

Is MARRIAGE
Really that
IMPORTANT
to GOD?



*How the marital institute is
woven throughout the Divine Narrative*

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Is Marriage Really that Important to God?



“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

—Ephesians 5:31-32 ESV

Marriage has an extremely intimate place in God’s heart and has been central through the fullness of His historic and redemptive interaction with humanity.

Marriage is a thread that runs consistently and significantly through God’s historic narrative in Scripture. It *is* really the Gospel itself if understood in its fullness.

This nuptial drama is played out in seven vivid scenes spanning the first page of scripture to the last.

Scene 1/Creation

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On the very first page of the Bible, God speaks into being every part of creation. He declares it and it is so. But He comes to a place in creation that He treats very differently. He doesn't just speak it into being. For the first time, He declares what He will do and what it will be, saying,

“Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness.”
— Genesis 1:26

Here God, in the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is uniquely anticipating and taking great pleasure in the thought of what He will create next. It will be a unique and special reflection of His own divine likeness and image in the world. No other part of His glorious creation will hold such a distinction.

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*
— Genesis 1:27

It is not just *humanity* generically that shows forth the image of God in the world, but specifically humanity as created and lived out in *male* and *female*. We read in Genesis 2:18 that it is not good for the man to be alone. He is created, like God, to be a relational, loving, intimate creature. God does not create a “buddy” for Adam, but a wife, with which he can become a life giver.

*And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be
fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...”*
— Genesis 1:28

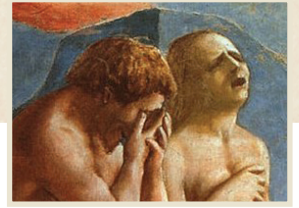
What is the first thing He calls this male and female to do? He calls them to start a family. The first thing God does with Adam and Eve is to perform their wedding. He *blesses* them.

Thus, God created humanity *and* marriage.

Scene 2 / Fall

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[The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”]

— Genesis 3:12

Like all good stories, God’s divine narrative takes a very dramatic, unexpected turn and quite early. Adam and Eve are in the garden where God put them and the serpent, Satan, tells them they do not need to obey God’s clear command not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They believe Satan rather than God and something terribly bad happens. And it happens within a marriage.

Think about the mistakes you’ve made in your marriage. Think about the possible destruction you’ve caused to your spouse and possibly your children by your wrong choices and disobedient behavior. Some of them might be so bad you would not share them with anyone. Keep those mistakes in mind as we explore the implications of Scene 2 in God’s drama.

God creates a man and woman and makes them husband and wife. He personally performed their pre-marital counseling. He officiated their wedding. What kind of marriage would you expect with a start like that? You’d be set for wedded bliss till death do us part, right? Well, not quite.

Of all the mistakes you’ve made in your marriage, have you ever ushered in the damnation of the entire human race? The first couple did and quite early in their marriage. So, in God’s eyes, your marital transgressions matter and will have consequences in your marriage, family and personal life to be sure. But whatever your sins and mistakes are, they are far short of what this first couple did so soon after getting their marital advice and blessing directly from the mouth of God.

Our Lord knows all too well
that marriage can be quite
tenuous. He also knows it can
be wonderfully delightful.

And it is through a marital heart that God seeks to put the destruction of this terrible and devastating Fall back together again. We see that next.

Scene 3/ Prophets

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*“You adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband!
Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your
lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side...”*

— Ezekiel 16:32-33

Later in the Old Testament, we read the work of the Prophets, those whom God chose to speak His Word on how His people had gone wayward. Often these Prophets use curious, stark and even beautiful language from marital love and fidelity. The most dramatic imagery is found in Ezekiel 16 from around the year 597 B.C.

Halley’s Bible Handbook explains that chapter this way,

This is a very graphic chapter and vivid portrayal of Israel’s Idolatry under the imagery of a Bride, beloved by her husband, who made her a queen, and lavished upon her silks, jewels and every beautiful thing. She then made herself a prostitute to every man that passed by, even shaming Sodom and Samaria.

It is indeed a very graphic chapter. God, through Ezekiel, wants to make it impossible for Israel to miss how their faithlessness and rebellion humiliated their Father. Every Christian should take time to carefully read and reflect on this chapter. Some of the language used by Ezekiel is even too graphic to share here or read in church.

You’ll find the same distinct
imagery in the early chapters of
Jeremiah and Hosea. God loves
his precious Bride, but she is so
dramatically unfaithful.

Song of Solomon uses the same dramatic language but in a positive way. It is right there in the very middle of God’s Word, dramatic love poetry between a loving husband and his bride, but it also illustrates the love of God for His Church and people. We are listening in on the tender and private marital bed, utterings so intimate we wonder if we should even be party to them.

Song of Songs speaks of the glorious and passionate ideal of God’s marriage to His bride. The Prophets speak of the disgraceful and humiliating reality of His bride’s infidelity. The redemptive language of the Old Testament uses the imagery of marriage.

Scene 4 / Bridegroom

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And Jesus said to them, “Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”

— Luke 5:34-35

While we read throughout scripture of God as the ever-loving, steadfastly faithful Bridegroom, the New Testament begins with the telling of this Bridegroom come to earth as a real man to dwell among us. It is a profound development.

Jesus speaks of Himself and His Kingdom many times throughout the Gospels in terms of marriage and weddings.

Even John the Baptist, Christ’s forerunner and own cousin, serving as a link between the Old and New Testaments, speaks of himself as a “friend of the bridegroom” (John 3:29) who is Jesus of Nazareth. John says

*You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ **The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.***

Jesus came to redeem His Bride from all the terrible infidelity with which she disgraced Him, as shown us from the very mouths of God’s Prophets.

The Bridegroom’s destiny is the Cross, upon which He will pay the immeasurable bride price for his beloved, to ransom us from our lives as slaves to our infidelity. To put it bluntly, and in the unavoidable words of Scripture itself, Jesus has come in order to turn us from faithless whores into pure, spotless brides. He will pay this tremendous bride price with His own blood, His very life. We are that precious to Him.

That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

What man has ever paid such a price for His beloved? Who has ever shown such desire to the point of death? This is precisely what Jesus did, the very center of His glorious Gospel.

Scene 5/ Preparation

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“Let not your hearts be troubled.

... In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

— John 14:1-3

Not only did Jesus, the Bridegroom, come to win us to Himself and to pay for our infidelity. In accordance with the Jewish wedding custom of the day, He has gone now to His Father’s house to prepare a place for us to live forever with Him where He is as His beloved.

When Jesus spoke the verses above to His disciples, the imagery of His words were not lost on them. Not at all. They understood that this is what a man said to his espoused after their engagement and before the wedding. It describes the necessary time of marital preparation. The groom must go and prepare a place for her to come live with him as his wife at his father’s house. And it is the young man’s father who tells him when their marital house is ready and that it is time to go get his bride.

