

Family Fraud

The Deception of the Common-law Relationship



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Illustrated by Monty Parks

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this study on FAMILY FRAUD. This booklet is a supplement to the NYM *Family Studies* series.

In the past few years, many church leaders and Christian missionaries have been very concerned about the breakdown in families. They have seen a great need for Bible teaching in this area. A number of pastors, church leaders and missionaries started specific teaching on this subject. In 1977 they began putting their family life teaching together into a set of lessons that everyone could use.

In the beginning God established the family with father, mother and children, and the father as leader. Through this system God has worked to build individual lives, communities, churches and nations.

Today, as never before in our lifetime, the family is under attack from Satan. One method he uses is getting people to accept alternatives to God's plan for the family. FAMILY FRAUD was written to expose the deception of the common-law relationship and to show why God's ways bring greatest happiness and well-being to families.

A FALSE PICTURE

Everyone wants to know the truth. The problem comes when people do not want to act and live according to the truth. When people try to avoid truth, then there is deception and fraud. People tell lies or act in dishonest ways to cover up truth.

A glossy, red apple can be deceptive. The outside is red, shiny and smooth. It looks delicious and inviting. But one bite to the inside shows a brown, rotten core. What a disappointment!



Common-law relationships are like that rotten apple.

In a common-law relationship, two unmarried persons live together in the community for an indefinite length of time and assume the roles and privileges of marriage partners.

In Canada, common-law marriages are not illegal. In fact, they are recognized as a valid grouping for purposes of employment benefits, taxation rules, financial partnerships and some legal rights of children. Some people even gain financially by living together unmarried. Seniors, for example, have better pension and taxation benefits if they live together as unmarried couples rather than married.

BUT EVERYBODY DOES IT!

It used to be that people were embarrassed when they talked about "shacking up." Now common-law relationships are quite acceptable. They are often called "alternative life styles" or "open-ended relationships."

Among Canada's First Nations, common-law relationships are often accepted as normal. They are viewed as an extension of teen sexual activity which begins even among twelve and thirteen-year-olds. These young people engage in recreational sex in the younger years until, either because of preference or pregnancy, the two "couple up."

A damaging reality of the 1990's is that the common-law relationship has become the norm in many First Nations communities. Often the two teenagers come home and set up housekeeping in a bedroom of one set of parents, who themselves may not be married.

Some people look to cultural tradition to validate the common-law relationship. They say, "We're married in the Indian way."

But the historical and traditional marriage customs of tribal communities across Canada show that this just is not true. There may not have been legal marriage licenses on paper and attending clergy. Yet marriage practices and laws existed. These practices were as evident and binding as any law introduced by white society.

In most tribal groups, marriages were arranged and the rules for the new social unit were well known. Every generation

had its share of sexual unfaithfulness because of sin. However, the norm of two people in life partnership was upheld by the community.

A PICTURE OF CONFUSION



The church's position on common-law relationships is often clouded because the way people live conflicts with their doctrinal position. Christians say that the common-law relationship is wrong and couples need to "make it right".

But actual statistics might well reveal that even in Christian First Nations homes, boyfriends are allowed to move in or girlfriends are brought home at about the same rate as in non-Christian homes. Christian parents give financial support and social acceptance to these unmarried couples. If living together should lead to a wedding, the traditional white (symbolizing purity) is worn. Even in church ranks, living together is becoming an acceptable "normal" pre-marriage stage leading to the wedding. Sometimes the church seeks "not to offend" by not requiring marriage standards even for church leaders.

Yet we must ask, have several generations of lower marriage standards resulted in security and strength of families? Are there not many damaging effects which break up relationships? What about individual personal happiness? What about the confused relationship ties among children who are born into these make-believe marriages?

Honest thought on these questions gives reason enough for the title "Family Fraud". The dictionary definition of fraud uses the words deception, trickery and dishonesty. It must be concluded that in the new norm of the common-law relationship, people are being "ripped off". True needs of intimacy are not being met. **Couples who practice the sexual bond before marriage increase the probability of failure after they marry.** Every day a couple stays in that "non-married" bed, they reduce their future happiness.

