

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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28 February 2015

### ***Fifty Shades of Grey: Legitimizing Perversion***

In 2011, British author E.L. James self-published *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Vintage Books acquired the publishing rights of the book and Hollywood released a movie adaptation of *Fifty Shades of Grey* this Valentine's Day. The book and movie chart the fictional romance of a recent college graduate, Anastasia Steele, and billionaire businessman, Christian Grey. In both the book and the movie are explicitly erotic scenes, which also feature sexual practices of BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sado/masochism). Among other perverse aspects of the story is Christian's insistence that Anastasia sign a "dominant/submissive contract," which she eventually signs. Amazingly, the book has sold over 100 million copies and the recently-released movie gives evidence of being a Hollywood success. The phenomenon of the book and movie is energized by their appeal to women, who have bought the book in record numbers. In short, one could make the case that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is female erotica/pornography in both narrative and visual form.

Any discussion of this cultural phenomenon must begin with two propositions: (1) We live in a Postmodern, Post-Christian civilization that embraces the absolute autonomy of the individual. Combined with a radical pragmatism, this worldview maintains that what works for the autonomous individual is true and right for that individual. There are no binding absolutes. (2) Genuine, biblical Christianity is by definition countercultural. As Jesus' disciples, we identify with the culture in which Christ places us, but separate from its evils; all the while seeking to be the agents of God's transforming grace. These two propositions collide when discussing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Since the Postmodern, Post-Christian worldview is firmly anchored in mid-air, when considering human sexuality, confusion naturally results. We live in a culture that has distorted and perverted the beauty and fulfillment of the one-flesh union so central to God's Creation Ordinance (Genesis 1-2) and to Paul's principles detailed in 1 Corinthians 7:1-10. Technology, the media and the assumptions of the secular, Postmodern worldview have enabled humans to create their own fantasy world when it comes to sexuality.

When problems develop, the therapeutic culture avoids any mention of sin and merely affirms that "you are okay." The result is the ruinous dysfunction of practices that undermine the one-flesh, complementary union between a husband and wife within the protective security of marriage: (1) The dysfunction of adultery causes another person to intrude into the one-flesh union, so central to God's design. It thereby completely destroys the trust in that union. Adultery violates the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment (Exodus 20:14) and Jesus' interpretation and application of that commandment in Matthew 5:27-28. To build a hedge of protection around marriage, Jesus calls for the sanctification of the heart—because a disordered heart, leads to a

disordered life, which produces a disordered culture. Adultery is finally a grotesque violation of Ephesian 5:32. (2) The dysfunction of pornography (“adultery of the heart”). Because it fosters a lust-filled fantasy world that entices and deceives but never fulfills, pornography flouts Jesus’ warning about lustful intent (Matthew 5:28). Accordingly it distorts reality, creates long-lasting, harmful memories and can destroy meaningful intimacy within marriage. It likewise dehumanizes other humans, treating them as lustful objects of pleasure.

The *Fifty Shades* sexual fantasy takes the sexual revolution in Western Civilization to a perverse end of radical libertinism that, in the words of columnist Ross Douthat, “is about ushering in a society where everyone can freely love and take pleasure in anyone and anything they want. But viewed from another angle, that same revolution looks more like a permission slip for the strong and privileged to prey upon the weak and easily exploited.” The absurdity of *Fifty Shades* is that Christian Grey is a man who will “first dominate you but ultimately love you—providing that, like Anastasia Steele, you’re careful to sign a rigorously detailed contract detailing how much domination you’ll take.” But such perversion is an assault upon human dignity and beauty so central to God’s Creation Ordinance. This phenomenon also constitutes an abandonment and loss of shame as a culture, “an act of defiance against the goodness of the gift of sex as granted to humanity by God [and] . . . an assault upon the dignity of every human being.” American culture seems to view *Fifty Shades* as cultural progress; it is not! It is evidence of cultural deterioration and decline.

The corrective is a review of our Creator’s view of marriage and sexuality. The Creation Ordinance of God clearly connects the “image of God” concept with gender and human sexuality (“male and female He created them”, Gen. 1:26-27) and the institution of marriage and the family (Genesis 2:18-25): Marriage, as a “one-flesh” union, is monogamous, heterosexual and establishes a covenantal relationship (see Malachi 2:14). It is also an archetype of Christ’s relationship with His church (Ephesian 5:32). But what does this “one-flesh” union look like? In 1 Corinthians 7:1-10, the Apostle Paul provides the answer. Paul is addressing a church centered in a pagan, sex-saturated culture, not at all unlike our own. Some in the Corinthian church had swung to the other side of the spectrum and were now arguing that Christians should all be celibate. While recognizing the spiritual gift of celibacy for those not married, Paul emphatically says that, in Christ, sexual intercourse is central to the one-flesh union of marriage; celibacy is not an option in marriage. He articulates three guiding principles: (1) The principle of mutual reciprocity, vv.1-2. Paul intentionally mentions both the husband and the wife, indicating that intimacy is not only for the husband; it is also for the wife. (2) The principle of mutual rights, v. 3. There is an obligation, a duty for both the husband and the wife in the marriage bed. This principle clearly argues against using sex as a weapon, or as a tool for manipulation and control in a marriage. The moment we say “I do,” as equal partners in this complementary relationship, we realize it is no longer just about me; it is about us! We have conjugal rights and obligations that transcend a self-centered approach to intimacy. (3) The principle of mutual authority, v. 4. As complementary partners, we no longer have authority over our own bodies; our bodies are an extension of our spouse. We belong to each other. There is now a shared, mutual concern for the well-being, health and ownership of our respective bodies. We are truly a one-flesh union. Finally, marriage serves a protective

function, keeping and shielding us as partners from the immorality and sexual temptation of a self-indulgent, extra-marital ethic of sex so pervasive in culture (see vv. 5-10). Sexual intimacy within the marriage bond is intended by God to manifest the joy and fulfillment of other-centered sexual expression and love between a husband and wife. It is the ultimate expression of femininity and masculinity within the marriage bond. Sexual intimacy also enhances and strengthens the marriage roles so clearly pronounced in Ephesians 5:22-32 and Colossians 3:18-19. The Song of Solomon and Proverbs 5:15-19 represent poetic expressions of sexual intimacy in the one-flesh union God creates in marriage. They are to be read, enjoyed and celebrated by both sexual partners in a God-centered, Ephesians 5:32 marriage! *Fifty Shades of Grey* bears no resemblance whatsoever to this ideal. It is a selfish, self-centered, self-indulgent perversion of something beautiful, good and precious.

See Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* 15 February 2015) and Albert Mohler at [www.albertmohler.com](http://www.albertmohler.com) (16 February 2015).