PASTOR WE ARE HAVING SEX: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO COUNSELING COUPLES ENGAGED IN PREMARITAL SEX & COHABITATION

DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT
A PERSONAL NOTE

We are passionate about helping new couples launch lifelong love in marriage. Because you’re reading this, you probably are, too.

You want the very best for the couples in your care. How do we know? Because we conducted a massive “listening tour” involving hundreds of churches, to find out what churches are doing when it comes to pre-marriage. And one thing is certain – the church cares about pre-marriage. However, we also know the local church can do a better job of it.

That’s why we launched the SYMBIS Assessment, a pre-marriage tool for pastors, counselors and mentors. We wanted a tool that would ensure success and make it as easy as possible for pastors, counselors and mentors to do it with excellence.

As a result of onboarding thousands of SYMBIS Facilitators, we now know that one of the most perplexing issue for the local church in working with today’s engaged couples is cohabitation and premarital sex. That’s why we’ve put together this little guide.

Here you’ll find both the science and scripture to help you explore this topic with conviction and compassion - giving the very best to the couples in your care. Here you’ll find both the science and scripture to help you explore this topic with conviction and compassion - giving the very best to the couples in your care.

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SYMBIS.com
THE GIFT OF TIME

When cohabiting couples approach the church for marriage, it can be a teachable moment. It offers ministers a unique opportunity to help couples understand the Christian vision of a marriage covenant. It may even be an opportunity for evangelism. By supporting the couple’s plans for the future rather than chastising them for the past, the facilitator can draw a couple more deeply into the church community and the practice of their faith. Treated with sensitivity and respect, couples can be helped to understand and live the institution of Christian marriage.

COHABITERS’ PERSPECTIVE

Since 1960, America has witnessed a 12-fold increase in cohabitation from 430,000 couples to 5.4 million couples. Whether you like it or not, most couples today—at least two-thirds—live together before getting married. Many cohabiters believe that living together is the best way to “test out” the relationship and increase their odds of doing well in marriage. Proponents say things like, “It’s crazy to marry someone without living with them first. You need to test out the relationship!”

In fact, the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia found that nearly half of 20-somethings agreed with the statement, “You would only marry someone if he or she agreed to live together with you first, so that you could find out whether you really get along.” About two-thirds said they believed that moving in together before marriage was a good way to avoid divorce.

No wonder so many ministers are trying to figure out how to respond with care and intelligence to a reality that doesn't jibe with a common view of scripture. Let’s face it: if you’re doing pre-marriage work, you’re inevitably working with plenty of couples who are engaging in premarital sex.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

With the help of a good pre-marital counseling material such as the SYMBIS Assessment, a pastor or facilitator can build some solid rapport before jumping into the issues of cohabitation and premarital sex. After exploring how they each experi-
ence and define love, a facilitator might say, “Can we talk about the personal aspect of sexuality in your relationship?” to start the conversation well. If the couple indicates that they are having premarital sex, a good follow-up question could be, “Well, you both revealed that you’re having sex. How are you feeling about that?” Be prepared for any variety of answers – from exuberant happiness to heart-wrenching guilt. The question, regardless of the answer, creates a space to explore the topic together.

We don’t know what your stance is on sex before marriage. Whatever end of the continuum you might be on, we have a suggestion: above all, convey care. If the couple is content to be sexually active, and that goes against your grain, by all means, refrain from preaching at them. At best, they will discount your input, and at worst, they will dismiss church altogether.

Instead, listen to their story. Do your best to understand their thoughts and feelings about it. The more they feel understood by you, the more likely they are to hear whatever you’d like to say. Of course, not all couples are the same. You’d likely take a different tack, for example, when you’re working with church members than you would with a non-believing couple.
A FEW REASONS TO JUST SAY "WAIT" TO PREMARITAL SEX

The following findings may be helpful talking points:
RESEARCH:

• The highest levels of sexual satisfaction are linked to marriage and traditional sexual ethics. That is, the people most apt to report that they are very satisfied with their current sex life are not singles who freely flit from one sexual encounter to another, but married couples who “strongly” believe sex outside of marriage is wrong. In fact, “traditionalists” rank an astounding 31% higher in their level of sexual satisfaction than singles who have no objection to sex outside of marriage. The findings contribute to a growing body of research linking sexual satisfaction to marital harmony, fidelity, and permanence. 4

• Researchers have not only found that sex is better in marriage, but it is best if you have had only one sexual partner in a lifetime. “Physical and emotional satisfaction started to decline when people had more than one sexual partner,” the researchers stated.5

• A study at the University of South Carolina revealed that people who engaged in premarital sex were more likely to be involved in extramarital affairs once they were married.6

• David Larson, a senior researcher with the National Institute of Health, in a review of existing research, summed it up this way: “Couples not involved before marriage and faithful during marriage are more satisfied with their current sex life and also with their marriages compared to those who were involved sexually before marriage.”7 Abstinence, research has clearly shown, makes the heart grow fonder.
BIBLICAL:

The biblical message on premarital sex is clear. It’s not God’s best for couples. For those who revere the Bible and aspire to follow its teachings, it’s abundantly clear that God calls us to save sex for marriage. The Bible expresses its perspective primarily in positive terms:

• “Have you not read,” says Jesus, “that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:4-5; quoting from Genesis 1:27, 2:24). This passage clearly states that sex is for marriage and marriage is for sex. Exclusively.

