

## Westboro Baptist Church

By Ben Williamson

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**Founder:** Fred W. Phelps, Sr.

**Founding Date:** 1955

**Location:** Topeka, KS

**Organization Structure:** The Westboro Baptist Church is led by Pastor Fred Phelps. The church consists mostly of Phelps' family. Sunday attendance is estimated around 70, mostly family members of Fred Phelps himself.<sup>1</sup>

**Unique Activities:** Protesting pro-homosexual events; picketing at dead soldiers' funerals and other funerals of prominent personalities or tragedies; declaring judgment on nations and religions including particularly Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism.

**Unique Slogans:** God hates America, God hates fags, Thank God for Dead Soldiers, Thank God for 9/11, Thank God for IEDs, Pray for More Dead Soldiers.

### HISTORY

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While Madalyn Murray O'Hair was called, "the most hated woman in America," Fred Phelps and his family have been dubbed "the most hated family in America."<sup>2</sup> The Westboro Baptist Church<sup>3</sup> (hereafter, WBC) is the product of Fred W. Phelps, Sr. According to the WBC website,

Fred Phelps was born Nov. 13, 1929, in Meridian, Mississippi...The summer following graduation, he had a profound religious experience, gave up West Point, enrolled instead for Bible/ministerial training at Bob Jones College, Cleveland, Tennessee (later moving with them as they transitioned to Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina). Ordained by the Southern Baptists Sept. 8, 1947. Met his wife, Margie M. Phelps, in 1951 while preaching at the Arizona Bible Institute in Phoenix, Arizona. Their marriage May 15, 1952 has been blessed of God with 13 children, 54 grandchildren (to date) and 7 great-grandchildren (to date). Has served as Pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, since Nov. 1955. WBC has engaged in daily picketing demonstrations across America and some foreign countries since 1991 -- aimed at showing Americans their transgression (Isa. 58:1) and causing America to know her abominations. Ezek. 16:2.<sup>4</sup>

Not only has Phelps served as pastor but also a career as an attorney. Phelps began the law firm Phelps-Chartered in 1964. Today, that same law firm continues under four of his children.<sup>5</sup>

Early in Phelps' career as a lawyer, he worked as civil rights leader. According to the Phelps-Chartered website,

During the 1960's, Mr. Phelps gained a reputation for handling cases that no other attorney in the area would take. Most notably, he was the only white lawyer to represent a group of African-American students...During his career, Mr. Phelps handled numerous civil rights/discrimination cases. In addition to these matters, he was active in criminal defense, consumer protection, and employment discrimination matters.<sup>6</sup>

Critics, however, have attempted to link Phelps to notorious racists such as Rev. Pete Peters of La Porte, Colorado and the Christian Identity movement which teaches that, "the white race is God's true Chosen People...Jews are animal souls...[and] Blacks are 'mud people' who also possess animal souls-meaning they are not immortal and cannot go to heaven."<sup>7</sup> Though Peters agrees with Phelps position on homosexuality, he has distanced himself from

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Phelps' protesting activities by saying the WBC "push people towards tolerance [of] homosexual perverts."<sup>8</sup>

Phelps has also had a political career. He has run as a Democrat for several Kansas races and was even a supporter of Al Gore in the 1988 presidential run.

By the 1980s, Gage Park near Phelps' home in Topeka, Kansas, had become a well-known meeting spot for homosexuals and alleged sexual encounters. In 1991, Phelps began picketing against homosexuality when he claims city officials did not respond to public complaints to police the park.<sup>9</sup>

From those early days, Phelps and the WBC's demonstrations have grown to picketing at various places including churches, and funerals of dead soldiers, celebrities, and victims of tragedies often because of some perceived connection to homosexuality.

## **WESTBORO BAPTIST BELIEFS**

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The WBC is an independent,<sup>10</sup> primitive<sup>11</sup> Baptist Church and is strongly hyper-Calvinist<sup>12</sup>. Their unusual application of their version of hyper-Calvinism gives them a basis for their hatred. This amounts to outright hatred of any person or group that is not a part of their church. Their logic is as follows: WBC is part of the elect. Only the elect will be saved. God loves only the elect. God hates the non-elect. WBC also hates the non-elect. Therefore, WBC hates everybody else, especially homosexuals and those somehow connected to homosexuals.

