

Now Showing: Ted Haggard, the Movie

The HBO documentary The Trials of Ted Haggard dredges up a lot of pain and sometimes blames the church for the Colorado pastor's problems.

In November 2006 the American evangelical movement was dragged through an embarrassing credibility crisis when Colorado pastor Ted Haggard admitted to a sexual relationship with a male prostitute. This week it's *déjà vu* all over again. In a documentary about Haggard's moral failure, HBO dredges up the ugly scandal and shows us how Haggard is coping with life now that he's out of the ministry.

After watching an advance copy of *The Trials of Ted Haggard*, I'm wondering if this film should have been made at all.

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Although the 42-minute movie was directed by Alexandra Pelosi, daughter of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, it is not a political rant. Pelosi followed Haggard and his family around for months (with their full cooperation) to explore how the disgraced pastor survived his ordeal after being fired from New Life Church and then moving to Arizona to seek counseling and a new career as an insurance salesman.

The film itself is both heartwarming and painfully mocking. Haggard is blunt about his sexual struggles (he says he started dealing with gay feelings after experiences in the seventh grade), he apologizes for his behavior and he calls himself "a first-class loser." His wife, Gayle, explains why she stayed with her husband after the affair became public ("I

don't believe in writing people off") and says she and Ted enjoy deeper intimacy today because he has faced his brokenness.

Thankfully Haggard makes it clear that he has not changed his views on biblical morality, telling Pelosi that he still believes heterosexual marriage is God's plan. This is surely the first time HBO has ever aired such conservative views on that subject.

But the tragic flaw of *The Trials of Ted Haggard* is Pelosi's attempt to blame New Life Church for Haggard's problems. She seems aghast that he was fired simply for sexual immorality- and then characterizes the restrictions placed upon him by New Life's elders as "exile."

Haggard plays along with the blame game at times. When Pelosi asks him, "Where are your friends now?" Haggard stares across an Arizona sky and answers: "They left. I violated the rules." When she brings up the subject of his restoration process- which required him to leave Colorado and submit to a counseling process directed by pastor Tommy Barnett of Phoenix First Assembly of God- Haggard says: "The church has said, 'Go to hell.' The church chose not to forgive me."

(The truth: No one at New Life, Phoenix First or any other church wanted Haggard to go to hell. It was unfortunate, however, that one New Life leader was quoted as saying that Haggard needed to "disappear.")

Pelosi paints New Life Church and Haggard's restoration team as the bad guys. In actuality, Haggard's church gave him a generous severance package that included a year's salary, continual care for the Haggard's special-needs son and months of counseling.

The people I know at New Life love the Haggards and extended forgiveness to Ted from the first day the scandal broke. But Pelosi edits out that side of the story, except when she shows

footage of New Life members crying when they first learned of his fall.

The saddest part of the film features a clip from a sermon Haggard gave several years ago at his church. He tells his congregation to embrace integrity and warns them not to keep secrets or live double lives. Those words, juxtaposed against news clips about the prostitute Haggard visited frequently in Denver, remind us that we will face painful consequences if we preach one thing and live another.

Haggard tells Pelosi: "I can certainly understand why people can't stand me." I want to shout from the housetops that the Christian community loves Ted, that we forgave him in 2006 and that we forgive him now (especially since new revelations surfaced this week about another man who says he was involved with Haggard).

The world needs to know that forgiveness doesn't negate the need for church discipline, nor does it automatically solve the complex problems people create for themselves and others when they fall as hard as Haggard did.

It's tragic that the men who loved Haggard the most-particularly Larry Stockstill, the Louisiana pastor who managed the disciplinary process-don't get the respect they deserve in this movie. After extending amazing grace to the Haggards, they are skewered by Pelosi, HBO and, at times, by Haggard himself.

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think Haggard should have told Pelosi that it just wasn't time to air his public pain on national television. He could have stayed in obscurity for a few more years while embracing his healing process-but Haggard chose not only to make this film but also to go on talk shows this week with Larry King and Oprah Winfrey.

What's done is done. Hopefully secular audiences will focus more on the positives of Haggard's faith and less on his

cynicism. One thing is for sure: The trials of Ted Haggard are not over. Stay tuned for the sequel.

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