

The Problem with Playing House

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Several years ago, I got a call from an old fraternity brother, Rick, who was now attending LifeChurch.tv. “Monica and I are going through some struggles at home,” he said.

“Would you be open to giving us some counsel?”

“Of course!” I replied, and we set a time to meet.

Three days later, Rick and Monica walked into my office, visibly tense. Almost immediately, Monica said, “He drives me crazy. Everything he does gets on my nerves. I can’t take much more. I don’t want to leave, but if something doesn’t change soon, I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Rick defended himself: “I’m not as bad as she says. It’s tough living with Miss Perfect.”

Monica prepared to fire back, but I interrupted. I needed to get some basic information first. “I’m so sorry you’re struggling. With God’s help, I know we can work something out,” I offered. “First, tell me, how long have you been married?”

“Oh, we’re not married,” Rick answered. “We’ve lived together fourteen months.” Neither of them felt the least bit uncomfortable telling me—their pastor—that they were cohabitants, not spouses.

“Have you guys ever considered marriage?” I asked gently.

They didn’t “believe in marriage,” Monica explained. She detailed their parents’ divorces, including her dad’s infidelity. “Getting married just doesn’t seem necessary,” she concluded.

Rick added, “We love church. And we’re as committed as any married couple. After all, we’re married in our hearts.”

He continued, “We have an idea we think might help us. Would you conduct a special ceremony to bless our relationship?”

The “special ceremony” they requested wasn’t a wedding. It was more like a house blessing or a baby dedication—something to make their relationship feel more official or garner more of God’s favor for their lives. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. As I’ve thought about it since, when you live together before marriage, you’re saying by your actions, “I don’t really believe in marriage.” Not marriage by God’s plan, anyway.

Inspiration struck. “Sure!” I answered. “I’d be happy to write some vows to bless your living arrangement. Let’s meet next week to talk them over.”

They beamed.

The following week my old friend and his live-in arrived, glowing with anticipation. “Before I share your special vows,” I said, “I wanted to talk a little more about the ceremony itself. I thought we’d have it at your home. Maybe invite some close friends and family.”

Monica squeezed Rick’s hand and smiled, obviously excited about the possibilities.

“Everyone will gather in your bedroom.”

Startled, Rick and Monica looked at each other.

I plunged ahead.

“Here’s how the vows will go,” I said. “On your big day, I’ll start, and you’ll repeat after me. But for now I’ll read the whole thing. Ready for your special relationship blessing vows?”

They hesitated for an instant, then both nodded. I read:

“I, Rick, take you, Monica, to be my cohabitant, to have sex with you and to hold you responsible for half the bills,

to love and take advantage of you,

from this day forward, or as long as our arrangement works out.

I will be, more or less, faithful to you,

as long as my needs are met, and if nothing better comes along.

If I should break up with you, it doesn’t mean this wasn’t special to me.

Because I love you almost as much as I love myself,

I commit to live with you for a while.

So help me ... me.

*In the name of sex, options, and selfishness, amen.”**

I knew I had taken a huge gamble. I prayed silently. I was met with blank stares.

After what felt like an eternity, Rick gently took Monica’s hand. Softly, sincerely he said, “We need to go. We have some things to talk about.” And they left.

The next day Rick and Monica walked in without an appointment. They hate me, I thought, and cringed, waiting for the worst.

“We always *thought* we were committed.” Rick glanced at Monica, then turned to me. “Your vows sobered us up. We don’t want what we thought we wanted. We want God to bless us.”

Monica asked if I’d marry them. I couldn’t have been more delighted.

**Adapted in part from Danny Murphy’s “Vows of Cohabitation,” The Door, (January/February 2000), 21.*

FUZZY LOGIC

Once a couple truly commits, before long one or both start to reason, *Why are we paying bills at two places? Moving in together would be so much cheaper.*

It makes sense, doesn’t it? According to conservative studies, almost half of non-Christians live together before marrying. Not surprising, right? Without a biblical worldview, living together sounds viable. What’s surprising is that one in four Christians—you, me, and people we love and know—follow the same reasoning and move in together before walking the aisle.

