

God Blessed Marriage

Adapted from Matthew Harrison (the current President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod), *Second Thoughts about Living Together* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005).

- 1. What is marriage?** The institution of marriage, established by God at creation and publicly and voluntarily entered into, is the lifelong union of one man and one woman (cf [Gn 1:27–28](#); [2:18–25](#); [Mt 19:3–9](#); [Rm 7:2](#); [1Co 7:9, 39](#)).

- 2. Who regulates marriage: Church or State?** In the beginning, God created the spiritual order and the temporal order (Church and State). God rules the spiritual and temporal orders, but in different ways. The spiritual order has to do with the proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the Holy Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper). The regulation of marriage properly belongs to the temporal order, which is still ruled by God, but through legitimate civil authority. Therefore, society, through custom or legislation, has the ability to pronounce when a marriage is lawfully constituted. The definition of marriage belongs to God, who instituted it. If the society or the government changes the definition of marriage so that it conflicts with God’s definition, then the Church, through its called representatives, will need to decline invitations to marry such couples (cf [Ac 5:29](#)).

- 3. What is the purpose of marriage?** Marriage has five God-given purposes:
 - a. To establish a household of faith (cf [Eph 4:32](#)).
 - b. To provide a way for a man and a woman to love each other (cf [1Pt 3:7](#); [Col 3:19](#); [Eph 5:22–33](#)).
 - c. To provide for the procreation and nurturing of children (cf [Eph 6:1–4](#)).
 - d. To provide a legitimate and God-pleasing outlet for sexual desire (cf [1Co 7:1–5](#)).
 - e. To provide for the mutual care of husband and wife in the commonwealth of goods. In the marriage rite, a man and woman take a solemn vow “to have and to hold from this

day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part” (*LSB*, p 276). This shows that there is more to marriage than feelings of love and sex. Marriage is a commitment, come what may, built upon God’s action, command, and promise: What God has joined, let no man break apart!

- 4. Isn’t living together or engagement acting “publicly and voluntarily”?** (See point 1.) No. When we say above that marriage is a public act, we mean that two people make a formal, official, and legally binding public declaration of commitment for life.

Cohabitation is mentioned in the Bible. Remember Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well? She was living with a man “publicly” (not in the legal sense, but in the sense of “openly and for all the world to see”), yet Jesus certainly did *not* recognize that it was a marriage ([Jn 4:16–18](#)).

- 5. But isn’t it a good idea to live together for a while to see if we are compatible?** A good idea based on what? Based on God’s Word, such an activity is forbidden for Christians. Living together breaks the Sixth Commandment, violates the love we should give to our neighbor, and tells God that we have a greater wisdom about marriage and sexual relations than He does.

It also happens to be a bad idea from a practical standpoint. Studies show that 80 percent of all marriages *begun as cohabitation* fail. Why? Because there is a lack of moral conviction (which may lead to infidelity) along with a lack of commitment. Note some of the following facts:

- a. Live-ins are least likely to marry.
- b. Live-ins have higher separation and divorce rates.
- c. Those who lived together have unhappier marriages: cohabitants without plans to marry were more inclined to argue, hit, shout, and have an unfair division of labor in the home.
- d. Live-ins often engage in extramarital affairs.
- e. Marriage reduces antisocial behavior.

- f. Live-ins do not enjoy the best sex: those who refrain from premarital sex are 29–47 percent more likely to enjoy sex after marriage.
- g. Cohabiting men tend to want a woman who will cook and clean for them rather than a lifelong partner.

Difficulties such as a bad first marriage, a desertion, a divorce, or a difficult home life may make us reticent [*restrained*] to make a lifelong commitment. The unconditional love of Christ, our Savior, and His forgiveness for our past sins and misdeeds enables us to deal with past hurts and old wrongs. And it is God’s unconditional love for us that enables us to forgive those who have hurt and deserted us and to love and trust again in the lifelong commitment called marriage.

We as Christians are not free to do what we want when it is contrary to God’s Word and will. We cannot say, “It’s my body. I can do with it what I want” (cf [1Co 6:19–20](#)).

Sex within legal marriage is a great blessing from God. It is the only legitimate and God-pleasing outlet for sexual desire recognized in the New Testament (cf [Ac 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1Co 5; 6:9; 10:8; 2Co 12:19–21; Rm 1:18–28; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3–5; Col 3:5; 1Th 4:1–8; Heb 12:14–16](#)).

6. How should pastors, elders, and congregations respond?

- a. Our first priority is the salvation of the soul of our erring brother or sister. We care enough about you, we love you enough, to tell you that your soul is in danger, that you need to flee the sin that has entrapped you. We love you enough to share the love of God’s grace and forgiveness with you as the Spirit of God leads you to godly contrition and repentance (cf [Ac 3:19; 2Co 7:10; 1Tm 2:4](#)).
- b. Do we have options in dealing with the situation? Yes. We can and should apply [Mt 18:15–18; Gal 6:1–2](#). Our overriding goal is repentance, so that our dear brother or sister recognizes he or she is sinning (cf [Ps 32:1–5](#)).
- c. If, after admonition and instruction in what God’s Word says, there is no repentance (which would include heartfelt sorrow over the sin committed and a desire to remedy the

situation by either marriage or separation), then the minor ban (no Communion) will be applied by the pastor. Further attempts at reconciliation will be made. Eventually, excommunication *may* be necessary in certain cases—*as a last resort*—in order to shock the brother or sister to his or her senses. This is an application of the Law. But it is also an act of *love*, tough love.

- d. If the Holy Spirit leads a couple to recognize that their current situation is wrong and if there is true repentance, the fullness of the Gospel is to be shared with the couple. Consider these passages: [1 Co 6:9–11](#); [Rm 8:1–2](#).
- e. What options do the repentant have? (1) Separate with no plans for marriage. (2) Separate until marriage. (3) If at any time during the process they wish to marry, the pastor will do so via a private ceremony (a concession by the congregation and pastor). (4) Get married by a justice of the peace immediately and have a consecration of the marriage in church at a later time.

7. What should be the guiding principle for the pastor and congregation in these matters? Matters of marriage, sex, and cohabitation are often fraught with difficulty. That is because they involve men and women, and all men and women are sinners ([Ps 51:5](#); [Rm 3:10–12](#)).

But God our Father has mercy on poor sinners. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to save us from our sins. He did this by His sinless life, His atoning death on the cross, and His glorious resurrection from the dead ([Is 53:6](#); [Jn 3:16](#)).

Our guiding principle in all things, therefore, should be the Gospel of Jesus Christ—especially in matters pertaining to marriage, sex, and cohabitation. Yes, we must apply the Law of God in all its severity when people sin, but we must also apply the Gospel in all its sweetness when people repent of their sins ([Mt 11:29–30](#); [Eph 4:32](#)).¹

¹ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (pp. 2120–2121). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.