In our times and culture, it would be similar to Jesus saying to us, “I will go and purchase a ring, put it on your finger, ask you an important question and then we will plan for a very important date in the future. After that special event, I will take you to live with me forever where I am.”

What he is referring to was
crystal clear to his listeners, even
if they didn’t fully *understand* why
he was using this marital imagery.

But it is clear that Jesus is speaking as a Bridegroom who must go and prepare a place for He and His Bride to dwell in glorious union forever. He is even deeply desirous to do so. He came to win and transform His Bride. He is going to prepare their marital home. What that reunion will be like is demonstrated in Scene 6.

Scene 6 / Wedding Feast

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What is the culmination of God's Divine narrative which started on page one of Scripture and threaded through every following page? This will tell us what whole story ~~has~~ been moving toward, its purpose.

We saw in Scene 1 where our story with God started: Genesis 1. We see where it concludes in the final chapters of Revelation. We have quickly traveled from the first pages of scripture to the last.

In Revelation 19:6-8 we are told,

*Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude...crying out,
"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory...
**For the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and His Bride has made herself ready...***

What God's whole story is about and has been moving toward is found in this glorious statement: *"For the marriage of the Lamb has come."*

And then we are given this promise in verse 9,

And the angel said to me,

"Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

God then tells us that He will become to us a new Husband. Revelation 21:3 tells us, "Now the dwelling place of God is with men. He will dwell with them" just as husband and wife do.

At this, He tells us "It is done." The great conclusion, finality. This new husband is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

This is what everything is and has been about.

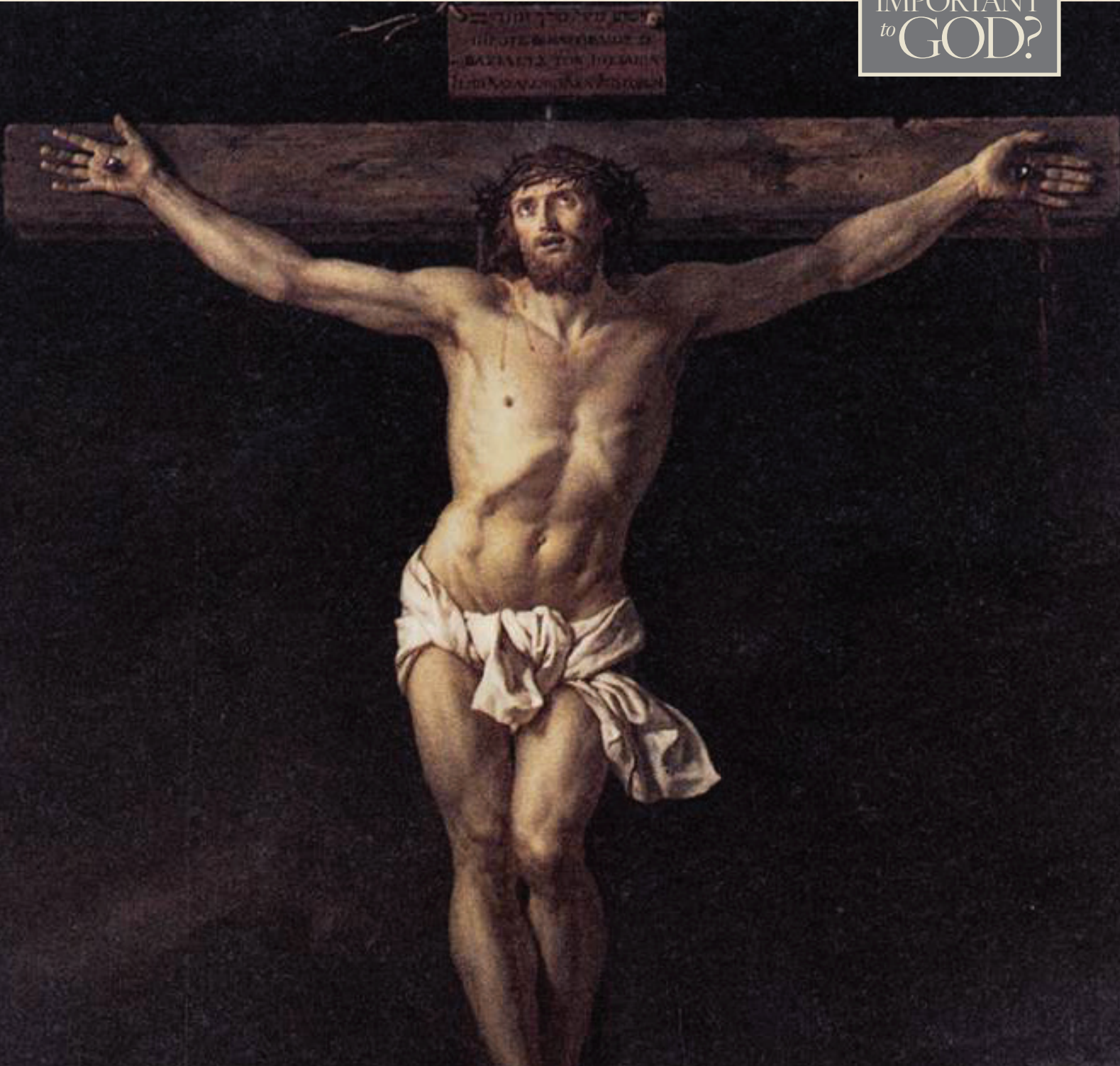
It is why Jesus said in Luke 20:35 that in the resurrection, we will "neither marry nor be given in marriage" like on earth. Not because marriage will be done away with in heaven. Quite the opposite.

Jesus said this because He knew marriage would actually be divinely *fulfilled* in the Great Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Every human marriage has merely been a foreshadowing of what is to come in God's Divine Narrative.

But before any wedding, there must be a proposal.

Scene 7 / Proposal

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To have a wedding and marriage, something very important must happen. There must be a proposal, a potential husband asking for the hand and lifetime commitment of her, the one he loves more than any other.

If Christ's Church — and those who make up her presence in the world — is to become His Bride, there must be a proposal, some invitation to join Him in a reciprocal relationship of everlasting faithful love and intimacy.

Does this proposal exist in God's Divine Narrative?

It certainly does and in a dramatic fashion. *We find it on the Cross.* What brought our Savior to this place on that tragic Good Friday afternoon was pure spousal love for each one of us, and love alone. It is His payment of the Bride — the price of our own infidelity — and our response to His offer is required.

We read about this even in the Old Testament.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her...
And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, [before her infidelity]
And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,'
 — Hosea 2:14-16

He invites her to call Him her Husband. But His marital promise doesn't end there.

