infancy as she prayed over him and with him. She prayed daily that he might someday find a Christian wife. Later, at around four years of age, she missed praying this part of her prayer with him, at which time Jacob quickly asked her, "What about my Christian wife?" She had quietly blessed him with a picture of a hopeful future for him—a marriage with a Christian wife.

God, in His infinite wisdom and love for His people, has revealed many truths about the institution of marriage. These truths need to



be shared by the Church loudly and clearly:

- Marriage is a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4-6);
- Marriage is for companionship (Genesis 2:20a-24);
- Marriage is for procreation (Genesis 1:27-28);
- Marriage is to keep people from sexual sin (1 Corinthians 7:1-2).

Since the church has also been commanded to teach and "obey everything" God has commanded (Matthew 28:20), it is also required to talk about sex and what God says about this gift in the context of marriage as well as sexual sins outside marriage. It is essential this teaching begin early in a child's life because of the many other venues that seek to shape the child's thinking on this subject, such as television and the Internet. In not talking about the subject, we subcontract out our children to other agencies and institutions. Though sexual abstinence may be taught in the public schools, most sex education is taught purely from a physical perspective. Although it is important for young people to have a firm grasp of the physical aspect of sex, sex education programs based on this alone are not enough. It distorts the truth and gives them the impression that sex is purely a physical pleasure that must guide their behavior. In reality, sexuality and the gift of sex can be understood and celebrated only in the context of what God's Word says. It clearly notes that the sexual expression of love is to be in a marriage relationship.

"The Best of Times" for Mentoring

MENTORING IS ANOTHER BIBLICAL TRUTH that can be practiced in the Church to help strengthen marriages. The need for mentoring and models of mentoring are found throughout Scripture. One excellent model is found in Titus 2:1-8. Because relationships are so difficult, God suggests that wiser and experienced men and women serve as mentors to one another. Too many people have no idea what a biblical marriage looks like.

Mentoring couples, though they in no way claim to have all the answers or are in no way perfect, seek to help teach and model a correct biblical relationship between a husband and a wife. At Our Savior Lutheran Church in Arcadia, California, marriage mentors agree to the following guidelines for their mentorees:

- Share their successes and struggles of a Christian marriage;
- Share what they do and how they do it to maintain a Christian marriage;
- Help build skills to meet needs (e.g., budgeting).

"The Best of Times" to do Preventative Ministry

IF THERE IS ONE THING we should learn from HMOs and other large medical groups today, it is that prevention is key to keeping down the costs of medical care. This means spending time, money, and energy now in order to prevent sickness later. As a commercial once said, "You can pay me now or pay me later." Too often, we lean toward a shortsighted perspective; we wait for marital distress to set in before we do anything. With the wide range of problems now traceable to marital distress and divorce, we can and must help people prevent such outcomes through preventative workshops and teaching.

Over the last few years many useful programs and resources have been developed to help individuals and churches build lasting marriages. They include: Building Better Marriages; Creating a Spiritual Marriage; The Five Love Languages; Fighting for Your Marriage; Marriage Builders; Married in Christ Ministries; Marriage Makers Family Conference; MarriageWise; Smart Marriages; The Power of We; Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus Seminars, any many more. An Internet resource helpful in choosing the right program or resource is the "Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education." (www.smartmarriages.com)

Historically there has been little attention focused on prevention in the form of pre-marital preparation. But times have changed. Research has helped us in seeing what makes stronger, happier, and lasting marriages. The research repeatedly substantiates the truth of Scripture. For example, C-PREP (Stanley & Trathen, 1994) offers a 12-hour sequence of mini-lectures, discussion, and interpersonal skill practice to teach the skills needed for a fulfilling marriage. Training includes skills in communication and conflict resolution. It focuses in on the need for fun and friendship, forgiveness and faith.

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book reviews

Beyond "I Do" What Christians Believe About Marriage

Douglas J. Brouwer
Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
Publishing, 2001

"Within the last generation, marriage and our attitudes toward it have gone through some extraordinary changes. What was once true about relationships between women and men no longer seems to be true. This raises an important question: What do Christians believe about marriage today?"

Brouwer seeks to develop a theological framework for Christian marriage. His book is an outgrowth of an adult class he taught on the subject of marriage at First Presbyterian Church in Wheaton, Illinois, where he serves as senior pastor.

