

“Pray not for this People for their Good”: Westboro Baptist Church, the Religious Right, and
American Nationalism

By
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Abstract

Westboro Baptist Church, a small Topeka, Kansas-based church pastored by Fred Phelps, came to national attention for members' pickets of the funerals of gay people but has prompted continued public outrage because of pickets at the funerals of deceased military servicemen and women and at scenes of national tragedy, where they preach a message that God is destroying America because of the nation's sexual sins. Drawing from extensive field research at Westboro Baptist Church services and pickets, this dissertation provides an ethnography and history of the church. Rhetorical and visual analyses of church-produced artifacts, including sermons, signs, websites, and reports, provide data for an explanation of church theology and a timeline of anti-gay activism. The dissertation places the theology and activism of Westboro Baptist Church in the context of American religious history and suggests that Westboro Baptist Church's message of national doom that reflects a strand of thought that has always been present in American religion. Using radical flank theory, the dissertation examines Westboro Baptist Church in the context of the contemporary Religious Right, noting how the offensive message and in-your-face tactics of Westboro Baptist Church serve as a foil to the "compassion" of the Religious Right, centering and softening the Religious Right's anti-gay theology, which similarly argues that sexual sins damn a nation, and its anti-gay political activism. The dissertation concludes by examining legal aspects of Westboro Baptist Church funeral pickets and argues that public outrage in response to pickets at the funerals of fallen servicemen and women reveals a willingness to trade civil liberties for civility, an impulse to celebrate all fallen servicemen and women as straight and Christian, and a valuing of the lives of presumably straight servicemen and women as more deserving of dignity than the lives of gay men and women, trends that are more threatening to democracy, the dissertation, argues, than are the uncivil pickets of Westboro Baptists.

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Finally, I dedicate this document to my family and many friends at Peace Mennonite Church, for the many Sundays I missed communing with you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A lot of people did not like Jerry Falwell, including the feminists, lesbians, and abortionists he blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on America,¹ but few of them used his sudden death in April 2007 as an opportunity to berate him. Such respect for the dead is unknown, though, to members of Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, which is pastored by Fred Phelps. Upon learning of Falwell's death, church members traveled to Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, to picket the funeral of a man they declared had "split Hell wide open the instant he died."² The position that the small Primitive Baptist church took in response to Falwell's death surprised many who mistakenly thought that Phelps and Falwell, both white Southerners who came from the Baptist tradition and who preached against homosexuality and linked national sin to national tragedy, had enough in common to protect Falwell's followers from a funeral picket. Not so. Falwell, according to Phelps, had traded his Calvinist beliefs for Arminianism in order to create a larger following and, in the process, had taken the money of hell-bound people such as Catholics, Jews, and "backsliders."³

Phelps' church makes frequent headlines for its virulent anti-gay message. It first came to broad national attention when, in 1998, members picketed the funeral of gay University of

¹ Jerry Falwell, fundamentalist preacher and organizer of the Moral Majority, blamed Americans for forfeiting God's protection when he said, shortly after the September 11th, 2001 attacks, in an episode of Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club*:

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen." (Jerry Falwell, interview by Pat Robertson, *The 700 Club*, Christian Broadcasting Network, September 13, 2001.)

Quickly, Falwell issued an apology—sort of. While noting that only the hijackers are responsible for the destruction of September 11th, he quoted Proverbs 14:23, which, he says, declares that "living by God's principles promotes a nation to greatness, violating those principles brings a nation to shame." ("Falwell Apologizes to Gays, Feminists, Lesbians," *CNN.com/US*, September 14, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/>.)

² Westboro Baptist Church, "Jerry Falwell Split Hell Wide Open," *The Signs of the Time*, May 18, 2007 http://www.thesignsofthetimes.net/videos/news/2007/20070518_falwell-in-hell.html.

³ *Ibid.* Significant to Phelps was Falwell's continued relationship with ghostwriter Mel White, who came out as gay in 1994, but whose relationship with Falwell continued even after White left his ministry team.

Wyoming student Matthew Shepard and created a “perpetual memorial” to Shepard online that included an image of the young man in hell, screaming that people should heed Phelps’ warning.⁴ When Westboro Baptist church members visited the New York City site of the fallen twin towers a few days after the attacks of September 11, 2001, they gained national attention again, only this time their message was even bigger: God did not just hate gay people—He was punishing America for its tolerance of homosexuality.⁵ While Falwell and Pat Robertson had suggested that God lifted his protective veil from America on September 11, Westboro Baptist declared that, in fact, God was “America’s terrorist,” actively destroying the nation.⁶ Protests emphasizing this theme were repeated in the months that followed at funerals for the first fallen United States servicemen and –women killed in the War on Terror.⁷

Suddenly, Westboro Baptist Church had found a message that brought them constant attention: God is killing U.S. soldiers. Individual states responded by passing laws banning funeral pickets,⁸ and in 2006 President George W. Bush signed into law the Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act, which outlawed such pickets in national cemeteries.⁹ The Patriot Guard Riders, a motorcycle brigade, formed to contest Westboro Baptist Church’s pickets.¹⁰ Shirley Phelps-Roper, spokeswoman for the church, started appearing on national television

⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “Perpetual Memorial to Matthew Shepard,” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/library/memorials/matthewshepardmemorial.html>. The play *The Laramie Project*, now commonly performed by high schools and picketed by members of Westboro Baptist Church, includes Phelps as a character.

⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “God’s Wrath Against America Revealed,” *God Hates America*, <http://www.godhatesamerica.com/godswrath.html>.

⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “Fag Nation,” *America is Doomed*, <http://www.americaisdoomed.com/>.

⁷ The first picket at the funeral of a soldier was held on June 15, 2005, at the funeral of Army Spc. Carrie L. French. Remembers church spokesperson Shirley Phelps-Roper, “I recall perfectly the first soldier funeral, because it was one of the few things that we have done that I actually thought through and realized was going to leave a mark. I knew we were stepping off into the middle of HUGE Doomed [A]merican idols” (email to the author, May 1, 2009).

⁸ As of March 3, 2009, forty-one states had passed legislation limiting funeral pickets, according to Alan Potash, Plains region director of the Anti-Defamation League, which monitors Westboro Baptist Church activity (email to the author, dated March 3, 2009).

⁹ The bill became U.S. law 109-228 on January 3, 2006.

¹⁰ “Our History,” *Patriot Guard Riders*, <http://www.patriotguard.org/Home/OurHistory/tabid/145/Default.aspx>.

news shows and talk shows. In political speeches, news reports, and online discussion boards, disgust for the church was expressed vehemently and, sometimes, with threats of violence. Then, in 2008, the church lost a multimillion-dollar lawsuit brought by the father of a fallen soldier who claimed the intentional infliction of harm by funeral picketers, a decision that was reversed upon appeal and was heard by the Supreme Court on October 6, 2010; a decision is expected in the spring of 2011.¹¹ Nonetheless, the church continues to picket funerals of members of the U.S. military.

Though media attention to Westboro Baptist Church has increased dramatically since the start of its pickets at the funerals of soldiers in 2006, the church has been running an anti-gay campaign since 1991 and picketing at funerals since 1992 or 1993.¹² The church's website reports that, to date, it has held more than 40,000 pickets, including ones in Iraq during the Saddam Hussein reign and in Canada.¹³ The pickets began in 1991, when Fred Phelps complained to Topeka's City Council about the use of Gage Park, a public city park, by gay men for sexual encounters. When the city failed to Phelps' satisfaction, church members developed pickets to protest what they perceived as a cultural tolerance of homosexuality.¹⁴ In their production of picket signs, they found that the words "God Hates Fags" fit perfectly on a poster-board. Not coincidentally, the signs are highly visible, easy-to-read from the road or on a television screen. It was these words, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, that really fired the church's campaign. "Fag," she says, is not the controversial word on their placards; many

¹¹ The original order of judgment was filed November 5, 2007 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland. The full-text of the decision, in favor of Albert Snyder, is available online at <http://www.citmedialaw.org/sites/citmedialaw.org/files/2007-11-05-Order%20of%20Judgment.pdf>. The September 24, 2009 reversal of that decision by the appellate court is available at <http://www.pace.ca4.uscourts.gov/opinion.pdf/081026.P.pdf>.

¹² Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, October 19, 2008.

¹³ Westboro Baptist Church, "Past Picket Locations," *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/picketlocations.html>.

¹⁴ Steve Drain, director, *Hatemongers*. Originally titled *Fred: The Movie*, it was created in 2000. The film can be downloaded at <http://www.hatemongers.com/clips.html>.

people participating in the events being picketed themselves use the world they refer to homosexuals, she claims. In other words, it is not Westboro Baptist Church's homophobia that alienates those toward whom the pickets are directed. Instead, the controversy is in the words "God hates," she says. The people of Topeka, Kansas—and Laramie, Wyoming, and even New York City—do not like homosexuality, says Phelps-Roper, and she contends that they probably agree with Westboro Baptist Church that unrepentant gay people go to hell.¹⁵ In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Judy Miller of Topeka's Gay and Lesbian Task Force agreed, admitting, "I'm afraid there are a lot of people who secretly in their heart of hearts agree with the Phelpses, and don't really want them to be stopped."¹⁶ Instead, the public is most upset that its image of God as loving and merciful is challenged by the idea that God can "hate."¹⁷ According to *God Hates Fags*, one of the church's websites, the claim that "God loves everyone" is "the greatest lie ever told," and the website lists 701 Bible passages to refute this contention, which is central to the theology popularized by most evangelical Christians today.¹⁸

Even the words "God hates," though, were not enough to generate a consistent public outcry against Westboro Baptist Church on the national level, though local organizations found creative ways to protest the church's activities.¹⁹ When the church began to picket at the funerals of fallen soldiers, however, public outcry against Westboro Baptist Church intensified.

¹⁵ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2009.

¹⁶ Annie Gowan, "Holy Hell," *The Washington Post*, 12 November 1995, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=NewsBank&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=0EB28567A53ABC9A&d_place=WPIW&f_subsection=sSTYLE&f_issue=1995-11-12&f_publisher.

¹⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

¹⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, "'God Loves Everyone'—The Greatest Lie Ever Told!" *God Hates Fags* http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/reports/20060331_god-loves-everyone-lie.pdf.

¹⁹ Examples include Angel Action, a counter-protest first used at Matthew Shepard's funeral, in which activists shielded grieving family members from the sight of Westboro Baptists by wearing large angel wings, and the Million "Fag" March, an annual picket at or near Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka that draws several hundred activists holding signs that parody the signs of Westboro Baptist Church members. For a more thorough discussion of counter protests, see Rebecca Barrett-Fox, "'Thank God for Dead Soldiers': Heteronationalism and Religious Protest at the Funerals of U.S. Soldiers" (presentation at the Hall Center for the Humanities, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, March 9, 2009).

Prior to this, some liberal churches—such as those where Westboro Baptist Church had picketed the funerals of people who had died from AIDS-related illnesses—did decry Westboro Baptist Church’s activism, but the funeral pickets of soldiers prompted a wide range of Religious Right churches to publicly disavow Westboro Baptist Church. For other conservative, anti-gay churches, especially Baptist churches that share the same denominational label, this distinction was important, especially because at the same time that the Afghanistan and Iraq wars escalated, the debate over same-sex marriage was becoming a major domestic issue, and Religious Right leaders were speaking out clearly against same-sex marriage and homosexuality more broadly while also supporting U.S.-led invasions abroad. Religious Right groups, as well as conservative politicians advocating anti-gay rights laws, spoke forcefully against Westboro Baptist Church in order to avoid confusion between their own anti-gay rhetoric and the anti-gay *and* anti-patriotic rhetoric of Westboro Baptist Church.²⁰ The result could only please Westboro Baptist Church, for the more isolated the church remains in its position, the more assured it is of its correctness, for it sees itself as a lone remnant, a prophetic voice crying in the wilderness, and its isolation reinforces its special role.²¹ As the Religious Right has maintained and even reinforced its own

²⁰ Richard Land, president of The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, called pickets at the funerals of soldiers “grotesque assault[s] on . . . bereft family members [that are] nothing less than verbal pornography and obscenity [that are] not, and should not, be protected under the First Amendment,” declaring that “[f]or this group of misguided zealots to do their despicable deeds in the name of God is blasphemous.” He also reassured his audience: “Let there be no doubt. This man is not a Southern Baptist, and his ‘church’ is not a Southern Baptist church.” Such a statement serves more as an effort to distance Land’s Southern Baptist Convention from Westboro Baptist Church than to inform, for Westboro Baptist Church does not claim to be a Southern Baptist Church. Instead, it identifies as a primitive or “old school” Baptist church, and any well-informed reader of *The Christian Post*, in which Land’s article, appeared, would recognize the difference (Richard Land, “Verbal Terrorism,” *The Christian Post*, 7 November 2007, <http://www.christianpost.com/Opinion/Columns/2007/11/verbal-terrorism-07/index.html>).

²¹ For example, Westboro Baptist Church published a press release declaring “Thank God for the \$10.9 Million Verdict!” According to the press release, the verdict in *Snyder v. Phelps*, which was later reduced to five million dollars by a federal court that found the original amount to be excessive, guarantees God’s future wrath on America, which may or may not be recalled if the appellate court’s decision is upheld by the Supreme Court. The writer of the press release quotes from 2nd Thessalonians 1, which says, “Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you”—in other words, that God will repay America with “tribulation” for its “persecution” of Westboro Baptist Church (Westboro Baptist Church, “Thank God for the \$10.9 Million Verdict!”

anti-gay stance, it has rhetorically distanced itself from Westboro Baptist Church, and Westboro Baptist Church has responded in turn, claiming that the Religious Right has sacrificed its religious integrity in order to consolidate its power.²² This alleged hypocrisy is at the center of all Westboro Baptist Church's criticisms of the Religious Right, as seen in the church's words regarding Falwell's death.²³ (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1. Steve Drain, picketing the funeral of Jerry Falwell in 2007. Image taken from Google images and available at http://www.google.com/images?q=westboro+baptist+church+AND+jerry+falwell&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=pTg&rls=org.mozilla:en-S:official&channel=s&prmd=ivo&source=Inms&tbs=isch:1&ei=a2kTILDAo2MnQek6v2QAQ&sa=X&oi=mode_link&ct=mode&ved=0CAcQ_AU&biw=1366&bih=552.

God Hates Fags, October 31, 2007, http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/fliers/archive/20071031_thank-god-for-verdict.pdf).

²² Westboro Baptist Church, "America's Gone A Whoring from God," *God Hates Fags*, May 6, 2007, http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/sermons/outlines/Sermon_20070506.pdf.

²³ In an interview with Dan Kapelovitz that originally appeared in *Hustler* magazine, Phelps tells Kapelovitz that the attacks on September 11, 2001, were in part due to George W. Bush's appointment of Mike Guest, an openly-gay man, as ambassador to Romania. The attacks were, he says, "a direct act of the wrath and vengeance of God Almighty upon this evil nation. Everybody who knows any Bible knows it. Falwell let it slip, and then he got so scared for his hide and for his revenues that he semibacked down." Clearly, Fred Phelps has no respect for Falwell because he sees Falwell as compromising his anti-gay theology to please his audience (Dan Kapelovitz, "Fred Phelps Hates Fags: Straight Talk with God's Favorite Homophobe," <http://www.kapelovitz.com/phelps.htm>; originally published in the September 2003 issue of *Hustler*).

Central Questions of the Dissertation

With the passage of House Substitute for Senate Bill 226, also in 2006, Kansas became the twenty-second state to limit funeral pickets.²⁴ During the fifteen-year gap between Westboro Baptist Church's first funeral pickets—aimed, in the early 1990s, at gay people and gay rights supporters—and the passage of the state law, Westboro Baptist Church picketed the funerals of gay Kansans and their straight allies with relatively little outrage from state politicians. The law was finally passed in response to pickets at the funerals of soldiers, who, under the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, are presumed to be heterosexual. Similarly, when, in 2006, President Bush signed into law a statute banning funeral pickets in federal cemeteries such as Arlington National Cemetery, the legislation was titled Respect for America's Fallen Heroes Act, the title of which makes clear the law's priority: members of the military. The passage of state and federal laws aimed at limiting pickets at military funerals, on one hand, while simultaneously failing to enact such laws for gay people simply reaffirms the entrenched devaluing of the lives of gay men and women.²⁵ A central contention of this dissertation is that the difference in the

²⁴ Kansas had attempted to pass such a law in the early to mid-1990s but had failed, and a 1995 effort in the Kansas legislature was deemed unconstitutional by the state's Supreme Court after Westboro Baptist Church challenged the law. In 2006, Kansas finally passed a constitutional law; it requires picketers to be at least 150 feet from the entrance to "a cemetery, church, mortuary or other location where a funeral is held or conducted;" prevents picketing one hour before, during, or two hours after the start of a funeral service; and makes illegal the knowing obstruction of funeral services or processions on public streets or sidewalks. Punishment consists of fines and up to six months in jail ("Kansas Military Bill of Rights and Other Services Provided by the State," *Kansas Commission on Veterans' Affairs*, <http://www.kcva.org/rights.shtml>).

²⁵ Similarly, the city of Topeka saw the anti-Westboro group Concerned Citizens for Topeka grow from sixty to five hundred members when the church discouraged the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway from situating six hundred clerical jobs in Topeka. Judy Miller, leader of a gay rights group in Topeka, charged that "as long as it's a gay issue, it doesn't matter." When Phelps threatened the financial growth of the city, though, "he crossed the line" (Gowan, "Holy Hell"). Gay activists hesitate to point out the failure of the community to respond to their concerns, perhaps out of concern that it will isolate straight people allied with them in efforts to enact anti-picketing bills. See, for example, an interview with Romaine Patterson, who created the counter-protest Angel Action, in which Patterson refuses to express "resentment" for the failure of straight America to respond to the presence of Westboro Baptist Church picketers at funerals (Yusef Najafi, "Avenging Angel," *Metro Weekly* (Washington, D.C.), November 8, 2007 <http://www.metroweekly.com/feature/?ak=3069>).

responses of religious, civic, and political leaders to Westboro Baptist Church's pickets of gay people's funerals and to pickets of presumably straight *soldiers'* funerals reveals that the American religious sector, public, and politicians value the lives of soldiers more than those of gay men and women—or, at least, that politicians find the cause of banning pickets at soldiers' funerals to be more politically acceptable than banning pickets at the funerals of gay men and women.