And I will betroth you to me forever.
I will betroth you to me...in steadfast love and in mercy.
I will betroth you to me in faithfulness.
And you shall know the Lord.
 — Hosea 2:19

His marriage to His Beloved will be founded on eternal fidelity, enduring love and forgiving mercy. Have you ever gotten such a wonderful offer?

This is the gospel itself, it was established and offered to us on the cross and each of us must decide whether we will say "yes" or "no" to this profound proposal.

And like a marriage proposal, no one else can answer for you, not your parents, your siblings or your earthly spouse.

Only you can respond. What will your answer be to God's Great Proposal?



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Why MARRIAGE MATTERS



*A Biblical and Societal Study
of the Good of Marriage*

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A Biblical and Societal Study of the Good of Marriage



In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”

—Genesis 1:27-28 NIV

The first thing God does with the first two humans is creating them male and female as a compliment and completion of each other in His very image and likeness. He then joins them together as husband and wife.

In blessing Adam and Eve, God performed their wedding and called them to live as husband and wife, be fruitful, fill the earth and engage all of creation.

And then God says, “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*”

Marriage is central to God’s plan for humanity.

^{1/}What is Marriage?

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^{1/}What is Marriage?



When we think about what marriage is, we must think about it from two perspectives.

First, we cannot ignore the divine, supernatural perspective. Marriage is a thread that runs right through God's redemptive story appearing right there prominently on the first page of *Genesis* and ending in the ultimate and eternal marriage of God and His people in the final pages of *Revelation*. Marriage is central to God's own self-told story.

But of course, marriage also has a very natural, human angle. So let us also examine this human aspect.

Marriage is so fundamental to human experience and thriving that it exists in all civilizations. Even evolutionists and secular anthropologists tell us so.

One of the brightest pioneers in anthropology of the family, Edward Westermarck, wrote the first major modern history of marriage in his three volume *The History of Human Marriage*. He explains early in this work, "As for the origin of the institution of marriage, I consider it probable that it has developed out of primeval habit."¹

Westermarck is conceding that there is no time in known human history when marriage did not exist, when it was not essential to human thriving and civilizational life. Almost as if it was formed with the first human beings.

We will examine how and why marriage developed as a human institution in the next section, but let us spend just a moment examining what marriage actually is.

Marriage is the first and most fundamental of human institutions, essential for fostering humane life and culture. How do we know? Because across the long span of history and the globe's vast stretches of diverse nations and peoples, there is not one society which has established and maintained civilization *without* what anyone would recognize as marriage. *Not one.*

Consider the profound power of that statement. This means that marriage is not some unique Western or modern construct. It was *essential* to the earliest human civilizations and remains so today.

¹ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*, (The Allerton Book Company, 1922) Vol. I, p. 27.



Marriage is a sexual, parental, domestic, creative, economic, educational, emotional, loving, and legal relationship which produces the next generation of humanity. No other human association is all these things. Not even close!

Consider the wonder of that statement as well.

Marriage, in its fullest sense, properly involves each of these, bringing together the two different kinds of human beings, male and female, in a unique cooperative and exclusive union.

Decades ago, the British Association for the Advancement of Science published the volume *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* where they hold...

The family ... is based on marriage, which is defined as a union between a man and a woman such that children borne by the woman are recognized as the legitimate offspring of both partners.²

Another foundational anthropologist of marriage and family, Ward Goodenough defines marriage this way,

Thus seen, marriage is a contractual union of a man and a woman and involves sexual privilege, economic cooperation, cohabitation, the production of children, and responsibility for the children's care, socialization, and education. If the marriage is fruitful, the resulting social unit is a nuclear or elementary family. ...Marriage is thus the social transaction that establishes a nuclear family.

² A Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institute, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1951) p. 71.

He adds,

Other definitions of marriage — variously phrased as a union of a man and woman in which they are the jural father and mother of the children born to the woman or in which the woman's children are regarded as their legitimate offspring imply the same thing: marriage establishes the jural basis for a group consisting of a man, a woman, and their children...³

Marriage is the foundation which builds a family. It is a public and enduring legal bond between a man and woman which serves as the glue of family. And again, because of the nature of human sexuality and procreation, no nation has ever found a proper replacement.

- Marriage gives children legal and provisional access to their mother and father and establishes a specific man and woman as the proper parents of the child. It establishes them as the child's primary providers, protectors, professors and pediatricians.
- Marriage establishes who does and does not have sexual access to whom.
- Marriage determines who shall naturally benefit from another's labors and freely share their property and earnings without cost and complaint.
- Marriage bonds two previously existing extended families.
- Marriage is the first-order institution which establishes human society.

Without marriage nothing else happens, at least nothing that is essential for building that which humanity requires to grow and thrive. If anyone challenges this, then show us the nation that knows nothing of marriage. It doesn't exist.

The great Christian writer G.K. Chesterton taught us,

When we defend the family, we do not mean it is always a peaceful family; when we maintain the thesis of marriage, we do not always mean it is a happy marriage. We mean it is the theatre of the spiritual drama, the place where things happen, especially the things that matter.⁴

It is not only Christianity that teaches this. Evolutionists admit it. Anthropologists recognize it. Even James Q. Wilson, who served decades as a leading dean of modern social scientists, admitted wryly that "The evidence as to the powerful effect of this familial foundation is now so strong that even some sociologists believe it."⁵

Marriage establishes and maintains human civilization.

³ Ward Hunt Goodenough, *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970), p. 4.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Fancies Versus Fads*, (Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1923), p. 114.

⁵ James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families*, (HarperCollins, 2002), p. 7.

^{2/} How Did Marriage Develop?

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^{2/}How Did Marriage Develop?



We have already established that human civilization cannot exist without marriage. It serves as the first ordering of human behavior. We have also seen that marriage seemed to develop naturally among humanity's earliest civilizations.

But we must also investigate what caused marriage's formation?

Leading secular anthropologist of family Kathleen Gough explained in an important academic paper some years ago in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, "The trouble with the origin of the family [and marriage] is that no one really knows."⁶

There is simply no human record of how and why marriage developed because, as we learned in the previous commentary, marriage arose out of primeval habit. It predates the human historical record. It has always been a part of human history because it solves important problems fundamental to human experience.

The academic understanding of this reason originated with one of Edward Westermarck's brightest ground-breaking students, Bronislaw Malinowski. He recognized that the formation of marriage had everything to do with two facts:

1. Humans are sexual creatures and sexuality is consequential, producing children.
2. Male and female sexuality are qualitatively different.

Regarding the first point, humans soon came to realize, given the power of sexuality, that humanity is best served when sexual relations are guarded by the protective and exclusive confines of matrimony.