The men and women on the band council at Rocky Falls wanted the people in their village to have good families. Some time before, they had passed a band resolution that said no unmarried couples could live together in Rocky Falls. This caused a lot of debate in the village. But everyone seemed to agree to it.

Recently Peter, the son of one of the church pastors, had started living with Betty, the daughter of the pastor of another church in the village. What's more, they lived together quite openly at Betty's home.

The band council asked the two fathers to do something about the situation. The two pastors did not do anything.

Because the pastors were influential in the village, the council was not able to do anything. Pressure from the two pastors caused the band council to strike down the resolution they had passed.

Now there are more couples living together unmarried. There has been an increase in the number of women who have been deserted by their partners, leaving more children growing up without their fathers.

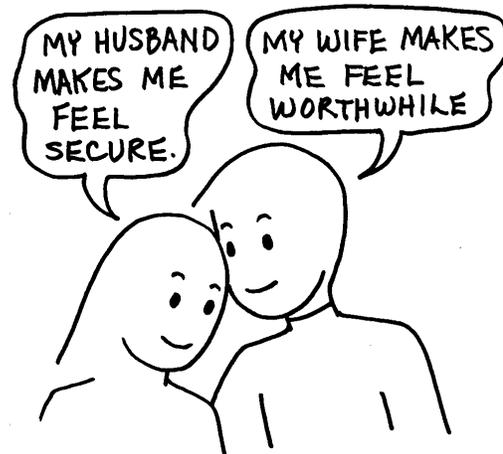
MEETING BASIC NEEDS

Many Christians are good at saying, "Thou shalt not..." However, God's plan is more than just a legalistic "Thou shalt not."

God's plan is that marriage should be a way of meeting personal needs. God created sex and the sexual drive. Unrestricted sexual pleasure within the bounds of a lifetime marriage commitment is not an idea Christians made up. Our Creator knows how men and women are made and how they function. A make-believe marriage which has no real commitment cannot provide what God's order of a lifetime of bonding between two people in marriage intends.

A woman has a basic need for security. A man has a basic need to know that he is important and worthwhile. These needs cannot be met in the deception of the common-law relationship.

It must be noted that many people are unhappy with marriage itself. Because of this, they have turned to common-



law relationships. Marriage just does not seem to provide much except conflict and hassle. Disappointment with marriage makes people look for alternatives that are "just as good".

Couples who have been together for years and who have children are heard to say, "We're not ready for marriage." Their answer is nearly humorous and yet is tragically serious. They may really be saying that marriage does not seem to work either. It is too high and lofty an ideal and just does not work well. So they continue having sex and having children—making love and making babies—because they are not confident that they would do well at "making marriage".

Linda and Gordon are in their mid-twenties. They have two children and started living together when their first child was born. Recently they have had a lot of arguments, some of which have turned into physical fights.

They went to see a counsellor, hoping that she could help them. As they talked with the counsellor about their relationship, Linda said she really would like to get married but had given up talking about it with Gordon. He just kept saying no.

Gordon's comment was, "I just don't want to get married. I've seen so many marriages break up. A marriage licence is just a piece of paper. It doesn't really mean anything. What's the use of all the fuss and bother of a wedding when I don't even know if I'll stick with it?"

That question is worth asking. But who is thinking about the long-range security of the children?

FAMILY FRAUD EXPOSED

Why is the common-law relationship such deception?

1. IT UNDERMINES TRUST

In his book *The Intimate Deception*, P. Roger Hellerstrom notes some popular ideas that seem to support the common-law relationship:

- "Isn't God more interested in love and relationship than in a marriage licence?"
- "Since we are committed to each other, why wait for a piece of paper?"
- "Why not practice our sexual response to each other just like we practice other things before marriage, such as communication and decision making?"
- "Since we love each other and we will get married, isn't that what really counts?"
- "It's O.K. because we're married in God's eyes anyway."¹

The common-law relationship cannot produce long-term satisfaction. It is not the same as marriage. Absent from the relationship are the commitment and communication which are essential for security and significance.

In the common-law relationship, nothing is certain. "We'll do it on a trial basis, just in case. I still have my options,



and the back door is open to leave without a lot of messy consequences." This is an untruth which fades when we observe the consequences that multiply in the **next** relationship.

