

SLIDING, NOT DECIDING

THE COHABITATION EFFECT

My friend, Allie, has made an investment. The cost is too great, she thinks, to disconnect from that investment.

Am I speaking about Allie's financial affairs? No. I'm referring to matters of her heart. To matters of her body and soul. Allie is cohabiting. She has invested the greater part of her very being to a man not her husband. Why?

There are many reasons why Allie continues to live with her boyfriend. She has bonded with her partner. She told me he isn't the Christian she'd like him to be. He isn't protecting her virtue like he should. He doesn't have the qualities she would choose in a husband nor is she convinced that he should be the father of her someday children. But she is "one" with him. She has bonded. What Allie doesn't realize is that oxytocin and her amygdala have paralyzed her good judgment. Hormonal chemicals and the "feeling" part of her brain are playing with the strings of her heart.

FEAR

The concept of marriage frightens both Allie and her boyfriend. Allie's parents are divorced. Her boyfriend's parents are also divorced. In their circle of friends and relatives, there are few models of faithful and working marriage. "Living together" is just "what you do" to "find out if you really get along." Or, "living together" first is a "good way to avoid divorce." So, Allie and her boyfriend are just "doing what everyone else" seems to be doing.

DECEPTION

Allie wants to believe that her boyfriend might change. What is changing, however, is how she sees him. During our early visits, Allie explained how uneasy she was with her boyfriend's need to control her, his sudden bursts of anger, and his avoidance of discussions about faith. Over time, Allie began offering excuses for his negative and often wrongful behavior. What is also changing is Allie's perspective on God. She wants me to remind her of her identity as a daughter of God in Christ. She knows God loves her and that she'll always be His child. But, because she is living in a relationship that cannot please God, she is making God in her image to fit into her world. It would be fair to say that Allie is flirting with idolatry.

How did Allie find herself in a place she really doesn't want to be? She longs for home and family but has no husband. She knows she isn't in a healthy relationship but worries that there might not be another. She and her boyfriend sometimes speak about marriage, but her comments to me reveal that Allie's standards for her live-in partner are actually lower than they are for her some-day husband. Why is this happening?

SLIDING, NOT DECIDING

Allie has done what researchers call "sliding, not deciding." Meg Jay, a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia, explains. "Moving from dating to sleeping over to sleeping over a lot to cohabitation can be a gradual slope, one not marked by rings or ceremonies or

sometimes even a conversation. Couples bypass talking about why they want to live together and what it means.”

GENDER ASYMMETRY

There’s something else. Allie and her boyfriend have different, but unspoken, agendas. A woman may view living together as verification that a man cares about her and living together, as much as she may dislike it, is a step toward marriage. She may even think that by giving her man what he seems to want, he will, in turn, want to marry her. But a man may see living together as a way of testing a relationship or even postponing the commitment of marriage. And, if a woman is willing to fulfill his physical desires without a ring, why jump into commitment until, well, maybe until there are children to consider. Dr. Jay writes that “this gender asymmetry is associated with negative interactions and lower levels of commitment even after the relationship progresses to marriage.”

COHABITATION EFFECT

Couples who cohabit before marriage may want to avoid divorce, but that’s not the reality. Dr. Jay notes that “couples who cohabit before marriage (and especially before an engagement or an otherwise clear commitment) tend to be less satisfied with their marriages—and more likely to divorce—than couples who do not. These negative outcomes are called the cohabitation effect.”

Sliding into an unmarried-but-want-to-be-married state wouldn’t be a problem for Allie if sliding out was easy. But Dr. Jay explains that Allie is “locked in.” She’s “signed up for a credit card with 0 percent interest. At the end of 12 months when the interest goes up to 23 percent [Allie feels] stuck because [her] balance is too high to pay off.” For Allie, being “locked in” decreases the likelihood that she will search for, or adjust to, another option. “The greater the setup costs,” explains Dr. Jay, “the less likely we are to move to another, even better, situation, especially when faced with switching costs, or the time, money, and effort it requires to make a change.”

For some, living together seems fun. Economical. Safe. Allie also perceives it as better than living at home (after all, she’s in her 20s) or with a girlfriend. Allie once told me she was trying to “nest” in her boyfriend’s apartment, but when I asked her whose bed she was sleeping in she whispered, “His.” Not “ours.”

As time goes by, Allie more stubbornly defends her living arrangement. Why?

INVESTMENT

Because Allie’s investment is too high. In her mind, perhaps too high to disconnect. Too high to re-evaluate her standards. Too high to wait patiently for a man who values her enough to say “I do . . . until death do us part.” There are no children, yet; but, should Allie become pregnant, then what? Will she settle for whatever? Will she marry the man she says doesn’t have the qualities a child should have in a father?

Allie, like all men and women who cohabit and then slide rather than decide, seems stuck. She tears up when reminded that she is the daughter of God because of what Jesus has done for her. She says she is encouraged by our visits. She wants to believe she has a future of hope. So, it is important to be a friend who reminds her that she has the

strength—promised by Jesus and delivered by the Holy Spirit—to leave bad habits behind and start fresh.

Jesus' investment in Allie is much greater than any investment she has ever made. Jesus invested all He had for the sake of Allie's body and soul. Because of Jesus, Allie has "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading..." (1 Peter 1:4). That inheritance is for her someday children, too.

MOTHER'S PRIVILEGE

Allie isn't a mom yet, but there is an investment she can make that goes beyond herself. Although she can't choose her half of the ancestry biologically brought to her children, she can choose the other half. It is a mother's privilege to decide the paternal ancestry of her household. Allie can choose what kind of man will be the father of her children. At the same time, she can modify her own ancestry's harmful traits, cultivate healthy traits, and set boundaries against ungodly behavior.

Allie doesn't have to continue with wrong choices, nor does she have to stubbornly defend them. She doesn't have to be captive to the "philosophy and empty deceit" of the world (Colossians 2:8). God wants Allie—and all His people—to be invested in His Word and trusting of His promise for marriage and family.

Allie has generational reasons to stop sliding and start deciding.

TALKING POINTS

How highly does God value marriage? Read Genesis 2:15-24. As people of God, we cherish marriage as the union of our different yet complementary natures as male and female. **What does Jesus have to say about marriage in Mark 10:6-7?**

Marriage is a public promise to live faithfully together until death for mutual joy and the procreation of children. **In what ways is marriage good for society? A nation?**

What happens to marriage and family when we have a misunderstanding of love? Wait to marry until we have enough money? Just want to be happy? How is cohabitation confusing or deceptive to children?

Think about the reasons why Allie felt "stuck" living with her boyfriend. **What were her fears? What does God tell us in Romans 8:15-17 and 2 Timothy 1:7?**

Allie and all women have a "mother's privilege." In other words, the woman is the one who decides who will be the father of her child. **What does this require? Why is it important for a man and a woman who are interested in one another to spend time with each other's parents, siblings, and friends? To discuss faith and family?**

What can Allie (and all of us) learn about marriage from 1 Corinthians 13:6; Galatians 5:22-24; Ephesians 5:33; 1 Timothy 2:8-10; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 13:4; 1 John 2:16; and 2 Peter 1:5-6?