- Marriage serves children best, binding the baby's mother and father together in a clear, public, cooperatively sacrificial and enduring relationship.
- Marriage serves women best by tying her child's father, his energy, protection and resources to both of them.
- Marriage serves men better by focusing his energy toward one woman and their common children, making him a more focused responsible, productive citizen. This is the power of monogamy. Players don't make for good families, neighbors, employees or citizens. Married fatherhood does.

⁶ Kathleen Gough, "The Origin of Family," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, November 1971, 760-771.



- Society as a whole thrives in countless ways because marriage benefits children, women, and men in rich ways, as we shall see in our next section.
- Marriage does all of these things because of the second fact, that male and female sexuality are qualitatively different.
- Male sexuality is more opportunistic, tending to be more short-sighted.
- Female sexuality, because it is naturally and inextricably linked to child-bearing, takes a much longer, invested view. It is more discerning and selective.

These are two of the most fundamental social facts of humanity. As social theorist George Gilder explains right out of the gate in his classic book *Men and Marriage*,

The male body offers no sexual fulfillment comparable to a woman's passage through months of pregnancy to the tumult of childbirth and on into the suckling of her baby. ... Unlike a woman, a man has no civilized role or agenda inscribed in his body.⁷

Given this fact, Gilder explains,

The crucial process of civilization is the subordination of male sexual impulses and biology to the long-term horizons of female sexuality. ... It is male behavior that must be changed to create a civilized order [because] women conceive the future that men tend to flee.

In creating civilization, women transform male lust into love; channel male wanderlust into jobs, homes, and families; link men to specific children; rear children into citizens ... The prime fact of life is the sexual superiority of women.⁸

Marriage exists because marriage is the only way to regulate male sexuality in a pro-social direction.

There is no other civilizational institution capable of doing this. Gilder correctly contends,

Once, the man marries ... He has to change, for his wife will not long have

⁷ George Gilder, *Men and Marriage*, (Pelican Publishing Company, 1989), p. 6, 13.

⁸ Gilder, 1989, p. 5.

him if he remains in spirit [and behavior] a single man. He must settle his life, and commit it to the needs of raising a family. He must exchange the moral and spiritual rhythms of the hunt for a higher, more extended mode of sexual life.⁹

Just Consider the Words “Matrimony” and “Husband”

Marriage, and marriage alone, has this civilizing effect on male sexuality. No other force or social institution can tame it. The ancient meanings of two important words prove this fact. Consider the words *matrimony* and *husband*.

Matrimony, comes from the Latin, *matrimonium*, meaning literally “obligation to the mother.” That is what marriage is as a cultural institution.

Since it is virtually impossible for a mother and her child to thrive by themselves because of the intricate demands of motherhood, marriage arose in civilization throughout time as a way to have the impregnating male take responsibility for his child and the mother and contribute to their well-being.

A public bond must be made which ties the man to the two, announcing this fact to the larger community. The surrounding community expects *this* male, now wedded to *this* woman, to fulfill his obligation so *it* doesn’t have to. It is why marriage is a deeply public act and no society has found a way to grow and function without it.

Thus, the good man steps up, into matrimony
... and in doing so, becomes the second key
word: a *husband*.

This important word stems from the Old Norse, meaning literally house dweller: *hús* (“house”) *bóndi* (“dweller” and “bonded serf” or “slave”).

The husband is now the man who, through marriage, settles down and confines himself to a particular household serving and providing resources for its inhabitants. He is bonded to *this* address, to the things happening under the roof of *this* house. He becomes a whole other kind of man, taking full responsible for his sexuality and his part in creating and raising the next generation in cooperation with his children’s mother.

This is what marriage does and it is why marriage developed as the first human institution prior to recorded history.

Marriage has always existed in known human history because human sexuality is consequential, and every society has found it essential to corral free-wheeling male sexuality in a more pro-social and socially productive direction.

⁹ Gilder, 1989, p. 16.

^{3/} Is Marriage Essential for Human Thriving?

Why
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^{3/}Is Marriage Essential for Human Thriving?



We are living in an age where the growing mantra is “love makes a family” built upon the belief that it doesn’t really matter what form of family people choose as long as love is free and plentiful. This is nothing more than happy talk however, a form of family relativism and it doesn’t become any more true the more it’s said. As we shall see, the best social science in the world certainly does not back this up.

For all of the family experimentation we have seen over the last 50 years or so across the globe, not one form has risen to rival faithful marriage where mother and father cooperatively raise their own biological or adoptive children together.

Leading University of Maryland economist Melissa Kearney explains from her extensive research, “study after study suggests that a married-parent family tends to confer benefits to children in the form of greater resources during childhood, and that these increased resources then translate into better opportunities and greater educational attainment, among other outcomes.”¹⁰

Professor Kearney explains this in her recent book, *The Two-Parent Advantage*, published by University of Chicago Press: “Marriage is the most reliable institution for delivering a high level of resources and long-term stability to children.”¹¹

A politically diverse panel of 18 leading family scholars issued a major report entitled *Why Marriage Matters: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences* a number of years ago. Their stated three fundamental conclusions,

- The intact, biological, married family remains the gold standard for family life in the United States, insofar as children are most likely to thrive — economically, socially, and psychologically — in this family form.
- Marriage is an important public good, associated with a range of economic, health, educational, and safety benefits that help local, state, and federal governments serve the common good.

¹⁰ Melissa Kearney, *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind*, (University of Chicago Press, 2023), p. 45

¹¹ Kearney, 2023, p. 15.



- The benefits of marriage extend to poor, working-class, and minority communities, despite the fact that marriage has weakened in these communities in the last four decades.

These scholars tell us that mountains of the best social science research consistently demonstrate that “marriage, and a normative commitment to marriage, foster high-quality relationships between adults, as well as between parents and children.”¹²

These better relationships positively affect every important measure of human well-being from avoidance of poverty throughout the life-course, increased educational attainment for children and adults, substantially lower death rates, significantly increased physical and mental health by major measures, dramatically lowered rates of criminal and anti-social behavior, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, suicidality and idleness, which is being out of school and unemployed.

This panel of scholars even conclude that marriages of average quality and happiness produce these benefits as well, explaining,

Children in average intact, married families are more likely to thrive than children in average single- and stepparent families, and families headed by cohabiting couples. Communities where good-enough marriages are common have better outcomes for children, women, and men than do communities marked by high rates of divorce, unmarried childbearing, cohabitation, and high-conflict or violent marriages. Moreover, as we have seen, the benefits of a strong marriage culture extend across lines of race, ethnicity, and class.¹³

¹² *Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition: Thirty Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, (Institute for American Values / National Marriage Project, 2011) p. 12.

