

## **Confronting Cohabitation** by Rev. Roger Sonnenberg

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Charles Dickens writes these paradoxical lines in *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” In many respects, today is “the worst of times” for Christian families in America. That makes it “the best of times” for the church to do something about it.

### **The worst of times**

More and more families seem to be unraveling. 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.

And the rate of cohabitation has increased dramatically, multiplying the risk of domestic violence for women and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children. Commitment has been redefined to mean “as long as we love one another.” Many people, 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 advocated among many people.

One study indicates that 89 per cent of all couples in America now 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. They have lower levels of marital interaction and higher levels of disagreement. Though many 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 have experienced had they been married—especially for women.

### **Why so silent?**

“Have you ever heard a sermon on ‘living together’?” asks religion columnist Michael McManus in his book, *Marriage Savers*.

It seems that condemnation of premarital sex has virtually vanished from preaching. “In the pulpits there has been a backing away from moralizing about sex before marriage,” says James McHugh, a Roman Catholic bishop. David Whitman wrote in *U. S. News and World Report*: “The clergy once loquacious on the topic of premarital sin, are equally subdued.”

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 implicitly advocates 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 some people sitting in the pews.

The question of why the church has remained silent becomes especially significant when one considers studies that show there are few things more important to children than that they have parents who stay married.

In preparing their best-selling book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, authors Judith S. Wallerstein, Sandra Blakeslee and Julia M. Lewis 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.

## **The best of times**

### **... to proclaim the truth**

So what does the church need to do in a time like this? It is “the best of times” for the church to share 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 God’s Word. It is an opportunity to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14).

In a large adult-information class designed to teach the tenets of the Christian faith, I was not surprised to hear several participants express shock to learn 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. They were unaware of the wisdom of God’s Word on this subject. St. Paul writes: “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” (Eph. 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.

### **... to teach marriage**

Seemingly, in every counseling office and at every divorce hearing, the children of divorce cry out, “Speak to us ... help us ... we’re hurting.” We need to let these children, who find themselves so afraid of marriage due to their own parents’ divorces, know that living together won’t secure happy marriages for themselves. Living together unmarried won’t right the wrong of the divorce revolution. It becomes only another wrong that hurts and scars those involved.

It is “the best of times” not only to speak the truth about cohabitation but also truth about the blessing of marriage and its purpose. This teaching should be done across the entire lifespan—from cradle to grave.

My wife began teaching our son from infancy the importance of marrying a Christian wife as she prayed over him and with him. She daily prayed that he might someday find a Christian wife. Once, when he was about 4, she missed praying this part of her prayer with him. Jacob quickly asked her, “What about my Christian wife?” She had quietly blessed him with a picture of a hopeful future—including 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 need to be shared by the Church loudly and clearly:

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

### **... to talk about sex**

Since the church has been commanded to teach and obey every thing God has commanded, it is required to talk about sex and what God says about this gift in the context of marriage, as well as about sexual sins outside marriage. It is essential that this teaching begin early in a child’s life because of the many other forces that seek to shape the child’s thinking on this subject. By not talking about the subject, we subcontract this duty to other people and institutions.

Most public-school 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. They distort the truth and give the impression that sex is purely a physical pleasure that must guide their behavior.

In reality, sexuality and the gift of sex can be rightly understood and celebrated only in the context of what God’s Word says. It clearly states that the sexual expression of love is to be in a marriage relationship.

### **... for mentoring**

Too many people have no idea what a Biblical marriage looks like. Mentoring is a Biblical way to help strengthen marriages. The need for mentoring and for models are found throughout Scripture. (Read Titus 2:1-8 for an excellent model.) Because relationships are so difficult, God suggests that wiser and experienced men and women serve as mentors to others.

Mentoring couples, though they in no way claim to have all the answers, seek to teach and model a correct Biblical relationship between a husband and a wife. At Our Savior Lutheran Church in Arcadia, Calif., marriage mentors agree to:

- share their successes and struggles in a Christian marriage;
- share what they do and how they do it to maintain a Christian marriage;
- help build skills (such as budgeting) to meet real-life needs.

### **... for preventative ministry**

Historically, there has been little attention focused on marital stress and divorce prevention in the form of premarital preparation. Too often, we lean toward a shortsighted perspective; we wait for marital distress to set in before we do any thing. With the wide range of problems now traceable to marital distress and divorce, we can and we 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,” “Marriage Wise,” “Smart Marriages” and “The Power of We.”

An Internet resource helpful in choosing the right program or resource is the “Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education” at [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com).

Research has helped us to see what makes stronger, happier and lasting marriages. Not surprisingly, research repeatedly substantiates the truth of Scripture.

### **... to share the Gospel**

The strength of the 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.” 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 parents’ sins, the church has the opportunity to proclaim the hope and promise that are ours through faith in Jesus Christ. The power that raised Christ back to life is the power that brings new life, new possibilities. It is a truth that we as individuals and as the church are privileged to proclaim to a dying world.