Brouwer examines a number of topics in his book that have relevance to the topic of marriage, particularly Christian marriage. Two particular nuances that the author weaves throughout his book are that marriage is a covenant, and that marriage is sacramental. Brouwer writes, "By entering the marriage covenant, we are certainly limiting ourselves and restricting our freedoms. In an undeniable way, we are binding ourselves to another person." He sees marriage as being sacramental in that "God's grace becomes visible not only at church as the vows are spoken, but during a lifetime of shared experience." These two "pillars," marriage as covenant and marriage as sacramental (note: not sacrament), shape the author's perspective.

Brouwer also deals with the issue of spiritual compatibility in a marriage. He writes, "If your husband-to-be is a Missouri Synod Lutheran and can't imagine life outside that tradition, consider becoming Missouri Synod Lutheran." I couldn't agree more!

One chapter that is especially helpful discusses divorce and the Christian. His exegesis of the biblical texts regarding divorce was both fair and accurate. Brouwer moves beyond whether or not divorce is sin. He accepts the fact that divorce involves sin, and moves to the question as to how we respond compassionately and pastorally with those who are dealing with the effects of divorce. For example, the idea of Christian mediation, rather than litigation, as a way to resolve difficulties among Christians who divorce is discussed, with a model of what mediation may look like being included in the appendix.

A personal view is that the author's discussion of cohabitation is weak. He refers to cohabitation as an "announced marriage" rather than being a sin. Furthermore, he suggests that cohabitation is more a sign of the times in which we live rather than a willful breaking of the Sixth Commandment. It is also evident that Brouwer struggles with what the Christian response to the topic of same-sex unions should be. His ambivalence on this topic is somewhat disquieting.

It is obvious that Brouwer approaches the topic of Christian marriage from a different tradition than that of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod tradition. Some conclusions are highly questionable from a biblical perspective. However, Brouwer ends his book by recalling the "marriage as sacramental" theme that runs throughout his book: "Marriages—good marriages—are sacred. They're object lessons in God's grace." On that, both the author and I agree.

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Marriage—Just a Piece of Paper?

edited by Katherine Anderson,
Don Browning and Brian Boyer
Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
Publishing, 2002.

Marriage—Just a Piece of Paper? was a most interesting and yet disturbing read. Speaking as a wife who falls on the younger side of the twenty-something range and who has experienced the joys of marriage for a mere nine months, this companion to the PBS documentary opened my eyes to the hard facts of a blossoming social problem. This text is the compilation of the interviews obtained through a ten-year research endeavor conducted by the Religion, Culture and Family Project at the University of Chicago. The interviews were part of the search for answers to a wide array of questions regarding the growing number of divorces, the increased number of children born out of wedlock, fewer marriages, and an increased level of couples engaging in cohabitation rather than a marriage commitment. These trends also were examined for their effects on society, women, children, and the role of the father.

The text consists of seven sections, including the alarming interviews found in "Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?"; sections addressing the effects of family dysfunction on children, women, and fathers; and a group of interviews regarding trends related to marriage and family life. The truth is that there is a large population of people who believe that marriage is a "ridiculous commitment" and more of a hassle than it is worth. Furthermore, the increased amount of cohabitation is creating a generation of couples with a constant "escape hatch" made available to them when the first sign of trouble strikes the relationship. More than one person is quoted in their interviews as saying that they and their partner are ready to have children, but that they are not ready for marriage. Thus, they are indicating that children are now being considered less binding in a relationship than a piece of paper known as a marriage certificate. Incredulously, most of the non-professional interview participants

also indicated that their worst fear of marriage is divorce, not because of the emotional pain or the effect on their children, but because of the effect on their wallets and the splitting of their material possessions.

Clearly there has been a shift in relationship priorities over the past decades, and the text strives to find a root for this apparent shift. Most experts seem to agree that the root may lie in the wave of revolutions we have seen in the recent past, including women's rights (creating independence from a male provider) and the idea of individual happiness being valued above all else. Others mention the fact that marriage has turned into a market, thus turning brides and grooms into consumers: "If this product doesn't work for me, I can always get a new one that works better with my needs." One man is quoted as overhearing at a recent wedding reception, "She'll make such a nice first wife for Jason." Statements like these have given rise to the idea of "practice marriages" and "playing house."