¹³ *Why Marriage Matters*, 2011, p. 42

A 2022 report entitled *Marriage and the Public Good* authored by social scientists at the Witherspoon Institute, associated with Princeton University, comes to the same strong conclusion.

Over the past 50 years, American society [and much of the Western world] has experimented with new family forms, such as single-parenting, step-parenting, and cohabiting parenting. While no single study is definitive, and there is room for debate over particular consequences, the clear preponderance of the evidence shows that intact, married families provide a host of benefits and protections for adults and are the best possible environment for children, compared to alternative family arrangements.¹⁴

These scholars conclude that “the intact married family model has three distinct advantages over all other forms” these being “shared biology, sexual complementarity [of male and female], and stability.” Because of these factors, the Witherspoon Institute scholars contend,

The evidence linking the health of marriage to the welfare of children is definitive; a large body of social-scientific research has emerged in the past four decades indicating that children do best when reared by their mothers and fathers in a married intact family.¹⁵

Regarding the benefits of marriage for adults,

Vast amounts of research spanning over half a century have provided abundant evidence that marriage improves the lives of those women and men who accept its obligations and believe in its promises.¹⁶

These are the reason why marriage exists in all human cultures from the beginning of time. It marks the first ordering of society for adults and the rearing and raising of children. This is both a biblical and secular anthropological truth.

Many societies, in contemporary and ancient times, have proposed and tried alternatives to the marital family form of men and women raising their own children with the closeknit cooperative unity of extended family in grandparents and aunts and uncles.

None have stood the test of time. History cannot name one example.

The reason for this is that not one of these alternative family forms correspond with the truths and nature of human experience. They are artificial constructs, developed by ideology and real life over long stretches of time have judged them failures.

Marriage is the original and foundational human good. All other social successes are subsequent. Both the biblical and natural narratives tell us this in vast and profound ways.

¹⁴ *Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles*, (The Witherspoon Institute, 2022), p. 13

¹⁵ *Marriage and the Public Good*, 2022, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Marriage and the Public Good*, 2022, p. 28.



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Should COUPLES LIVE TOGETHER



*How Cohabitation Undermines Marriage and
Harms Adult and Child Well-Being*

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How Cohabitation Undermines Marriage and Harms Adult and Child Well-Being



Unmarried cohabitation, men and women sharing home and bed outside of marriage, has been one of the United States' fastest growing family forms over the last several decades.

Remarkably, the Pew Research Center reports that “the share of adults ages 18 to 44 who have ever lived with an unmarried partner (59 percent) has surpassed the share who has ever been married (50 percent).” Pew adds, “This represents a significant change from roughly a decade ago, when 54 percent of adults in this age group had ever cohabited and 60 percent had ever married, according to data from the national Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).”¹

And this is not just young people in their formative years. A full 54 percent of cohabiting homes in America have children present and about a third have children from that relationship.² Scholars at Cornell University tell us that “the majority of all nonmarital births (roughly 60 percent) occur within cohabiting unions” driving them to conclude that “what was once pejoratively termed ‘shotgun weddings’ have seemingly given way to ‘shotgun cohabitation’.”³ So cohabitation is not just the domain of transitional college students and those starting careers. It has become the unstable foundation of increasing numbers of families.

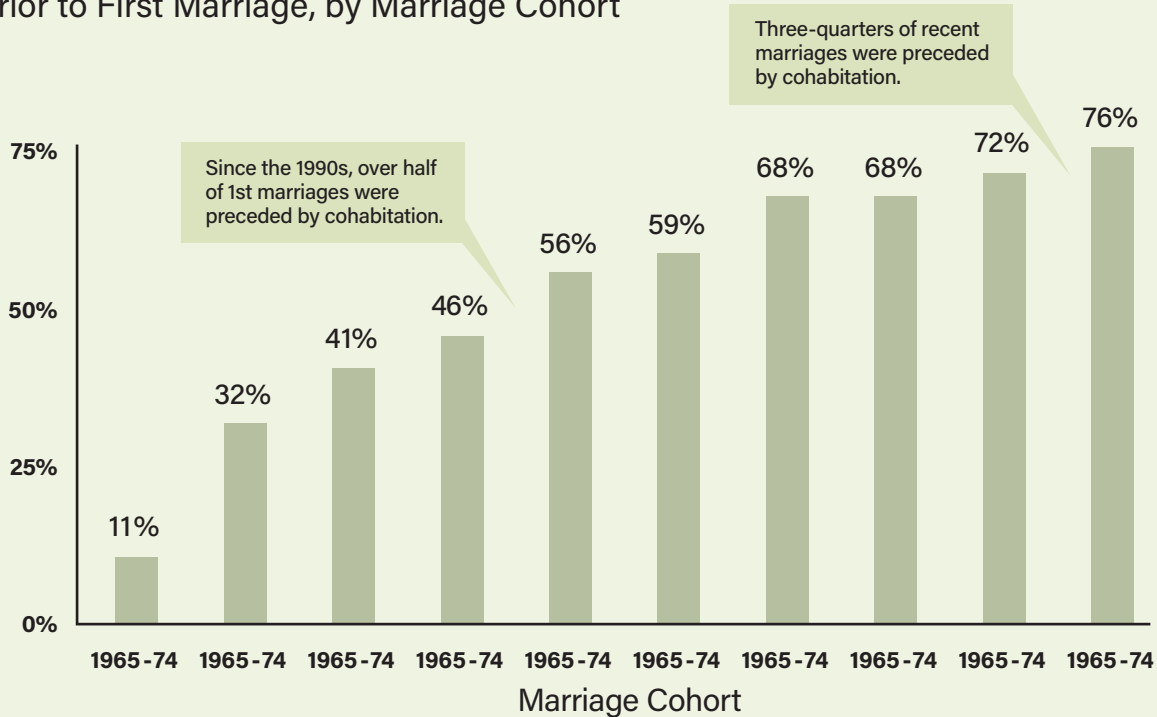
¹ Pew Research Center, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.,” November 2019, p.17

² Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 14, 20.

³ Sharon Sassler and Daniel T. Lichter, “Cohabitation and Marriage: Complexity and Diversity in Union-Formation Patterns,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 82 (2020), p. 47.

Living together outside of marriage started rising substantially in the 1970s in the U.S. and much of Europe. That growth has only accelerated in the last two decades. The number of cohabiting couples jumped from 1.6 million in 1970 to a staggering 7.5 million in 2010, climbing to 8.5 million in 2018.⁴ Dramatically, over 75 percent of all marriages entered today are preceded by some form of premarital cohabitation.⁵ The historic trendline for marriages preceded by ever living with a future spouse or someone else prior to walking down the aisle over the last 50 years looks like this.

