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The Holsinger Question — A New Religious Test for the Surgeon General?

Tuesday, June 26, 2007



Have we reached the point that a Christian who affirms traditional church teachings cannot be appointed to public office?

The case of Dr. James Wilson Holsinger, Jr. now raises that question. President George W. Bush has nominated Dr. Holsinger to be the next Surgeon General of the United States, the nation's highest ranking health official.

As a physician, Dr. Holsinger is unusually qualified for the position. He holds a medical degree from Duke University, where he also earned a Ph.D. in anatomy and physiology. He also holds graduate degrees in hospital administration and biblical studies.

He has served as Medical Director for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, an agency he served for 25 years. He also served for 31 years in the United States Army Reserve, where he received numerous citations and retired at the rank of Major General.

Beyond these qualifications, he served as Chancellor of the University of Kentucky Medical Center, which also involved his supervision of the schools of medicine, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, and health sciences. He later served as Secretary of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services for Kentucky.

By any measure, he is one of the most qualified physicians in the United States. So, why are so many people — including several influential Democratic senators — opposing his nomination?

Reporter Art Jester of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* explains:

The nomination of University of Kentucky professor Dr. James W. Holsinger as U.S. surgeon general has come under fire from groups that fear his actions as a high-ranking official in the United Methodist Church indicate he is anti-gay.

Holsinger, 68, who holds UK's Charles T. Wethington Jr. Chair in the Health Sciences and is a former chancellor of UK's Chandler Medical Center and a former state Secretary of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, is being challenged for his role in decisions by the United Methodist Judicial Council. That highest "court" rules on disputes involving church doctrine and policies in the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination.

In his role on the nine-member Judicial Council, Holsinger has opposed a decision to allow a practicing lesbian to be an associate pastor; and he supported a pastor who would not permit an openly gay man to join the church. In both instances, Holsinger's supporters say, he was correctly interpreting and applying church policy. (The church's bishops voted later to allow the gay man to become a member.)

In other words, his opponents are not directing their attention to his medical experience or qualifications, but to his beliefs and responsibilities as a Christian and a member of the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church.

An editorial in *The Washington Post* makes this absolutely clear. The paper points to a 1991 paper Dr. Holsinger wrote for the Committee to Study Homosexuality of the United Methodist Church. The paper “has raised red flags,” the editorial suggests.

That is in itself a very revealing statement. But consider these paragraphs:

As a member of the church's Judicial Council, Dr. Holsinger voted with the majority to boot a lesbian from her post as a minister and to allow ministers to deny church membership to gay men and lesbians. It is not our place to tell religions what their beliefs should or should not be. But that stricture does not apply when bigotry masquerades as science. Dr. Holsinger prepared "Pathophysiology of Male Homosexuality" for the Committee to Study Homosexuality of the United Methodist Church, which was discussing whether to end the church's stance of not condoning homosexuality. Pathophysiology was defined as "abnormal function."

The six pages of prurient fascination with what Dr. Holsinger believes is gay sex paint all gay men as promiscuous beings who are riddled with disease because of various sex acts (described in detail) that are in the extreme for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. To prove his argument that gay sex was unhealthy and unnatural, Dr. Holsinger wrote, "In fact, the logical complementarity of the human sexes has been so recognized in our culture that it has entered our vocabulary in the form of naming various pipe fittings either the male fitting or the female fitting depending upon which one interlocks within the other." Is he a doctor or the ACE Hardware man?

Overlooking the sarcasm for a moment, what is at stake here? Dr. Holsinger's paper [available [here](#)] states the obvious fact that the human reproductive systems are made for heterosexual union and that the systems of reproduction and elimination (of solids) are separate — for good reason. The conclusion of Dr. Holsinger's argument is that heterosexual sex is implied by the structure of the male and female bodies and that the use of a tract meant for the elimination of solid waste as a means of intercourse involves dangerous health risks.

The Washington Post's editors may claim that this is bigotry, but they will then have to explain why health authorities routinely warn of the same reality. Warnings about necessary precautions for such acts are standard fare in homosexual literature.

The most offensive part of Dr. Holsinger's paper has to do with his argument for the complementarity of the male and female bodies.

Take a careful look at his argument:

The anatomic and physiologic facts of alimation and reproduction simply do not change based on any cultural setting. In fact, the logical complementarity of the human sexes has been so recognized in our culture that it has entered our vocabulary in the form of naming various pipe fittings either the male fitting or the female fitting depending upon which one interlocks within the other. When the complementarity of the sexes is breached, injuries and diseases may occur as noted above.

Dr. Holsinger argues that heterosexual intercourse is normative given our anatomical and physiological structure as human beings. He also states the obvious — that this natural and normative complementarity is reflected even in the way we describe pipe fittings. Is anyone ready to refute this fact?

Again, the key issue here is that Dr. Holsinger was writing this paper for his church. His arguments and actions indicate that he believes, as the Christian church has taught for 2,000 years, the homosexuality is a sin.

Article VI of the U.S. Constitution forbids any religious test for public office. Are members of the United States Senate now prepared to vote against this highly qualified physician on the basis of his Christian convictions?

Or, to put it differently, can any Roman Catholic physician who affirms official Roman Catholic doctrines concerning sexuality, or any evangelical Christian who affirms the sinfulness of homosexual acts, or any physician of any other religious commitment that does not sanction homosexual acts (including Orthodox Judaism and Islam) be confirmed as Surgeon General of the United States?

In its own editorial, *The Boston Globe* goes even further. Referring to Dr. Holsinger's service on the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, the paper states this:

In 2005, as a leader of the judicial council of the United Methodist Church, Holsinger acted to reinstate a Methodist minister who had been suspended for refusing to allow a gay man to be a member of his congregation. In 2004, he wrote in a council opinion that the church should have acted to remove a lesbian minister. In 1991, he wrote a paper for a church committee that described male homosexuality as unnatural.

The paper then argues that "no one should go into the job with a record of discriminating against people because of their sexual orientation."

Dr. Holsinger's record as a physician and public official is clear — he does not discriminate when it comes to medical treatment or health care.

So Dr. Holsinger is to be denied confirmation because as a member of his church's highest tribunal he voted to uphold church doctrine and teaching? The *Globe* even states that it would be somewhat assured if Dr. Holsinger would "renounce his previous views on homosexuality."

The nomination of Dr. James Holsinger promises now to be a defining moment in American history. Will it now be necessary for a nominee to deny the teachings of his or her own church in order to be confirmed by the United States Senate?

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