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## The preacher and the porn star to debate

### Touring speakers discussing pros and cons of pornography

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Warning: This article contains sexually oriented adult content, verbal descriptions of nude adults and the unusual partnership of a pastor and a porn star.

Rev. Craig Gross, a former youth pastor and founder of XXXChurch.com, will bring his anti-porn crusade to Chicago on Monday at the Lakeshore Theater when he takes the stage opposite longtime porn star Ron Jeremy for "The Great Porn Debate." On tour together for the last few years, Gross promotes his ministry while Jeremy defends his industry, which he says has been unfairly targeted for years by the Christian right as shameful.

"People have a right to watch porn if they choose to and not feel bad," Jeremy said in an interview. "I'm going to combat that attitude till I'm blue in the face. And they're not going to beat me on it."

While Gross delivers the same dire warnings as other opponents of porn, he does so in a manner that Jeremy considers more respectful. Gross argues that pornography destroys relationships and degrades women. Jeremy counters that it enhances couples' sex lives and empowers men and women who use their bodies to make millions.

"There are two sides of the story," Gross said. "In the Christian world a lot of times we want to pretend there's only one side. The thing for me is, beyond my view of porn, as a Christian I want to show I can disagree with this guy and still be his friend."

Aiming to clean up what he considers the dirtiest little secret of the 21st Century, Gross hands out Bibles at porn shows and runs a Web site where people disclose their fixations and download free software to curb their obsession. A regular at porn industry conventions, he stands among porn stars who are offering autographs and hawking adult toys -- a strategy that has

enabled him to reach those most in need.

"I can't escape what God is doing," Gross said. "I'm responsible for the platform God has given us, not only to push the envelope on this issue, but stay away from it. Now my phone will ring and it will be a porn star [seeking help]. I'm OK with that."

It was at such a convention that Gross met Jeremy, who invited the pastor to debate the pros and cons of porn for college students. While Gross has preached against pornography in at least 250 churches across the country, he soon realized he could ride Jeremy's coattails to reach a different kind of flock.

"I'm the underdog on the tour," Gross said. "There are more Ron fans than anti-porn church fans."

Jeremy applauds the pastor's approach for flying in the face of other porn foes.

"Jesus supposedly was a very special person. Nobody argues that. He was a very nice guy," said Jeremy, a secular Jew. "He wouldn't shy away from healing people right where the problem was. While other churches give Craig a hard time for doing what he's doing, he's doing what Jesus would try to do."

Though there's plenty of Scripture that condemns "lust of the eyes" and warns about "the harlot who lurks on every corner," Gross does not quote the Bible on his tours with Jeremy, but sticks to secular warnings instead. For shock value, he often reads off a list of raunchy movie titles to illustrate how the industry degrades women -- pronouncing words in public that he would never utter in a pulpit.

"This is degrading and hurtful," he said. "It creates false expectations for what sex is all about. It's not real. It's fantasy."

Gross waged war on pornography as a youth pastor after he heard conversations that suggested young people were watching sex on the Internet. He remembered his buddies stealing smut magazines and living in fear of getting caught.

But today's teens just surf the Web with little risk of being found out, he said, adding that those teens form unrealistic expectations about sex.

Jeremy, who was born Ron Hyatt but goes by his middle name in his porn career, argues that the pornography industry is not to blame. He said that movies are not marketed to youths and that hard-core porn is not supposed to be sold to customers who can't prove they are 18 or older.

"We're trying to do the right thing," Jeremy said. "I'd like to think we're doing it for moral reasons, and for many of us that's true. I don't want to come across that we're holier-than-thou because not only is it a moral issue -- it's an intelligent one to avoid jail."

Still, if young people want to satisfy their curiosity, they will find a way, and Victorian sensibilities about sex in many churches don't help, Gross said. More than 48 percent of Christian families struggle with pornography, and that figure is exacerbated by Christian youths who trade in premarital sex for pornography, he said.

Rev. Dennis Lyle, rector of Mundelein Seminary, teaches aspiring priests in his moral theology classes how to deal with the topic of pornography. He is quick to say it's not about nudity. The Sistine Chapel is covered with images of naked bodies. "The problem with pornography is not that it shows too much but that it shows too little," Lyle said. "It doesn't reveal a totality of the human person. ... Pornography draws our attention only to the external, so we never really arrive at a true appreciation for the person as he or she is. The person becomes an object ... like a toy or a tool."

Lyle said moral theologians are divided on whether a small dose of porn can enhance a couple's sex life, as Jeremy often suggests during the debate. Lyle has heard confessions that suggest otherwise. He hears husbands and wives express feelings of hurt and inadequacy.

Confessions are precisely what Gross is after. "The Bible says confess your sins one to another," he said. "Most people look at porn in secrecy. If you really want to stop, you tell somebody."

Jon Peacock, director of Willow Creek Community Church's Axis Ministry for young adults, praises the virtual conversation on the XXXChurch.com Web site for providing a safe space to do that. It also offers free software for addicts to download and disclose their Internet activity to friends.

"It's a portal for hope," Peacock said. "What helps for so many people when they go on the site, they see that there's hope if they've gotten themselves into destructive patterns that there are other people out there wrestling with the same thing, which is really powerful. I love that Craig and his crew don't leave people where they're at. They meet them where they're at."

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