More specifically, the dissertation will address the following questions:

1. What has been the relationship of Westboro Baptist Church to Religious Radical, Religious Right, religious mainstream, and Religious Left groups? Is Westboro Baptist Church part of the Religious Right or in a separate category? Which groups have ignored Westboro Baptist Church? Which have challenged Westboro Baptist Church or criticized it and in what contexts? How have they used Westboro Baptist Church as a foil against which to articulate their own ideas about human sexuality, national sin, and national tragedy?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the anti-gay rhetoric of the Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church? Is the rhetoric that the Religious Right uses with believers different from the rhetoric it uses when engaging the broader secular culture—and is the internal rhetoric closer to Westboro Baptist Church's' rhetoric than its public rhetoric? If so, how? Is the theology that Westboro Baptist Church members use to justify their anti-gay position similar to or different from the theology that Religious Right churches use to justify their anti-gay activism?
3. How do conservative groups respond to Westboro Baptist Church members' anti-American rhetoric (including videos, songs, and flag stomping)? How does the Patriot

Guard Rider and media coverage contribute to popular understandings of Westboro Baptist Church's anti-Americanism?

4. How does the battle over funeral pickets exemplify the tension between civility and civil liberties? How has Westboro Baptist Church forced contemporary America to consider its commitments to both civility and civil liberties?
5. What does civic response to military funeral protests reveal about Americans' valuation of the citizen-soldier, who are always presumed to be straight? Their valuation of gay citizens?

Methods

Westboro Baptists as human subjects are easy to demonize—for a reason. Yet scholarship must avoid simplistic moralizing that frequently allows larger, more complex and controversial questions to go unasked and, rather, should focus on what—and whose—function Westboro Baptist Church pickets serve. While public opinion unanimously deplores funeral pickets, failing to engage Westboro Baptist Church beyond excoriating church members for rudeness ignores how the church does more than simply act uncivilly in these contexts. Warns Kathleen Blee about researchers' temptation to use studies of racists to affirm the dominant culture:

Superficial studies simply caricature racist activists and make organized racism a foil against which we see ourselves as righteous and tolerant.... We gain much more by taking a direct, hard look at the members of modern racist groups,

acknowledging the commonalities between them and mainstream groups as well as the differences.²⁶

Similarly, in this research, I have avoided positioning Westboro Baptist Church members as straw men in an argument against hate groups.

In “Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States,” Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson challenge scholars to recognize how their explanations of Religious Right behavior serve “reflect the values and assumptions that scholars bring to their data,”²⁷ an awareness especially needed when the research subjects are mistrustful of academic researchers and the kinds of intellectual knowledge they produce, as Westboro Baptists generally are.²⁸ Moreover, the kind of explanations that scholars use to understand current church belief and behavior determines what they say about the future of religious believers. For example,

If it could be shown that, in the past, fundamentalism was a function of an authoritarian personality style [as psychological explanations often do], for example, then it becomes possible not only to dismiss its theological claims but to associate it with fascism, bigotry, and racism. Or...if it could be said that fundamentalism grows because it wheedled its way into power, cleverly disguising its militant, hegemonic intentions [as arguments saying that the rise of the Religious Right is a result of corporate populism do], then it could be likened

²⁶ Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 21.

²⁷ Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson, “Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19.

²⁸ Westboro Baptists are very aware that the church is the subject of widespread public discussion. Each sermon, for example, begins with a review of recent media coverage of the church. The goal of this review seems to be to divide the world into the believing church and the evil outside world. Reporters are routinely ridiculed in the church, though, to be fair, scorn is reserved for those journalists and commentators who, in their reports, clearly aim to humiliate church members. (See, for example, see Sean Hannity’s interview on *Fox News* with Shirley Phelps-Roper on April 24, 2006. The interview is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-STpW7jarrs>.) Other reports, such as the 2007 BBC documentary *The Most Hated Family in America*, directed by Louis Theroux, were appreciated by the church for what it views as an honest depiction of it.

to the dangerous, potentially violent political movements occurring in other parts of the world.²⁹

As Wuthnow and Lawson illustrate, scholars must avoid *argumentum ad consequentiam*, the acceptance of explanations of particular behavior because they find those explanations support their own desires for how the believers and their movements should be studied, celebrated, or regulated.

Any research method must be sensitive to the danger of producing results that reflect the researcher's own perspectives and desires, especially when the living research subjects and the researcher have different orientations toward the world and different goals. "Religion," says Roger Friedland, "used to bolster the rule of the state, to set states into conquest and war, to spark civil wars, and to establish the ethical habits conditioning the accumulation of productive wealth," but was, via the Enlightenment and modernity, "sequestered, made safe and platitudinous."³⁰ By articulating a public, far-reaching, and radical religion, Westboro Baptist Church sees itself as diametrically opposed to these trends. Research methods that dismiss or trivialize this self-assessment are disrespectful of the subject and, moreover, result in naïve understandings of the group, ones that may ignore or underestimate their potential power.³¹

At the same time, scholars of unsympathetic groups and people must be aware that such research has "the power to publicize even as they scrutinize"³² and "may subtly lend an academic gloss" to dangerous or hurtful behavior. In *When Religion is an Addiction*, Robert N. Minor complains that right wing religionists in the U.S. today "are setting the agenda to which

²⁹ Wuthnow and Lawson, "Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States," 18.

³⁰ Roger Friedland, "Money, Sex, and God: The Erotic Logic of Religious Nationalism," *Sociological Theory* 20, no. 3 (November 2002): 388.

³¹ Estranged son Nate Phelps has suggested that, if his father found a Bible verse that he thought justified it, Westboro Baptist Church could become violent, either toward outsiders or toward members. (*The Standard*, Television Series, Hosted by Peter Klein (2010; Vancouver: VisionTV) <http://vimeo.com/10584739>.)

³² Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*, 11.

other political, religious, and activist groups are having to respond. And the responses have often been like those of an addict's enablers."³³ In presenting preliminary findings for this dissertation in some popular outlets, I have been confronted with comments from people who argue that "the media" is complicit in promoting Westboro Baptist Church's message and that ignoring the church is the best way to address it. In one regard, this is true. Passersby who are confronted with offensive images at picket signs should probably ignore the church, for church members are unlikely to be persuaded by displays of anger or even respectful engagement, so unless addressing picketers contributes to the well-being of the passerby, he or she should just ignore the church. However, ignoring the church will not silence its members, for reasons that will be discussed in chapter 4. Therefore, scholarly research about the group is required to understand it, situate it, and learn the lessons that it has to teach about the formation and motivation of social movements. Accidentally publicizing or encouraging such a group "are dangerous outcomes," notes Kathleen Blee, "but the consequences [of not doing the scholarship] are worse."³⁴

In order to respect my research subjects and gain a meaningful and accurate understanding of their position, this dissertation, following Roselie H. Wax's warning that "strict and rigid adherence to any method, technique, or doctrinaire position may, for the fieldworker, become like confinement in a cage,"³⁵ uses multiple methods to address its central questions—including ethnography, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, and critical legal analysis of texts. Texts reviewed include interview transcripts and notes, recordings of pickets, church-produced public announcements and websites, media coverage about Westboro Baptist Church, testimony of those who have witnessed funeral pickets, on-line discussions about the

³³ Robert N. Minor, *When Religion is an Addiction* (St. Louis: HumanityWorks!, 2007), 1.

³⁴ Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*, 21.

³⁵ Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 10.

church, court cases, legal briefs, legislation, and sermons. Westboro Baptist Church produces new writings and performs new pickets daily, distributing texts and video and audio recordings via numerous church-sponsored websites as well as via faxes. Daily monitoring of these sources over a period of years has informed this study. However, because “[t]exts are read in various ways by different readers—sometimes in ways contrary to the author’s intentions,” reminds Kathleen Blee, “it can be dangerously misleading to presume that we can understand the motives of [hate group members] by looking at the ideologies of their groups,”³⁶ so textual analysis here is complemented by participation, observation, and interviews.

Participation in church activity has been a crucial source of information and has been integral in establishing the relationships with individual church members necessary to understand—that is, to experience “a phenomenon of *shared meanings*”³⁷—church life. As Wax reflects, “[P]articipation is the most efficient way to gain as near total a grasp of it as is possible for the alien” for “as he observes, the fieldworker undergoes a secondary socialization (or resocialization) which allows him to perceive the major categories of objects of the culture.”³⁸ From 2004 to 2009, I was a sporadic visitor to church services and a witness to pickets, and, from January 2010 through August 2010, I was a regular Sunday service attendee, a participant in Bible readings, a close observer of pickets of other churches, and a close observer of funeral pickets. I continued research through October 2010, observing a Quran and U.S. flag burning on September 11, 2010. Though I did not participate in pickets by holding signs, signing, or speaking to passersby, I did observe picket sites in Topeka; Lawrence, Kansas; Omaha, Nebraska; and Liberty, Missouri, and I traveled to picket sites in Nebraska and Missouri with church members. Observation at pickets and participation in travel to pickets established my

³⁶ Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*, 5.

³⁷ Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

credibility with church members and permitted me insight into the larger structure of how pickets and theology engaged each other.

In addition, interviews with members of Westboro Baptist Church yielded insight into church beliefs and actions. Interviews, reflects Alesha Doan about her own research into the contact zone between abortion rights advocates and members of the pro-life movement, “bring depth, meaning, and understanding to aspects of the... conflict that cannot be captured through a quantitative analysis” because “interviewing those most intimately drawn into [the contact zone is] imperative for understanding the strategies (and their implications) used in [a] social-political conflict.”³⁹ Like Doan, I use qualitative information to investigate the contact zones between anti-gay activists and those they encounter (those being picketed, counter-protestors, and potential allies). Like many members of Bible-centered religious groups, Westboro Baptists are, overall, well-versed in their own theology and eager to talk about their beliefs. Further, like all researchers studying Primitive Baptist congregations, use of ethnographic data is essential because, since “the Primitive tradition is primarily oral...and also because in theological, liturgical, and church governance, there has been little change over time.”⁴⁰ Moreover, interviews allow individual voices—as well as potential dissent—to emerge and prevents researchers from “los[ing] sight of the more complex nature of the people in [a movement].”⁴¹ In interviews, participants share personal narratives, where believers constitute “cosmological selves. These are stories of the self as part of great cosmic narratives.”⁴² For religious believers

³⁹ Alesha E. Doan, *Opposition and Intimidation: The Abortion Wars and Strategies of Political Harassment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), x.

⁴⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 115.

⁴¹ Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*, 4.

⁴² James L. Peacock and Tim Pettyjohn, “Fundamentalisms Narrated: Muslim, Christian, and Mystical,” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 133.

concerned with a much larger story—one that goes from the beginning to the end of time—interviews provide one opportunity to identify their part in that bigger story.

Interviewees include pastor Fred Phelps; spokesperson Shirley Phelps-Roper; Sam Phelps-Roper, who grew to adulthood in the church during the start of the anti-gay campaign; church attorney Margie Phelps; Steve Drain, who joined the church after it had an established reputation as anti-gay; and forty-one other church members or regular participants. Rhetorically savvy and articulate, those I have spoken to are keenly aware that any news story about them will include the provocative words “God Hates Fags”—their main message. Thus, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, they are happy to talk, for their mission is to deliver this message to the world and talking with outsiders allows them to disperse this message.⁴³

Because “[a] rigid and uncompromising self-definition...limits the areas in which a student may do research”⁴⁴ and because I desire to be flexible in my research, I have employed a variety of methods. Such an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to assess the variety of materials—written, visual, oral—produced by Westboro Baptist Church, as is familiarity with genres unique to American religious discourse—for example, the jeremiad and what Westboro Baptist Church terms the “love picket,” their daily public pickets of perceived enemies of God, pickets that include singing religious hymns and original parodies of patriotic songs as well as hand-held picket signs and sandwich board signs as part of the spectacle. Having familiarity with the rhetorical strategies, public performances, and texts referenced by Westboro Baptist Church members is a prerequisite to comprehending their anti-gay and anti-patriotic activism. “Understanding in field research is very like the aural learning of a language,” notes Wax. “The fieldworker begins ‘outside’ the interaction, confronting behaviors he finds bewildering and

⁴³ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

⁴⁴ Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 6.

inexplicable: the actors are oriented to a world of meanings that the observer does not grasp.”⁴⁵

A lifetime interest in religion, long exposure to the rhetorical tradition of fundamentalist preaching, and an immersion in the primary texts of Primitive Baptist theology prepared me to “think in their symbols.”⁴⁶ The trick for ethnographers, notes James A. Aho in his research on Christian Patriotism in Idaho, is to “immerse themselves in that world without, so to speak, drowning in it.”⁴⁷

The greater risk of the “possible transformative effect of the anthropological encounter”⁴⁸ occurs when researcher and subject are culturally or historically distant but not in conflict.

“However, when the ‘other’ represents some very close opposition within one’s own society...taking on the ‘native’s point of view’ is problematic in different ways, especially when research is focused on a social and political conflict.”⁴⁹ In short, cultivating empathy for Westboro Baptists is challenging, not because we had so little in common but because we had so much in common—our love for our children, our appreciation of church—that the differences in theology, politics, and civic engagement were brought into even sharper focus. In writing about her research with racist groups, Kathleen Blee similarly recalls “an eerie sense of the familiar colliding with the bizarre” as she witnessed “disturbingly ordinary” aspects of her subjects’ lives, “especially their evocation of community, family, and social ties.”⁵⁰ At Westboro Baptist Church, though, family and community life is so intimately tied to the church’s anti-gay mission

⁴⁵ Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 3-4.

⁴⁶ Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 79.

⁴⁷ James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 11.

⁴⁸ Faye Ginsburg, “Preface” (1987) to *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xxxiv.

⁴⁹ Faye Ginsburg, “Preface,” xxxiv.

⁵⁰ Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*, 2.

that such “disturbingly ordinary” moments are frequently punctuated by reminders that, in the end, this was Westboro Baptist Church I was researching after all.

A bigger risk than inappropriate identification with Westboro Baptists was the risk of the normalization of hatred. As for the people of Topeka, who have lived with the sight of Westboro Baptists picketing on their streets for nearly twenty years, frequent exposure to the rhetoric of Westboro Baptists can result in desensitizing, even to people who would prefer you dead (or think you are going to hell). In the long-term, “my perceptions...became unconsciously attenuated,” reflects Kathleen Blee on her work with racists. “At the beginning, my insight was sharp and my emotions were constantly wrenched. Later, my vision and emotions were dulled, worn down by the emotional confinement of studying racism from within.” One potential consequence, for me, was insensitivity to those targeted by Westboro Baptists. As a result, I deliberately cultivated awareness of their pain through interviews with counter-protestors, including parents of soldiers currently serving in war, a family member of a woman killed by a shooter in a mall, and Muslims who protested the church’s destruction of the Quran.

Kathleen Blee identifies a benefit from desensitization, though: it can help researchers understand how those inside the organization experience the world, for the researcher’s experience “suggests something about what it must feel to be inside...: how the bizarre begins to feel normal, taken-for-granted, both unquestioned and unquestionable.... This state of mind results from a perceptual contraction that is all but imperceptible to the actor”—and even to the researcher striving to be self-aware.⁵¹ Frequent breaks from data collection, reviews of field notes, and continued engagement with those, including former church members, who had been hurt by the church, served as deterrents to that contraction.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

At all times, church members were generous with their time and provided me with ample information, though I frequently witnessed interactions between church members and others, including reporters, police officers, and ideological opponents, when church members lost patience with those who lacked fluency in the rhetoric of conservative Protestantism. For the church, though, such communication breakdowns were not interpreted as evidence of their own failure to represent themselves accurately but rather that their audience was willfully ignorant of God:

We are not really interested in a dialogue with you demon-possessed [sic] perverts. We are not out to change your minds, win your soul to Jesus, agree to disagree, find common ground upon which to build a meaningful long-term relationship, or any other of your euphemisms for compromising in our stance on the Word of God.⁵²

I was there, from the church's perspective, as a mouthpiece for their beliefs, but I was also provided with the opportunity to learn about Westboro Baptist Church theology for my own sake, for, as Shirley Phelps-Roper reassured me, "NO ONE thinks you are anything except a little person making your way through this life."⁵³ However, questions that suggested criticism of the church were unwelcome, as evidenced in the dismissive responses to challenging questions posed by journalists and others who wanted to refute the church's teachings. In moments of research when I could not build sincere rapport with my research subjects, I relied instead on "more indirect and fragile measures"⁵⁴ of maintaining a relationship with church members, including silence, deflection, and reflective listening.

⁵² Westboro Baptist Church, "Contact Us," *God Hates America* <http://www.godhatesamerica.com/contact.html>.

⁵³ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, July 21, 2010.

⁵⁴ Blee, *Inside Organized Racism*, 12.

Scholarly Context

Literature reviews have revealed a paucity of informed secondary information about Westboro Baptist Church, and that which has been written has often failed to understand the theology or structure of the church, relying heavily on information taken from people outside the church, including newspaper accounts from the *Topeka Capital-Journal* but ignoring the church's own publications,⁵⁵ a fact that the church has noticed.⁵⁶ The church is prolific in its production of written material, much of which is archived online, and other sources are held in the Wilcox Collection, a collection of primary documents relating to far right and far left politics archived at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, and the Kansas Historical Society.