The WBC is best known for their protests on anything pro-gay. Homosexuality, however, is just one of several things that WBC focuses on. Some individuals that have been targeted by WBC are Dick Cheney, Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, Fred Rogers, Ronald Reagan and others. Often individuals, organizations, or nations are targeted by WBC because of some supposed ties or connections to homosexuality. WBC believes, "All nations must immediately outlaw sodomy (homosexuality) and impose the death penalty!"<sup>13</sup>

The tragedies that happen in the world today are supposedly God's punishment. For instance, the tragic 2006 shooting of Amish schoolchildren in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania is said to be the result of God punishing America. Shirley Phelps-Roper,<sup>14</sup> daughter of Fred Phelps and spokesperson for WBC, claimed on *Hannity & Colmes* that the Amish girls deserved to die because Pennsylvania's governor Ed Rendell had made unfavorable comments about the WBC. Therefore, God punished Rendell by the deaths of five Amish schoolgirls.<sup>15</sup> One has to wonder, if it was Rendell that had upset God, why did the schoolchildren have to die?

A more recent example is the 2011 shooting of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords and 21 others by alleged gunman Jared Lee Loughner.<sup>16</sup> WBC thanked God for the tragedy. On a video posting on the WBC's website, Fred Phelps states: "Westboro Baptist Church prays for more shooters, more violent veterans, and more dead."<sup>17</sup> Arizona legislation preventing any picketing within 300 feet of a funeral was passed quickly after the WBC announced they would picket the funerals associated with this tragedy.

WBC makes it clear that God hates America. This is clear from signs such as, "Thank God for 9-11," "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," displaying the American flag upside down and trampling it on the ground.

WBC also targets the Jews. On their website, jewskilledjesus.com, they state, "The Jews killed Jesus. That fact will never change. They have never repented, and they try to bully into silence anyone who states that fact." WBC questions the number of Jews that died in the holocaust.<sup>18</sup> Concerning the future of the Jews, the same website states:

Your history is nearly complete Israel. Your doom is coming, and is bound up in the final destruction of all things (see 2 Peter 3). If you have a hear (sic) to know God, come out from among doomed Israel and OBEY. Forget about the land and your perceived persecution; FEAR AND OBEY GOD. That is your only hope.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that WBC is not evangelistic in any traditional sense of the word. They are primarily not out to convert or make new disciples. Their ministry is one of picketing and proclaiming damnation to the world. When asked, "Do you ever pray for the salvation of those who you feel are condemned?" they respond, "Of course not! For, if we follow (as we ought) the example of our Saviour and the clear commandment of God, we would not dare to do so."<sup>20</sup>

WBC sees themselves as the only ones doing God's work. In the *Hannity & Colmes* interview, Alan Colmes asked, "Who serves God besides people in your church?" to which Phelps-Roper replied, "Well, you tell me. I don't see anyone on the landscape in America."<sup>21</sup> Also, under "How may we know that we are God's elect?," they respond that only the elect are "Understanding and joyfully embracing Calvinism" and "The elect are hated of all men and mercilessly persecuted."<sup>22</sup> Apparently, as evidence of their election, the saved must also be mercilessly persecuting the non-elect as demonstrate by WBC.

## **CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

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While the Bible does teach that homosexuality is a sin (Rom. 1:26-27<sup>23</sup>), the Bible also teaches that it is not the only sin. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, one of several "vice lists" in the Bible, homosexuality is listed along side of sexual immorality, idolatry, greed, drunkenness and other sins. The faithful proclaimer of God's Word must "not shrink from declaring...the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). This would include preaching against *all* sins, not just homosexuality.<sup>24</sup> It would also include offering the Good News gift of forgiveness of sin and eternal life through the atonement of Christ to *all* sinners (Luke 24:46) – including homosexual sinners.

WBC is guilty of committing the fallacy of false cause. That is, Phelps argues that American soldiers are dying because of America's increasing acceptance of homosexuality. Yet, how does he explain the death of soldiers from Muslim countries? Islamic nations are far less tolerant of homosexuality than America and yet their soldiers are dying too. It is ironic that the very nation Phelps denounces (America) is the very nation that gives him the very freedom to carry on his activities.

It is wrong to ascribe any and every disaster to God's judgment and anger because of a nation's sin. Not every good circumstance is proof of God's approval nor is every bad event proof of God's divine judgment. Blessings (common grace) and tragedies fall on both "the evil and the good" on "the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). It is true in some cases such as Sodom, Gomorrah, and the Canaanite cities (see Gen. 19:1-29; Lev. 18:21-30; Deut. 20:16) that God destroyed whole cities and ordered their obliteration as a result of their wickedness. Because of special revelation provided in God's word, we know these to be examples of divine judgment. These biblical examples are not, however, proof that all destruction comes as a result of God's anger with sin nor does this give God's people a license to destroy sinning cities today or an excuse to hate those who have sinned.<sup>25</sup>

Concerning the charge that it was the Jews who killed Jesus, the Bible teaches that it was not just the Jews but the Romans also. Acts 4:27 places the blame on *both* Jews and Gentiles. In fact, verse 28 teaches that ultimately it was God who is responsible! Furthermore, Paul had a special love for his Jewish brethren and even wished to be accursed if that meant salvation for them! (Rom. 9:3).

