

The Haggard Episode and the Case for “Gay Marriage”: Why the Two Have No Connection

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The media has generated enormous coverage over the Ted Haggard sex scandal. A male homosexual prostitute has alleged that Rev. Haggard—at the time of the disclosure head of the National Association of Evangelicals and senior pastor of the 14,000-member New Life Church in Colorado—regularly paid him for homosexual sex. Haggard at first denied this but in a letter of confession issued to his church he acknowledged, without going into any detail, that he was “guilty of sexual immorality” (for a copy of the letter on the web, go to <http://www.gazette.com/display.php?id=1326186&secid=14>, retrieved 11/6/06). The consequences for Haggard are great: not only resignation from the NAE but also “permanent removal from the office of Senior Pastor of New Life Church.” Left-leaning media outlets have spun the story to underscore the hypocrisy of his criticism, and perhaps *any* criticism, of “gay marriage”; that this whole scandal would not have come about if Haggard had been free to marry a man.

I don’t agree with the spin. The scandal should have no bearing on the “gay marriage” debate. Now it is true that in politics what *should* be the case is not always *in fact* the case—the whole perception vs. reality debate. Nevertheless, there is still some benefit to injecting some reason and logic into the issue, if only to give impulsive political commentators some pause.

Haggard is now repenting of three repetitive sexual activities that the Scriptures of his church consistently treat as serious offenses to God and a dishonoring of self: homosexual intercourse, adultery, and sex with a prostitute. On top of these are two non-sexual offenses: deception and the purchasing, if not taking, of illegal drugs.

[Author’s note, 11/14/06: A correction is in order here. Strictly speaking, Haggard has confessed only to “sexual immorality” in the context of some dealings with a homosexual prostitute. So the homosexual offense may have been something less than full intercourse. This correction, however, does not materially affect the point of this article; namely, the false use of the Haggard episode by the media and others to promote “gay marriage.”]

Haggard was correct in publicly opposing homosexual practice, adultery, and sex with prostitutes but incorrect in violating his own principles. The remedy is repentance from immoral behavior, not the endorsement of such behavior. It is interesting that liberal media outlets have not yet made a case for civil incentives for adultery and prostitution. They only extend the political implications of hypocrisy to homosexual marriage.

Analogies are helpful here. Most men are ‘polysexual.’ Except for conscience, they would experience no significant psychic discomfort from having intercourse with multiple, drop-dead gorgeous women. A 2003 study of over 16,000 persons around the

globe concluded that, cross-culturally, men find monogamy significantly more difficult than women (David P. Schmitt et al., “Universal sex differences in the desire for sexual variety: Tests from 52 nations, 6 continents, and 13 islands,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85 [2003]: 85-104). It is studies like these that generate the wry observation, “What would we do without experts?”

The fact that most men have polysexual orientations, which creates a higher risk factor for non-monogamous patterns of behavior, should not lead society to endorse polygamous practices for men. Would the media trumpet as an argument for polygamous marriage the case of a pastor who, while publicly opposing polygamy, was having sexual relations with more than one person at the same time? I very much doubt it, at least as of today. Tomorrow may be another matter.

Or take the case of ‘pedosexuality’ (pedophilia). Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital, has referred to pedophilia as an “orientation” that nobody chooses to have but whose development is at least partly tied to risk factors at birth and/or in early childhood (“United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Interview with Frederick S. Berlin, M.D., Ph.D.,” 1997, <http://www.nccbuscc.org/comm/kit6.shtml>; retrieved 11/3/06). Change for pedophiles, defined unreasonably as the complete eradication of all pedophilic impulses, is very difficult, if not nearly impossible. Even so, if a pastor (rightly) publicly condemned pedosexual behavior and afterwards was caught engaging (wrongly) in sex with a child, would any in the media use this as an argument for eliminating formal age prerequisites for sexual activity?

The list of absurdities could go on and on. A prominent pastor who has publicly railed against the exploitative practices of multinational corporations is caught embezzling church funds. A good argument for societal approval of greedy business practices?

The truth is that the tension between knowing the right and doing the wrong is as old as humanity. It doesn’t make the wrong right. The ancients knew this. Euripides drew the lesson from the story of Medea, who out of feelings for revenge ended up killing her own children, that “passion overmasters sober thought” (*Medea* 1074-80). Centuries later, Ovid commented similarly on the story: “Desire persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but follow the worse” (*Metamorphoses* 7:17-21). The apostle Paul described the life of everyone under the jurisdiction of the Law of Moses as “not doing the good that I want but doing the evil that I do not want,” owing to the tyranny of the sinful impulse operating in human “flesh” (Letter to the Romans 7:14-25).

This lament did not lead to the condoning of improper behavior, however, or an attack on moral knowledge itself. The Stoics argued that bad behavior was, in reality, evidence of bad or defective knowledge. The apostle Paul contended that a new internal regulating power was needed to master the internal “law of sin”; namely, the gift of the Spirit of God (Romans 8:1-17).

Even some prominent pro-gay researchers who have posited congenital factors for homosexual development acknowledge that “no clear conclusions about the morality of a behavior can be made from the mere fact of biological causation, because all behavior is biologically caused” (Brian Mustanski and J. Michael Bailey, “A therapist’s guide to the genetics of human sexual orientation,” *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 18:4 [2003]: 432). Yes, all behavior is at some level biologically caused *and* all non-coerced sane persons are morally culpable for their behavior—obviously. People are not responsible for the mere experience of sinful impulses. But they are responsible for what they do with such impulses.

In his letter to his church Haggard candidly reflects on how he got to this point in his life:

I am a deceiver and a liar. There is a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark that I've been warring against it all of my adult life. For extended periods of time, I would enjoy victory and rejoice in freedom. Then, from time to time, the dirt that I thought was gone would resurface, and I would find myself thinking thoughts and experiencing desires that were contrary to everything I believe and teach. . . . When I stopped communicating about my problems, the darkness increased and finally dominated me. As a result, I did things that were contrary to everything I believe.

If Ted Haggard has had to struggle with homosexual impulses, then the years in which he did not give into those impulses and violate trust with his wife are commendable. Warfare with deeply ingrained desires to do what God expressly forbids is a part of human life. Haggard is right. When we stop communicating to others about the battles that we have with sinful impulses, especially sinful *sexual* impulses, we open ourselves to the domination of such impulses. No command of God that is strongly, absolutely, and pervasively present in Scripture is predicated on human beings first losing all desire to violate the command in question.

Haggard may have to struggle with homosexual impulses all his life, just as all of us have to struggle with various sinful impulses, some of which Haggard may share with most of humanity and some of which he may not. Nobody gets an exemption from the struggle, not even when the sinful desires persist. That is why Jesus called his followers to take up their cross, deny themselves, and lose their lives. At the points when we fail to live up to the moral commands of God that we rightly proclaim, the fault lies with our behavior, not with the commands of God.

The church should hold Haggard lovingly accountable to repent or turn from such behavior and, following such repentance, should actively work to restore him—and continue to oppose all the offenses that he committed. My one regret with the way that Haggard has been treated is that he has been permanently barred from ever again being senior pastor at New Life Church. I think that this is a mistake. There is no valid Christian reason why Haggard could not return to that position at a future date, after the period of oversight and recovery to which Haggard is now submitting. Jesus did tell us that even if we sin seven times a day (or 77 times or 70 times 7 times, depending on the Gospel cited) and say “I repent” we can be forgiven (Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:15, 21-22). I see no reason why a pastor is any different. Now that would be a model of grace to the church.

[For responses to the article and my comments go [here](#).]

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