The common-law relationship sends mixed messages. One side says, "I desire intimacy with you and I want to give myself to you and get to know you deeply."

However, the open back door suggests, "Don't get too close; there is a limit. I don't want to get so close that I can't escape if you hurt me. I'm not sure I can trust you."

People who are afraid to trust have often grown up in abusive homes. They have learned that it is not safe to trust important people.² The common-law relationship deepens this mistrust.

Tom and Carol are another couple who have lived together without being married. They have one child.

During the four years they have lived together, they have had a number of violent fights. Some of their fights ended up with either Tom or Carol leaving for a while. Both have admitted to having gone off with another partner during these times.

Carol says, "I don't really know why I stay with Tom. At one time I did want to marry him. But now—who knows? I know he has slept with other women. I just don't trust him. Maybe I'm just too chicken to try it on my own. Maybe I'm afraid of what it will do to my little son. Oh, I just don't know!"

2. IT SHUTS DOWN COMMUNICATION AND INTIMACY

Sex before marriage "jumps the gun". The couple feel married and presume they are giving themselves totally to each other. In reality, physical sex replaces true intimacy. When a young couple come together with physical sex as the main attraction, they miss other areas of communication.

Communication is progressive. The five stages of communication include:

Stage 1: Cliché. "How are you? I am fine."

Stage 2: Reporting facts.

Stage 3: Ideas, judgments (opinions).

Stage 4: Feelings.

Stage 5: Full emotional and interpersonal sharing.

Many common-law couples learn their communication styles in alcoholic homes. The three basic rules in these homes are:

- don't talk;
- don't trust;
- don't feel.

As adults it is hard to shake off these rules and enter into true communication. As partners in a relationship where no public commitment has been made, common-law couples very often replace true intimacy with the artificial intimacy of sex alone. They feel accepted, "heard," appreciated and secure in the sexual relationship.

But when the initial feelings of pleasure wear off, emptiness and longing take their place. *Ripped off, deceived* and *dishonest* all seem to fit this scene of "sex with a stranger". With the act of

physical sex, they thought they were at Stage 5. But in the end they feel empty and defrauded.

All people want to be loved for who they are, not just for what they can do or give to someone else. The sexual bond is intended to be an expression of intimacy, but it can never be the source of it. This is the distinction that many people fail to make.³

The progression of communication can also be illustrated by steps in physical relationships.

1. Eye to body
2. Eye to eye
3. Voice to voice
4. Hand to hand
5. Hand to shoulder
6. Arm to waist
7. Face to face
8. Hand to head
- 9–12. Final steps before sex

Well-bonded relationships stay at #3 for a long time before getting physical and sexual: voice to voice, talking, expressing, knowing and being known.

In the common-law relationship, the time and effort of “voice to voice” is bypassed in favour of the sensation and closeness of mutual sexual arousal. Sex becomes the fraudulent and artificial intimacy.



To be intimate with another person is to be trusting, vulnerable and emotionally open. None of these are necessary for sexual intercourse.

Couples who begin their relationship in the bedroom have never developed the necessary levels of bonding found in courting and romance. Later they come to resent this. Each partner assumes that he or she has worth only when performing sexually. “I’m good for only one thing and that is sex; I’m not loved and appreciated for who I am.”

Why doesn’t the couple break out of this trap which is so unfulfilling?

When emotional needs are not met and problems crop up, creating tension and conflict, **the easy way out is to deny the conflict by having sex.** The sensation of intimacy reinforces the denial, making it seem unnecessary to deal with the issues. The relationship becomes more and more dishonest. The unsettled conflict becomes a strong barrier to a closer relationship.⁴

Martha is thirty-two. She has two children whom she is trying to raise on her own. She has lived with a number of different men.

These men didn’t really care about Martha. All they wanted was someone to sleep with or someone to make them comfortable.

Martha says, “I’ve never felt that I was special to anybody. I just don’t feel good about myself. I even hate to think about my birthday, and it has nothing to do with getting older. Hardly anyone ever remembers my birthday or says Happy Birthday to me. It seems that men just want one thing, my body. But no one seems to think about me.”

