

Fifty Shades of Grey: How to Respond

With the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey* grossing millions of dollars already since its Valentine's Day 2015 release, parents and teachers and church leaders face a huge challenge to speak up about its content and messages. Even those who do not see it are impacted by its advertising and its very existence in our culture. Silence implies acceptance, but fortunately some leaders, writers, and bloggers have already provided analyses and "quotable quotes" to bolster the corrective message we want to convey.

The Rev. Gwyneth Arrison, pastor of a United Methodist Church in Merrimac, Massachusetts, in an article published in the local paper after the movie's release, wrote: "... I thought about how the women and children at Turning Point [a women's shelter where she sometimes volunteers] would react if they went to see this heavily advertised "romantic movie," which glamorizes the very sexual violence and domestic abuse they were escaping. And I thought of how I'd feel if my own teenage daughter went to see this movie or read the book, and it made my skin crawl. There's nothing romantic about any kind of abuse. And the fairytale ending is not reality; domestic violence, with very rare exception, continues and often escalates over time until the victim leaves or is murdered." Rev. Arrison comments that the book and movie may appeal to women because of our desire for attention, acceptance, love, and perhaps our dreams of being noticed by someone "handsome, wealthy and powerful." Or perhaps some can relate to Ana's desire to "save" Grey from his addiction to violence and domination. Such a happy ending is not, in fact, likely.

Michael Miller, in an article titled "Fifty Shades of Sadness," posted in *Ministry Matters* (www.ministrymatters.com) on March 4, 2015, declares that *Fifty Shades* does not portray either love or romance, but "...is a story of abuse. The film's story makes clear (even if this reality is never explored with any depth in the plot) that Christian Grey was sexually and emotionally abused by a friend of his mother's beginning when he was fifteen. Tragically, he grows up to become an abuser himself." Miller goes on to specify the problems in Grey's relationship with Ana. He is extremely possessive, controlling, and demanding, and refuses any genuine emotional connection.

Miller continues, "Watching the film was a difficult experience for me. I didn't think I'd enjoy it, but I certainly wasn't ready for how it would unnerve me. *This* is the film my students are in love with? This is the film our *country* is in love with? Not only was it a disturbing depiction of abuse, it *romanticized* that abuse. Their relationship was presented as one to envy. The pain and abusive nature of Christian and Anastasia's relationship was never addressed, much less condemned. Rather it was depicted as sexy, amorous and desirable. It troubles me to consider how watching a film like this can warp my students' understanding of what love is and what relationships should be — especially at a time in their lives when those ideas are forming. I also felt an overpowering sadness when I thought of what watching this film, which unabashedly romanticizes emotional abuse, would do to a woman trapped in an abusive relationship, struggling to find the strength to leave."

Miller concludes, "The film disturbed me in many ways — as a teacher, as a man, as someone in a loving relationship — but it particularly disturbed me as a Christian....The Gospels make clear that the weapon of Jesus' revolution, the tool of transformation, is love. With that in mind, there can be no question of greater importance in our lives than, 'What is love?'" He exhorts Christians to speak out against the *Fifty Shades of Grey* answer to that question and to demonstrate love that heals and does no harm. "...we are called to show the world what true

love can do. Love has the power to transform everything. May God give us the courage to love like that.”

Not only must the church itself speak out, we must also equip parents and teachers to dialogue effectively with their children and students. We know that outrage and hyperbole cause young people to tune us out and tend to make them reactively defensive of their culture. Help parents and teachers understand how to approach the subject gently, but intentionally, asking thoughtful questions. “What do your friends say about the movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Do they think it is romantic? Do they think they would like to be in that kind of relationship? What do you think?” Pause to listen between questions, stifling your own reactivity. “Hmmm....” is a safe response for parents and teachers to make, providing time to think through what you will say if what you hear makes you uncomfortable.

Psychiatrist Miriam Grossman, MD, in her blog at (www.miriamgrossmanmd.com) writes an excellent letter to young people (in both English and Spanish) about the movie and provides a five-part “Parent Survival Guide.” Drawing on her counseling experiences, especially with youth confused about love, she declares unequivocally that “Abuse is not glamorous or cool. It is never OK, under any circumstances.” Her “Parent Survival Guide” includes separate articles posted in January and February, 2015, titled “The Danger to Your Daughter,” “More Danger to Your Daughter,” “The Danger to Your Son,” “More Danger to Your Son,” and “How to Speak to Your Child About Sadomasochism.” Depending on your child’s age, there are many strategies you can choose to come over against the *Fifty Shades* message. You might decide to hand your child a printout of Dr. Grossman’s letter and ask him or her to read it, then share thoughts with you. You might share information about domestic violence. Ask them what dating behaviors indicate a trustworthy person, and what should warn them of potential problems. Visit The Dibble Institute website (<http://www.dibbleinstitute.org/webinar-archives>) for a webinar discussing the results of a study on teen dating relationships, which was conducted in response to increasing reports of teen dating violence, and for other resources related to teen dating and relationships. Use the subject of *Fifty Shades* to strengthen your connection with children and youth and to establish yourself as a calm confidante and a willing responder to questions.

Emma Green, in a February 10, 2015 article in *The Atlantic*, titled “Consent isn’t Enough: The Troubling Sex of *Fifty Shades*,” notes that even those who favor BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism) activities in their sexual relationships object to much of the content of the movie. From their point of view, safe participation in sexual power role-play is acceptable only with consensual partners and requires self-knowledge, communication skills, and emotional maturity. “Sometimes Ana says yes to sex she’s uncomfortable with because she’s too shy to speak her mind, or because she’s afraid of losing Christian; she gives consent when he wants to inflict pain, yet that doesn’t prevent her from being harmed.

For more insight and information about addressing the issues raised by *Fifty Shades of Grey*, see the following documents: “Shedding Light on Domestic Violence,” “Facing up to Pornography and Sexual Addictions,” “Protecting Our Children,” “Countering Mass Media’s Negative Influence,” and “Equipping Youth to Build Healthy Relationships.” These are posted at www.marriagelovepower.net under “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” and at <http://www.gbod.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries> (search by topic or title).

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