Two types of scholarly projects have addressed Westboro Baptist Church: studies focusing on the rhetoric of the church's anti-gay campaigns⁵⁷ and larger works that use Westboro Baptist Church as an illustration of extremist religious behavior.⁵⁸ Only one legal analysis of the first amendment issues that funeral pickets raise has been published in scholarly venues at the

⁵⁵ Rick Musser's "Fred Phelps versus Topeka" in *Culture Wars and Local Politics* is a helpful example of the application of sociological theory to the relationship between Topeka residents and Westboro Baptist Church (ed. Elaine B. Sharp. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999). However, it relies primarily on local and national newspaper coverage of the relationship between the two groups and does not address issues of theology in detail. Tina Fetner self-identifies as a scholar-activist with a commitment to gay rights in the opening of her recent *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*, and her assessment of Westboro Baptist Church is heavily informed by her interest in gender and sexuality, but her work contains significant factual errors the church (*Social Movements, Protest, and Contention*, vol. 31. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Michael L. Cobb's *God Hates Fags: The Rhetoric of Religious Violence* makes similar errors in understanding the church's religious mission and identity (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁵⁶ For example, Fred Phelps sent a letter to reporter Mark Enoch excoriating the reporter for failing to complete any interviews with church members in preparing an article on the church. (Fred Phelps, letter to Mark Enoch, October 31, 1991).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Daniel C. Brouwer and Aaron Hess, "Making Sense of 'God Hates Fags' and 'Thank God for 9/11': A Thematic Analysis of Milbloggers' Responses to Reverend Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church," *Western Journal of Communication* 71, no. 1 (January 2007): 69-90. See also, Jeff Gremillion, "Twisted in Topeka: An Investigation of Preacher Raises Holy Hell," *Columbia Journalism Review* 33, no. 3 (September 1994):15-18.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Cobb, *God Hates Fags*. See also, Cynthia Burack's *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008). These texts also offer analyses of Westboro Baptist Church rhetoric but do so in discussions of larger themes of anti-gay religious rhetoric. Todd Powell-Williams completed a dissertation at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 2008 that investigated questions about social control through an examination of Westboro Baptist Church's interaction with police.

time that data collection was complete for this project,⁵⁹ though the topic is debated on blogs and in editorials. Notably, none of the published scholarship provides significant historical, demographic, or sociological information about the church, nor do they place the texts they analyze within the context of primitive Baptist theology, history, or rhetorical tradition.

Moreover discourse analyses have placed Westboro Baptist Church in the context of the Religious Right, an important approach but insufficient in understanding the church itself, primarily because of the difficulty researchers may have in working with living subjects who occupy “a world of meaning very different” from the subjects⁶⁰ and, in the case of Westboro Baptist Church, researchers’ reluctance to try to enter that intense world. Previous treatments of the church have been generally uninformed by interviews or ethnographic observation. Thus, scholars who fail to do research with the actual living subjects and who ignore the rich historic context of the church subsequently produce results that are filled with inaccuracies (particularly regarding church organization and theology). Such errors may not diminish the importance of their conclusions, especially in the scholarly fields of rhetoric, English, or queer studies, where most of the scholarship on Westboro Baptist Church has occurred, but they do undermine the credibility of the claims in the field of religious studies.

This dissertation examines Westboro Baptist Church’s distinctive history and theology but also seeks to place it in the contexts of conservative socio-religious groups and the broader heteronormative American public generally because “interpretive frameworks for religious life in North American must acknowledge complicated relations among religious groups, subcultures,

⁵⁹ Stephen R. McAllister, “Funeral Picketing Laws and Free Speech,” *Kansas Law Review* 55, no. 3 (June 2007): 575-626.

⁶⁰ Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 9.

and the larger culture.”⁶¹ It thus offers a conclusion different from interpretations that marginalize Westboro Baptist Church: that the church members are speaking in a way consistent with their own history and theology, and thus their words are, for those aware of this history and theology, unsurprising. Indeed, by understanding Westboro Baptist Church in these multiple contexts, I agree with Cynthia Burack’s conclusion that “Phelps’ importance lies in the fact that his extremism and that of other far right-wing actors [work] to center the views of Christian [R]ight leaders like Falwell, Roberson, James Dobson, Gary Bauer, and others.”⁶² My analysis of Westboro Baptist Church, however, also exposes the contradictions of Religious Right groups that denounce Westboro Baptist rhetoric while denying their alignment with its anti-gay theology and the similarity of their political visions of American nationalism.

Dissertation Overview

The second chapter of this dissertation, “The History of Westboro Baptist Church,” provides a historical overview of Westboro Baptist Church from its founding to the present. It gives a biography of pastor Fred Phelps and an account of church membership over time. It describes Fred Phelps’ legal work, including his disbarment, and looks at the church’s efforts to run candidates in local elections. It will also speculate about the future of the church, including efforts to recruit or retain members and the church’s plan for its future after pastor Fred Phelps dies.

⁶¹ Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy L. Eiesland, “Developing Interpretations: Ethnography and the Restructuring of Knowledge in a Changing Field” in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*, eds. Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy L. Eiesland (Walnut Creek, California: Altamira Press, 1998), 16.

⁶² Cynthia Burack, “Getting What ‘We’ Deserve: Terrorism, Sexuality, and the Christian Right,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston Marriot Copley Place, Sheraton Boston & Hyynes Convention Center, Boston, Massachusetts, August 28, 2002 http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p65079_index.html: 13.

The third chapter of this dissertation, “Theology of Westboro Baptist Church,” provides analyzes the church’s theology and its place in American Christianity, beginning with an explanation of its (hyper) Calvinism, its focus on sin, its theology of sexuality, and its belief that individual sin and national tragedy are causally related. Though “the relationship between doctrine and life is richer and more complex than predicted by theory,”⁶³ doctrine plays an important role in Westboro Baptist Church members’ self-understanding and activism. Because theology is “a continuous effort to relate the apostolic faith to the conditions, needs, and temptations of men,”⁶⁴ a review of the evolution of Westboro Baptist Church theology reveals the “conditions, needs, and temptations” that church members have faced over the more than fifty years of the church’s existence.

The fourth chapter, “Westboro Baptist Church’s Ministry,” describes the multiple ministries of Westboro Baptist Church, including funeral pickets and multimedia preaching. It assesses the theological motivation for the church’s public activities at the local, national, and international level, contending that the confluence of mobilized resources and a ready audience has allowed theologically-justified pickets and preaching to continue. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have worn on, Westboro Baptist Church has shifted its pickets from events that are explicitly linked to gay causes (such as performances of *The Laramie Project*) to military funerals. This chapter will examine why and how this shift happened. This chapter will draw heavily from observations of funeral pickets and interviews with Patriot Guard Riders and Westboro Baptist counter-pickers. Taken together, chapters 2, 3, and 4, drawing upon anthropological methods, provide an ethnography of the church. This study contributes to the

⁶³ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 221.

⁶⁴ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “Introduction” in *Theology in American: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, ed. Sydney E. Ahlstrom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company: 1967), 13.

field of religious studies, for “to understand the ongoing restricting of religion and the ongoing development of an adequate set of concepts with which to understand it, we need to pay particular attention to the local construction and negotiation of religious identities as creative spaces for religious innovation.”⁶⁵

The fifth chapter, “Religious Right Anti-Gay Activism,” defines the contemporary Religious Right, contextualizes its anti-gay activism in the history of moral legislation, and articulates its theological opposition to homosexuality. It also offers explanations of Religious Right anti-gay activism other than those rooted in theology. Additionally, it examines how, in recent years, Religious Right anti-gay rhetoric has generally jettisoned its use of theology in public debates about sexuality in favor of pseudo-scientific arguments in order to garner more respect from a public wary of legislating overtly religious laws. Finally, it briefly considers Westboro Baptist Church as a Religious Radical group in the context of Religious Right groups.

The sixth chapter, “The Religious Right’s Response to Westboro Baptist Church,” examines the similarities and differences expressed in the anti-gay rhetoric of the Religious Right, conservative politicians who advocate anti-gay policies, and Westboro Baptist Church, noting the overlap in the theology of sexuality of Westboro Baptist Church and Religious Right groups. It details Religious Right groups’ public responses to Westboro Baptist Church, including their support of laws against funeral pickets and their praise of the Patriot Guard Riders. Data for this section will be drawn from official documents from a variety of Religious Right groups as well as publications from Westboro Baptist Church about Religious Right groups. Together, chapters 5 and 6 place my research into Westboro Baptist Church into the broader context of religiously-motivated anti-gay activism.

⁶⁵ Edgell Becker and Eiesland, “Developing Interpretations,” 20.

The concluding chapter of this dissertation, “Radical Flanking, Heteronormativity, and Religious Patriotism,” synthesizes findings that reveal that the Religious Right shares much theology with Westboro Baptist Church but expresses this theology in terms that are more palatable to a conservative American public that is anti-gay but that does not want to appear intolerant of social diversity, in part because of fear of alienating potential supporters of its conservative social agenda. The rhetoric that the Religious Right uses when addressing its own adherents is much closer to the rhetoric of Westboro Baptist Church’s rhetoric than to the rhetoric used when the Religious Right speaks to a broader public, and the anti-gay rhetoric of conservative politicians is closest to the Religious Right’s public rhetoric. Most significantly, the anti-Westboro Baptist Church rhetoric of the Religious Right and politicians who oppose gay rights contributes to nationalistic, patriotic feelings by simultaneously vilifying those who would picket soldiers at their funerals even as it ignores or accepts the homophobia of Westboro Baptist Church in order to minimize or obscure its own homophobia. Anti-Westboro Baptist Church language thus serves to differentiate the homophobia of “first-class nut job[s]”⁶⁶ from the homophobia of Religious Right groups, thus making the homophobia of the Religious Right appear less violent or harmful, a characterization that benefits the Religious Right. This concluding chapter also includes an exploration of tensions between civility and civil liberties; an overview of potential legal methods for protecting both first amendments rights to the free expression of religion, assembly, and free speech and the privacy of mourning communities; and a discussion of what debates about funeral pickets reveal about contemporary American culture.

The researcher’s goal, notes Wax, “is to realize what they have experienced and learned and to communicate this in terms that will illumine significant areas of the social sciences.”⁶⁷

⁷⁰ Liebllich, “Conservative Christians Protest Anti-Gay Protestor.”

⁶⁷ Wax, *Doing Fieldwork*, 3-4.

Only a more thorough examination of the theology and religious context of Westboro Baptist Church, gained through ethnographic research, rhetorical analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, and critical legal analysis, will yield a fuller understanding of how and why Westboro Baptist Church operates and what the public's response to Westboro Baptist Church says about the broader American culture. In this way, this dissertation contributes to the meager scholarship completed on this church, which proclaims that it stands as "this world's last hope"⁶⁸ to hear God's truth.

⁶⁸ "About Us," *Westboro Baptist Church*, [http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/Westboro Baptist Churchinfo/aboutWestboro Baptist Church.html](http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/Westboro%20Baptist%20Churchinfo/aboutWestboro%20Baptist%20Church.html).

Chapter 2: The History of Westboro Baptist Church

A congregational history provides the context for understanding the development of Westboro Baptist Church theology, which will be examined in Chapter 3, and activism, which will be examined in Chapter 4. Westboro Baptist Church provides a unique framework for congregants to understand their worlds, reinforcing beliefs and behaviors that find no encouragement from other sources in their lives; for example, neither employment nor public schools—the two places where members spend most of their out-of-church time—affirm the worldview the church espouses. As Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson note about fundamentalist religious belief generally,

To say that fundamentalism holds itself to be the unique framework in which life has meaning is to imply that it also sets itself over against various other frameworks that are false, errant, deceptive, and capable of leading people astray. ... It means ... that fundamentalism also contains its own picture of society, and indeed of history...[,] a picture that tells its members how to think about people outside the faith, how to think about morality and politics, and how to interpret current events in light of historical trends. It also means that this social horizon ... is a framework in which *polarities* abound. The believer exists in a world of right and wrong, good and evil, light and darkness, mammon and God, flesh and spirit, demons and angels, worldly temptations and heavenly salvation.⁶⁹

Westboro Baptist Church provides members with a clear picture of who they—and their enemies—are. It depicts the church as an ark, like Noah's, that the members are building despite the derision of critics. That ark will carry the elect church members to salvation while the

⁶⁹ Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson, "Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 40.

damned, too late, attempt to swamp the boat as stoic church members watch their demise. The image of Noah's ark is both metaphoric, symbolizing the spiritual safety of the church in contrast to the tempting but ultimately damned outside world, as well as literal, as Westboro Baptists, like many fundamentalists Christians, envision an imminent apocalypse that will result in the salvation of the elect and eternal suffering of the damned.

Throughout its theology—its soteriology, its eschatology, its theology of sexuality—Westboro Baptist Church stresses its distinction from the rest of the world. Indeed, each church service begins with a prayer thanking God that church members “are not hopeless, as are those outside the church,”⁷⁰ and, in some critical features, the church is quite different from other contemporary American congregations. Much of that distinctiveness derives from its charismatic founder, Fred Phelps.

Pastor Fred Phelps

According to Primitive Baptist theology—and, indeed, the theology and ecclesiological traditions of many Christian denominations—, only males can serve as pastors or church leaders. Consistent with this tradition, Westboro Baptist Church uses the terms “pastor” or “preacher” to describe their leader, noting that “reverend” is reserved for God according to Psalm 111:9,⁷¹ a detail that many reporting on the church fail to recognize. Fred Phelps, who has been described by reporters as a “commanding presence and... mesmerizing speaker,” with a speaking style that is “spellbinding and chilling,”⁷² has been Westboro's pastor since its founding and will likely serve in this capacity until his death. Church members stress that they are unconcerned about

⁷⁰ Sam Phelps-Roper, invocation at Sunday service, February 14, 2010.

⁷¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 23, 2008. The King James translation of Psalm 111:9 says, “He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name.”

⁷² Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “The Gospel According to Fred,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps04.shtml.

what will happen after the death of “Gramps,” as he is affectionately called by his many grandchildren and great-grandchildren and even by non-related adults. They claim, first, that the return of Jesus Christ is imminent, and they believe that Jesus Christ will likely return to remove the elect to heaven prior to the death of their pastor.⁷³ Church members feel no need to ready themselves for a leadership change because they would never accept a leader dramatically different from Fred Phelps, and they have no process for credentialing one because Primitive Baptist pastors need no formal theological training, which is genererally mistrusted by Primitive Baptists. Indeed, the denomination has no associated theological school. Moreover, because they are rejected as authentic Primitive Baptists by other Primitive Baptists, Westboro Baptists will not receive a new pastor as a transfer from a different congregation.

Traditionally, Primitive Baptist preachers do not rely on church support for a salary but are usually bivocational. Retirement from paid employment does not mandate retirement from voluntary preaching and pastoring, however, and Fred Phelps, who was disbarred from the practice of law in state courts in 1979 and federal courts in 1989, continues to preach each Sunday at Westboro Baptist Church. He has made fewer public appearances since 2004 and has given very few interviews since that time. Though he occasionally appears at pickets, he reserves most of his energy for sermon writing and the production of internet videos directed at specific members of the public, including figures on the church picket schedule.⁷⁴ Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church have been deployed as symbols of anti-gay hatred and general intolerance in *The Laramie Project*, a play based upon the events around Matthew Shepard’s

⁷³ Justin Kendall, “The New Fred,” *The Pitch*, November 2, 2006, <http://www.pitch.com/content/printVersion/155699>.

⁷⁴ Fred Phelps, “Westboro Baptist Church Video News,” *Sign Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.net/videos/news/index.html>. The title of the website is a reference to the Primitive Baptist periodical *Signs of the Times*, which has been published since the 1830s.

death,⁷⁵ and in the documentary films *Anatomy of Hate*,⁷⁶ *Fish Out of Water*,⁷⁷ and *For the Bible Tells Me So*.⁷⁸ The Adam Sandler comedy *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*⁷⁹ includes characters based upon church members, as does the forthcoming horror film *Red State*.⁸⁰ Additionally, the BBC produced a documentary hosted by Louis Theroux, *The Most Hated Family in America*⁸¹, and the *Fall from Grace*, a documentary directed by a University of Kansas undergraduate, focus exclusively on Westboro Baptist Church and Fred Phelps.⁸²

Childhood and Youth

Fred Waldron Phelps was born in Meriden, Mississippi, in 1929, to Catherine Idalette Phelps and Fred Wade Phelps, a World War I veteran. His mother passed away when Phelps was only five, leaving the boy and his younger sister, Martha Jean, to be reared primarily by his aunt, Irene Jordan, in conjunction with their father, a railway detective who policed trains during the Depression to remove hobos and generally keep order.⁸³ As a child, Fred Phelps spent much of his time in neighboring Alabama with his aunt, according to Fred Phelps, Jr., the pastor's oldest child.⁸⁴ The family was respected in the town of 45,000 partly because of their affluence, their affiliation with the Methodist Church, and, according to Abigail Phelps, youngest child of Fred and Margie Phelps, because of her grandfather's likely affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan, a

⁷⁵ Moisés Kaufman, *The Laramie Project* (New York : Dramatists Play Service, 2001).

⁷⁶ *Anatomy of Hate: A Dialogue to Hope*, Theatrical Release, directed by Mike Ramsdell (2009; City: Redwood Palms Pictures, 2009.)

⁷⁷ *Fish out of Water*, DVD, directed by Ky Dickens (2010; New York: First Run Features, 2010.)

⁷⁸ *For the Bible Tells Me So*, DVD, directed by Daniel Karlake (2008; New York: First Run Features, 2008.)

⁷⁹ *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, DVD, directed by Dennis Dugan (2007 Los Angeles: Universal Pictures, 2007.)

