



IN THE NEWS

from *www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com*

FEATURED: APRIL 2014

Fred Phelps: Responding to His Death

Introduction

On March 19, 2014, the Rev. Fred Phelps died in Topeka, Kansas, at age eighty-four. A disbarred civil rights attorney better known as a virulently antigay preacher, Phelps founded the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka in 1955. The Westboro Baptist Church, a tiny congregation consisting largely of members of the Phelps family, has become internationally known for its decades-old policy of picketing public and private events, schools, and churches across the United States and for its message of unrelenting hate: “God hates China,” “God hates the United States,” and, most notably, (as evidenced by the church’s hateful web address, godhatesfags.com), “God hates gays and those who do not condemn them.”

The announcement of Phelps’s impending death—and the death itself—generated considerable controversy and conversation. Actor and gay activist George Takei generated hundreds of thousands of responses to his social media call for tolerance and restraint: “I take no solace or joy in this man’s passing. . . . He was a tormented soul.”¹ On the Internet, in the media, and in churches and other gatherings, many people—gay or straight, religious or secular—debate the legacy of Phelps and whether his death should be celebrated or mourned.

Fred Phelps is already recognized as both a truly divisive and truly important figure in American history. His hate-filled rhetoric and the spectacle of his protests may have shown that even the most hateful messages were protected speech under the U.S. Constitution, but they also helped advance the very thing he decried: the social acceptance of gays and lesbians. His actions also helped to diminish the reputation of Christianity in the eyes of many as intolerant, judgmental, and prejudiced. The work of Phelps will assuredly be studied by future generations as a significant factor impacting the equality of LGBT people and the decline of American Christianity.

The Legal Issue: Hate and Free Speech

Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church had been well known locally for their protests, but they rose to national prominence in 1998 when they picketed the Wyoming funeral of Matthew Shepard, the gay college student tortured and beaten to death because of his sexual orientation. Around 2005 the church began protesting at military funerals, which generated more outrage as well as legislation and court action centered on the tensions between the church’s right to express its beliefs through free speech and the rights of the bereaved to privacy.

The church's website states their beliefs succinctly, if crudely: God hates America because it has not criminalized homosexual behavior. In response to what it perceives as America's ungodly tolerance of homosexuality, the church has for more than twenty years sought every opportunity to command America's attention and urge it to repent. As the website puts it, "WBC engages in daily peaceful sidewalk demonstrations opposing the homosexual lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth."²

These "peaceful demonstrations"—men, women, and children holding signs featuring antigay slogans and chanting "God hates fags"—have been held at locations ranging from the NCAA Basketball Final Four to Catholic and Protestant churches to military funerals to locations destroyed by natural disasters such as tornados. In response, counterdemonstrations (made up of groups ranging from Hells Angels to pastors and church leaders) have formed at many of the Westboro picketing events to erect a wall of love to counter Westboro's wall of hate and often to screen mourners from the sights and sounds of the protest if it is being held at a funeral.

In the 2011 Supreme Court case *Snyder v. Phelps*, Chief Justice John G. Roberts wrote for the majority that while the speech employed in the Westboro Baptist Church's picketing might be hateful—and many people have been, at the very least, pained by the rhetoric of the church—"we cannot react to that pain by punishing the speaker."³ The opinion ruled that the issues with which the church concerned itself—politics, morality, homosexuality in the military, and the Catholic child abuse scandals—were matters of public importance, and thus their protests constitute protected expression, no matter how hatefully expressed. Fred Phelps, disbarred

lawyer, died having seen his beliefs and actions denounced by the public but upheld as legal by the highest court in the land.

The Theological Issue: Hate and Christianity

It is no surprise to anyone who studies the church that large numbers of people have left organized Christianity in recent years and that great numbers of young people express antipathy or even negativity toward organized religion. One of the most oft-cited reasons for rejection of Christianity is the perception that Christians are judgmental, prejudiced, unloving, and homophobic. Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church contribute to this perception, justifying their antigay religious group through their understanding of the Bible. Although their membership is tiny, their visibility is huge. Phelps and the leaders of Westboro have always understood that to make a big splash, a

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message must be loud, crude, and completely in your face, and the effect has reached far beyond the church's small number of followers.

Phelps and his church were and are representative of American Christians who believe that seven verses in the Bible should be read as condemning gays and gay marriage. In recent years, despite gains in the larger society, these Christians have supported antigay legislation in Africa and Arizona, offered their own demonstrations in support of antigay remarks made by executives of Chik-Fil-A, and denounced and

even pulled financial support from the Christian charity World Vision when it announced it was willing to employ married gays. The last is the most recently in the news and certainly suggests that a strong antigay bias is still to be found among Christians.

Prominent conservative Christians Franklin Graham, Albert Moehler, Tony Perkins, and the Family Research Council, among others, spoke out immediately and vehemently against World Vision's modest proposal. Perkins and others called for Christians to pull their contributions from World Vision: "The church should continue to support Christian aid and humanitarianism, but only through organizations that remain true to the word of God."⁴ Ironically, the backlash from angry Christians threatened to undermine World Vision's Christian mission of feeding the hungry and helping the destitute; clearly many still vocally share Phelps's belief that homosexuality is an abomination so vile that opposing it is central to their faith and practice. In the face of the threats from these Christian leaders, the leaders of World Vision reversed their decision.