3. IT CAUSES DISTRUST AND BRUISES INDIVIDUAL SELF-WORTH.

Guilt and shame are always just beneath the surface. The basic female need is for security: “I will give myself to you because in belonging I will be secure.”

Annie and Bill just couldn’t get along any more. They had been living together for three years. They had two children and weren’t married. After their last big fight Annie left with the children. She said she was finished with the relationship. She did not want to be with Bill any more.

After a couple weeks, Bill persuaded Annie to see a counsellor with him, with the view of working out something between them. Annie went with Bill to see the counsellor, but she didn’t want to get back together again.

When the counsellor asked Annie why she did not want to live with Bill any longer, she said, “I don’t really think Bill cares about me. He doesn’t want to make any lasting commitments to me or the kids. He’s just lazy and wants to get all he can from me without doing anything himself. And I don’t feel anything sexually for him any more. When we try to make love I just wonder if he really knows I’m there. I think about those other women he’s been with, and I just shut right down. I’ve been hurt too many times to want to give anything any more.”

However, the fraudulent common-law relationship mocks the woman’s empty heart by saying, “He doesn’t love you enough to make a marriage commitment.” She feels betrayed, abandoned and fearful, because what she desired so deeply and was willing to have sex to get just is not there. She closes down her true feelings to keep from getting hurt anymore.

The basic male need is for significance: “I matter to you.”



In marriage God made the man to fulfill this need for significance by leading the woman who is lovingly and trustingly submitted to him. Without commitment, the desires for significance and belonging are at risk. Jealousies and doubts arise. The man begins to think, "If she had the choice, she'd prefer somebody else. I don't matter enough for her to marry."

AFTER THE WEDDING ALTAR

Sometimes common-law relationships that seemed to work all right before a wedding fall apart after the couple marry. Why is this?

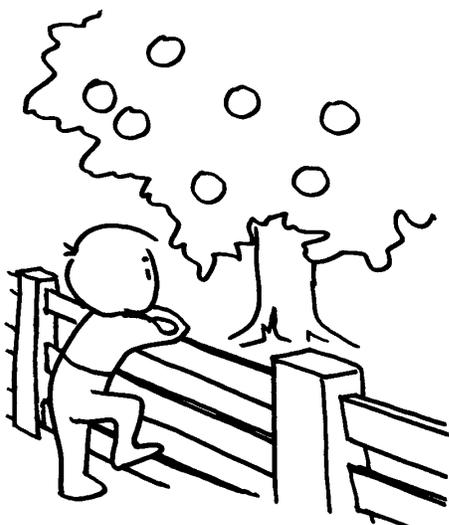
It is best explained by reviewing the following deception:

The back door is closed. The couple must work out conflicts and work to build on a new foundation of trust. Each one may now feel betrayed and trapped for awhile. When they were living together common-law, just experimenting with intimacy, they learned to live in an atmosphere of doubt and mistrust. This doubt and mistrust which has become a part of daily living will not go away just because there has been a wedding ceremony.

Now the couple feel betrayed and trapped. They cannot run away. The will to work out the irritations and misunderstandings is missing. At this point their response to each other may become one of disinterest, an affair, or physical violence.

Another significant factor contributing to the breakdown of marriages after a common-law affair is called "the trap of illicitness".⁵

Sin and wrong-doing are stimulating to the fallen nature. The Garden of Eden illustrates the gravitational pull of the forbidden fruit. Couples explore the forbidden sexual intimacy. Once they are married, the excitement may be gone. The attraction has not been based on the things that build strong relationships. Extramarital affairs are very attractive to this couple, conditioned as they are by the excitement of the forbidden.



RESPONDING TO FAMILY FRAUD

What can the church do to restore God's precious plan of marriage to communities with so many common-law relationships?

While it is essential that the church stay consistent in upholding God's plan, simply preaching "Thou shalt not" is not enough. God's people in the church must show by clear teaching and strong example that God's way is a better way.