Fred Phelps and the WBC do the exact opposite of the apostle Paul's instructions in Ephesians 4:15. There, we are told to be "speaking the truth in love." While some of what WBC says is true (i.e. that homosexuality is a sin), WBC fails to love the sinner while hating the sin. Christians are exhorted to maintain the balance between truth and love. 1 Peter 3:15 exhorts us to "always being prepared to make a defense...yet do it with gentleness and respect." WBC rejoices when tragedy strikes and others die but Scripture says to "not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles" (Prov. 24:17).

Concerning the love of God, while it is true that God has a special love for His own, this does not mean that God has no love towards those who are not Christians. After Jesus confronted the man who claimed to have followed all the commandments, the Bible says that Jesus "loved" him (Mark 10:21). There is no biblical evidence that this man turned to Christ and yet Christ still loved him. While WBC seems to glory when some tragedy occurs, even thanking God for the killer, God tells us that He gets "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11).

Christians should always have a reasoned and Christ-like response to issues like homosexuality.<sup>26</sup> While Christians have utilized picketing as a way to express their concerns (i.e. at abortion clinics) and this certainly may be appropriate in some situations, the *primary* duty of the Church is evangelism and discipleship (Matt. 28:19-20). When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, He knew that she was a sinner oppressed by sexual immorality. Rather than picketing her or hating her, Jesus offered her the "living water" of eternal life (John 4:1-26).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some family members have left the fold, having nothing to do with the father or the WBC, including four of his thirteen children. One example is Fred's son, Nathan, a professed atheist. On the documentary *The Most Hated Family in America*, reporter Louis Theroux asked Phelps how many children he has to which Phelps refuses to answer.
- <sup>2</sup> The phrase, "the most hated family in America," comes from a BBC documentary of the same name done in 2007 that highlighted the Phelps family.
- <sup>3</sup> This *Profile* is not a criticism of all Baptist churches. Instead, its focus is on the history and theology of one particular group/individual that uses the name "Baptist."
- <sup>4</sup> "Brief Bio of Pastor Fred Phelps," WBC, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/wbcinfo/phelpsbio.html> (accessed Feb. 22, 2011).
- <sup>5</sup> Many of Phelps' children hold law degrees.
- <sup>6</sup> Phelps-Chartered, <http://www.phelpschartered.com/FirmHistory.htm> (accessed Feb. 7, 2011).
- <sup>7</sup> Gay activists and critics of Phelps have staged counter-demonstrations with a "Million Fag March" held annually at Gage Park since 2008 as a "peaceful protest against the Westboro Baptist Church." See <http://millionfagmarch.com> (accessed March 1, 2011).
- <sup>8</sup> Archived Broadcasts, Scriptures for America, June 7, 2006, <http://archives.slaw.org/06-2006.asp> (accessed March 2011).
- <sup>9</sup> "Addicted to Hate," Chapter 6. This text file is purported to be part of a sealed court document dated June 2, 1994. The document also attempts to link Phelps to leaders in the Posse Comitatus and the Ku Klux Klan. The file names a reporter, Jon Michael Bell, as one of the authors. A copy of this document is archived on the website of Carnegie Mellon School of Computer Science: <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs.cmu.edu/user/scotts/bulgarians/phelps-article.txt>. A separate 4-page Profile has been published on Christian Identity: Phillip Arnn and Rob Bowman, "Christian Identity," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2011). A complete *Profile Notebook* (400-pages) is available at [www.watchman.org/notebook.htm](http://www.watchman.org/notebook.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> Independent churches are called as such because they are *independent* of any denominational accountability. That is, they are not "under" any overseer like bishop, convention, etc.
- <sup>11</sup> There is a disclaimer on the website "Primitive Baptist Online," written by David Montgomery, Sept. 9, 2008 that says Fred Phelps nor the WBC is recognized by the Primitive Baptist Church. Montgomery states, "We find the actions of these people to be deplorable and against the very Scriptures they claim to believe." [http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=1434](http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1434) (accessed March 1, 2011). Primitive Baptists arose as a reaction against the Southern Baptist Convention's "denominational structure." Noll writes,
- For their resistance to the idea of outside, denominational control, these Baptists became known as 'Primitive,' 'Old School,' 'Regular,' 'Hard Shell,' or 'Anti-Mission.' These groups tended to be determinedly Calvinistic, and they frowned on coordinated missionary or educational activity that took funds or personnel out of the control of individual churches.
- Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 180.
