

## **IS COHABITATION WRONG?**

*Baptist Times* 22 July 2004

Today cohabitation is the norm – most couples live together before they marry. Although a good number of these relationships are unstable, some undoubtedly involve the kind of commitment that one would desire for any married couple. As a result there is a tendency to equate such committed relationships with the marriage relationship itself. And yet it is not the same. For marriage involves the making of life-long vows - ‘till death do us part’; while cohabitation is a present relationship where the future is ill-defined. Furthermore, marriage is a public act in which families as also the community in general is involved (indeed, the law requires that the doors of the church have to be open during a wedding!), while cohabitation tends to be a private relationship between two individuals. I see co-habiting couples as couples on the way to marriage – although perhaps ‘betrothed’ to one another, they have yet to fully ‘cleave’ to one another. Although they may enjoy sexual union, I do not see a co-habiting couple as being truly ‘one flesh’ – sexual intercourse is an integral part of marriage (indeed, in law a marriage without sexual union is not a marriage and can therefore be annulled), but by itself it does not make a marriage. Like most ministers, I find that most of the couples I marry are already living together. This causes me no problem when the couple concerned are not members of my church. In my initial interview with them, I tell them quite openly that as a Christian minister I cannot approve of their living arrangements; but I go on to say that I am more than happy to marry them and in that way ‘regularise’ their present relationship. For me the issue of cohabitation becomes a pastoral problem when the couple concerned are church members. For my reading of Scripture is that when a couple live together without committing themselves in marriage, then they are going against the clear teaching of Scripture. This being so, as a Christian minister I cannot allow such a situation to continue without the exercise of some form of ‘church discipline’. Some time ago I faced this problem with two young members who began to live together before their wedding day. As we talked through the issue, they realized the error of their ways. So on the night before their wedding day we held a private service of penitence in which they that they acknowledged they had “sinned by following the way of the world, living together without first seeking God’s blessing upon our relationship together”. But at the same time I along with my two ministerial colleagues confessed before them that “we too are in need of God’s grace and his forgiveness; for we too have sinned in thought and word and deed”. In other words, we were recognising that in our varying ways all of us had things which needed to be put right; all of us ‘live in sin’, whether or not we cohabit. This mutual recognition, however, does not do away with the need for church discipline. There are things which are right, and things which are wrong. And as a church we need to make a stand – on all these issues..

Paul Beasley-Murray