

## Living Together – Is Marriage “Just a Piece of Paper?”

By R.C. Sproul – Thriving Marriages Email - March 9, 2023

In past years, the option of living together, rather than making a formal marriage contract, has proliferated in our culture. Christians must be careful not to establish their precepts of marriage (*or any other ethical dimension of life*) on the basis of contemporary community standards. The Christian's conscience is to be governed not merely by what is socially acceptable or even by what is legal according to the law of the land, but rather by what God sanctions.

Unfortunately, some Christians have rejected the legal and formal aspects of marriage, arguing that marriage is a private, individual commitment between two people and has no legal or formal requirements. These view marriage as an individual private decision apart from external ceremony. A common question asked of clergy about this is “Why do we have to sign a piece of paper to make it legal?”

Signing a piece of paper to a meaningless document isn't the point. A marriage certificate is an integral part of what the Bible calls a **covenant**. A covenant is made publicly before witnesses and with formal legal commitments that are taken seriously by the community. The protection of both partners is at stake; there is legal recourse should one act in a way that is destructive to the other.

Contracts are signed out of the necessity spawned by the presence of sin and our fallen nature. We have an enormous capacity to wound each other, so, sanctions have to be imposed by legal contracts. Contracts not only restrain sin but also protect the innocent in the case of legal and moral violation. With every commitment I make to another human being, there is a sense in which a part of me becomes vulnerable. No enterprise renders a person more vulnerable to hurt than does the estate of marriage.

God ordained rules regarding living together in order to protect people. His law was born of love, concern, and compassion for His Creation. The sanctions God imposed on sexual activity outside marriage do not mean that God is a prude. Sex is an enjoyment He Himself created and gave to humans. God, in His infinite wisdom, understands that there is no time that human beings are more vulnerable than when they are engaged in this most intimate activity. Thus, He adds safeguards for this special act of intimacy. He is saying to both the man and the woman that it is safe to give oneself to the other when there is a certain knowledge of a lifelong commitment behind it. There is a vast difference between a commitment sealed with a formal document and declared in the presence of witnesses, including family, friends, and authorities of church and state, and a whispered, hollow promise breathed in the back seat of a car.