1. The church needs to emphasize to our youth the built-in dangers and deceptions of premature intimacy. Excellent resources are available in the Josh McDowell series *Why Wait?*
2. Couples living together need to be led through a process of identifying and acknowledging issues of mistrust, doubt, betrayal, lack of respect, and resentment that have grown in the common-law relationship. If there have been multiple sexual relationships in the past, the couple should be made aware of the difficulty this causes for bonding in marriage. It is just like having a third person in the bedroom. There is a certain degree of emotional bonding with every sexual partner.

Rather than rushing the couple to the altar, the church needs to lead them in retracing their steps back to the missing stages of communication. It will be necessary to break off sexual relations. Living apart and consciously working at the missing links can result in "secondary virginity" and proper foundations for the future.

Peter and Donna both grew up in Christian families, but both rebelled against Christian values in their mid-teens.

By the time they got to know each other in their late teens they were involved quite heavily in drugs and drinking and were sexually active.

Peter and Donna started sleeping together and living together off and on. Then Donna began having a lot of health problems and long periods of severe depression.

One day in a panic Donna called out to God for help. With the help of her church pastor she rededicated her life to God. Also with the help of her pastor she got started in counselling with a Christian counsellor. Soon Peter also put his faith in God.

Peter and Donna, with the help of their families and pastor, decided they wanted to get married. They took a very thorough pre-marriage course with a marriage counsellor over a period of four months. On the advice of the pastor and counsellor, they stayed apart sexually until they were married. They knew they could not undo the damage done in the past, but they knew that God forgives and blesses new beginnings.

On their wedding night they could enjoy their sexual relationship. They could trust each other, knowing that they had promised to avoid sexual contact until it was right in God's eyes.

- The church must be prepared and trained to work with married couples whose problems started in sexual relations before marriage.



PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER AGAIN

The tarnishing of the marriage ideal will take much work to reverse. Wrong beliefs and wrong actions have become deeply rooted. Family fraud goes down from one generation to deceive the next. Needs are increased by one broken relationship after another. It does not make sense to say that “practicing another bad relationship will better equip me to build a good marriage”. Couples do have hope in God’s grace and forgiveness. Respect, honesty, trust and commitment can be learned with time and effort.

When Fred and Norma met each other they were both in their early thirties and had lived with other partners. Norma had two children that her parents were raising.

Fred and Norma began living together and soon a daughter was born. Fred had a bad drinking problem, but with the help of some alcohol programs he was able to get free of alcohol.

When their daughter started school she came home sometimes asking why her last name wasn’t the same as Daddy’s. At about the same time Fred’s mother, who was a Christian, died. Just before her death she told Fred, “Son, I’ve never stopped praying for you.” Fred couldn’t forget her saying that.

Fred and Norma and their daughter started attending a church. After attending for a couple of months they went to talk to the pastor. They said to him, “We don’t know if you know that we aren’t married, but in the past few months we don’t feel right about living together and not being married. We see now that God wants to bless our family with a godly marriage. And when our daughter started asking about our last names being different, we realized we wanted her to have a right start in life. We want our relationship to be right in the eyes of God the way the Bible teaches. We would like to be married.”

The pastor agreed with them, and they were married shortly after.

Restoring grace must be extended to men and women who grieve their losses as they are abandoned by their common-

law partners without the social licence to grieve as widowers or widows. Children, left insecure from the passing parade of their parents’ sexual partners, need ministry.

It is dishonest to act as if all is normal when the norms have changed. God will empower the church and equip His people to apply His life-giving grace to the puzzle of relationships. Where virginity is lost, chastity can be re-established.

“God wants you to be holy. You must keep away from sex sins. God wants each of you to use his body in the right way by keeping it holy and by respecting it. You should not use it to please your own desires like the people who do not know God. No man should do wrong to his Christian brother in anything. The Lord will punish a person who does. I have told you this before. For God has not called us to live in sin. He has called us to live a holy life. The one who turns away from this teaching does not turn away from man, but from God. It is God Who has given us His Holy Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 TLB).

Fraud can be exposed and faulty patterns can be replaced by effective tools to build marriages that will last a lifetime.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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ENDNOTES

- Hellerstrom, P. Roger. *The Intimate Deception (Escaping The Trap Of Sexual Impurity)*. Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1989.
- Ibid, page 30.
- Ibid, page 35.
- Ibid, page 25.
- Ibid, page 45.

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