Figure 1: Fifty Years of Change in the Share of Women (19-44) Cohabiting Prior to First Marriage, by Marriage Cohort



Source: 1987 NSFH (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989); 1995 NSFG (Bumpass & Lu, 2000); NCFMR analyses of female data files from NSFG cycles 2002, 2006-15, and 2015-2019.

Image credit: Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 10.

Increases in cohabitation appear to be eroding an essential marriage culture. Pew reports 78 percent of young adults under age 30 believe it is wholly acceptable for unmarried couples to live together with no intentions of marrying.

Remarkably, the General Social Survey found a stunning 41 percent of Christians believe living together is acceptable even without marriage plans.⁶ The Institute for Family Studies (IFS) reports that Pew told them “58 percent of white Evangelicals say they believe that cohabiting is acceptable if a couple plans to marry.”⁷ This should be deeply disturbing to all Christians.

⁴ Sassler and Lichter, 2020, p. 38.

⁵ Wendy D. Manning and Lisa Carlson, “Trends in Cohabitation Prior to Marriage,” National Center for Family & Marriage Research, Bowling Green State University, Family Profile No. 4, 2021.

⁶ W. Bradford Wilcox and Alysse Elhage, “Cohabitation Doesn’t Help Your Odds of Marital Success,” *Institute for Family Studies*, April 27, 2023.

⁷ David J. Ayers, “Cohabitation Among Evangelicals: A New Norm?” *Institute for Family Studies*, April 19, 2021.

What is more, IFS explains, “Evangelical Protestants are not as different as we might expect [on living together]: 65 percent have cohabited, essentially the same as Black Protestants (66 percent) and Catholics (63 percent).”⁸ And only a minority of evangelical cohabiting relationships lead to marriage. The Institute explains, “Among Evangelicals who have ever cohabited, only 49 percent of first cohabitations culminated in marriage.”⁹

Remarkably, only 14 percent of American adults always disapprove of unmarried cohabitation in all circumstances.¹⁰

Our young adults are growing up in an age of increasing relational confusion and declining marriage culture. Are these shifts leading to greater relational happiness for our children and neighbors across culture?

This Focus on the Family report provides solid, research-based answers, drawing from careful academic conclusions published in leading scholarly journals.

8 Ayers, 2021.

9 Ayers, 2021.

10 Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 4.



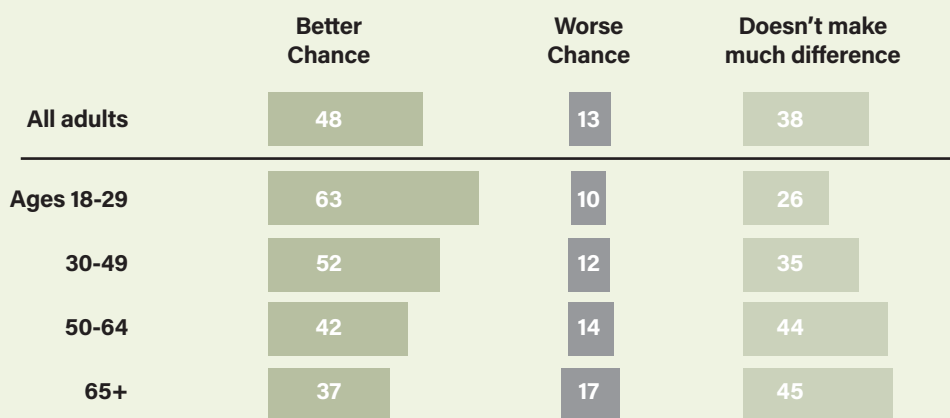
Cohabitation: A Useful Relational Testing Ground?

We have all heard the claim that cohabitation can serve as a useful test drive for young couple considering marriage. The pair can see if they really are compatible by just living together. If not, they simply separate and go their own way; no harm, no foul. Far better than a messy, painful divorce, right?

Many people (48 percent) wholly believe living together leads to be more successful marriages, and a stronger majority (63 percent) of young adults think this is true. Is it?

Most adults younger than 30 say couples who live together first are more likely to have a successful marriage

% saying that, compared with couples who don't live together before marriage, couples who DO live together have a ____ of having a successful marriage



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 25 – July 8, 2019. "Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S."

Image credit: Pew Research Center, 2019, p. 10.

Absolutely not! The best university-based research over the last few decades consistently concludes that cohabitation is generally related to having shorter, less stable, unhappy relationships and marriages.

Early sociologists investigating the impact of premarital cohabitation on relational health and endurance — working from two leading schools of sociology, the Universities of Chicago and Michigan — tell us clearly that the...

expectations of a positive relationship between cohabitation and marital stability ... has been shattered in recent years by studies conducted in several Western countries, including Canada, Sweden, New Zealand, and the United States.

Their data "provide no evidence that cohabitation experience leads to lower rates of dissolution after marriage." They continue, "Instead, those who cohabit before marriage have substantially higher divorce rates than those who do not..." They found differentials

from 50 percent to 100 percent higher risk of divorce for those who married with any cohabiting experience.¹¹ A Canadian-based sociologist explains:

Contrary to conventional wisdom that living together before marriage will screen out poor matches and therefore improve subsequent marital stability, there is considerable empirical evidence demonstrating that premarital cohabitation is associated with lowered marital stability.¹²

He found a 50 percent higher risk of serious marital trouble for cohabitators compared to non-cohabitators. Two of the leading and most foundational sociologists of marriage and family, and early explorers of the health of cohabiting relationships, explained in the early 1990s that:

While we do not have much evidence yet on the reasons, we know that cohabiting unions are much less stable than those that begin as marriages. Forty percent will disrupt before marriage [in a relatively short period of time], and marriages that are preceded by living together have 50 percent higher disruption rates than marriages without premarital cohabitation.¹³

These findings of negative relational consequences from living together outside of marriage have become so consistent through the academic literature, that the fact has been given a name by those who study it: *the cohabitation effect*.

Jay Teachman, another leading scholar in this field working from Western Washington University, explained in a 2003 *Journal of Marriage and Family* study that “One of the most clearly defined correlates of cohabitation is an increased risk of marital dissolution” adding “marriages preceded by a spell of cohabitation are as much as 50 percent more likely to end in divorce at any marital duration than marriages not preceded by cohabitation.” These findings caused him to describe living together while unmarried as “one of the most robust predictors of marital dissolution that has appeared in the literature...”¹⁴

What is most disturbing is that this is a predictor couples freely choose to engage in, firmly believing all the while it will actually help them reach their relational dreams.

The most powerful and insightful article published more recently (2019) comes from Stanford University and it examines some very interesting angles on couple's cohabiting experiences. They wondered if some of the serious negative relational aspects of cohabitation over the decades might have something to do with the fact that living together had been associated with harmful social stigma because some see it as sinful?