⁸⁰ Said director Kevin Smith in an interview about the film, which is to be released in 2011, "[T]o me, ... the notion of using a Phelps-like character as a villain, as horrifying and scary as that guy can be, there's even something more insidious than him that lurks out there in as much as a public or a government that allows it and that's the other thing that I'm trying to examine in a big, big way" (Joe Utich, "Rotten Tomatoes, "RT-UK Exclusive: Kevin Smith's Horror Project Revealed," *U.K. Rotten Tomatoes*, April 6, 2007, <http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/news/1648575/>).

⁸¹ *The Most Hated Family in America*, Television Documentary, written by Louis Theroux and directed by Geoffrey O'Conner (2007; London: BBC, 2007).

⁸² *Fall from Grace*, DVD, directed by K. Ryan Jones (2008; New York: DOCURAMA, 2008.)

⁸³ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "The Transformation of Fred Phelps," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994,

⁸⁴ Fred Phelps, Jr., interview with the author, July 18, 2010.

relationship that inspired Fred Phelps to fight against racism later in his life.⁸⁵ However, his family's prominent position did not protect Phelps from further tragedy; his aunt Irene was killed in an automobile collision in 1950.⁸⁶

Despite the traumatic loss of his mother in childhood, Phelps excelled in school and as a community leader. The future pastor earned the rank of Eagle Scout with Palms, played coronet and bass horn in the high school band, was a high hurdler on the track team, and worked as a reporter on the school's newspaper. In a class of 213 graduates, he ranked sixth. In 1946, when he was only sixteen years old, Fred Phelps was voted class orator for commencement; received the American Legion Award for courage, leadership, scholarship, and service; and was honored as his Congressional Representative's choice for West Point.⁸⁷

Because, at sixteen, Fred Phelps was too young to attend West Point, which, until that point, had been his life-long goal, he had little to do during the summer after graduation except to attend the local junior college and wait for his next birthday. That summer, along with his friend and future brother-in-law John Capon, Phelps attended a revival led by a Methodist minister. At that event, both he and Capon experienced a religious conversion. Phelps promptly decided not to go to West Point but rather to attend Bob Jones University, then located in Cleveland, Tennessee, and he switched his religious affiliation from Methodist to Baptist. At the end of the following summer, only one year after his conversion, within a year of his baptism, and after having completed only one year of study at Bob Jones University, Phelps was ordained by B.H. McAlister, the Southern Baptist minister who had helped Phelps and some colleagues set up a mission to the Mormons the summer after their first year at Bob Jones. Phelps was baptized *by* but not *as* a Southern Baptist minister. Instead,

⁸⁵ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

⁸⁶ Taschler and Fry, "The Transformation of Fred Phelps."

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

I was ordained by the First Baptist Church of Vernal, Utah.... There is no such thing as being ordained by the Southern Baptists. You are ordained by the Baptist church. I went to that church, and we liked each other. They baptized me in a mountain stream that was cold and ordained me.⁸⁸

In fact, to other Baptists, details about baptism matter very much. For example, Phelps now considers himself a Primitive Baptist, but, because he was not baptized by a Primitive Baptist who had been baptized by a Primitive Baptist (and so on through history), he lacks one of the few necessary credentials for being an authentic Primitive Baptist that the Primitive Baptist tradition maintains.⁸⁹

Early Ministry

In the summer of 1947, Fred Phelps and two fellow Bob Jones University students, under the direction of a local Southern Baptist pastor, set up a revival tent in the city park of Vernal, Utah, in the northeastern part of the state, where they planned to hold revival meetings in the evening, then spend their days going door-to-door in the hopes of winning new converts from among the conservative Mormons to their fundamentalist Baptist faith. The ministry was generally ineffective at promoting conversion throughout the summer, and the revival tent was empty each night—until one of the students tricked a local radio station into promoting an event. When Phelps' colleague asked the radio host if he could speak on air, the disc jockey agreed that the evangelist could announce the students' upcoming speech only if their on-air words did not

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ For a contemporary example of the protocol for calling a Primitive Baptist minister, see the case of Zack Guess, who had been an “orderly” Primitive Baptist preacher (that is, in good standing) in Morris Memorial Primitive Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. When he broke with his congregation without proper dismissal, Morris Memorial no longer considered him orderly, and no one he baptized while in that state was considered by Morris Memorial to be an orderly Primitive Baptist. If those who were baptized by Guess after he broke with the church wanted to be considered for membership in Morris Memorial, they would have to be re-baptized by a preacher in good standing with the church (Elder J.W. Perry and Bill Welch, “Setting the Record Straight” [open letter regarding the status of Zack Guess], *Old Line Primitive Baptist Churches*, http://www.olpbc.com/Romans_16/Record.htm).

disparage the Mormon religion. The young men agreed, then announced that they would speak on “What’s Wrong with the Mormon Church?”—a title that prompted a crowd to turn up that night. This confrontational style marked Fred Phelps ministry in Utah and, later, among the indigenous people of the Southwest, according to his son Nate Phelps, who has left the church.⁹⁰ At the end of the summer, Phelps and his colleagues returned to Bob Jones University, but Phelps continued his education there only for only a short time before leaving the university because of, he says, its unusually racist policies.⁹¹ After leaving Bob Jones, Phelps attended Prairie Bible Institute near Calgary, Alberta, for two semesters. He then headed to Pasadena, California to John Muir College, finally taking a two-year degree in 1951.⁹²

While at John Muir College, Phelps gained national attention in *Time* magazine for his campaign against public expressions of sexuality. He aimed railed against “sins committed on campus by students and teachers,” including especially “promiscuous petting” and other kinds of “pandering to the lusts of the flesh.” Despite being suspended and removed from campus by police, the young preacher was able to continue to preach to students from the property of a sympathizer who lived across the street from the school.⁹³

Phelps is quite proud of his appearance in *Time*, and a clipping from the magazine hangs in his office. He soon became an itinerant preacher, circulating from church to church, during which time he met his future wife, Margie Simms, a student at Arizona Bible School and participant in a radio ministry in the area who was also a nanny for a family in whose home

⁹⁰ Nate Phelps, interview by Walt Bodine and Gina Kaufman, *The Walt Bodine Show*, KCUR, June 14, 2010, <http://archive.kcur.org/kcurViewDirect.asp?PlaylistID=7469>.

⁹¹ Steve Tompkins, “Phelps’ Work Raises Hopes, and Questions,” *Wichita Eagle*, February 13, 1983. Bob Jones University did not admit African-American students until 1971 and had a ban on interracial dating until 2000 (“Bob Jones U. Apologizes for Racism,” *CBS News*, November 21, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/11/21/national/main4625581.shtml>).

⁹² Taschler and Fry, “The Transformation of Fred Phelps.”

⁹³ “Repentance in Pasadena,” *Time*, June 11, 1951, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,814897,00.html>.

Phelps was staying for a time. The pair married on May 15, 1952 after a brief courtship, and the new bride did not finish her degree, trading a future as a missionary for a future as a pastor's wife.⁹⁴ They moved to Albuquerque, where their first child, Fred Jr., was born within a year of their marriage. Phelps continued his work as an itinerant preacher in Albuquerque for a year and had moved his family to Sunnyslope, Arizona, when East Side Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, invited the preacher to deliver a sermon. It was an invitation that redirected the life of the young family and changed the religious landscape of Topeka.

Founding of Westboro Baptist Church

Regardless of their theology or the specific convention to which they belong, Baptists tend to be anti-hierarchical and independent. In 1750, the Philadelphia Baptist Association proclaimed that each church could “exercise every part of the gospel discipline and church government, independent of any other church or assembly whatever,”⁹⁵ and Baptists since then have taken that to mean that they have great liberty in establishing and maintaining churches. It was this congregational autonomy that allowed East Side Baptist Church, which had been founded as part of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1931, to leave the relatively liberal Northern Baptist Convention and become an independent Baptist church in 1942.⁹⁶ Like other churches in the Northern Baptist Convention, East Side Baptist Church sponsored Sunday schools and missionary work.

East Side Baptist Church had invited Fred Phelps to serve as an associate pastor after hearing a sermon he had preached on April 14, 1955 in a Colorado church led by East Side's

⁹⁴ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

⁹⁵ A.D. Gillette, editor, *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, from A.D. 1707 to A.D. 1807; Being the First One Hundred Years of Its Existence* (Philadelphia: American Baptists Publication Society, 1851. Reprint, Otisville, MI: Baptist Book Trust, 1976), 61.

⁹⁶ The Northern Baptist Convention became the American Baptist Convention in 1950, and the American Baptist Convention became the American Baptist Churches USA in 1972.

pastor's brother. When a recording of that Colorado sermon, along with the recommendation of the Colorado pastor, reached East Side Baptist, the church sent a contract for Phelps to join them as an associate pastor. Leaving the life of an itinerant preacher, Fred Phelps brought Fred Jr. and a pregnant Margie Phelps to Topeka, arriving in May 1954.⁹⁷ In addition to preaching, the new associate pastor worked selling Midwest Insurance, vacuum cleaners, Edison dictating machines, and Topeka Stroll-o-Chair strollers door-to-door.⁹⁸ Though, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, a few members of East Side were unhappy about the new preacher's admonitions against Masonry and other fraternal orders, most were pleased enough to select him to establish a new church in the Westboro area of the city.⁹⁹ Westboro Baptist Church was founded as a church plant—a new branch of East Side Baptist Church—in November 27, 1955, when pastor Fred Phelps preached the first sermon at the West 12th street location in the Westboro neighborhood of Topeka, Kansas, and was formally organized in May 1956.¹⁰⁰

Soon after Phelps, supported by East Side Baptists who committed to attending the new church, settled into the building on West 12th Street, trouble began, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper. The mortgage on the new structure was held by East Side but paid by Westboro, and the contract between the two churches obligated Westboro to pay the mortgage and stated that when Westboro Baptist Church had paid off the mortgage, it would gain control of the property.¹⁰¹ Very quickly, though, the previously cordial relationship between the churches disintegrated, and a legal dispute about the property ensued.

⁹⁷ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "Fate, Timing Kept Phelps in Topeka," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps13.shtml.

⁹⁸ Gregory S. Boyd, "Fred Waldron Phelps, Sr.," report provided to ABC News' *20/20* (Wichita: Gay Services Bureau, 1992). Bruce McKinney Collection at the Spencer Research Library.

⁹⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, June 30, 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Taschler and Fry, "Fate, Timing Kept Phelps in Topeka."

¹⁰¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, June 30, 2010.

The problem, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, involved a single woman in the congregation who had had a premarital affair with a soldier at nearby Fort Riley. Church discipline, as interpreted by the new pastor, required that the congregation address her behavior—which included not only the premarital affair and subsequent pregnancy but her absence from congregational life and her failure to explain herself to the congregation and accept being disciplined. In response, the church voted to excommunicate her—an act called *exclusion* among Primitive Baptists. According to Shirley Phelps-Roper, though the exclusion was a unanimous decision, members of the church who were related to the woman began to defect from Westboro and returned to East Side. The situation illustrates how “[m]any twentieth-century social trends conflicted with basic Primitive beliefs, generating damaging divisions.”¹⁰²

Says Phelps-Roper,

It was at that point that the East Side Baptist Church, with the complaining of those that left, about that standard that is replete in the scripture and the duty of the church to execute the office of The Porter, began to think that they had the wrong preacher. They didn't mean to have a person that would actually uphold the standards, even when the people changed their minds. They didn't change their minds out loud, they just quit coming.

The congregation at Westboro Baptist Church shrunk in size soon after, and a legal battle for the church property ensued, with Westboro Baptist Church eventually gaining control of the property.

Just as East Side Baptist Church had left the Northern Baptist Convention to become an independent congregation, Westboro Baptist Church exercised its authority to operate

¹⁰² John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 170.



Figure 2. Westboro Baptist Church is attached to the modest home of Fred Phelps, Sr. and his wife Margie. The front of the building is covered with a massive banner promoting the church's flagship website. A privacy fence runs the perimeter of the block, which includes homes owned by church members. The church's sign was long ago vandalized with graffiti that proclaims "God Hates the Phelps." Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin, July 18, 2010. All rights reserved.



Figure 3. Westboro Baptist Church installed security cameras that church members can monitor from the church office. The cameras were installed in June 2010, after vandals spray painted the church garage door and exterior wall. The church door is locked at all times. Members enter through a door inside the fenced yard shared by some of the church's families. Visitors should call in advance so that a church member can meet them at the entrance and let them into the building. Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin, July 18, 2010. All rights reserved.

independently and without external checks on theology or practice. “Baptists, by definition, are independent and autonomous and fiercely so,” Fred Phelps stated in an interview about his choice to stay in Topeka. “No genuine Baptist church is going to be giving up its sovereignty.”¹⁰³ That independent streak has been one of several factors that has allowed Westboro Baptist Church to maintain its distinct identity and may have facilitated the emergence of its unusual theology.

Theological Changes

“His Majesty, The Devil,” the April 14, 1955 sermon that brought Fred Phelps to the attention of East Side Baptist Church, was full of the fire-and-brimstone preaching to which the independent East Side Baptist congregation was receptive. It focused on the reality of sin, both as a personal act and a state of being; understood hell and Satan to be literal; and advocated the Arminian position that depraved humans could—and, in fact, must—turn toward God and accept Jesus as their personal savior and, significantly, that this free grace is available to all people. This theology, which would have been familiar to the new pastor because of his Methodist upbringing, remains the theology of East Side Baptist Church.¹⁰⁴

Over time, though, Fred Phelps jettisoned the Arminianism of East Side Baptist Church and led Westboro Baptist Church toward an increasingly strict Calvinism, having been, as Jonathan Phelps said upon reviewing “His Majesty, the Devil,” “delivered from” the darkness of Arminianism “by a gracious and omnipotent God.”¹⁰⁵ Examining the early sermons of her father, Abigail, the youngest of Fred and Margie Phelps’ children, laughs and suggests that “God

¹⁰³ Taschler and Fry, “Fate, Timing Kept Phelps in Topeka.”

¹⁰⁴ East Side Baptist Church, “What We Believe,” *Who We Are*, [http://esbcks.org/esbc2.0/index.php/who-we-are/what-we-believe#Of percent20Grace percent20In percent20The percent20New percent20Creation](http://esbcks.org/esbc2.0/index.php/who-we-are/what-we-believe#Of%20Grace%20In%20The%20New%20Creation).

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Phelps, email to Calvary Baptist Church in Sterling, Colorado, November 4, 2009.

had to knock some of that Arminianism out of my dad!”¹⁰⁶ This happened, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, through continued reading and studying of scripture and because “God showed [her father] and directed his path” as he “put his hand to understand those scriptures.”¹⁰⁷ Over time, Westboro Baptist Church rejected the doctrine that salvation was available to all and the practices of Sunday school and missionary work, practices that Fred and Margie Phelps had both supported as youths. By 1957, Westboro Baptist Church came to adopt the beliefs and most of the practices of Primitive Baptists, “having been granted the grace to slough off that hellish pretense that it was by any human power that God redeems his elect people.”¹⁰⁸ The process of this theological transformation was gradual and supernaturally-led and, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, straightforward. She notes,

Once we nail a matter down, we don't revisit and we don't look back. Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the COMMAND of God. That God that said LET THERE BE LIGHT! THAT is the very God that commands his creatures to hear or NOT to hear. HE alone is able to open the eyes of our understanding and he does that at his good will and by his good pleasure! ... If God gives you a heart to know and to fear and to love him, THAT is the ONLY WAY you get such. God does not leave his people to walk in darkness, he opens the eyes of your understanding and shows you the path that you must take... [A]s my dad put his hand to understand those scriptures, God showed him and directed his path. In short, it is learning from the words, from God, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, June 28, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Phelps, email to Calvary Baptist Church in Sterling, Colorado, November 4, 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, June 28, 2010.

For Westboro Baptists, then, understanding comes only to those selected by God to receive it, and it is delivered through scriptural study alone. Because, for religious fundamentalists, scripture's meaning is plain—"NOT ROCKET SCIENCE!" as Shirley Phelps-Roper explains¹¹⁰—differences in understanding are intolerable. By the late 1950s, Westboro Baptist Church identified itself on its church sign as a Primitive Baptist congregation. As it became a hyper-Calvinist church, Westboro Baptist Church could less and less tolerate dissent, resulting in increasing tensions between the church and the broader culture, including Phelps' adopted city. However, Fred Phelps saw opportunities in Topeka that went beyond the church, and he soon set about to meet them.

Law Career, Civil Rights Activism, and Disbarment

In keeping with his self-styled image as a civil rights campaigner, Phelps recalls that his family arrived in Topeka on May 4, 1954, the day that the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, demanded that *de jure* racial segregation be ended with "all deliberate speed." The young pastor interpreted this historic decision as a sign that he should stay in Topeka.¹¹¹ Further, the legal conflict between East Side and Westboro Baptist may have introduced to him to the importance of legal skills. However, given his responsibilities as a new pastor, he did not graduate from Washburn University School of Law until 1964, just two years after he had completed an undergraduate degree in history from Washburn.¹¹² Though he had been a star law student, heading both the School of Law's moot court and its law journal, Phelps

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Taschler and Fry, "Fate, Timing Kept Phelps in Topeka."

¹¹² Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "Phelps' Law Career Checkered," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps16.shtml.

struggled to gain admission to the bar because no judge would vouch for his character—a consequence, he contends, of their opposition to the theology he was preaching at Westboro Baptist Church and, at that point, on the radio.¹¹³ He eventually did gain admittance, though, saying that he had demonstrated his character with his Eagle Scout and American Legion awards as well by as a letter from former president Harry S Truman.