• In the biblical view, adultery includes any sexual activity carried on outside the bonds of committed marriage. This is why the writer to the Hebrews tells us, “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral” (Hebrews 13:4). This teaching explains Joseph’s certain expectation that Mary would be “exposed to public disgrace” when it was discovered that she had become pregnant “before they came together” in marriage.

• While some will say there is no specific prohibition in the Bible against sex between an unmarried man and unmarried woman, “sexual immorality” is denounced in about 25 passages in the New Testament. The word translated as “sexual immorality” or “fornication” in English versions of the Bible is the Greek word porneia, which means “illicit sexual intercourse.”

• Jesus says this: “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (NRSV, Mark 7:20-23)

• The apostle Paul wrote this: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (NIV, Galatians 5:19-21).
• “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins people commit are outside their bodies, but those who sin sexually sin against their own bodies. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (TNIV, 1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

• “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God...” (TNIV, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5).
A FEW REASONS TO JUST SAY "WAIT" TO LIVING TOGETHER
The bottom line is that concerns about premarital cohabitation are legitimate. Sure, you will find studies pointing to the benefits of living together before marriage, but substantial evidence associates cohabitation with greater hazards of marital instability and negative relationship outcomes. The following findings may be helpful talking points:

• Pre-marital cohabitation is viewed as a risk factor for divorce, as it predicts later marital instability, poorer marital quality, and less relationship satisfaction. Compared to married couples, cohabiting couples argue more, have more trouble resolving conflicts, are more insecure about one another’s feelings, and have more problems related to their future goals.

• Psychologist Meg Jay, author of The Defining Decade, says women tend to see cohabiting as a step toward marriage, while some men see it as a way to stall marriage. It is easy to see how such conflicted, often unconscious, motives could be unhealthy. Couples who cohabit before marriage (and especially before an engagement) tend to be less satisfied with their marriages—and more likely to divorce—than couples who do not.

• Dr. Galena Rhoades, a Research Associate Professor at University of Denver, found that those who moved in together before marriage reported lower marital satisfaction and more potential for divorce than couples who waited until they were married to make the big move. Through her research, Rhoades posts that the increase in cohabiting couples is resulting in marriages that simply never would have happened in a non-cohabiting society.

• One thing men and women do agree on, however, is that their standards for a live-in partner are lower than they are for a spouse. Founding relationships on convenience or ambiguity can interfere with the process of claiming the people we love. A life built on top of “maybe you’ll do” simply does not feel as dedicated as a life built on top of the “we do” of marriage. As some say, you can’t practice permanence.

Perhaps this is why, long before all the research studies were conducted, Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:17-18: “Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. We must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever...”
HOW TO CONVEY CONVICTIONS WITHOUT LOSING CREDIBILITY
Once you sense that they feel understood and you’d like to explore the idea of putting their sexual activity in abeyance until they are married, you can say something like: “So can I talk to you about what might seem like a really radical idea?” They will undoubtedly be willing to hear you out because at this point, you’ve earned the ability to offer your thoughts.

“This is going to sound prudish, but have you ever considered making a decision to put intercourse on hold until you are married?” Then pause. Let them speak — even if there’s a moment of uncomfortable silence or laughter. What they say next can be telling. For example, one or both may reveal that they have a degree of discontent with their current sexual activity. Or they may say that the mere thought of abstaining at this point in their relationship is ridiculous to them.

Whatever the response, listen and convey understanding. Do your best to avoid losing any rapport you’ve built with them up to this point. We’ll say it again: If they feel judged and rejected, you can count on not seeing them in your next session. With a sensitive and caring tone, you can bring up what you believe and why you believe it. You can talk about your moral reasoning as well as research findings. You may even want to talk about personal experience or experiences you’ve witnessed with other couples.

The secret to saving sex for marriage is found in a single word: boundaries. Couples who abstain from sex without shutting off their sexuality have learned to set specific boundaries and stick to them. They have made intentional, deliberate, and conscious choices about how far they will go. Setting boundaries is a decision they ultimately need to make on their own if it is going to have any chance of working. But you can help them process it with more objectivity, answering questions and potential suggestions along the way. After all, if you don’t discuss this personal matter with them, who will?
FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW TO HELP A COUPLE WHO WANTS TO ABSTAIN FROM SEX, SEXUAL HURT, THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING COUNSELING, OR EVEN ARTICULATING A PRE-MARRIAGE CHURCH POLICY, PLEASE REFER TO THE SYMBIS ASSESSMENT AND ALL OF ITS WONDERFUL RESOURCES. WE HAVE WRITTEN A 19-PAGE HELP RESOURCE GUIDE ON THIS TOPIC ALONE FOR THE SYMBIS ASSESSMENT FACILITATOR. BOTH SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE ARE USED TO HELP EXPLORE THIS TOPIC WITH CONVICTION AND COMPASSION.
THE SYMBIS ASSESSMENT IS A REVOLUTIONARY ONLINE EVALUATION FOR PRE-MARRIAGE COUPLES DESIGNED TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS AND MORE FULLY PREPARE COUPLES FOR MARRIAGE. SYMBIS GENERATES A 15-PAGE REPORT PACKED WITH INFORMATION ABOUT EACH COUPLE TO HELP GENERATE LIVELY CONVERSATIONS AND DEEP DISCUSSIONS AS YOU FACILITATE PRE-MARRIAGE COUNSELING.

“Toni Day & Chris Cray”

Presented by Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott

“I am floored. This is amazing! Couldn’t be more excited to use this with couples in our church. It outclasses everything I’ve ever seen.”

—Jonathan Hoover, NewSpring Church
REFERENCES:

3 http://nationalmarriageproject.org/reports/