

Cohabitation: Fornication Gone Mainstream

By Jerry Collins

Not only is cohabitation on the rise, it is now a permanent fixture in western society. Cohabitation is an acceptable alternative to marriage in the West. Societal values have shifted toward the acceptance of cohabitation as a viable alternative for couples. **Cohabitation, rather than dating, has become the testing ground for compatibility today.**

Cohabitation has also become an issue for the church. Its acceptance in society has made it a temptation to which many have succumbed. **Young Christian couples as well as older Christian couples often choose this alternative to marriage.** Against this trend, a plain at-face value reading of Scripture reveals that cohabitation is unacceptable and sinful. Since cohabitation involves couples who are often sexual partners, we can address this issue from what the Bible says about fornication.

The Greek word translated “sexual immorality” or “fornication” is *porneia* (from which we get the English word *pornography*), and it means literally “unlawful lust” and “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse” (BAG, a Greek lexicon). First Corinthians 6:13 says *yet the body is not for immorality (porneia) but for the Lord and the Lord for the body*. When the body signaled hunger, food was taken to satisfy. When the body craved sexual desire some concluded that desire needed to be satisfied, too. But since one’s body belongs to the Lord, it’s incompatible to use it immorally. Instead, when faced with the desire to become sexually immoral, one should *flee immorality* (verse 18).

In Galatians 5:19, the Apostle Paul writes, *now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality (porneia), impurity, sensuality*. The deeds of the sinful human nature are as evident as fruit on a tree. Behavior normally demonstrates nature. The Apostle Paul seems to have been saying ironically, look at the accomplishments of the flesh! In this case, it’s immorality or fornication, referring to all types of forbidden sexual relationships. **A plain reading of the verse signals that sexual immorality is of the flesh with desires in conflict with the Spirit** (verse 17).

In Ephesians 5:3, it states *but do not let immorality (porneia) or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints*. The point here is not just to avoid immorality, impurity, and greed **but to not live in such a way that anyone would even accuse you of it**. Since the only form of lawful sexuality is marriage between one man and one woman, then anything outside of marriage, including the sexual immorality of fornication, is unlawful, in other words, sin. It certainly sounds like this passage understood in a plain ordinary way would indicate cohabitation is unacceptable.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, it says *for this is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality (porneia)*. It is God’s will that His people be holy, set apart, in daily experience from sin. This requires a believer to *abstain from sexual immorality*. So setting one’s life apart to God in holiness is exhibited by avoiding fornication. This is the expressed *will of God* for His followers. An ordinary normal understanding of the passage clearly indicates that **cohabiting partners is not the will of God and thus, is sinful**.

Hebrews 13:4 describes the honorable state of marriage, *let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators (porneia) and adulterers God will judge*. This verse draws a clear distinction between that which is pure and honorable—marriage—and that which is sexually immoral—anything outside of marriage. The marriage bed is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. So the marriage bed is morally pure between marriage partners. Otherwise, fornication, sexual intercourse before marriage, or adultery, sexual intercourse with one other than your marriage partner, *God will judge*. **A plain reading of Scripture indicates that living together outside of marriage falls into this category and is definitely sinful.**

In summary, a plain at-face value understanding of the Bible indicates that fornication is a deviation from God’s standard. Cohabitation is usually understood as living together as sexual partners. So cohabitation would be a deviation from God’s standard. Instead, believers should flee immorality, not indulge in it as cohabiting sexual partners. It is in marriage that sexual relations are undefiled and morally pure. Fornicators, indulging in non-marital sexual relations, can expect to face God’s judgment.