Phelps soon formed Fred W. Phelps Chartered, now called Phelps-Chartered, a law firm dedicated to the enforcement of civil rights legislation. According to the firm’s website, “During the 1960's, Mr. Phelps gained a reputation for handling cases that no other attorney in the area would take,”¹¹⁴ including the defense of Gale Sayers, a University of Kansas student and All-American football player arrested during a protest against racial discrimination in student housing. Phelps was the only white lawyer to take the case of Sayers and the other African-American students, says the website. Phelps won the case and pursued other discrimination cases, including *Johnson v. Whittier*, a 1973 class action case on behalf of “all Black children who were then or had during the past ten years been students of elementary and junior high schools in East Topeka and North Topeka”¹¹⁵ who, the suit contended, had been denied access to equitable facilities in the Topeka school district. The case failed to qualify as a class action lawsuit, but it became a catalyst for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to examine racial discrimination in public schooling in the city, inspiring continued discussion of and litigation about Topeka’s failure to live up to the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Further, Phelps filed suit on behalf of African-American members of the Jordan-Patterson American Legion members who alleged that their post had been illegally searched in

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ “Firm History,” *Phelps-Chartered*, <http://www.phelpschartered.com/FirmHistory.htm>.

¹¹⁵ As quoted in Jean Van Delinder, “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: A Landmark Case Unresolved Fifty Years Later, Part 2*,” *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2004), <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2004/spring/brown-v-board-2.html>.

an act of racial discrimination by police in 1979,¹¹⁶ and he also represented minority employees of Kansas Power and Light¹¹⁷ and Southwestern Bell¹¹⁸ and a female professor who sued the University of Kansas, alleging gender discrimination.¹¹⁹ Current clients include many members of minority communities seeking assistance with immigration issues and members of area indigenous tribes.

Phelps' commitment to challenging racial discrimination was widely recognized. In 1986, he was the recipient of both the Omaha Mayor's Special Recognition Award for his civil rights work, and an award from the Greater Kansas City Chapter of Blacks in Government. In 1987, he was recognized by the Bonner Springs, Kansas, branch of the NAACP for his legal work on behalf of African-Americans.¹²⁰ Even though he had made a name for himself as a litigator on behalf of African-Americans, he also won the first reverse discrimination case in Kansas¹²¹ and made a claim of reverse discrimination when two of his daughters failed to gain admission to Washburn University's School of Law. Originally claiming that, due to his own civil rights activism, three of his children suffered discrimination,¹²² he later switched his argument to claim that they failed to gain admittance because they were white, even though the University had admitted less qualified black law students.¹²³ Both arguments failed, and though his son Tim Phelps was admitted the following year, daughters Rebekah and Katherine (who is

¹¹⁶ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "As a Lawyer, Phelps was Good in Court," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994.

¹¹⁷ *Wecker v. Kansas Power and Light*, 1986.

¹¹⁸ *Fisher v. Southwest Bell*, 1986.

¹¹⁹ *Hinman v. Rogers*, 1987.

¹²⁰ Taschler and Fry, "As a Lawyer, Phelps was Good in Court."

¹²¹ "Firm History," *Phelps-Chartered*.

¹²² *Phelps v. Washburn University of Topeka*, 1986.

¹²³ Jon Taschler and Steve Fry, "Phelps Controlled Children's Lives, Sons Say," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps07.shtml.

no longer affiliated with the church) were not. Both attended Oklahoma City University School of Law instead.¹²⁴

The Phelps continue to claim that they were and continue to be persecuted for their father's civil rights activism, with Shirley Phelps-Roper recalling that she and her siblings were called racist names and were threatened with broken windows and other acts of menacing vandalism.¹²⁵ In the early 1980s, lawyers from other areas of the country supported this claim, including Monroe Friedman, former dean of Hofstra University Law School, who argued, "It was as clear to me as could be that the kind of conduct that Fred Phelps was accused of is as commonplace among the bar, that it is proper conduct, and that it would never be subjected to a disciplinary attack unless there was some other motive."¹²⁶

Others argue that Fred Phelps was and is a racist and an opportunist who merely pursued a career in civil rights law because such cases were profitable. Nate Phelps, who has left the church and is estranged from the family, credits his father with doing much good for African-Americans in Kansas but cautions against misunderstanding his motives as altruistic. Instead, he says, his father saw an opportunity for an energetic lawyer to make money. He notes that the profit motive is not unethical—but that it does not equate with a sincere commitment to civil rights. For example, in a case against Kansas Power and Light in which he represented African-Americans alleging racial discrimination in hiring and promotion, Fred Phelps won settlements of \$12,000 for each of two employees and the company reserved \$100,000 for other employees, but Fred Phelps collected a total of \$85,000 in legal fees,¹²⁷ taking the bulk of the total settlement. Indeed, according to Nate Phelps, his father preached a traditional racist

¹²⁴ Taschler and Fry, "As a Lawyer, Phelps was Good in Court."

¹²⁵ *Hatemongers*.

¹²⁶ Steve Tompkins, "Phelps' Work Raises Hopes, and Questions," *Wichita Eagle*, February 13, 1983.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

interpretation of the story of Noah's sons, which says that Ham was punished by being made black and a servant to his brothers for laughing at his father's drunken nakedness. Nate Phelps also contends that his father used racial epithets to describe African-Americans,—a claim that seems to be supported by the church's occasional use of racist stereotypes and fear-mongering racist rhetoric, as illustrated in Figure 4.¹²⁸ Despite the church's use of racist images in its publications, church members vehemently reject characterizations of themselves as racists and vigorously deny alleged church connections between Westboro Baptist Church and white supremacist groups, noting the church's prohibitions against "outside groups" such as fraternal organizations or the KKK.¹²⁹

Whether or not individual church members are racist, social justice does not seem to be the only motive for pursuing civil rights litigation. A common accusation against Fred Phelps was that he encouraged clients to sue for huge sums, which pressured defendants to settle for smaller amounts whether they were liable or not.¹³⁰ For example, in *Brown v. General Tires Co.*, the plaintiff, Phelps' client, sued for \$27,000, alleging that General Tire had failed to replace spark plugs during a \$20 tune-up. In the end, Phelps' client accepted a \$250 settlement. Similarly, in *Weber v. Davis Sport Cycles*, Phelps' client accepted \$500 after suing a motorcycle dealership for \$52,000 when, according to the plaintiff, the motorcycle failed to achieve the allegedly

¹²⁸ Nate Phelps, interview by Walt Bodine and Gina Kaufman, *The Walt Bodine Show*, KCUR, June 14, 2010, <http://archive.kcur.org/kcurViewDirect.asp?PlaylistID=7469>.

¹²⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010. In response to the allegation that Fred Phelps has appeared on Pete Peterson's Scriptures for America radio program, which espouses a theology similar to the white supremacist Christian Identity movement's, a representative for Scriptures for America denies it (Webmaster for Scriptures for America, email to the author, December 8, 2009). Further Shirley Phelps-Roper argues that church members would not know if they appeared on such a show, given their ignorance of the racist theology. However, she notes, church members do not give much attention to the outlets provided to them. Rather, she says, they take every opportunity that God gives to them. This is not a denial, then, that the church would appear on a racist radio program, only a denial that they, themselves, are racist. In response to the question about her father's alleged appearance on Scriptures for America, Shirley Phelps-Roper asked what the show was, then said: "Let me be crystal clear. Our God holds the keys to the doors of utterance, and HE opens and no man can close and HE closes and no man can open. If there is such a thing as a white supremacist broadcast, you KNOW we do not traffic in such places, so HOW could we know if we are invited to speak that they are such people" (email to the author, May 12, 2010).

¹³⁰ Tompkins, "Phelps' Work Raises Hopes, and Questions."

promised gas mileage.¹³¹ A 1978 state investigation revealed that in many of the cases that Phelps settled outright, the settlement was one tenth of one percent of the amount originally sought.¹³² For example, in 1973, Phelps filed a \$50 million class-action lawsuit against Sears on behalf of one million people who had used the company's layaway plan after a local Sears accidentally sold a television the family had put on layaway. Though Sears delivered a new television promptly, Phelps pursued litigation for six years, receiving, in the end, less than the set


¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Gregory S. Boyd, "Fred Waldron Phelps, Sr.," report provided to ABC News' *20/20* (Wichita: Gay Services Bureau, 1992). Bruce McKinney Collection at the Spencer Research Library.

MAY-21-92 THU 12:59 FAX NO. 0 P. 01 RH 876

May 22, 1992 Fred Phelps, Pastor 3701 West 12th Westboro Baptist Church Since November, 1955
Topeka, Kansas 66604 913-273-0333/FAX 913-273-9228

HOOLIGAN McCLINTON, BLACK THUG



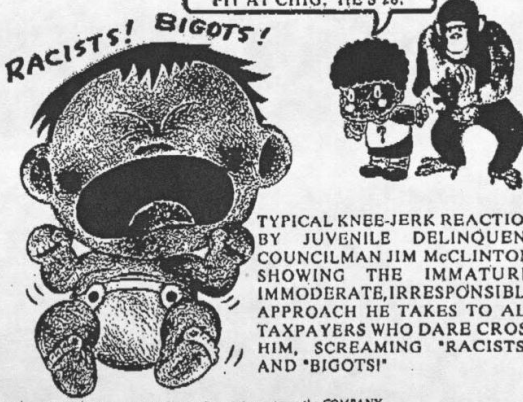
Councilman JIM McCLINTON is a CRIMINAL, a THUG, and a HOOLIGAN, and should resign or be impeached for assaulting and threatening physical violence to a senior citizen who mildly criticized his official misconduct! McCLINTON and his girlfriend MECHLER, as usual, left the May 19 City Council meeting early as an insult to taxpayers there to comment on city government. Upon seeing taxpayer BUD BUSER, leader of a citizens group, complain of his conduct on TV, McCLINTON returned to City Hall and angrily accosted Mr. Buser with curses and threats of physical violence until restrained by a TPD officer's warning: "Councilman, you're way out of order!"

MAYOR FELKER should order an investigation of this incident, which was witnessed by 20-30 people. If citizens cannot appear at official public meetings and offer orderly criticisms of an elected official's conduct without being physically assaulted and threatened by that official, then our democracy is in name only. McCLINTON MUST GO!

COWARDLY BULLY

Last Feb. we portrayed McCLINTON as a crybaby (see attached). His latest behavior is that of a COWARDLY BULLY! It's disgusting and illegal for any young man in his prime to assault and threaten physical violence to a senior citizen twice his age. But for an elected official to stoop so low is intolerable and inexcusable. McCLINTON MUST GO!

RACISTS! BIGOTS!



THAT'S COUNCILMAN JIM McCLINTON, THROWING A FIT AT CHIG. HE'S 28.

TYPICAL KNEE-JERK REACTION BY JUVENILE DELINQUENT COUNCILMAN JIM McCLINTON. SHOWING THE IMMATURE, IMMODERATE, IRRESPONSIBLE APPROACH HE TAKES TO ALL TAXPAYERS WHO DARE CROSS HIM, SCREAMING "RACISTS!" AND "BIGOTS!"

PLEASE

PLEASE join our COMPANY: "The Lord gave the word; great was the COMPANY of those that published it." (Psa. 68:11) Please make copies for others.

Figure 4. Westboro Baptist Church-produced fax dated May 22, 1992, calling a Topeka City Council member a "Black Thug" and suggesting that he unfairly accuses his detractors of being "racists and bigots" as a caricature of a black child and a chimpanzee look on. was worth.¹³³ According to Federal Judge Richard Rogers, whom Westboro Baptists would later

vilify in faxes as a crooked judge who will face an eternity in hell,¹³⁴ in a 1979 opinion, "Mr.

¹³³ Taschler and Fry, "As a Lawyer, Phelps was Good in Court."

Phelps files 'strike suits' of little merit in the expectation of securing settlements by defendants anxious to avoid the inconvenience and expense of litigation."¹³⁵ The accusation of abuse of the legal process followed Phelps from the start of his legal career until the end, when the *Wichita Eagle* noted that "[t]here have been more complaints filed against Phelps, and more formal hearings into his conduct, than any other Kansas attorney since records have been kept."¹³⁶

Fred Phelps faced his first disciplinary case in 1969, just five years after he had passed the bar. Phelps was suspended for two years on three of seven counts of professional misconduct alleged by the State Board of Law Examiners.¹³⁷ In 1974, Phelps initiated a case that would land him in further trouble with the state when he filed a case against a court reporter employed by the Shawnee County District Court, whom he accused of failing to provide a court transcript promptly. The suit sought \$2,000 in actual and \$20,000 in punitive damages, and Phelps cross-examined the court reporter brutally, according to the Kansas Supreme Court's assessment¹³⁸--the kind of behavior that, in another case, had earned him a ten day jail sentence for contempt of court in Sedgwick County in 1977.¹³⁹

When Phelps lost the case, he sought a new trial, promising to deliver witnesses who would testify against Brady to establish her reputation and character. When Brady provided affidavits from those same witnesses saying that they would not testify as Phelps promised, he

¹³⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, "God's Warnings to an Evil City," fax dated August 11, 1993, Kansas Collection at the Spencer Research Library.

¹³⁵ As quoted in Steve Tompkins, "Phelps' Work Raises Hopes, and Questions," *Wichita Eagle*, February 13, 1983.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Taschler and Fry, "Phelps' Law Career Checkered."

¹³⁸ Notes the court in *State of Kansas v. Fred W. Phelps, Sr.* (1979): "The trial became an exhibition of a personal vendetta by Phelps against Carolene Brady. His examination was replete with repetition, badgering, innuendo, belligerence, irrelevant and immaterial matter, evidencing only a desire to hurt and destroy the defendant. The jury verdict didn't stop the onslaught of Phelps. He was not satisfied with the hurt, pain, and damage he had visited on Carolene Brady."

¹³⁹ In that case Judge Keith Anderson sentenced Phelps to ten days in jail for direct contempt of court relating to the improper questioning of JoAnn Norwood in a case about bad checks (Gregory S. Boyd, "Fred Waldron Phelps, Sr.," report provided to ABC News' *20/20* (Wichita: Gay Services Bureau, 1992). Bruce McKinney Collection at the Spencer Research Library).

was accused by the state of “clearly misrepresent[ing] the truth to the court.”¹⁴⁰ In 1977, the state of Kansas began the process of disbaring Phelps, and the case was heard in 1979, with the lawyer for the state noting the harm that Phelps’ abnormally aggressive behavior and unwarranted personal attacks caused not only the defendant but also the legal system:

When attorneys engage in conduct such as Phelps has done, they do serious injury to the workings of our judicial system. Even the lay person could see how serious Phelps' infractions are. To allow this type of conduct to go essentially unpunished is being disrespectful to our entire judicial system.¹⁴¹

The justices of the Kansas Supreme Court agreed,¹⁴² concluding that Fred Phelps had “little regard for the ethics of his profession.”¹⁴³ He was disbarred on July 20, 1979. The decision was upheld by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver,¹⁴⁴ and his appeal to reverse the disbarment was denied. Phelps was no longer able to practice law in the state courts of Kansas, and, at the same time, he was suspended from practicing law in Kansas’ U.S. District Courts for two years. According to Phelps, though, “To be wrongfully disbarred by a corrupt court is a badge of honor.”¹⁴⁵

Fred Phelps was able to continue practicing in federal court, and he continued to be known for his aggressive tactics. A 1983 complaint spearheaded by Robert Howard, a Wichita lawyer, accused Phelps of sending letters to people he planned to sue unless they paid money to his client to avoid the lawsuit; such “demand letters” were, essentially, extortion, and provided support for earlier assessments that Phelps filed legally trivial or irrelevant lawsuits for large

¹⁴⁰ *State v. Phelps*, 1979

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Actually, the justices were divided. All agreed that Phelps should be disbarred from practice in the state. A minority added that he should have been disbarred from practice in federal court, too.

¹⁴³ *State v. Phelps*, 1979.

¹⁴⁴ “Lawyer’s Suspension is Upheld,” *Wichita Eagle*, March 3, 1981.

¹⁴⁵ Al Polczinski, “Fred Phelps Sr.,” *Wichita Eagle*, July 15, 1990.

sums of money in hopes that defendants would settle out-of-court for smaller amounts.¹⁴⁶ The strategy of demanding the money before the suit was even filed seemed to many only to be a more efficient form of the method he was already using. In 1987, a panel of federal judges dismissed some but not all of the charges related to the demand letters, then delivered a public censure of Fred Phelps.¹⁴⁷

During this time, though, Phelps and family members working for Phelps-Chartered were committing acts that would earn them more than a censure. In 1985, Fred Phelps, Sr.; Fred Phelps, Jr.; Betty Phelps, the wife of Fred Phelps, Jr.; Margie Phelps, daughter of Fred Phelps, Sr.; Shirley Phelps-Roper, Jonathan Phelps; and Elizabeth (Lizz) Phelps were accused of making false charges against nine U.S. District Court judges in Kansas. The false accusations generally involved making claims that the judges were racist, prejudiced against religion, and reluctant to hear civil rights cases.¹⁴⁸ Given that, at one time, twenty-five percent of all the civil lawsuits in U.S. District Court in Shawnee County and six percent of the civil docket in Shawnee County District Court were handled by Phelps-Chartered, the family law firm,¹⁴⁹ both the charges and the potential consequences were serious. If Phelps' accusations were found to be false and Phelps was disbarred, it would mean that African-Americans would lose a valuable ally in civil rights litigation.

In 1989, when investigators concluded that the Phelpses' accusations against the judges were false, they concluded that the lawyers had violated their ethical code, echoing an earlier complaint by a local lawyer who had noted "a mean streak" in the pastor-lawyer, saying that,

¹⁴⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Fred Phelps Timeline," *Intelligence Report* 101 (Spring 2001), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2001/spring/a-city-held-hostage/fred-phelps-timel>.

¹⁴⁷ Polczinski, "Fred Phelps Sr."

