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## 50 Shades of ... Clay?

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## 50 Shades of ... Clay?

### **Abstract**

"Thoughts on two movies about sex, relationships, and love."

Posting about the movies *50 Shades of Grey* and *Old-Fashioned* and what they tell us about love and sexuality from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/50-shades-of-grey-or-clay>

### **Keywords**

In All Things, 50 Shades of Grey, marriage, movies, Old-Fashioned, relationships, sex

### **Disciplines**

Christianity

### **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

# 50 Shades of...Clay?

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 [all in allthings.org/50-shades-of-grey-or-clay](https://allthings.org/50-shades-of-grey-or-clay)

Neal DeRoo

There's a movie that just came out this weekend. You may have heard of it: it's about a tortured man who appears successful (at least in certain ways) on the outside, but is hiding a deep hurt and pain within. This hurt directly affects his romantic relationships, for all intents and purposes shutting off the possibility of genuine vulnerability and intimacy, leaving him instead with the intense desire to control whichever woman he is with, making her follow a rigid set of rules he has established for how their 'relationship' will have to go, if she wants to "be with" him. Ultimately, his view of his romantic partner is purely sexualized: she is, to him, nothing but her sexuality, which must be manipulated to fit his (and only his) desires for what sexuality has to look like.

Really, the movie—like its main character's view of women—is all about sex. And that's why everyone expects it to make a boatload of money. It knows what its audience wants, and it plans to give it to them.

The movie I'm talking about is, of course, *Old-Fashioned*. Were you thinking of something else? Perhaps you thought I was referring to *50 Shades of Grey*, the Hollywood blockbuster, based on the international best-selling trilogy, that explicitly depicts bondage and masochistic-themed sex. *Grey* has generated its fair share of controversy: a [bishop](#) and [several Baptist organizations](#) have called for Christians to boycott the movie because it is an "[attack on Christian marriage](#)," while other [Christians](#) and [domestic violence groups](#) have protested the film and also called for a boycott over the films [glorification of abusive behavior](#). In fact, the movement to boycott the film has even spawned its own hashtag—[#50dollarsnot50shades](#)—which, in turn, now has its own [Facebook page](#).

Clearly, there are problems with *50 Shades of Grey*. And those problems are causing a lot of Christians to wonder whether they should watch the film or not. Some people might question [the motivation](#) behind the Christian angst, but I don't think it's bad to question whether we should watch a particular movie or not. I do question, though, what criteria we are using to help us make these decisions.

What makes a movie "good" or "bad"? With *Grey*, the focus has largely been on the underlying "message" of the film, whether that message is perceived to be "Abuse is sexy" or "Pornography is cool." But little attention (at least so far) in these "Christian conversations" has been given to the fact that the movie is just poorly made. It has a 30% rating on [Rotten Tomatoes](#), and a [MetaScore](#) of 47 out of 100 and gets an aggregate score of just 3.3 out of 10 on [IMDB](#) (based on reviews from over 15,000 viewers). Some professional critics have given backhanded (at best) compliments (my favorite so far: "[sort of classy-looking, in a generic, TV-ad-for-bath-oil way](#)"), but in general, the consensus seems to be that the movie is poorly directed, unevenly acted, poorly written (though perhaps less badly written than the book; backhanded compliments again), and—this might be the most damning criticism of all, for a movie of this type—fairly boring. After all, movies are not just complicated content-delivery systems; shouldn't a movie be evaluated, at least in part, by how good it is *as a movie*?

I ask this question, in part, because during the lead up to the movie's release, I really wanted to ask the people encouraging boycotts: "so, what movie should I watch instead of this one? If this movie is 'bad', what movie would be 'better'?"

The "Christian" film industry<sup>1</sup> is ready [with its answer](#): *Old-Fashioned*.