But many other Christians—even those who read the Bible in the same way as Phelps—realized that they did not want to be lumped together with him and his church. Seeing their theology brought to life in such ugly fashion forced some to reconsider their support of antigay readings of Scripture, their opposition to gays in the church, and their objections to gay marriage. Other Christians wrote and spoke out against this interpretation of Scripture, and many offered counterdemonstrations to show that the Phelps family and their church do not represent the beliefs of all Christians. From Matthew Shepard's funeral onward, well-meaning people have attempted to shield the bereaved from the virulent hatred and horrid slogans of the picketers. In doing so, they have offered an opposing vision of the church as a community that loves, supports, and accepts, not a community that hates, reproves, and condemns.

My friend the Rev. Torey Lightcap, an Episcopal priest in Nebraska, was one of many church and community leaders who joined in offering a protest of love when the Westboro message of hate came to his town: "Westboro has visited Sioux City twice now. I was here for the last one. We figured we could be as loving as they could be loud, and we matched them pound for pound. Those of us who came together to organize looked beyond our differences and made our city better." These protesters suggest an appropriate response to the hate and anger of Fred Phelps: love and forgiveness.

Christians sometimes wrestle with how to react to the death of someone who is completely at odds with our values, someone we fear and perhaps even hate. This time, our culture has offered multiple reminders that we are not to rejoice at the death of our enemies. When Judy Shepard, mother of Matthew, released a generous statement concerning Phelps's death, she was reminding us that even Phelps had those who will mourn his loss and that the mourning process should be respected for the sake of the living. George Takei wrote in a Facebook status shared 37,000 times, "Today, Mr. Phelps may have learned that God, in fact, hates no one. Vicious and hate-filled as he was, may his soul find the kind of peace through death that was so plainly elusive during his life."⁵ It's a message all of us—most particularly, perhaps, the Christians who villainized Phelps—need to hear. To celebrate the death of Fred Phelps is to refuse to learn the lesson of his life.

What's Next?

Fred Phelps may be gone, but antigay prejudice continues within the church and in the larger culture. Where do you stand on homosexuality and why? Can you articulate your own position? A class or series of discussions on human sexuality may offer a chance for you to explore your beliefs and think about how to have a dialogue with others about theirs. You may want to study thoughtful readings of the Bible and sexu-

ality. Consider *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (HarperOne, 2002), the work of the gay Republican Baptist preacher Peter J. Gomes; or *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), written by pastor and former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Jack Rogers. In addition to biblical study, consider having a conversation on the larger concept of Christian love. The author of this study, Greg Garrett, has written a book illustrating this concept, *The Other Jesus: Rejecting a Religion of Fear for the God of Love* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

The Southern Poverty Law Center has called the Westboro Baptist Church “the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America.”⁶ You can read background about the church and its founder on the SPLC website, but more importantly, you can begin thinking about responses to this group and other hate groups in America. The SPLC site offers ways to get involved, including supporting the work of the center.

Another response you and your church could make to the Westboro Baptist Church is to offer counterdemonstrations at an upcoming picketing event—the schedule is, conveniently, listed on the Westboro Baptist Church web pages.

The legacy of Fred Phelps deserves a larger response, though. Not only should we speak up and act out against this legacy of hate, but we should educate our churches, our children, and our culture so that we can see Phelps as a man whose time has come—and gone. Consider the work of the NALT Christians project (notalllikethat.org) in educating and advocating for a loving and welcoming response to gays and lesbians. You might also want to have a conversation about having your church recognized as a Welcoming Congre-

gation, publicly proclaiming that all who enter will be loved and welcomed regardless of their sexual orientation. You can begin exploring the process at welcomingresources.org.

Endnotes

1. George Takei’s Facebook page, accessed March 16, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/georgetakei/posts/10151934398335443>.
2. “GodHatesFags,” Westboro Baptist Church, godhatesfags.com.
3. Adam Liptak, “Justices Rule for Protesters at Military Funerals,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/03/us/03scotus.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.
4. Zack Ford, “How the World Vision Flip-Flop Demonstrates Conservatives’ Commitment to Anti-Gay Discrimination,” *ThinkProgress*, March 27, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/lgbt/2014/03/27/3419623/world-vision-discrimination/>.
5. George Takei’s Facebook page, accessed March 20, 2014, https://www.facebook.com/georgetakei/posts/10151941093890443?stream_ref=10.
6. “Westboro Baptist Church,” Southern Poverty Law Center, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/groups/westboro-baptist-church>.

Greg Garrett is 2013 Centennial Professor at Baylor University and author or coauthor of twenty books, including The Gospel according to Hollywood, The Other Jesus, We Get to Carry Each Other: The Gospel according to U2, and the novel The Prodigal with Brennan Manning. One of America’s most respected commentators on religion and culture, Greg is a frequent speaker and media guest. He serves as writer in residence at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest and as a licensed lay preacher at St. David’s Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do your theological beliefs compare to those of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church?
2. The Supreme Court ruled that the Westboro Baptist Church had the freedom to protest and use hurtful speech in doing so. Do you believe Christians should employ these tactics, even in the service of a powerful message? Why or why not?
3. How has homophobia affected the contemporary reputation of Christianity? Do you believe that in the final assessment, Fred Phelps will have had a positive or negative impact on the church?
4. Do you believe Christians have a responsibility to speak out against hateful religion? How might you and your church respond to the rhetoric of the Westboro Baptist Church?