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Tompkins, "Phelps' Work Raises Hopes, and Questions."

“Sometimes he is so filled with hate when he takes after somebody, it becomes an obsession with him.”¹⁵⁰ Rather than fighting against the potential disbarment of all members of the family who were involved in the matter, Fred Phelps, Sr., agreed to surrender his license to practice in federal court if the other members of the family could retain their licenses. Fred Phelps, Sr., however, explains that he retired from the practice of law “to expose judicial corruption.”¹⁵¹ Phelps’ legal career ended ignobly but not unsurprisingly, even to him. Phelps continues to believe that it was his civil rights work, anti-gay activism, and defense of free speech that made him a threat to his peer lawyers and the judges of the state of Kansas who pushed for his removal from the profession. Though Margie Phelps was suspended from both Kansas and federal courts for a year and Fred Phelps, Jr., was suspended from both courts for six months, everyone else retained their licenses. Today, Betty Phelps is retired from the practice of law, which she admits she did not love as a career,¹⁵² and happily operates a licensed in-home daycare that serves the children of the church. Lizz Phelps works for the state as Director of Medicaid and Program Oversight. The remaining family members involved in the case that led to Fred Phelps, Sr.’s disbarment work as traditional lawyers.

Given his professed commitment to racial equality, how can Phelps’ vitriolic anti-gay activity be explained? Phelps himself uses theology to explain what some see as the contradiction between his commitment to civil rights for African-Americans and his commitment to anti-gay activism. Like other anti-gay rights churches that deny a similarity between sexuality and race or homophobia and racism, Westboro Baptist Church clearly states that “the Scripture doesn't support racism,” noting “God never says ‘thou shalt not be black.’ However, He does

¹⁵⁰ Polczinski, “Fred Phelps Sr..”

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Betty Phelps, interview with the author, April 11, 2010.

say, ‘Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.’ (Leviticus 18:22).”¹⁵³ Explained Fred Phelps in a letter to the *Topeka Capital-Journal*,

Gays and lesbians are not legitimate minorities entitled to government’s protection by force of law.... Legitimate minorities are characterized by immutable attributes of being—not by immoral, criminal acts of conduction, voluntarily engaged in. Skin color is an immutable attribute, not an immoral, criminal act voluntarily performed. Homosexuals are self-defined by immoral, sinful, criminal sex acts, voluntarily engaged in.¹⁵⁴

Such sentiments are shared by many anti-gay rights religious believers, including many African-Americans, who are often willing to vote for Religious Right candidates because of their conservative positions on social issues, despite disagreeing with these candidates on economic and foreign policy issues.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, historically black denominations frequently support anti-gay rights politics.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Are You Associated with a Militia, Aryan Nation, Nazi, KKK, or Any Other Similar Group?” God Hates Fags, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html>

¹⁵⁴ Fred Phelps, letter to the editor of *Topeka Capital-Journal*, March 8, 1998; Kansas Collection at Spencer Research Library. Italics and underlining in original.

¹⁵⁵ Wilcox’s research focuses on African-Americans in Washington D.C. during the presidential bid of Pat Robertson. (“Blacks and the New Christian Right: Support for the Moral Majority and Pat Robertson among Washington, D.C. Blacks,” *Review of Religious Research* 32, no. 1 (September 1990): 43-55. The thesis that African-American Protestants are often conservative on social issues and liberal on economic ones is revisited in *God’s Warriors: The Christian Right in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, 1992).

¹⁵⁶ Lawrence H. Williams, “The Influence of the Black Church on Black Parenting,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* (February 2009): 39-46. A recent example is California’s Proposition 8, which, in 2008, reversed that state’s laws to prohibit gay marriage and was supported by 70 percent of African-American voters, a rate much higher than any other ethnic or racial group (Karl Vick and Ashley Surdin, “Most of California’s Black Voters Backed Gay Marriage Ban,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/06/AR2008110603880.html>).



Figure 5. Cartoon from an undated press release produced by Westboro Baptist Church, referring to Topeka Mayor Joan Wagon and Human Relations Committee member Bill Beachy. The endorsement of Martin Luther King, Jr. has been imagined by both gay rights activists and anti-gay rights activists.

"Gay rights" degrades Black Americans, other minorities
Homosexuality is not a "minority"

Legitimate minorities (blacks, females, aged, disabled) are defined by innocent conditions of involuntary **BEING**, not by guilty **CONDUCT**, voluntarily engaged in! These filthy homosexuals deliberately engage in vile conduct condemned by God, man and nature, and then demand special treatment under the law. "It is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret." (Eph. 5:12)

IT'S TIME FOR DECENT PEOPLE to rise up and tell these moral freaks to get back in the closet where they belong, and stop bothering us with their filth!

Do homosexuals *really* face discrimination?

Historically accepted evidences of discrimination	BLACK AMERICANS	HOMOSEXUALS
Ever denied the right to vote?	Yes	NO
Ever face legal segregation?	Yes	NO
Ever denied access by law to public drinking fountains, restrooms?	Yes	NO
Ever denied access by law to businesses, restaurants, barber shops, etc.?	Yes	NO
Evidence of systematic discrimination in housing and jobs?	Yes	NO
Verifiable economic hardship as a result of discrimination?	Yes	NO

Degrading: "Gay rights" will destroy self-image of young African-American males

Figure 6. Excerpt from a Westboro Baptist Church-produced press release dated July 15, 1992, arguing that civil rights claims for gay people are not equivalent to civil rights claims for African-Americans and, in fact, dishonor the history of African-Americans.

Potentially, their shared history of civil rights struggle and their shared anti-gay theology may have contributed to Topeka's black population's long-lasting support of Fred Phelps' law

office. For example, in 1983, the president of the Wichita branch of the NAACP, Reverend D.D. Miller, noted, “Before Fred Phelps came on the scene, we couldn’t get an attorney in Wichita to touch a civil rights case,” while a NAACP representative from Topeka called him “a modern-day John Brown.”¹⁵⁷

Though Fred Phelps has now been retired from law for more than twenty years, the perception of him as a vicious litigator prepared to use the law as a weapon in personal vendettas has created long-term fear among local citizens and may have discouraged early efforts to counter pickets when they began shortly after the end of his law career. Because of both his litigious tenacity and his picketing, the city of Topeka has been described as “a city held hostage.”¹⁵⁸ In contrast to this perspective, Phelps sees himself as serving his adopted hometown, through his civil rights activism, his religious leadership, and his attempts at political office.

Political Aspirations

“If you want a law license to relieve the oppressed, you’re wasting your time,” Fred Phelps opined in 1994. “You can do more now by running for office and getting that platform to preach stuff and influence debate.”¹⁵⁹ Phelps ran for public office several times in his attempt to “do more” to “relieve the oppressed,” though he never won a seat. His earliest efforts were in 1966, when he ran for the Democratic nominee for the 45th District of the Kansas House of Representatives,¹⁶⁰ and over nearly four decades and across three generations, family members

¹⁵⁷ Tompkins, “Phelps’ Work Raises Hopes, and Questions.”

¹⁵⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, “A City Held Hostage,” *Intelligence Report* 101 (Spring 2001), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2001/spring/a-city-held-hostage>.

¹⁵⁹ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “Faxes, Pickets, Politics Carry Phelps’ Message,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps21.shtml.

¹⁶⁰ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 26, 2010.

have sought public office, not necessarily for the sake of winning but because, as Shirley Phelps-Roper says, “The process opens doors to speak.... The election is just the secondary by-product of the ability to timely say words, to draw eyes to a situation.”¹⁶¹ In their campaigns, Westboro Baptists use in-your-face tactics and language not necessarily to win voters but to draw attention to causes important to them.

Even when not running for office, though, Fred Phelps was active in the Democratic Party, working as an organizer for the state’s party for many years and housing campaign workers during Al Gore’s 1988 presidential campaign. Further, his son Fred Phelps Jr. hosted, in his own home, a fundraiser for Gore’s Senate campaign in 1989—a fact that Republicans sometimes highlight in efforts to link their political enemies to Fred Phelps.¹⁶² In return for their loyalty to the Democratic Party, members of the Phelps family were invited to President Bill Clinton’s inaugurations in 1992 and 1996, though, because of the party’s increasing support of gay rights, members of Westboro Baptist Church, who had, in fact, attended the 1992 event, chose to picket the 1996 one.¹⁶³ They doomed their public relationship with the national party when they picketed the funeral of Al Gore, Sr., the vice-president’s father, in 1998.¹⁶⁴ By that time, though, Fred Phelps was running for office himself, always as a Democrat but also as a critic of the party’s alleged appeasement of gay rights activists.

Fred Phelps ran again for office in 1990, when he won 6.7 percent of the Democratic vote in the state primary for governor, votes that, if they had been cast for incumbent governor John Carlin, would have not allowed the Democratic challenger—and eventual loser in the state-wide

¹⁶¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 26, 2010.

¹⁶² For just one example, see Mark D. Tooley, “The ‘God Hates Fags’ Left,” *FrontPage Magazine*, February 9, 2006, <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=5606>.

¹⁶³ Kerry Lauermann, “The Man Who Loves to Hate,” *Mother Jones*, March/April 1999, <http://motherjones.com/politics/1999/03/man-who-loves-hate>.

¹⁶⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Fred Phelps Timeline.”

election, Joan Finney—to win.¹⁶⁵ That same year, Phelps received 19.1 percent of the vote to be a replacement senator representing the state of Kansas in Washington, D.C.,¹⁶⁶ and two years later, he won an impressive 30.8 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary race for Senator against Gloria O’Dell in the spring of 1992.¹⁶⁷ This election was held *after* Westboro Baptist Church had begun its anti-gay picketing, and Fred Phelps’ campaign included numerous examples of anti-gay rhetoric, as illustrated in Figures 7, 8, and 9, which forced O’Dell to publicly defend her heterosexuality.

In 1994, Fred Phelps received only 3.4 percent of the votes in the Democratic primary for governor in a primary that included Joan Wagnon, who also failed to garner the party’s nomination.¹⁶⁸ Prior to running against her, Phelps had barraged Wagnon with questions about her sexuality, just as he had done to Gloria O’Dell, warning her that though she was “among my favorite fag-lovers and baby-killers, . . . unless there’s some honest-to-God confessing and repenting, I intend to clean your [clock] in 1994: 50,000 votes [which he had received in the previous primary for Senator against O’Dell] could decide the primary, and God-fearing Republicans could decide the general.”¹⁶⁹ Had he been running with the Republican Party, which frequently has explicitly anti-gay rights planks in its platform, the number of votes might have been much higher. In 1997, he lost badly in the race for mayor of Topeka.¹⁷⁰ In 1998, before Westboro Baptist Church made national news with its picket of Matthew Shepard’s funeral but

¹⁶⁵ Incumbent governor John Carlin lost the 1990 Democratic primary 79,217 votes to Joan Finney’s 79,217 votes; Fred Phelps received 11, 634 votes (“Election Statistics: 1990 Kansas Election Results,” *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html).

¹⁶⁶ “Election Statistics: 1990 Kansas Election Results,” *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html.

¹⁶⁷ Election Statistics: 1992 Kansas Election Results,” *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html).

¹⁶⁸ Election Statistics: 1994 Kansas Election Results,” *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html).

¹⁶⁹ Fred Phelps, open letter to Joan Wagnon, August 7, 1992, Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library.

¹⁷⁰ “Topeka Mayor—Primary,” *Our Campaigns*, <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=569791>.

after it had, nonetheless, conducted many funeral protests, Fred Phelps won 14.7 percent of the Democratic primary for governor,¹⁷¹ and, though he did not win, Fred Phelps Jr. garnered 26,054 votes in the Democratic primary for Attorney General—an impressive 25.7 percent.¹⁷² In this trajectory, Fred Phelps, Sr. increased his share of the votes in the first election he deployed anti-gay rhetoric, but he never won so many votes again, though people beyond the church did support him in future elections.

Support for Fred Phelps from Kansas Democrats might be less surprising than it first seems. First, Phelps' civil rights litigation gained him the respect of many of the state's African-Americans, people more likely to be registered Democrat than Republican and also likely to support a religiously anti-gay stance in politics, despite their political affiliation.¹⁷³ Further, Kansans have often voted against the advancement of gay rights. For example, in 1998, after it announced its plan to study issues relating to sexual orientation, Topeka's Human Relations Commission was abolished by the city council. Though it was reinstated after public protest, the commission was quite weakened.¹⁷⁴ The city's 2000 anti-hate resolution was similarly hard-fought, and the city council rejected a ban on discrimination against gay people in housing and employment in 2002, with council member Lisa Hecht, who had sponsored the bill, losing her re-election, presumably for her support of the legislation.¹⁷⁵ Finally, in 2005, the council voted 5-4 to approve an ordinance that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in hiring

¹⁷¹ "Election Statistics: 1998 Kansas Election Results," *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html. His running mate was Abe Ibrahim, a Palestine-born immigrant to Topeka who had served as an intelligence officer in the U.S. military (Jim McClean, "Sawyer, Miller Make Unconventional Choices to Fill Out Gubernatorial Tickets," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, June 11, 1998, http://cjonline.com/stories/061198/gov_govcandidates.shtml).

¹⁷² Election Statistics: 1998 Kansas Election Results," *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html).

¹⁷³ Michael A. Jones-Correa and David L. Leal, "Political Participation: Does Religion Matter?" *Political Research Quarterly* 54, no. 4. (December 2001): 765. See also, Clyde Wilcox and Leopoldo Gomez, "Religion, Group Identification, and Politics among American Blacks," *Sociological Analyses* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 271-285.

¹⁷⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Fred Phelps Timeline."

¹⁷⁵ Jodi Wilgoren, "Vote in Topeka Today Hangs on Gay Rights and a Vitriolic Local Protestor," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/01/national/01topeka.html?pagewanted=1>.

practices¹⁷⁶—but the law only applies to the municipality, not residents, who can consider sexuality a factor in hiring or firing an employee. Even this very weak law, which passed nearly fifteen years after the start of Westboro Baptist Church’s anti-gay picketing and won approval by only one vote, was seen by Westboro Baptists as an outrageous capitulation to gay rights advocates. The church promptly began a petition drive that aimed to repeal the ordinance as well as the 2002 hate crimes ordinance and to prevent the passage of any law that recognized gay people as a protected class for the following ten years.¹⁷⁷ On March 1, 2005, Topeka voted on the issue, with 53 percent voting to keep the city’s ban against discrimination based on sexual orientation in the municipality’s employment practices.¹⁷⁸ This means that 47 percent of voters were willing to side with Westboro Baptist Church in the church’s drive to overturn the ordinance. On April 5, 2005, Kansans voted in even larger numbers to amend the state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman.¹⁷⁹ Thus, many Kansans, while they may not agree with his tactics or even his theology, support Fred Phelps’ anti-gay rights agenda.

¹⁷⁶ “Time Article Focuses Debate,” *Capital-Journal*, February 22, 2005, http://cjonline.com/stories/022205/loc_articlefocus.shtml.

¹⁷⁷ Wilgoren, “Vote in Topeka Today Hangs on Gay Rights and a Vitriolic Local Protestor.”

¹⁷⁸ “Support in Unlikely Places,” *The Advocate*, April 12, 2005, 21.

¹⁷⁹ In Shawnee County, where Topeka is located, voters approved of a ban of same sex marriage 31,322 to 15,135. Overall, the vote to amend the state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman passed by seventy percent (“Election Statistics: 2005 Constitutional Amendment Results by County,” *Kansas Secretary of State*, http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html).

MAY-19-92 TUE 7:24

FAX NO. 0

P. 01

PH
8876Fred Phelps, Pastor
3701 West 12thWestboro Baptist Church
Topocka, Kansas 66604Since November, 1955
913-273-0338/FAX 9132739228

May 19, 1992

NEWS RELEASE

NO BULL DIKE IN U.S. SENATE

Last July 20, in an open letter to **BOB DOLE**, I stated that I would not allow either **DOLE** or **DAN GLICKMAN** a free pass to the U.S. Senate; **DOLE** because of his moral failures and his part in the decline of our nation, and **GLICKMAN** because the sodomite/baby-killer agenda is the cornerstone of his political base. **GLICKMAN** has since bowed out of the race.

However, **GLORIA O'DELL** has now popped up (the May 17 Capital-Journal says she's "mulling a challenge," and the May 19 Eagle says she's "an announced candidate for Dole's seat"). I am informed that **O'DELL** is a lesbian ala her hero, NOW President Ireland, and so I am herewith asking her point blank: **GLORIA**, are you a NOW lesbian? Yes or no? I'll take your silence on this issue for one week as a positive response.

IF she's a NOW lesbian, and **IF** she seeks the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate, I do not intend to allow **GLORIA O'DELL** a free pass to that nomination. If I could not abide **GLICKMAN's** affinity for sodomites in government, perforce I'll not tolerate the sodomite herself! due to the devastating effect such degenerates have on the moral tone of society.

APHELPS/O'DELL primary will give Kansas Democrats a classic opportunity to truly reveal whether sodomites control our party, as many believe, or whether Kansas Democrats will heed the wisdom of **NORB DREILING** last Washington Day: "Drop the homosexual agenda, or lose!"

Figure 4. A press release by Westboro Baptist Church, dated May 19, 1992, stating Fred Phelps' intention to challenge soon-to-be Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate Gloria O'Dell. Though Phelps says he has been "informed" that she is a lesbian and uses conditional statements to discuss her sexuality ("IF she's a NOW lesbian"), he also declares that he will interpret silence on the issue of her sexuality as evidence of lesbianism and announces his suspicion in a declarative headline.

