



Ted Said

Afterthoughts on Ted Haggard's Interview with Oprah

By Joe Dallas

Rev. Ted Haggard broke his two year silence on Oprah's show yesterday, his first media appearance since a catastrophic fall from the pulpit of New Life Church in 2006, when his longstanding relationship with a male prostitute was exposed. The details are still fresh: Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, was condemning gay sex publicly while paying for it privately, until accusations from male escort Mike Jones cracked the dam of Ted's denials ("I *never* had gay sex!") and trickles of half-concessions leaked out ("Well, yeah, I bought some meth from a gay escort, but threw it away") followed by voice mail recordings irrefutable as Monica's blue dress, and the inevitable confession, contrition and exit. It was as tawdry as it was achingly familiar in this era of public falls, and many of us hoped the story was played out.

Enter the sequel. An HBO special titled *The Trials of Ted Haggard* premieres Thursday January 29, and by way of promotion, Ted granted interviews to Larry King as well as Oprah, revisiting those dark days with his own insights and explanations. If there's a redemptive twist to all this, it lies in what can be gleaned from the Reverend's experience and, to an extent, his statements about Christianity, homosexuality, church life and human nature. A typical spectator, I cheered and booed throughout the Oprah interview, shouting criticisms or praise while knowing nothing of what it was like for the man under the bright lights being grilled about his worst failures and private agonies. So I'll concede, a la Roosevelt's famous observation about the man in the arena, that it is indeed the guy in the ring whose performance matters far and above the critic who wishes he'd done *this* or said *that*.

From that deferential position, then, let me offer some thoughts on what Ted said, what I *wish* he'd said, and what still needs to be said.

Ted said: "I'm a heterosexual with homosexual attachments."
What prompted it: Oprah's predictable but relevant question: Are you gay, straight, or bisexual?
How it played: Clumsy. Most people look for a one word summation of sexual preference (gay, straight or bi) or a description of sexual feelings. ("I'm attracted to men, women or both.") And while I appreciate Ted's aversion to gay/straight labels, this phrase only muddied waters that he was hoping to clear.

What I wish Ted said: "I'm a married man who's at times attracted to other men. I'm attracted to my wife as well and, more important, committed to her and my family. So when I'm attracted to someone other than her, I resist those attractions. And isn't that what most married men do?"

Ted said: "I cannot deny who I am"



What prompted it: Oprah's claim that when Ted resisted his homosexual attractions he was denying who/what he really was, versus Ted's belief that who he was, in fact, more than that.

How it played: Earnest. Ted rightfully challenged the inevitability approach Oprah was taking (as in, our feelings inevitably define us, dictating our actions and identity.) But who we are is also defined by what we believe, and when feelings clash with conscience, we *are* being true to ourselves when we say no to them.

What I wish Ted said: "When you do something you don't feel right about, you're not being true to yourself. To me, sex with a man didn't feel right, even if it felt good, so I made a choice between my conscience and my attractions. You may not agree with that choice, but I'm sure you'll agree that we all need to know not only what we desire, but what we believe as well. And if we're smart, we'll say no to the desires that clash with our beliefs."

Ted said: "I believe that Christ accepts everyone."

What prompted it: Oprah asking, "Do you believe Christ accepts homosexuals?"

How it played: Correct but incomplete. Oprah's question insinuated that if Christ accepted someone, He approved of them as well. Ted's answer affirmed that Jesus turns no one away, but omitted the messy question of sin.

What I wish Ted said: "Jesus accepts all of us, but He doesn't accept all that we do. If what we're doing isn't in line with His will, no matter how deeply it's ingrained in us, He'll call us to give it up. And if we say no, then we're not really following Him."

Haggard was in a tough spot. Any Christian calling homosexuality a sin (much less one who struggles with it himself!) is going to walk into a cross examination when he's interviewed, and who looks good under cross examination? So given the volatility of the subject and Oprah's openly pro-gay position, I appreciate Ted's efforts. In the coming years, who knows how many other believers will find themselves pointedly asked, "Is homosexuality really a sin? Doesn't God love gays? Shouldn't we all just accept who we are?" To which I hope we'll all have the grace to say, in our own words:

Everyone sins, and God alone decides what sin is. That's why He inspired men to write the Scriptures, so we'd know what's expected of us. And someday all of us will answer to Him for how well or how poorly we've met those expectations. I received Christ because I knew I'd never meet them on my own, and He promised to pay the price when I fell short. So is homosexuality a sin? Sure, look it up. Does God love gays? You bet. But should we all just accept who we are, as we are? Only if that means accepting that we're loved by God, called to follow Him, and willing to surrender our will to His.

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