Although I never shared an address with a girlfriend, before I surrendered to Christ I seriously considered living with my last one. We practically lived together anyway. I remember thinking, *Hey, I pay \$450 a month plus bills, and she splits rent for \$500. That’s stupid! We’re in love. We could test-drive marriage. If it works, we’ll just take the next step. Besides, I’ve seen what divorce does. That’s not happening to me. Some people may look down on us, but it’s our business. We’re committed in our hearts. That’s what matters.*

It all seemed so innocent. So logical. So friendly.

Which reminds me of a friend my son made.

A few years ago, I walked onto my porch and saw my then three-year-old, Bookie, jumping excitedly, singing and pointing. “My fwend! My fwend! I wuv my fwend!”

I’d never seen him that worked up. Curious, I walked over to see his “friend.” My heart stopped. Bookie’s new friend was a young rattlesnake. I snatched Bookie away before the snake could strike. Then I crushed the snake’s head with my shoe. (After chopping the head off with a shovel.)

What appeared innocent—even friendly—was in fact deadly.

A wise man once said, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). We sometimes want so much for something to be right that we’re willing to live in denial of the very thing that could kill the relationship.

We sometimes miss the clarity of God's logic because we're getting pressure from the other person. For example, one person might begin to play the "If you really loved me" game. You know that game. Dating couples play it just before wrecking their relationships.

"If you really loved me, you'd stay."

"If you really loved me, you'd move in."

If your boyfriend or girlfriend tries manipulating you into something wrong, warn them that they're risking losing you. You live to please God, and you won't compromise His standards. If they can't live with that, they'll have to live without you. A manipulative relationship is dangerous, especially when it can lead to losing those treasures that you value most.

And what are some of your most precious treasures? Your reputation. Your example. The trust of family and friends. Your purity. Your future marriage bed. The love story your children and grandchildren will ask you to tell one day. And above all, the unhindered blessing of God. Cohabitation before marriage puts some of your greatest treasures on the line.

Guard your treasures! Don't compromise, or you might destroy the relationship and your lifetime together. Moving in together may seem right. After all, you really want your relationship to last. But this path toward what you want most can actually lead to losing it.

OMINOUS ODDS

If you think you're improving your odds of getting married by sharing a home with your boyfriend or girlfriend, you're wrong. Half the couples living together right now will break up within five years. And more than 60 percent will break up within ten years, according to a 2002 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And only 40 percent of people who live together actually get married.

Living together may make you *feel* secure. But that kind of security is a phantom. Even for those who do marry after living together, the statistics are grim. The divorce rate for people who live together before marriage is at least 33 percent higher than for those who don't.

You might be one of those who say, "Well, Craig, the reason I'm living with my significant other is that I'm not sure about love or marriage. I think it's wiser not to commit. If we don't end up married, then it will be the right thing, and at least it won't hurt so much when we split."

With so many couples getting divorced these days, I don't blame you for being hesitant. But if you are asking God to guide you in your relationships, and you're making a conscious effort to follow His will, you should trust Him to get you where you need to be—and to help you recover if something does go wrong. The problem with living together is that, by your actions, you're telling God you think you know better than He does—that your truth is better than His. You're choosing to not trust Him with one of the biggest decisions of your life. And if you don't trust Him, you won't be able to receive His blessing.

Certainly some live-in partners do get married and enjoy long and meaningful lives together. That's the way the world works. A principle is not a guarantee or an equation. The book of Proverbs makes it clear that fools sometimes succeed, cheaters sometimes prosper. But exceptions to a rule do not invalidate that rule. As a rule, fools and cheaters—even really nice ones with warm, fuzzy intentions—lose. Life just goes better when we value wisdom and integrity. So if you're resisting biblical truth on this issue and nothing terrible has happened yet, I urge you to carefully reconsider.

