

**Observations regarding comments by Sheila Wray  
Gregoire about writing, speaking and research by  
me and other marriage authors**

**From Shaunti Feldhahn**

**March 2, 2021**



**[shaunti.com/2021/03/public-statement](https://shaunti.com/2021/03/public-statement)**

Over the past few months, a long-time author-speaker friend who discusses Christian marriage—Sheila Wray Gregoire—has made a number of comments regarding my books and messages, and those of other marriage authors. Usually, each of us speaks on our own topic, so addressing what others say, rather than our own work, has been rare. Her comments center around what she views as our damaging teachings on sex. I have been surprised that many comments have been inaccurate, and that they have escalated to include personal statements about me and my family.

It appears that this is part of a marketing campaign in advance of the March 2, 2021 release of a new book that Sheila has co-authored with her daughter and a biostatistician. Sheila is a sister in Christ, and I know she truly cares about marriages.

I have raised my concerns about some of her comments with her privately. It is my practice to not get into public back-and-forth arguments. My heart is to help people thrive as individuals and in relationships, and public debates do not support that mission. However, in this case I have been urged to provide a response, and I have agreed to do so. I intend that these comments and a corresponding initial analysis of Sheila's research will be my only public statements on the matter.

To avoid further division, I am not sending this statement to my social media followers or mailing list. Rather, I am posting this single statement on my website so I can point people to something if they contact me or want to know my response to her comments.

**The summary of my response is that I agree there is a need for care in how Christian authors teach about sex, that I have *not* made the damaging statements attributed to me, and that it is difficult to see how Sheila's process and personal attacks will honor God or bring healing to those who are hurting.**

## Five Key Points

- **This statement is made after a lengthy effort to address Sheila's comments privately.** I am a social scientist who is also a follower of Jesus. In keeping with the biblical process of Matthew 18-15-17, I first contacted Sheila privately to share my concerns. Her response was that her claims regarding me are accurate. I then asked to have a joint phone call with a pastor, ministry leader, or other Christian author she respects. Thus far, she has not responded. (In fairness, a book launch season is busy.)
- **Some of her statements about my books, blogs, and other messages are inaccurate.** (I provide some representative samples in the [Supplement](#) below.) There are several ways to reference another's work inaccurately. And when the intent of a book, blog, or podcast is to counter others' work, the temptation to do so multiplies. One can, for example, state an outright falsehood, provide incomplete or inaccurate quotes, summarize in a unnuanced or misleading manner, or provide sensitive comments stripped of important context and caveats. A careful author or researcher does not allow these techniques within their work.

Often, an author's statements are not open to interpretation. But when they are, I believe it wise and Christ-like to interpret them graciously according to their most likely meaning. However, her book, blogs, and other resources appear to be heavily weighted toward interpreting statements from me and other authors unfavorably. In other words,

Sheila states opinions about what I meant that are inaccurate—I did not mean what I am purported to mean. I have written and spoken enough that there is no need to misinterpret me.

Even more serious is the claim that I've said certain damaging messages—messages that I agree are damaging—but which I have not said. This is a problem not of interpretation, but of a different kind. I am bewildered why anyone would attribute false statements to me or others—to what end? An author can easily construct a straw man for the purpose of an argument, without attributing the straw man to another author. Sadly, such cases exist throughout the book and other resources.

It is my judgment that some of the misleading or false statements in the book should not have made it through the editing process with her publisher, and may well be corrected in future printings. One key statement has already been corrected by an external publication.

It also should be noted that Sheila claims that I did not meaningfully respond to her outreach for comment while she was writing the book. That is untrue. On the same day that she reached out to me, I sent her a very long and detailed response.

- **The survey that forms the basis of her book appears to be primarily of women with a particular point of view.** In a survey of 20,000 respondents, the authors' goal was to investigate Christian women's marital and sexual satisfaction and, especially, the impact of certain teachings on that satisfaction. It appears that they spent a great deal of time and effort on it. However, close to half of respondents also appear to be Sheila's existing followers, who had heard multiple times from her that those teachings were damaging. Just as concerning, many other respondents were recruited with a leading message. ("Ever feel like the Christian sex and marriage advice we get is just kind of, well, OFF somehow? Let's change that!")

It is contrary to good research practice to recruit a sample with an existing viewpoint, and which is "primed" to respond in a certain way, and then ask them "how do you feel about this viewpoint?" There is value in hearing from those people and those viewpoints. But the results must be viewed as results from Christian women of that viewpoint rather than Christian women as a whole. (We are hoping to release a short analysis of the research itself at some point. If you are a ministry leader and would find that helpful, feel free to [let us know](#).)

- **Sheila and I agree that there is a need for certain healthy adjustments to how Christian leaders teach on sex—but calculated attacks are not the way to accomplish that.** Although I do not agree with Sheila on certain key things she teaches (such as her apparent denial of various gender differences), I believe she is trying to help protect those who have been abused by misapplications of scripture. It is important for all Christian authors to consider our messaging on sex. (For example, certain statements that unintentionally skew to a male-centric rather than balanced point of view.)