There is obviously a new epidemic of challenges facing the social institution of marriage. The question now is, "What do we do about this growing social problem as Christians who support the God-given concept of marriage?" It is definitely an idea to ponder, and I believe that it is time for the Church to take this breakdown of marriage seriously. (Note: A VHS tape of the PBS documentary of the same title is available from Eerdmans.)

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Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation on Families, Children and Social Policy

edited by Alan Booth and
Ann C. Crouter
Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum &
Associates, 2002

Cohabitation is increasing in the United States, Canada and in Western Europe, yet attitudes in the U.S. have often viewed cohabitation primarily in negative terms. However, this attitude differs for some Western European countries and for Quebec, which have higher rates of cohabitation and greater institutionalization as a family form than the U.S. With the increase in cohabitation has come a rise in non-marital births that raises concerns about child well-being. *Just Living Together* provides a strong demographic analysis of cohabitation and addresses race, low-income and cultural factors that influence rates. Policy issues are addressed in terms of present policies in the U.S., Europe, and Canada and how these incorporate or are affected by cohabitation

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"The Best of Times" to Share the Gospel

THE STRENGTH of the Christian Church and its teaching on marriage is found in the power of the Gospel—the Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It alone saves. It alone gives "life eternal and life more abundant" (John 10:10). The Law shows us our sin. Although the Law must be proclaimed to all people, it is the Gospel that saves, that helps troubled sinners, that comforts, that empowers, that changes a person. It is the Gospel that makes for happy marriages and fulfilled lives.

In a time when so many people make mistakes in the area of love and marriage, in a time when so many live shattered lives because of their parents' sins, the Church has the opportunity to proclaim hope and promise. It truly is "the best of times" to proclaim and give thanks for the "incomparably great power" that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ—the power that raised Christ back to life (Ephesians 1:19–20). It is the power that brings new life, new promise—possibilities. It is a truth that we as individuals and a Church are privileged to proclaim to a dying world. "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24–25).

Yes, "the worst of times" in many respects, but truly "the best of times" for the Christian Church!



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in comparison to other family forms, especially married families.

Different views on the topic of cohabitation are offered. Pamela J. Smock and Sanjiv Gupta present cohabitation as a threat and marriage as the default to cohabitation. Yet, a later chapter challenges this position, viewing cohabitation as one choice from three options: marriage, cohabitation, and remaining single. Rukmalie Jayakody and Natasha Cabrera consider the benefits of cohabitation versus remaining single, especially for low-income families where cohabitation can be at times a realistic option and preferable to remaining single.

The chapters also analyze different aspects. As a follow-up on why cohabitation for low-income families may be preferable to remaining single, the next chapter explores how low-income mothers often directly and indirectly encourage self-sufficiency and gender mistrust with their daughters that may discourage daughters from marrying. This may explain the growing number of cohabiting couples in low-income and minority populations.

Just Living Together does not shy away from pointing out both the lack of attention and the inherent assumptions by researchers toward cohabitation that have limited information on this topic. While many Christians are concerned about cohabitation and its rise, we cannot ignore its existence. We must understand why it occurs, why it is increasing, the consequences, and how our policies must change to support families. Also, rather than assuming cohabitation leads to a

more unstable family life, we need to know how different non-marital unions affect family stability and child well-being rather than assuming they are all the same.

While *Just Living Together* is a collection of chapters based on the presentations and discussions from a national symposium, the book reads cohesively. The contributors include demographers, a sociologist, developmental researchers, legal scholars, economists, and government policy makers who provide a rather comprehensive review of cohabitation. The concluding chapter suggests a more interdisciplinary approach to address aspects these authors do not. I agree that this can help address issues including differences in types of cohabitating unions. This information would increase accuracy in comparability, address why some of the demographic differences discussed exist and provide better information for making changes in social policies.

Just Living Together reviews many issues on cohabitation and underlying assumptions about cohabitation that limit many disciplines from considering it as a topic of research. While not all chapters develop their topics completely, their intent is to outline issues to be considered. Also, these authors' strength lies in their willingness to critique each other, challenge assumptions, admit their weaknesses and make good suggestions for future research on the topic. I would recommend *Just Living Together* as a good beginning to this study.

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