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Cohabitation and the Church: A Short Response to Keith Warrington

Ted Pratt

Scripture teaches us that marriage was instituted by God and involves lifelong commitment. 'A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Gen 2:24). After quoting and affirming this, the Lord Jesus added his own exposition: 'Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate' (Matt 19:6).

Scripture also teaches us that sexual intercourse is only for marriage. I have surveyed the evidence for this in my (rather provocatively titled) booklet *Living in Sin?* For example, Scripture places considerable emphasis on virginity, a fact which Keith Warrington does not mention.

The acts which are recognized as creating a marriage have varied in different places throughout history, and vary in nations today. In England and Wales since 1753, Parliament has decreed that marriage can only take place in ways it recognizes.

Scripture also teaches us (Rom 13:1-2) that,

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment upon themselves.

All are obliged to live by the law, not just Christians. Exceptions arise only when the State commands something contrary to God's will, eg the worship of Caesar.

But in the case of our law on marriage, Parliament has clearly legislated in line with God's will revealed in Scripture.

The accepted form of marriage in some other nations in the past has

indeed been a couple setting up home together. It may still be so in some nations in the present. In such places, if cohabitation is intended as lifelong, that conforms with God's will.

But cohabitation in Britain today very rarely involves lifelong commitment. It is an arrangement to live together for as long as it works for that couple. Some cohabitees hope it will be lifelong. All think that it will be easier to part than if they had married. Couples know that getting married involves making a lifelong commitment. The majority of cohabitations break down, but a minority do get married. Those statistics have shown that such marriages are much less likely to succeed than those which have not begun with cohabitation.

Whatever cohabitees' motives may be, and some are highly questionable, their relationship does not conform to the essential biblical marital principle of commitment, and therefore cannot be regarded as marriage.

Furthermore, acceptance of cohabitation leads, as I have shown in *Living in Sin?*, to all sorts of other most undesirable consequences for the present and future generations. This has been further demonstrated by Declan Flanagan and Ted Williams in their most helpful report *Cohabitation or Marriage?*

In moving to Swanage, I was unaware that I was following in the steps of the late J B Phillips. I close with his most helpful paraphrase of Romans 12:2 which applies to attitudes to cohabitation and much else: 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould.'

TED PRATT has retired early after over thirty years of parish ministry because of increasing hearing loss. *Living in Sin?* is available from The Rev E A Pratt, 7 Bay Close, Swanage, Dorset, BH19 1RE, price £2.50 including postage. *Cohabitation or Marriage?* is available from Belmont House Publishing, 36 The Crescent, Belmont, Sutton, Surrey SM2 6BJ, price £2.99.