

Haggard must earn forgiveness he seeks

I can't forgive Ted Haggard. Not because I'm unable to, but because it's forbidden. I'm not one of his victims.

Jewish tradition teaches that forgiveness for a sin comes from those most hurt by it. That's why murder is so horrible. True forgiveness is impossible, at least in this lifetime. The victims are gone.

Fortunately, Haggard's victims remain. They spread out from his tormented soul like shock waves of an explosion. The closer you get, the more damage you find.

At the outer edge, we have millions of gay men and women told acting in accordance with who they are, as Haggard has done, is sinful and wrong. They are denied legal recognition of committed relationships and are targets of fanatical hatred and prejudice.

Haggard deserves credit for never preaching hate. But his public words and influence over the National Association of Evangelicals helped marginalize homosexuals in America. I've never been the target of hatred because of my Judaism. But I do know something of marginalization and the power of reaching out. To earn the forgiveness of his fellow homosexuals, Haggard should come out as a gay man and minister to their spiritual needs.

Moving inward from the outermost circle of victims, the waves get a little rougher. Haggard's congregants sought his help in knowing God's will. They trusted him with their deepest secrets.

I know something of their pain, too. Not long ago, the rabbi of the synagogue where I grew up admitted to a horrible crime and is now in prison. The wound in the heart of New Life's worshippers must be very deep indeed. But their response has been committed, clear and Christian: We love and forgive our pastor, for we are all human. I agree with the last, but it misses the point. We may all be hypocrites and liars, but very few of us are charismatic leaders in positions of power.

People in positions of leadership have a special obligation to match words with deeds. That is what integrity is: Making speech and action one. The more influence you have, the more important it is to banish



OPINION
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hypocrisy from your life.

I invite New Life worshippers to imagine what things would be like this Sunday if Mike Jones hadn't come forward. You'd be basking in the glow of worship, convinced of your pastor's goodness and honesty. Suggestions that he was an adulterous drug user would have been denounced as rumors spread by Satan.

In fact, Haggard's letter calls Jones his "accuser," the literal translation of "Satan" from the Hebrew. Does he want us to believe Jones is the devil?

Haggard's letter was not a confession. It was an admission to the bare minimum of what he believed Jones could corroborate. Members of New Life, if he had wanted to tell you anything, he could have bared his soul any Sunday for the past 10 years.

To earn your forgiveness, give him the pulpit one more time. For his last sermon at New Life, he should tell you every secret he has. Including the ones he doesn't have to.

Finally, at the storm-tossed core of Haggard's whirlpool, we find his wife and children. Flailing and gasping for air, they must now swim for their lives. No one seems to be talking about Haggard putting his wife at risk. Even worse, he may have jeopardized his children, depending on how far back his sexual history goes.

I don't know Gayle Haggard or her kids, but my heart goes out to them. I hope they get the support they need. I know women who gave their love to gay men. Hearing their pain is unbearable, it will tear out your heart. To every member of my gender, listen and heed: There is nothing wrong with homosexuality. There is everything wrong with deceit. If you are sexually attracted to men, do not accept a woman's love.

Gayle's courageous letter speaks of that love. She speaks of faithfulness as well. But she does not mention forgiveness. Good for you, Gayle. Deuteronomy 16:20 says "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue." Forgiveness is important, but it must be earned. Make your husband earn it for a long, long time.

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