Our life choices have consequences. God wants to bless you. But He won't bless sin. If you've become one of His by choosing to follow Christ, He won't reject you completely. When we pursue destructive lifestyles, our patient and merciful Father may let us follow our own ways for a season. But His patience doesn't negate the consequences that are piling up. Sooner or later, they will be ours to deal with (thankfully, with the help of a loving Father who never leaves us).

If you're living together, it's time to decide. I won't lie to you: your decision will be very difficult. But it'll be one of the biggest ones you ever make. Do you love this person? Do you really believe this is whom God wants you to marry? If not, call it quits now. You may hesitate, not wanting to hurt your lover. But you're already hurting that person, and yourself. Avoid any more pain and wasted time. You're doing the merciful, truly loving thing to break up today. (We'll talk more about how to do this later.) If, however, you believe this person is your Two, start treating him or her the way God desires. True love will do the hard thing, the right thing.

Now, it's commonly thought that the "right thing" for those living together is to marry immediately—to "make each other honest." Let's slow down and think this through. If you've been sexually involved, you've entered a mental and emotional fog. Sexual intercourse is more than biology at work—it's a merging of souls. That means it affects you more than just physically. It stirs your emotions. It clouds your judgment. It literally changes your brain chemistry.

If you're under the "spell" of sex, do you really think you can discern whether you're right for each other? Your sexual and emotional involvement has made you feel right together. That's very different from being right together.

TAKE A HARD RIGHT

In any case, the hard, right thing—right now—is to stop having sex. Move out. I know it's expensive. It's inconvenient. It's challenging. It's embarrassing. But it's better than missing God's best, maybe for the rest of your life. So move.

How about a cooling-off period? Give each other some space. Seek God, and soak yourself in your true identity in Him. Allow Him to reclaim your mind and emotions. Let the fog dissipate and your feelings emerge from the influence of sex's high. Taking a few months to achieve clarity is a small price to pay to ensure that you embark on a life commitment, not a life sentence.

While you're trying to discern whether you have, in fact, met your life partner—make three promises. You might express them verbally or in writing or both:

I love you so much that I'll never ask you to compromise. *Because you're so special to me, I promise never to do anything to hurt your reputation. I'll never push you sexually. I'll never ask you to do anything outside God's will.*

I love you so much that I won't hurt your relationship with God. *I won't do anything to damage your intimacy with God; I'll help you grow closer to Him.*

I love you so much that, if God leads, I'll devote my life to loving you in marriage. *Up to this point, we've been saying "maybe" to each other. We've been doing married things while keeping our options open. If we marry, from that point on my "yes" to you will always be "yes." Outside of marriage, my "no" to sex will always be "no" (see Matthew 5:37). As God leads, my commitment will become, "Yes, I promise to love you as Christ loves the church" (see Ephesians 5:22–33).*

If you've made mistakes, and if you're in pain because of them, don't lose hope! God is the God of second chances (and third, fourth, and five hundredth). Yes, you've blown it. But God wants you back. And He can genuinely change your desires, your habits, your patterns of thinking and living. He's that powerful. He's that loving.

God will show you His grace. It's not too late to experience His best.

NO HARM, NO FOUL?

Before we move on, I want to address a somewhat related topic. You might be thinking, *Hey, we're not living together. We occasionally stay the night, but we're not having sex. For us, it's just talking late into the night, snuggling. And what a blast waking up together (except for the morning breath)!*

And it's true. Staying the night with your girlfriend or boyfriend can be a lot of fun. So can road trips together, weekends away ... or at home.

But just because it's fun doesn't mean it's smart.

How would I know about coed sleepovers? Well, before I was committed to Christ, having girls stay the night was as common as drinking cheap beer. In those circles, having your girlfriend stay over wasn't just common, it was expected.

Usually the first sleepover wasn't planned. I'd meet a girl at a party, hit it off, and stay out late. Not wanting the evening to end, we'd go to my place or hers. Before we knew it ... morning. I'd just spent the night with a virtual stranger ... again.