11 William G. Axinn and Arland Thornton, “The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Causal Influence?” *Demography*, 29 (1992): 357-374, p. 358.

12 Zheng Wu, “Premarital Cohabitation and Postmarital Cohabiting Union Formation,” *Journal of Family Issues*, 16 (1995): 212-232.

13 Larry Bumpass, James A. Sweet, and Andrew Cherlin, “The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53 (1991): 913-927.

14 Jay Teachman, “Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65 (2003): 444-445, p. 444, 445.



Is Cohabitation Harmful Merely Because It is Stigmatized?

This Stanford research looked at six different waves of the respected National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFG) over several decades and determined “the association between marital dissolution and premarital cohabitation has not changed over time or across marriage cohorts.”

The various NSFG waves across multiple decades to the present “consistently found that premarital cohabitation was associated with a greater hazard of marital dissolution.”

This establishes the damaging impact of cohabitation appears to manifest throughout the growing years of marriage, serving as a looming relational Sword of Damocles.

The Stanford researchers found no support for the idea that as cohabitation became more socially accepted, it loses its negative consequences. As we just observed, these scholars found the relationship between cohabitation and later divorce “has not changed across time or across marriage cohorts.”

The Stanford research demonstrates the specific risks of marital dissolution for various cohabiting situations compared to non-cohabitants were as follows:

- Odds of marital dissolution in any year of marriage (beyond first 12 months) for woman who cohabited with husband prior to marriage: *1.19 times higher*.
- Odds of marital dissolution for woman who cohabited with one partner other than husband prior to marriage: *3.25 times higher*.
- Odds of marital dissolution for woman who cohabited with two or more partners other than husband prior to marriage: *4.66 times higher*.¹⁵

2021 research jointly from Temple University and Providence College tells us that “premarital cohabitation predicts a substantially higher rate of marital dissolution” compared with non-cohabiting marriages explaining that some of this is “driven by the fact that cohabiting couples were also less religious and less likely to come from an intact family, factors which independently predict divorce.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Rosenfeld and Roesler, 2019, p. 56, 52, 54.

¹⁶ Sarah Kerrigan and James Bailey, “Does Premarital Cohabitation Increase the Likelihood of Future Marital Dissolution?,” *SN Social Science*, 123 (2021): 1-9, p. 1.

Marriage, Cohabitation and Sexual Fidelity

One of the most important aspects of intimate domestic relationships between men and women is sexual connection and fidelity. Nearly everyone expects their partner to be faithful. But married and cohabiting couples are certainly not similar in this regard in outcome. Decades of research have shown that cohabitators have much higher levels of sexual infidelity compared to married couples.

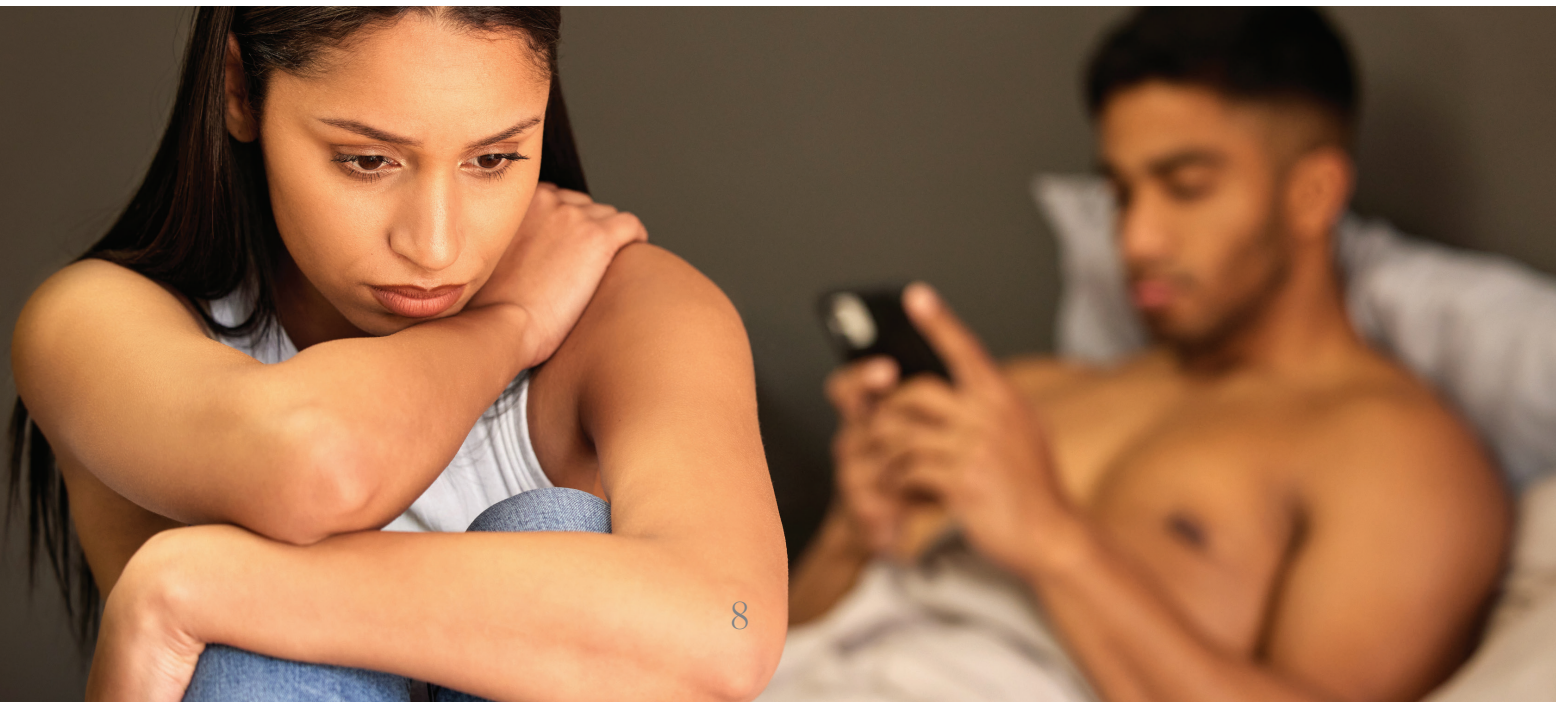
According to research done at the University of California — Irvine, “The odds of a recent infidelity were more than twice as high for cohabitators than for married persons.” This held true even when researchers controlled for issues such as more permissive attitudes by cohabitators about pre- and extra-marital sex. These researchers concluded that the “commitment mechanisms” of marriage — its clearer definitions of relational boundaries — were the likely reasons for the stark difference here.¹⁷

Research published in 2019 conducted at Texas Tech University found that cohabitators had a 57 percent greater likelihood of having sex with additional partners beyond the relationship compared to married individuals.