*However, there also must be room within the Christian community to "agree to disagree."* When the effort seems instead to be to "cancel" and attack certain authors, and even to stir up others to do so, it takes on the appearance of something other than a sincere effort to advance healthy dialogue and change.

Allow me to make a more personal note. In my judgment, all the authors that Sheila has strongly criticized, including Emerson Eggerichs, Willard Harley, and others, are men and women of goodwill who have positively impacted millions of marriages for many years. None of us would ever want to cause harm. It is wrong to imply that these ministries and books do more damage than they are worth.

Rather, one issue is that different readers can be hurt because they happen to see the matter differently than the author at the time of writing. We all have different backgrounds and a particular statement may be seen totally differently by a woman who has been happily married for 40 years and a woman going through a divorce after ten contentious years with a serial cheater. Authors try to understand and anticipate their audience but cannot get it perfect every time, or write to the situation of every reader.

I believe that all the authors Sheila is concerned about are open to hearing that a particular statement could be too-easily misunderstood and cause hurt, and to making adjustments to be clearer or more precise. This is especially true for the most vulnerable, people for whom we share deep compassion. But that doesn't mean that we will agree that all charges are correct.

Further, no desire to advance change is worthy of calculated or cruel attack. I do not believe that is the way the Kingdom works. One cannot do damage in order to heal hurt. Especially among fellow Christians, we are commanded to have grace with one another, live at peace with one another, and speak the truth *in love* even as we move toward what we all long for: to care for the hurting and foster abundant, God-honoring relationships.

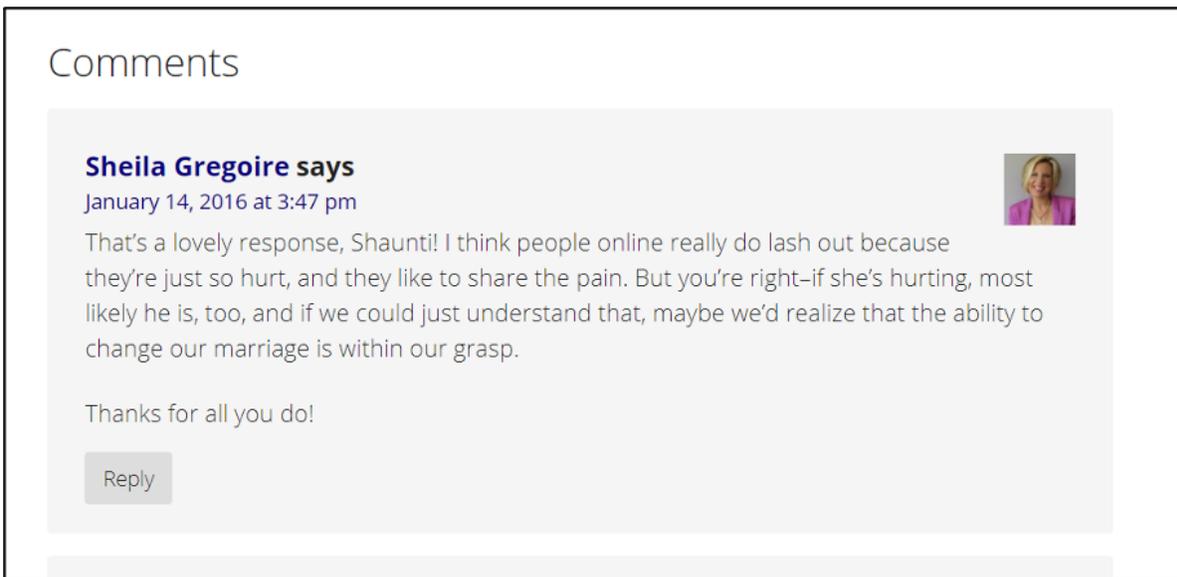
- **Sheila and her team have gone far over the line in some of their personal comments about me, including claiming that my son was likely being sexually abused as a young boy.** This distressing claim is not something I want to spend much time on, so suffice it to say that in a recent podcast and social media posts, the authors recounted a sweet, innocent, funny story I told about my then-4-year-old son having a reaction that is very common to healthy little boys (and that the American Academy of Pediatrics says is totally normal). They declared that that one-time reaction in a little boy meant that my son was likely being sexually abused. Then they went further, including directly stating that my books were “sexualizing” little ones, that I was writing the “pedophile’s playbook,” and other things I will not repeat.

Claiming that a harmless incident is in fact evidence of sexual abuse tends to obscure the [real signs of sexual abuse](#)—signs to which readers should be sensitive. (For example, sexual acting out.) It also risks making moms think their normal little boys are abnormal or they must have been molested. None of this is helpful. (I was told by one sexual abuse survivor that it is also frustrating to people who have indeed experienced traumatic sexual assault to see their experience trivialized.)

On a personal note, over the last two months, our family, team, and many readers have wrestled with various emotions. We have been praying for Sheila, for her team, and for her work to help marriages. The concern of my supporters has been heightened, wondering about the impact of this stress on my [health journey](#). That journey has also affected my ability to spend the time to create a more concise response—my radiation therapy starts in just a few days and there is so much to squeeze in the time I have.