But what makes this movie “better” than *50 Shades of Grey*? That depends on what you think the “problem” is with *50 Shades of Grey*. The marketers of *Old-Fashioned* (and they aren’t [alone](#)) seem to think that the problem is that *Grey* is simply perverted in its depiction of love and sexuality; *Old-Fashioned* is better because it has a better ‘message’ concerning love and sexuality. I have two questions for people who would pursue this line of argument to say that *Old-Fashioned* is “better”:

**What meaning of ‘love’ is portrayed here?** The tagline of the film is “Love is patient, love is kind, love is...Old-Fashioned.” An obvious allusion is being made to 1 Corinthians 13, the standard “Biblical definition” of love. It is worth quoting at some length here: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

How does the film (at least as portrayed in the marketing video) live up to this definition of love? Perhaps it’s not a coincidence that the tagline stops its Biblical quotation when it does. The main character certainly seems to keep records of wrongs (at least his own, if not also other people’s), and certainly does not seem to trust (others or himself). Further, the film appears, at least to some who have seen it, to be the epitome of [pride and boasting](#), and this promotional video fairly clearly dishonors others (specifically, in this case, *50 Shades of Grey*). Does this movie really help us love the world better—or does it just let us feel comfortable that we are right and safe, and the ‘world’ is going to hell in a hand-basket?

**Is this a healthy vision of sexuality?** In the movie, Clay refuses to ever be alone with a woman who is not his wife. Is this “rule” of his commendable for its chastity—or does it suggest an over-emphasis on the sexuality of women, as if all he can think about when he’s around women is their sexuality? The [trailer](#) implies that Clay will not kiss the woman he’s dating. Is that an appropriate “rule” to live by? Or do both of these rules repeat the sexual perversity of our culture’s view of sex: that women are primarily sexual beings, that sexuality can be reduced to specific sex acts, and that those sex acts are a matter of individual control, pleasure, and benefit? Is the only difference between Clay and Christian Grey that, while both think of women primarily in sexual terms, one refuses his desires while the other controls them (as the promotional video suggests)? If so, I think both movies offer us a perverted version of sexuality. If we, as Christians, think sexuality is created by God as a way of uniting two people “to become one flesh,” then we think sexual desires should be neither all-consuming nor absent or ignored. Rather, we need to discover how to develop our sexuality so that it helps join two into one flesh, rather than driving a wedge between people. We should stop assuming that policing our sex acts is equivalent to having a healthy, Christian sexuality, and instead explore how to develop a full, vibrant and fulfilling sexual life with our spouses (or prepare to have one with our future spouses). We might find that establishing such a fulfilling sexual relationship [might not be as easy as we hope](#).

But if the problem is that *50 Shades* is just a poorly made movie, then we should ask ourselves another question about *Old-Fashioned*: **Is the movie well-made, as a movie?**

Obviously, I cannot even begin to judge this, as I haven’t seen the movie (for what it’s worth, neither [Rotten Tomatoes](#) nor [MetaScore](#) is kind, but [user reviews](#) on IMDB are a bit better). The critics suggest the movie is poorly-acted, not very artfully directed and, overall, rather dull and boring. Almost exactly like they thought of *50 Shades of Grey*. If this is true, we should ask whether making (or watching) films like *Old-Fashioned* (or *50 Shades of Grey*, for that matter) really a way to honor and glorify the creativity of our Creator?

As Christians, I fear we are locking ourselves into a dichotomy, not just this weekend (Grey or Clay?), but every other weekend as well (“Hollywood” or the “Christian Film” industry?). Perhaps it’s time to stretch beyond both of those to find film and art that really challenges us to develop our relationship with God and God’s creation. Instead of either telling people what *not* to watch, or dictating what they *should* watch,

could we not help each other come to watch movies better (in addition to watching better movies)? Could we offer some recommendations about good movies, and discuss what we think is “good” about them? My friend Bob DeSmith has [started](#).

***Are there movies that you would recommend to fellow iAt readers, or things you would recommend people look for when watching movies?*** Are there other creative outlets you would recommend, other than movies? Please post them in the comments.

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## Footnotes

1. Yes, this is a thing, and it is not necessarily run by Christians. I have a friend who was in the film-making business a few years ago. I knew that he was not Christian, so I was surprised to hear him say he was working on a Christian movie. I asked him why he was doing that. His response? “Well, if you make something with overtly Christian characters and a happy ending, and you put it out around a holiday, there’s a lot of money to be made on the Evangelical demographic.” [↔](#)