Fred Phelps, Pastor
3701 West 12th Street
Westboro Baptist Church
Topsh, Kansas 66604
Since November, 1953
913-273-4138/FAX 913279228

KANSAS SHAME



Gloria O'Dell

AWAKE THOU THAT SLEEPEST

(Eph. 5:14)

ALL KANSANS -- DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS ALIKE -- MUST BE MADE AWARE OF THE MORAL HOLOCAUST NOW THREATENING OUR STATE: GLORIA O'DELL, A LESBIAN HOMOSEXUAL, HAS ANNOUNCED FOR THE U.S. SENATE, AND HOMOSEXUALS OUTSIDE KANSAS ARE POURING IN MONEY TO GET HER ELECTED.

NOMINATING O'DELL MEANS ACCEPTANCE OF THE HOMOSEXUAL AGENDA BY THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF KANSAS, FROM WHICH THE PARTY MAY NEVER BE ABLE TO RECOVER!

LESBIAN

NO BARNEY FRANK REPRESENTING KANSAS

USA TODAY • THURSDAY, MAY 21, 1992



O'DELL'S "FRIEND"

PRICE: Homosexuals "live very much like other people."

Barney Frank, who now represents part of Massachusetts and all gay people in Congress, also passed his Compulsory Heterosexuality final. He took a girl to his prom. "I was gay at the time, but I didn't tell her," he says.

Now Frank takes his lover, Herb Moses, with him to White House dinners.

("For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" -1 Cor. 14:8)

KANSAS CAN BE THE TRUMPET CALL: STOP HOMOSEXUAL IMMORALITY!

Immorality and homosexuality threaten the foundations of our society, and Kansas is historically famous for strong moral and family values. That wholesome image will be forever tarnished if a **LESBIAN HOMOSEXUAL** is even **nominated** for the U.S. Senate. We suffered enough when the greedy **BOB DOLE** betrayed the Bible standard of **ONE MAN, ONE WOMAN, ONE LIFETIME** and sloughed off the wife of his youth for the adulterous younger Elizabeth. We'll suffer irreparably if Kansas ignores Norb Dreiling's words of wisdom to Democrats: **DROP THE HOMOSEXUAL AGENDA, OR CONTINUE TO LOSE!**



Please join our **COMPANY**: "The Lord gave the word; great was the **COMPANY** of those that published it." (Psa. 68:11) Please make copies for others.

Figure 7. In an undated press release from 1993, Westboro Baptist Church attacks Democrat Gloria O'Dell, who was running in the state's primary for U.S. Senator, as a lesbian, identifying her alleged lover. Using tactics similar to ones adopted by other anti-gay rights activists, the authors link O'Dell to secretive and powerful gay activists from outside the region who seek to force a gay rights agenda on unsuspecting and wholesome Kansans.

JUL-27-92 MON 14:20

FAX NO. 91323286

P. 02
12
-8876

**ON AUG. 4
DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY**



VOTE PHELPS FOR U.S. SENATE

	<p>DEAR FELLOW DEMOCRAT:</p> <p>MY OPPONENT IS GLORIA O'DELL, A LESBIAN WHO PUSHES THE HOMOSEXUAL LIFESTYLE AND FAVORS SAME-SEX MARRIAGES. KANSAS DEMOCRATIC LEADERS WILL BRING SHAME TO OUR PARTY IF O'DELL IS NOMINATED AUG. 4 AS OUR CANDIDATE. I NEED YOUR VOTE FOR DECENCY AND FAMILY VALUES. PLEASE VOTE PHELPS FOR U.S. SENATE ON AUG. 4.</p>
--	---

FRED PHELPS



POLAD., PHELPS FOR U.S. SENATE, CHRIS DAVIS, TREAS.
1414 SW TOPEKA BLVD., TOPEKA, KS 66612, 913-234-4903

Figure 8. Fred Phelps announces that he is entering the Democratic primary race for the U.S. Senate in order to oppose Gloria O'Dell, whom he has identified as a lesbian, in this July 27, 1992 press release.

AUG- 5-92 WED 14:11

FAX NO. 91323286

P. 01

Fred Phelps, Pastor
3701 West 12th Street
Westboro Baptist Church
Topoka, Kansas 66604
Since November, 1955
913-273-0338/FAX 9132739228

WEEK 60 OF THE GREAT GAGE PARK DECENCY DRIVE

August 6, 1992

NEWS RELEASE

WBC will observe week 60 of peaceful protests against public sodomy in Gage Park on Aug. 9. Our lying Mayor FELKER and crooked Police Chief WEINKAUF, with sodomite Councilmembers like BETH MECHLER, continue to use our fag-ridden police dept. to obstruct justice and wink at illegal conduct at Gage Park.

DEMOFAGS NAME BULL DIKE O'DELL



LESBIAN

FINNEY'S new DEMOFAG PARTY has nominated a lesbian, GLORIA O'DELL, as their candidate for the U.S. Senate. Using her half-wit hatchet-fag JOHN BIRD to badger and hoodwink the gullible, FINNEY orchestrated O'DELL'S Pyrrhic Aug. 4 victory, thereby sealing her own as well as GAY GLORIA'S political doom in Kansas. Can't fool all the Democrats all the time!



PERVERT

50,000 DEMOCRATS VOTE FOR PHELPS



Despite FINNEY'S shameless and illegal manipulation of the Democratic Party, and despite the lying, hostile, pro-fag Kansas media, some 50,000 decent Kansas Democrats (nearly one-third of the Party's faithful) voted for FRED PHELPS, and against the militant homosexual agenda in the Aug. 4 U.S. Senate primary. PHELPS pledged to continue the campaign against BULL DIKE O'DELL to assure her defeat Nov. 3, and thereafter to begin the campaign to defeat PERVERT FINNEY in her Aug. '94 primary, and thereby wrest the Party from militant homosexual control.

Righteousness exalteth a nation. (Prov. 14:34)

Figure 9. After Gloria O'Dell is named the Democratic candidate in the 1992 race for the U.S. Senate, Westboro Baptist Church released this press release indicating disgust for the party and celebrating the votes that Fred Phelps received. O'Dell later lost the Senate contest to long-time Senator Robert Dole. Press release dated August 6, 1992.

When they voted to retain the city's ban on sexual orientation discrimination in city-wide hiring and firing, Topeka's citizens also voted against Jael Phelps, the granddaughter of Fred Phelps, who was then a nursing student running for city council. Though she finished last of the four candidates in the primary, with only five percent of the vote, Jael Phelps' main opponent in the primary was second-place primary finisher Tiffany Muller, the city's first openly gay council member.¹⁸⁰ Muller had been appointed to the council previously and so faced her first election in 2005. Though Muller spent much of her campaign talking about the need for supporting economic development, she also supported the city's anti-discrimination ordinance and opposed efforts to amend the state constitution to prohibit gay marriage.¹⁸¹ These issues, along with her sexuality, made Muller a target for Westboro Baptist Church, with Jael Phelps stating explicitly that she was running to expose Muller as a gay rights activist, "so the people of District 9 would know who the incumbent is. We have someone whose goal in life is to make it so the governmental stamp of approval is put on sin, and an abomination at that."¹⁸² While Muller was one of the top candidates in the primary, she lost in the general election to Richard Harmon. Though the 202 votes that Jael Phelps did win did not determine Muller's loss,¹⁸³ Westboro Baptist Church's relentless attacks on Muller may have both sparked and articulated an anti-gay vote in Topeka. Similarly, when Jael's father Jonathan Phelps ran for Topeka City Council against Dennis Dobson in 1993, a founder of Sunday in the Park without Fred, an anti-Westboro Baptist Church activist group that sought to discourage church members from their weekly Gage Park pickets, Dobson beat Jonathan Phelps in the primary but failed to capture enough votes to

¹⁸⁰ Tim Hrenchir, "Voting 'Yes,'" *Topeka Capital-Journal*, March 3, 2005.

¹⁸¹ Tim Hrenchir, "City Race Gets *Time* Coverage," *Capital-Journal*, February 12, 2005, http://cjonline.com/stories/021205/loc_councilrace.shtml.

¹⁸² Wilgoren, "Vote in Topeka Today Hangs on Gay Rights and a Vitriolic Local Protestor."

¹⁸³ Roy Bragg, "Topeka has Little Love for Hateful Preacher," *San Antonio Express-News*, April 10, 2005, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=NewsBank&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=10974BCE2F6AA4AB&p_docnum=9&p_queryname=3.

win in the general election.¹⁸⁴ As Shirley Phelps-Roper commented on the contest between anti-gay Jael Phelps and declared lesbian Tiffany Muller, while Topekans do not love the Phelps, they will not elect an openly gay council member.¹⁸⁵

In other words, the climate for the advancement of gay rights in Kansas has not been ideal and remains challenging, with or without the political leadership of Fred Phelps or his family members.¹⁸⁶ That climate allows Fred Phelps and his church members as much traction as they have gotten in local and state elections. When Fred Phelps lost his ability to practice law, he also lost his opportunity to be a public voice in the style to which he was accustomed, to act in public in ways that garnered him praise or instilled fear in would-be opponents, and to participate in civic life as an agitator for change or a defender of what he saw as right—but, despite his faith that public office is a better place than even the courtroom to achieve his anti-gay rights goals, he has not yet seen anyone associated with the church achieve his dream of public office.

Arrest Record of Fred Phelps and Other Church Members

Fred Phelps' legal difficulties go beyond those related to his work as a lawyer. A notable series of cases involved Shawnee County District Attorney Joan Hamilton, who campaigned on the promise to fully prosecute members of Westboro Baptist Church for violations of the law, provoking the ire of Phelps from the start of her tenure and insuring that she would be a target of Westboro Baptist Church pickets and faxes, which the church distributed widely. During and after her election, Hamilton found herself cruelly depicted in faxes that mocked her weight and her marriage. At one point, Westboro Baptists gained information about an exchange between

¹⁸⁴ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 26, 2010.

¹⁸⁵ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

¹⁸⁶ Brad Sears, "Kansas—Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Documentation of Discrimination," Documenting Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in State Employment, University of California Los Angeles School of Law, The Williams Institute: Los Angeles, September, 2009, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/05g290fb;jsessionid=4FE0B56ABECE5A1A04A813933208008D#page-1>

Hamilton and her husband in which Hamilton painfully addressed her feelings about a one-time sexual encounter she had had with a man named Syd (whose name would appear, enclosed in a heart, tattooed on the cartoon version of Hamilton that Westboro Baptists would use in faxes, as shown in Figure 10) while married and also discussed her personal pain at seeing her husband's ex-mistresses in Topeka. Westboro Baptists broadcast the news of the Joan and Jan Hamilton's marital troubles. The personal assault was humiliating, but it may have reinforced Hamilton's desire to aggressively prosecute church members.

Hamilton brought assault and battery charges against Westboro Baptist Church members for abusive behavior on the picket line. In March 1995, six members of the church were charged with misdemeanor assault and battery, battery, and criminal restraint in relation to a public brawl that had occurred at The Vintage Restaurant, an event now referred to as "The Vintage Massacre" by the church.¹⁸⁷ Unable to seat an impartial jury in the area, the judge moved the seven related trials to a neighboring county. In the end, church members were found guilty of only three charges.¹⁸⁸ Fred Phelps, Sr. was convicted of disorderly conduct and his grandson, twenty year old Ben Phelps, was found guilty of battery for spitting on Jerry Berger, owner of The Vintage, a restaurant in Topeka that employed an openly gay woman and that had long been a venue of Westboro Baptist Church picketing.¹⁸⁹ A similar outcome occurred in a 1996 trial. In 1993, brothers Jonathan and Tim Phelps and father and son Karl, who is no longer a member, and Charles Hockenbarger had been charged with misdemeanor battery and unlawful restraint in

¹⁸⁷ The church commemorates the day of the event each year with a picket of The Vintage (Westboro Baptist Church, "Westboro Baptist Church will Commemorate the 17th Anniversary of the Vintage Massacre on Fri., March 26, 5:30-7 pm, to Connect the Dots," March 26, 2010, http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/faxes/20100326_Vintage-Massacre-Connecting-the-Dots.pdf).

¹⁸⁸ Steve Fry, "Phelps Guilty; Appeal Planned." *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 12, 1995.

¹⁸⁹ Steve Fry, "Retrials to Start for Westboro Members," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, December 11, 1995.

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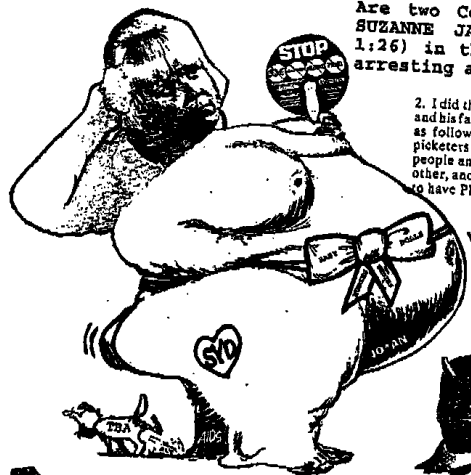
October 14, 1993 Westboro Baptist Church
3701 West 12th • P.O. Box 1886 • TOPEKA, KANSAS 66604
Office: 913/273-0325 Library: 913/273-0338

WEEK 122 OF THE GREAT GAGE PARK DECENCY DRIVE

NEWS RELEASE
WBC will observe week 122 of peaceful protests against public sodomy at Gage Park on Oct. 17 and each week until our cowardly Mayor & Council & Whore D.A. JO*AN HAMILTON enforce the law against anal copulating in public by their fag friends.

FLABBY WHORE D.A. PROSECUTES CHURCH FOR CALLING POLICE

Are two Courthouse Dykes, JO*AN HAMILTON & SUZANNE JAMES, having perverted sex (Rom. 1:26) in the courthouse? That would explain arresting a WBC member for calling the police!



AFFIDAVIT
2. I did then and there hear Joan Hamilton say words about Fred Phelps and his family and the members of Westboro Baptist Church substantially as follows: "You do not have to worry about Fred Phelps and his picketers if I am elected district attorney. I am going to take care of these people and get them off the streets. They must be violating some law or other, and if not it doesn't matter, and I will use my powers as prosecutor to have Phelps and his followers prosecuted and stopped."

FAG PASTOR GERALD WEEKS
First Lutheran Church has a fag pastor who attempts to murder WBC members for preaching God's truth Weeks & Bare-Butt Jan an item? Menninger perverts damn Topeka!

FAG WEEKS, A LAWLESS LIAR

IF IAN ONLY MOONED AT GAGE PARK WHAT'S ALL THAT VASELINE FOR?

IAN HAMILTON, HUSBAND OF D.A. CANDIDATE JOAN HAMILTON, EXPOSED HIMSELF AT GAGE PARK!

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears." 2 Tim. 4:3

Compliments of the KANSAS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Figure 10. A Westboro Baptist Church-produced press release, dated October 14, 1993, mocking District Attorney Joan Hamilton, who had been key in the prosecution of church members for an alleged attack on and false arrest of Rev. Gerald Weeks, depicted with horns in the lower center of the fax. Jan Hamilton, the District Attorney's husband, is depicted in the lower right of the page. He had "mooned" church members in counterprotest, but the image also implies his participation in anal sex, possibly with Weeks. The press release frames an attack on Joan Hamilton's sexuality as a question ("Are two Courthouse Dykes...having perverted sex...in the courthouse?") and criticizes her for an allegedly unwarranted attack on the church.

an incident involving Lutheran pastor William Gerald Weeks after the pastor, who had just hammered a sign that said “God’s Love Speaks Loudest” into the ground on church property, approached picketers outside of his church with the hammer still in his hand. According to Weeks, he threw the hammer down in disgust, not aiming it at anyone. Westboro Baptist Church picketers, however, interpreted his action as threatening and made a citizen’s arrest. At the conclusion of the trial three years later, though, only Charles Hockenbarger was found guilty.¹⁹⁰ When Hamilton also charged church members with criminal defamation, Fred Phelps responded by filing three lawsuits against Hamilton alleging wrongful prosecution. Initially, the court invalidated Kansas’ criminal defamation statute, preventing the prosecution of church members and awarding \$43,000 in legal fees to the original defendants. Though the Appeals Court would later reinstate the criminal defamation statute, the statute of limitations on the original charges had passed.¹⁹¹

The close call in Joan Hamilton’s charge of criminal defamation did not curtail church members’ offensive words, though, and in 1994, both Fred Phelps and daughter Margie were found to be in contempt of court by Shawnee County District Judge Michael Barbara. Fred Phelps was found to be in indirect contempt of court for words spoken on an August 14, 1994 radio sermon that insulted Judge Barbara, and Margie Phelps was found to be in direct contempt of court for offering a transcript of the sermon in a private meeting on September 20, 1994, allegedly for the purpose of forcing the judge to recuse himself.¹⁹² Family members continued to test the limits of legally defensible criticism of public officials, with Jonathan Phelps finding himself on trial in 1995 for disorderly conduct for calling a county employee a “whore,” a word he defended as an appropriate description of a person who abused a position of power but that

¹⁹⁰ Muneera Naseer, “1 Guilty, 3 Innocent in Trial of Picketers,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 24, 1996.

¹⁹¹ Steve Fry, “Retrials to Start for Westboro Members.”

¹⁹² Steve Fry, “Phelps, Daughter Convicted of Contempt,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, October 20, 1994.

the employee interpreted as a sexual slur.¹⁹³ Since the late 1990s, church members have been far more deliberate in limiting their liability by controlling church members' behavior on the picket line, and arrests, though they still occur, no longer center on picketer interactions with passersby.