- <sup>12</sup> Calvinism is based on the theology of the sixteenth-century Swiss Reformer John Calvin and is most often associated with "Reformed" and Presbyterian churches. Calvinism emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the condemned and helpless state of mankind because of sin, God's efficacious work in drawing sinners to Himself, the power of Christ's atonement to guarantee salvation for eternity, and the scope of Christ's atonement as applicable only to God's people (the elect), whom He has chosen before the foundation of the world. Philip Johnson defines Hyper-Calvinism as a theological system that:
1. Denies that the gospel call applies to all who hear, OR
  2. Denies that faith is the duty of every sinner, OR
  3. Denies that the gospel makes any "offer" of Christ, salvation, or mercy to the non-elect (or denies that the offer of divine mercy is free and universal), OR
  4. Denies that there is such a thing as "common grace," OR
  5. Denies that God has any sort of love for the non-elect.
- Philip Johnson, "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism," 1998; <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm>, (accessed March 1, 2011).
- <sup>13</sup> Westboro Baptist Church, December 3, 2002, [http://www.godhatesfags.com/fliers/archive/20021203\\_outlaw-sodomy.pdf](http://www.godhatesfags.com/fliers/archive/20021203_outlaw-sodomy.pdf).
- <sup>14</sup> Shirley Phelps-Roper's position as spokesperson for the WBC seems out of place. While there is a running debate within the Church on the place of women in ministry, independent primitive Baptist churches generally would not place women in a place of church leadership over men.
- <sup>15</sup> The program aired October 3, 2006. A partial transcript titled "Radical Westboro Baptist Church Claims Amish Community Was Punished by and Angry God," Fox News, October 5, 2006 can be found at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,217975,00.html> (accessed March 1 2011).
- <sup>16</sup> Again, similar to the logic concerning a supposed connection between Ed Rendell and the Pennsylvania Amish shooting, one has to wonder in the 2011 Tucson shooting tragedy, if God is mad at U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, why has she survived the shooting but others did not?
- <sup>17</sup> Video link found at: <http://www.godhatesfags.com/#> entitled "Video News: God Sent The Shooter to Arizona!" In exchange for air time on The Steve Sanchez Show out of Phoenix, the WBC called off the protest.
- <sup>18</sup> They write, "You Jews wouldn't heed any of these warnings – including those of the Lord Jesus Christ – and you ended up being slaughtered by the (however many there really were) millions by the Nazis from 1939-1945. God did that to you!" <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/antisemitismfraud/index.htm>.
- <sup>19</sup> "The Last 100 Years," WBC, <http://www.jewskill edjesus.com/antisemitismfraud/last100years.html> (accessed Feb. 16, 2011).
- <sup>20</sup> "FAQ," WBC, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Condemned> (accessed Feb. 22, 2011).
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> WBC, August 27, 2006, [http://www.godhatesfags.com/sermons/outlines/Sermon\\_20060827.pdf](http://www.godhatesfags.com/sermons/outlines/Sermon_20060827.pdf).
- <sup>23</sup> For a response against the pro-homosexual interpretation of this and other passages relating to homosexuality, see White, James R. and Jeffrey D. Niell. *The Same-Sex Controversy*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002.
- <sup>24</sup> To be fare, WBC does speak out against other sins. Homosexuality just happens to be their greatest focus.
- <sup>25</sup> Recognizing that "natural disasters are judgments" from God, Erwin Lutzer cautions us from connecting a "natural disaster" to certain sins. He writes,
- So we are correct in saying natural disasters are judgments, but mistaken when we go beyond this and say that they target only one religion, one race, or even one particular kind of sinner. Yes, it may be true that the countries hit by the [2004] tsunami, such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, were judged because of their exploitation of children. But we must also ask, why was Bangkok spared, when it is the hub of the sex trade industry? Was New Orleans a more sinful city than Las Vegas? Only God knows for sure if the tsunami and Katrina were targeted judgments for specific sins.
- Erwin W. Lutzer, *Where Was God? Answers to Tough Questions about God and Natural Disasters*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006, 64-65. Elsewhere the same author writes, "Let's agree to never make such predictions [of when America will fall] because we cannot presume to know God's mind." Erwin W. Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?* Chicago: Moody, 2008, 67.
- <sup>26</sup> See the works of Joe Dallas including *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality: A Biblical and Compassionate Response to Same-Sex Attraction*. (with Nancy Heche) Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2010; *The Gay Gospel?: How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2007; and *A Strong Delusion: Confronting the "Gay Christian" Movement*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996.



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