The highly reputable National Sex Survey revealed an even greater divide here, reporting that live-in boyfriends are nearly *four times* more likely than husbands to have cheated in the past year. While women tend to be more faithful in relationships, cohabiting women are shown to be *eight times* more likely than wives to cheat on their mate.¹⁸

¹⁷ Judith Treas and Deidre Giesen, “Sexual Infidelity Among Married and Cohabiting Americans,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62 (2000): 48-68, p. 58.

¹⁸ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, (Doubleday, 2000), p. 93.





Marriage Cohabitation and Domestic Violence

Research over the decades has consistently shown that couples who live together outside of marriage have some of the highest rates of domestic violence, or what scholars call intimate partner violence (IPV).

The Family Violence Research Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire, the nation's leading center for the study of domestic violence, has long found that all other things being equal, “cohabitators are much more violent than marrieds.” Specifically, the overall rate of violence among cohabiting couples is double the rate compared to married couples and the rate for “severe” violence is nearly *five times* greater.¹⁹

Jan Stets, a sociologist from Washington State University, was one of the earliest scholars to study domestic violence relative to relational type. In a famous paper with a title that reveals some bias — The Marriage License as a Hitting License — her research team found that marriage was actually much safer than living together. Marriage is actually protective against physical and sexual abuse.

Stets and her team explain,

The results show that cohabiting couples have a higher rate of assault than dating and married couples. These findings persist after controls for age, education, and occupational status are introduced. Violence is also more severe in cohabiting than dating or married couples. (emphasis added)

In another study, professor Stets explained “Aggression is at least twice as common among cohabitators as it is among married partners” with 14 percent of cohabitators reporting having hit, shoved, or thrown things at their partner in the past year, compared to only 5 percent of married people reporting this.²⁰

¹⁹ Kersti Yllo and Murray A. Straus, “Interpersonal Violence among Married and Cohabiting Couples,” *Family Relations*, 30 (1981): 339-347.

²⁰ Jan E. Stets, “Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53 (1991): 669-680

Marriage, Cohabitation and Finances

Married couples vow before family and friends that they will give themselves fully and exclusively to one another, forsaking all others. This includes the giving and sharing of all financial and material goods. Mine is yours and yours is mine.

But research consistently reveals that just as cohabitators are less likely to forsake all other potential sexual partners, they are also less likely share financial resources with one another.

It is well established in the research literature that married people typically earn and save more from their labors than their unmarried counterparts, either cohabiting or single.²¹ Research from Purdue University finds that wealth accumulation in cohabiting situations is far below what it typically is in marriage, with cohabitators — again — more closely resembling the earnings and savings of singles.²² Two are not better than one in cohabitation.

This is because cohabitators are less likely to empower and grow their resources by pooling them together. International research published in 2021 explains, “In most countries, there is a ‘cohabitation gap’ with cohabiting couples less likely to pool their incomes and act as a single economic unit compared to married couples.”²³

21 Waite and Gallagher, 2000, pp. 110-123.

22 Janet Wilmoth and Gregor Koso, “Does Marital History Matter? Marital Status and Wealth Outcomes Among Preretirement Adults,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (2002): 254-268.

23 Ann Evans and Edith Gray, “Cross-National Differences in Income Pooling Among Marriage and Cohabiting Couples,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 83 (2021): 534-550.





Marriage, Cohabitation and Household Chores

One of the nice things about being in a domestic relationship has nothing to do with the bedroom. It has to do with the bathroom... and the kitchen and vacuum cleaners. You have someone to share the chores with in keeping a house clean. Contrary to stereotypes, married men are more likely to help out with a variety of household chores than are men who are just living with their girlfriend.

Even a cohabiting man who has real plans to marry the woman he is living with will do up to 8 hours more housework in a week than his peer with no intentions to marry his mate. His help around the house increases and declines significantly relative to his level of commitment to the woman he loves.

What does all this mean?

All of these findings and more have led two of the most knowledgeable and widely respected scholars on cohabitation, Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades from the University of Denver, to explain to their peers,

Virtually every published study that has examined premarital cohabitation finds it to be associated with greater, rather than lower risk for problems in marriage. ... We know of no published study that shows a benefit of premarital cohabitation for marital outcomes and many published studies showing added risk.

Stanley and Rhoades have carefully documented how living together before marriage is associated with...

- Higher levels of negative communication habits in marriage.
- Reduced levels of marital satisfaction.
- Increased levels of domestic violence and sexual infidelity.
- Increasing erosion of belief in marriage and childrearing.
- Greater personal perception of marital instability.
- Husband being less committed to his spouse when married.
- Greater likelihood of divorce.

Cohabitation and Child Well-Being

So, how do children fare when they are living in cohabiting homes? One of the first indicators that children suffer is the stability of the home. Children thrive when their home is stable and dependable. Cohabiting homes are notoriously unstable.

Professor Manning explains that “overall, cohabiting unions last an average of 18 months” adding that “from a child’s perspective, more children born to cohabiting parents see their parents break up by age 5 compared to children born to married parents.”²⁴ Manning in earlier research explained that children born to cohabiting parents have up to a “246 percent greater odds of experiencing parental disruption than children born to married parents.”²⁵ She states this is a primary reason why “children who are born to cohabiting parents appear to experience enduring deficits of psychosocial wellbeing.”

This has serious implications for economic stability for the children. Data shows us “evidence of considerable economic uncertainty for children of cohabiting couple families.” Researchers note that “although the children of unmarried couples have two potential caretakers and economic providers, our research clearly shows that family resources ... fall well short of family resources in married-couple families.” Thirty one percent of children living with cohabiting parents live in poverty and 43 percent have incomes exceeding twice the poverty level.²⁶ By contrast, children living with married biological parents almost never face serious poverty.

Research conducted by scholars at Princeton University and the University of Texas, Austin “found that partnership instability is positively associated with aggressive and anxious/depressive behavior in children at age 3.” This is why scholars have consistently concluded that “many studies find that outcomes for women and children are poorer in cohabiting than marital unions.”²⁷

Cohabitation fails in nearly every way. This fact is shown time and again over six decades of careful sociological, medical, psychological, and public policy research. God’s plan for family formation, sexuality, and parenting children is regularly shown to be best in the scientific literature.

²⁴ Manning, 2015, p. 53.

²⁵ Wendy D. Manning, Pamela J. Smock, and Debarun Majumdar, “The Relative Stability of Cohabiting and Marital Unions for Children,” *Population Research and Policy Review*, 23 (2004):135-159.

²⁶ Wendy D. Manning and Daniel T. Lichter, “Parental Cohabitation and Childrens Economic Well-Being,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58 (1996): 998-1010, p. 1005, 1007.

²⁷ Sassler and Lichter, 2020, p. 45.



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