Let me end with this. This has been a pretty direct statement about a fellow Christian author, because I feel a responsibility to my own ministry and team to correct the record. But those who don't know her should be aware that Sheila's recent critical comments are not the whole story about who she has been over the years. I came across something recently that reminded me of this.

Five years ago on my blog, I wrote an open letter to a woman reader who had (ironically) written something abusive about me and my books. I stated my sorrow that she had been in a hurting relationship, and yet also challenged her to look at her own words and actions. To my surprise, this was the very first comment that appeared on that blog.



That response was an example of an encourager who was also willing and able to say straightforward things in a kind way. That has been Sheila in the past. And I pray it will be again in the future.

Those of us who follow Christ are called to a different standard. "Outrage marketing" is easy, but so damaging. I would urge everyone to *not* fuel that toxic cycle by responding to Sheila publicly. Many Christian leaders have contacted me to share their support and to say they have privately gone to Sheila with their concerns about her approach. I would urge all to take that approach. That is the Kingdom way to raise concerns and advance change.

—Shaunti Feldhahn

## SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

### Four examples of inaccurate or misleading statements

I'm providing one example of a big-picture concern, and three representative examples of what appear to be several dozen false or misleading quotes and statements.

1. Big-picture concern: When Sheila contacted me in August about the direction of her forthcoming book and gave me a chance to “retract” any of my previous writing, I told her that my most important concern about any “visual nature of men” teaching (including her rebuttals of it) was the need to make a distinction between discussing *temptation/attraction* and *sin/lust*. From a biblical perspective, the temptations we face in our life are not sin—the issue is what we choose to do with it. Further, “lust” usually means actually giving in to sexual temptation. She did not respond, and throughout her book, podcasts, social media and blogs has not acknowledged the difference—which has led to accusations that Christian leaders are “excusing sin” in cases that we are actually “explaining temptation”.

Thus, I believe it is misleading to present that a common Christian teaching is “All men struggle with lust; it is every man’s battle.” That is an extreme way of expressing it, and I agree it is damaging, because it implies that all men give in to sexual temptation. But I have never made that sort of statement, and I do not believe it is a “common” teaching. A more accurate “common” teaching might be, “Most men struggle with visual stimulation and temptation in this sexualized culture, but they work to fight it.” Those are two very different messages – and yet the extreme one is the one that is central to Sheila’s survey.

I also told Sheila that in my view it is damaging to not acknowledge that there is a difference between visual temptation and sin, because it *dishonors all the men and boys who work the hardest to respect women*. If (as the brain science has found) men’s brains are indeed being regularly and biologically stimulated by sexual sights in this culture, then those men have essentially two choices: to try very hard to honor women (and God) by pushing those thoughts aside, or to enjoy the visual stimulation and let their thoughts go where they may. If we deny that there is a difference, and get mad at men simply for having a male brain, then we are lumping all men together and dishonoring the work that so many men do to respect women and honor God in their thought lives.

2. In her book, Sheila states that certain “lines of thinking” were common when I originally published *For Women Only* 17 years ago, but that “despite new research and feedback from readers, many authors have not changed their message.” This is deceptive. In her book, she has chosen to quote and cite the 2004 first edition of *For Women Only*, rather than the 2013 second edition that was put out precisely to make the sorts of language and tone changes that she is advocating for. She did the same thing with at least one other author. In other words, the other author and I saw new research, got feedback from readers, released second editions to be more careful in our content and presentation and avoid certain damaging messaging ... and her book quotes the original editions anyway.

3. One example from her book: Of the seven actual excerpts she includes of my books and blogs, three ultimately reflect a difference of opinion. Four, however, are falsehoods or deceptive—often in multiple ways. As an example, she claims my position in *For Women Only* is that, “The wife has to affirm her husband, even if he is not tending to her needs in bed.” I have never said anything like that, nor would I imply it. She does not actually quote me, because she will never find such a quote.
4. As an example from beyond her book: In a recent, popular [Religion News Service op-ed](#), Sheila states that certain evangelical messages about sex are at the root of the high-profile moral failures of male ministry leaders. She claimed that evangelicals say “men can’t help it” and then said this about my book *For Women Only* (this is a screenshot from the original article):

**So if men can’t help it, what do these books propose is the solution?**

**Women! It is women who keep men from sinning. And it starts with understanding this is just how men are. “For Women Only” advises wives to “accept the struggle” their husbands have with lust.**

*I have never and would never say that quote or give that damaging advice. Those were not my words, and it is not accurate to say they were. Those were the words I reprinted of one husband in a survey response. (He was wishing that his wife could love him despite his “weakness”—I would never have included that quote if he was excusing his damaging actions—and talk to her about it, which is an important step in overcoming sexual addiction.)*

Once I learned about this, and after Sheila did not respond to my request to correct it, I contacted Religion News Service. The editor agreed that quote should never have gotten past their editorial process, apologized to me, edited Sheila’s piece, and issued a statement that the quote had previously been inaccurately attributed and corrected. However, by then the article had been up for five days and the damage was done. I have asked Sheila to stop sharing that quote on her social media and issue a statement somewhere to correct the falsehood with her followers, but so far she has not agreed and has continued to use that statement.