A lot of people do this. Often the sleepovers involve sex. Sometimes they don't. Someone might argue for a nonsexual sleepover: *It's no big deal. Are we hurting anyone? We just want to be close. We just want to talk. Snuggle maybe. No sex. Honest.*

We've already looked at Hebrews 13:4: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure." Obviously this rules out lovemaking outside of marriage—for both single and married people. But the intimacy of the marriage bed involves much more than the sex act, and protecting that intimacy rules out a lot of behaviors besides sex.

For example, would Amy mind if, while she was out of town, I had another woman stay the night? Yes. What if we promised not to go all the way, just fool around? You know, we can look in the barn but not go in. Again, yes. What if I promised we wouldn't do anything sexual? Just innocent companionship. Wouldn't that be okay? No. Why not? The marriage bed must stay pure. Sleeping in the same bed, prolonged physical contact, deeply personal conversations—all are intimate acts, reserved for marriage.

If it's right for me to carefully guard these nonsexual intimacies with my wife in marriage, why should it be any different for you before marriage? Your future marriage needs your protection now. You need to guard all aspects of that intimacy—sexual and nonsexual—if you want to experience the pleasures of purity and trust in your marriage bed.

And that's assuming you're actually able to stop before sex. What at first seems innocent can quickly slide into the territory you were sure you could avoid. The Bible actually says to avoid even "all *appearance* of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV). For Christians, even if sex is avoided, sleepovers mean compromised testimonies and possibly causing others to stumble.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Several months after my commitment to follow Christ, I promised God that my next sexual encounter would be my honeymoon. When I met Amy, I told her the same thing, and she enthusiastically agreed. We decided from the beginning: (1) zero sex and (2) zero sleepovers. Although we held to the first commitment, I'm sorry to say we compromised on the second.

And jeopardized our relationship.

As a financially challenged college student, I was motivated to approach our dates creatively.

One day I told Amy we were going camping, but I'd have her home by midnight. I brought her to my home, where I'd turned my living room into a makeshift campsite, complete with tent, sleeping bags, picnic dinner, and stuffed "wild" animals. She loved it.

We ate dinner, made fireplace s'mores, read the Bible, prayed, and talked. Midnight snuck right past us. At 2 a.m. I knew I had to get her home, but we didn't want the night to end. So we kept talking. Until, without meaning to, we both fell asleep. The next morning's sun woke us. We blinked at each other, beginning to grasp the significance of what had happened. Amy had just stayed the night.

That first compromise opened a dangerous door we hadn't intended to open. One sleepover led to another ... and another. Eventually we crossed some physical boundaries, never "going all the way," but we definitely went too far. Our behavior was threatening to destroy the potential to truly go the distance. I knew we were not pleasing God. Deeply grieved and ashamed, I finally told Amy we should probably break up.

I'm eternally grateful to God and a few mentors, who helped us work through that self-imposed danger. But we hadn't prevented all the damage. Later, when I thought we finally had everything under control, I realized people were talking. They believed I'd reverted to the old Craig.

What's more, we later learned that another dating Christian couple, seeing our bad example, started spending nights together. They wound up pregnant. To this day, I wish we'd been better examples.

CLUCK OR OINK?

Are you ready for a real commitment—a commitment as strong as any you've ever made? Are you a chicken, or are you a pig?

A farmer once wanted to make breakfast for his family. He strolled to the barn, told the animals his plan, and asked for volunteers. Chicken quickly strutted up and offered, "Dear Farmer, you know I love your family. I'll help!" The other animals fell silent for several awkward minutes. Finally, Pig squealed quietly, "Great Farmer, you're always kind and generous to me. I'll also help."

Later that morning, Chicken proudly peered through the farmhouse kitchen window, watching the family eat breakfast. But Pig was not beside her. The family was enjoying eggs and ham. Pig's words meant so much more than Chicken's.

Chicken was *involved*. Pig was *committed*.

Are you ready for a real commitment—a commitment as strong as any you've ever made? Being involved and being committed are miles apart. In our world today, most people are relationally involved, but few are truly committed. If you want a marriage that goes the distance in every way—the marriage that God fully desires for you—being involved isn't enough. You need to be committed.

I'll bet you never thought someone would tell you to be a pig.