Accusations and Denials of Abuse

Accusations of domestic violence, in the form of physical abuse of children, within Fred Phelps' household were first recorded in 1972, when Nate Phelps, the sixth child in the family of thirteen children, refused to wear shorts and a t-shirt for gym class out of fear that his clothes would reveal his bruises, he says. According to Nate Phelps, the police were called to the school, and the child welfare workers intervened, appointing an attorney to represent Nate Phelps and an unnamed brother. The boys, fearing that their father would punish them if they were honest about the abuse they received at home, lied to their court-appointed lawyer. In accordance with juvenile law, the court documents have been sealed, the outcome is unknown, and no action was taken against Fred Phelps.¹⁹⁴

However, the child abuse case is referenced in a 1972 lawsuit Fred Phelps filed against a cohort of lawyers, Judge Kay McFarland, and some county commissioners in Shawnee County, alleging that a "political machine" was controlling Shawnee County and that the county was misusing funds.¹⁹⁵ Though the case was dismissed, the defendants suggested that Phelps' suit may have been a response to the child abuse case, over which Judge McFarland had presided.¹⁹⁶ If this was the case, it was not the first time that Fred Phelps was accused of using the law to avenge himself against someone who had crossed him.

¹⁹³ Steve Fry, "Retrials to Start for Westboro Members."

¹⁹⁴ Taschler and Fry, "Phelps Controlled Children's Lives, Sons Say."

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Twenty-two years later, Nate Phelps and Mark Phelps, both of whom left the church in when they became adults, reiterated accusations of physical abuse, and, since 2009, Nate Phelps, the executive director of the Alberta branch of the atheist organization Center for Inquiry Canada, has been on a speaking tour to promote laws that would better protect victims of religiously-based violence, drawing from his own experience in his talks. According to Nate Phelps, his father regularly beat his children, first with a leather strap, then with a mattock, similar to an axe handle, for up to four hours. The physical violence was paired with emotional and verbal abuse, though the children were always provided with necessities such as food and clothing, the brothers reported to the *Capital-Journal* in 1994.¹⁹⁷ Beatings occurred, according to Nate Phelps, anytime his father was upset, and so the children soon learned to avoid angering him, creating a home environment similar to “a war zone where things were unpredictable and things were very violent,” according to Mark Phelps, who recalled that “[w]e had to watch out for this madman.”¹⁹⁸

According to Nate and Mark Phelps, their mother was also a victim of physical violence at the hands of their father.¹⁹⁹ Though she would corporally punish her sons, her actions did not amount to physical abuse, according to Nate Phelps. Instead, Nate Phelps views her as a victim, both of physical violence and of theology, which was used to control and psychologically abuse her, saying, “My overarching feeling about her is that she is a victim like everyone else.”²⁰⁰

Mark Phelps recalled a time when he saw his mother beaten:

¹⁹⁷ Jon Taschler and Steve Fry, “No Sparing of the Rod, Sons Recall,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps09.shtml.

¹⁹⁸ Jon Taschler and Steve Fry, “Life in a ‘War Zone’,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps02.shtml

¹⁹⁹ Taschler and Fry, “No Sparing of the Rod, Sons Recall.”

²⁰⁰ Sarah Hampson, “After Years of Silence, Nate Phelps Faces Off with His Anti-Gay Father,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), June 28, 2010, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/family-and-relationships/after-years-of-silence-nate-phelps-faces-off-with-his-anti-gay-father/article1621441/>.

I'll never forget the time when he wasn't happy about her weight and I was older by now.... Right in front of me he beat her with the mattock. He beat my mom with that mattock. I mean it was a real, real degrading, humiliating kind of experience to watch your mother treated like that.²⁰¹

Nate Phelps suggests that it was the fundamentalist belief in the Bible's passages about wifely obedience and the Calvinistic belief that everything is foreordained that prevented their mother from fighting back and justified, even to his father, the use of the "instructive fist" of physical violence.²⁰² His father terrorized his mother with the Bible, he said, at one point chopping off her hair as a sign of her failure to obey him, an act that made young Nate Phelps fear that his mother would go to hell.²⁰³ He does recall, however, one attempt that Margie Phelps made to leave his father, an attempt, he said, that was doomed to failure since, at the time, she had so many children and no money. She soon returned to his father.²⁰⁴

Church members, too, were encouraged to use physical violence against children in the church, even those not their own, says Nate Phelps. In an interview on Kansas City's public radio station, Nate Phelps said that his father would interrupt his preaching if a child was not paying attention or was being disruptive in the service and instruct a nearby congregant to hit the child. Religiously justified, authorized, and commanded violence were the norm, he says.²⁰⁵

The family-wide consequences of the violence were traumatizing, according to Mark Phelps, who admitted to beating his brother Nate Phelps when his father demanded it, recalling that his father ordered him, "You beat him. I want to hear it or you're both going to get beat."

²⁰¹ Taschler and Fry, "No Sparing of the Rod, Sons Recall."

²⁰² Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center, April 24, 2010.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Nate Phelps, interview by Walt Bodine and Gina Kaufman, *The Walt Bodine Show*, KCUR, June 14, 2010, <http://archive.kcur.org/kcurViewDirect.asp?PlaylistID=7469>.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

To his adult horror, Mark Phelps obeyed: “So I beat him. I beat Nate with a mattock. My brothers and sisters are entitled to hate me.”²⁰⁶ Eventually, though, both Mark and Nate Phelps left the church and worked together in the printing business in California for decades before Nate Phelps moved to Canada.

Physical violence was only one way that their father controlled them, Mark and Nate Phelps claim. Another often-cited example is the children’s candy sales. As recalled by Topekans the children of the family solicited, the Phelps children sold candy door-to-door during the 1960s and 1970s to support their large family. After school, the children would visit the local area, but, said Nate Phelps, they would travel to larger areas in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska on weekends,²⁰⁷ often selling in bars and other seedy places where they were exposed to violence and to lifestyles their father certainly would have considered sinful.²⁰⁸ According to Mark Phelps, the children were originally permitted to keep a percentage of the money they earned, but eventually their father demanded that they turn all of it over to him.²⁰⁹

Control of his children’s work choices did not end with candy sales, claims Nate Phelps. For example, all of Fred Phelps’ children were groomed to be lawyers, and all other career paths were discouraged.²¹⁰ While neither Mark nor Nate Phelps attended law school, all of their other siblings, including sisters Dortha²¹¹ and Kathy Phelps-Griffin, both of whom have also left the church, did, as did four of the spouses of Fred and Margie’s children: Betty Phelps, Lee Ann Phelps, Chris Davis, and Brent Roper. Becky Phelps-Davis, a lawyer at the family firm, admits that she was not enthusiastic about law school and would have preferred a career in nursing,

²⁰⁶ Taschler and Fry, “Life in a ‘War Zone’.”

²⁰⁷ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “Candy: ‘It was the Only Income We Had,’” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps10.shtml.

²⁰⁸ Nate Phelps, *The Walt Bodine Show*..

²⁰⁹ Taschler and Fry, “Candy.”

²¹⁰ Taschler and Fry, “Phelps Controlled Children’s Lives, Sons Say.”

²¹¹ Dortha Phelps has changed her name to protect her privacy. I refer to her here only by her first name.

something that many of her nieces and nephews have pursued.²¹² Likewise, Betty Phelps, wife of Fred Phelps, Jr., practiced as a lawyer for many years but then switched to a career in early childhood education, which she much prefers,²¹³ and Rachel Hockenbarger attempted a career in teaching after law school, teaching paralegal classes at a local career college, before turning to law full time.²¹⁴ Steve Drain, who was not reared in the congregation, attended but did not complete law school, though he has an advanced degree in philosophy.²¹⁵ In fact, none of Fred Phelps' grandchildren have careers in law.

Mark and Nate Phelps also accuse their father of dictating who church members could marry, a major reason why Mark Phelps left the church. As a teen, he had a girlfriend, Luava, who was not in the church and was opposed to joining. His decision to marry Luava set him at odds with his father, and he moved from the Topeka area in 1981.²¹⁶ Similarly, Nate Phelps' marriage to a divorced woman in California reinforced his status as an outsider in the eyes of his siblings,²¹⁷ though he stresses that he had left the church before he met his future wife.²¹⁸ The siblings who remain faithful to the church agree with Nate and Mark Phelps that the church does influence marriage partners in the sense that the church discourages exogamy and responds to it by excluding members who marry non-members, for “[a]s a servant of God getting married—there is only one requirement—that you marry a servant of the Loving God—some person than serves the Lord their God with all their heart, sould, and mind! PERIOD.”²¹⁹ For example, in his March 1993 testimony in the Shawnee District Court in a case against a motorist who allegedly tried to run over several church members while they were picketing, Jonathan Phelps admitted

²¹² Rebekah Phelps-Davis, interview with the author, March 15, 2010.

²¹³ Betty Phelps, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

²¹⁴ Rachel Hockenbarger, interview with the author, July 24, 2010.

²¹⁵ Steve Drain, email to the author, April 30, 2009.

²¹⁶ Taschler and Fry, “Phelps Controlled Children’s Lives, Sons Say.”

²¹⁷ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

²¹⁸ Nate Phelps, email to the author, July 31, 2010.

²¹⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 28, 2006.

that he had temporarily left the church after the church told him that his choice was unacceptable because the woman was not an adherent to their faith; however, he returned without her in February 1988. Similarly, Kathy Phelps-Griffin, who is no longer a church member, married a non-member during a time when she was excluded, then later returned to the church.

According to Nate Phelps, his father even attempted to control the bodies of his wife and children. Nate Phelps recalls that, during law school, his father became embroiled in a “toxic cycle of uppers and downers” to help him study, then sleep. The addiction hurt his health, and he gained weight. Faced with his health problems, says Nate Phelps, his father, “true to his character,” became obsessed with health, including the health of all of his family members. Nate Phelps recalls a rigorous running program, about which “none of the children dared complain.”²²⁰ The culmination was the 1970 Memorial Day “Heart of America” marathon, in which all of the Phelps children who joined the race, aged seven through seventeen, plus Fred Phelps, finished.²²¹

Nate Phelps reports that his father’s obsession with health went beyond exercise to diet. He recalls a 47-day water fast and other fad diets. His father, he says, developed a “finely tuned disdain for overweight people,” justified by the Biblical reminder that “the body is a temple.”²²² According to Nate Phelps, his father made frequent hurtful comments regarding Nate’s weight and the weight of another sibling, and Mark Phelps recalled witnessing his mother being beaten for weighing too much. Nate Phelps claims that the abuse led, for him, to eating disorders, including bingeing, purging, and fasting, and amphetamine use.²²³

²²⁰ Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center.

²²¹ “1970 Results,” *Heart of America Marathon*, <http://ctc.coin.org/hoa/results/1970.htm>.

²²² Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center.

²²³ *Ibid.*

The accusations of physical abuse are serious and detailed, and Nate Phelps, in particular, has devoted considerable energy to fighting against religiously-justified physical, emotional, and psychological violence against children, partnering with the Richard Dawkins' Foundation for Reason and Science to support his speaking tour on the issue, and he has told his story on numerous radio and television programs across the U.S. and Canada and also maintains an active blog. However, evaluating the charges is difficult, in part there is no open legal record of any kind of abuse.

Abuse of all kinds in churches is far more common than believers prefer to admit,²²⁴ but religious groups already outside the boundary of "respectable" religion are frequently the object of such charges. For example, accusations of abuse were hurled frequently at the nineteenth-century Oneida Perfectionist community in New York and polygamous Mormons,²²⁵ and, more recently, the Yearning for Zion community of fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints saw its compound in Texas raided and its children removed amid accusations of sexual abuse later found to be mostly untrue.²²⁶ At the same time, religious communities may give sanctuary to various sorts of abusers, fearful of the negative publicity that revealing abuse will bring, and religious texts and traditions may be used to control victims. Notes Leo Booth, religious abuse is present when participants have no choice and there is "no room for differing opinions and beliefs."²²⁷

In light of this definition, Nate and Mark Phelps' claims that Westboro Baptist church abuses people by forcing them to choose between membership and marrying a non-believer

²²⁴ Bette L. Bottoms, Michael Nielsen, Rebecca Murray, and Henrietta Filipas, "Religion-related Child Physical Abuse: Characteristics And Psychological Outcomes," in *Emerging Issues In The Victimization of Children: Trends, Patterns, and Problems*, edited by Janet L. Mullins, James W. Marquart, and Deborah J. Hartley (Binghamton, NY: Haworth, 2003): 87-114.

²²⁵ For a discussion of these groups, see Sarah Barringer Gordon, "Blasphemy and the Law of or Religious Liberty in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (December 2000): 682-719.

²²⁶ Scott Michells, "Court: Texas Had No Right to Keep Polygamy Kids; Appeals Court Overrules Decision Placing Sect Kids in State Custody," *ABC News*, May 22, 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=4911318&page=1>.

²²⁷ Leo Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction & Abuse* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1991), 112..

would qualify as abuse, but the church interprets such control as merely working in unison, with the whole church in agreement about standards and how they apply, with those disagreeing unwelcome into the body.²²⁸ Emmanuel Sivan notes that within a religious enclave, members claim that the regulation of behavior serves to keep members virtuous according to the community's standards, "on a par with other insiders, superior to all outsiders."²²⁹ Unlike other organizations, religious organizations claim that the purpose of such regulation is "not just for the benefit of other human beings" but "for a higher entity."²³⁰

Leo Booth suggests, as do Nate and Mark Phelps, that the source of religious abuse is in the personality of the abuser rather than in the demand of God, which is how religious abusers justify their behavior. Says Booth, "A religious addict's need to control, judge, and proselytize makes abuse a virtual imperative."²³¹ Certain religious structures may give rise to or at least tolerate this kind of behavior: religions that are focused on behavior, sin, and evangelism. While Westboro Baptist Church is not evangelical, members certainly hope that their children will remain in the church. Further, Westboro Baptist Church endorses the kind of biblical literalism, belief in the sinful nature of humanity, and punitive attitude toward sinners that marks authoritarian child-rearing values.²³² Religious historian John G. Crowley comments more broadly that "[t]hroughout their history... Primitive Baptists have often submitted tamely for generations to the rule of charismatic authoritarian ministers,"²³³ words that many would say characterize Fred Phelps. Wrote Mark Phelps about his father in a 1993 open letter to Topekans:

²²⁸ Megan Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

²²⁹ Emmanuel Sivan, "The Enclave Culture," in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 56.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug*, 92.

²³² Christopher G. Ellison and Darren E. Sherkat, "Obedience and Authority: Religion and Parental Values Reconsidered," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32 (1993): 326.

²³³ John G. Crowley, "The Primitive or Old School Baptists," in *The Baptist River: Essays on the Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition*, edited by W. Glenn Jonas, Jr. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006), 178.

He can seem very intimidating. He can use foul language and come across with a booming voice to the community, but the truth is, like the Wizard of Oz, when Toto pulls the curtain back, instead of this big powerful individual, it's only a small, pathetic old man.

I feel sorry for my father as I would for anyone who displays this kind of hate and evil viciousness. These can only be the manifestations of tortured, injured and agonizing souls.²³⁴

In seeking to understand his father's church, Mark Phelps looks to his father's personality and opts to understand him with pity, theorizing that the pastor has an internal problem that he has not addressed. Nate Phelps suggests that his father's theology shaped him into an angry person, "as though he's taken on the emotion that he imagines that God has."²³⁵ Others have suggested that Fred Phelps is a narcissist or a victim of sexual violence himself or struggling against his own homosexual desires. These accusations of repressed homosexuality are often deployed as the creators' self-described humorous counters to Phelps' own homophobic message (See Figures 11, 12, and 13), but they are also occasionally said with compassion, not only for the pastor but for those whom his suspected psychological problems have damaged. Fred Phelps dismisses them entirely, saying, "God is my witness that I have never had thought to do carnally with any creature, save my wife."²³⁶ While not committing his father to life-long purity of thought, Nate Phelps also dismisses the idea that unwanted homosexual desire drives his father.²³⁷

²³⁴ Mark W. Phelps, "Letter from a Son who Left" (Dated May 19, 1993), *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1993, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps03.shtml.

²³⁵ Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center.

²³⁶ "America is Going the Way of Sodom and Gomorrah," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps20.shtml.

²³⁷ Interview with Nate Phelps, *The Standard*, Television Series, Hosted by Peter Klein (2010; Vancouver: VisionTV) <http://vimeo.com/10584739>.)



Figures 11 and 12. In the 1990s, counterprotestors altered photographs to make Fred Phelps look like a transvestite or snake-handler. As photo-shop technology became more widely available, pranksters and counterprotestors sponsored online “Fred Phelps Photoshop” contests. Images often include Phelps’ trademark white cowboy hat or University of Kansas or Kansas City Chiefs apparel. They recall images from pornographic movies, as the mock movie poster on the left does, and are likely to include images of Fred Phelps engaging in anal or oral same-sex contact or cross-dressing. Undated images taken from Google images, http://www.google.com/images?q=images+fred+phelps&hl=en&safe=off&prmd=ivo&source=lnms&tbs=isch:1&ei=QSx4TJ7xAcL98Aak0JCZBw&sa=X&oi=mode_link&ct=mode&sqi=2&ved=0CAsQ_AU&biw=1024&bih=579.



Figure 13. Perhaps drawing from recent examples of anti-gay religious leaders who are caught in same-sex affairs, including Ted Haggard, George Rekers, and Eddie Long, two young men question Fred Phelps' sexuality in a counterprotest. Undated Photograph available at http://www.google.com/images?q=fred+phelps+he%27s+gay+photo&hl=en&prmd=ivo&source=lnms&tbs=isch:1&ei=HgadTLfPDcScIgfj39HnCQ&sa=X&oi=mode_link&ct=mode&ved=0CAcQ_AU&biw=1366&bih=523.

Given that a psychological evaluation of Fred Phelps is unlikely to occur, researchers can only look to other sources to validate or discredit claims of physical, emotional, psychological, or other kinds of abuse within the church. The Phelps children who remain loyal to the church deny their brothers Nate's and Mark's allegations. Fred Phelps Sr., Fred Phelps Jr., and Margie Phelps all denied the claims in interviews with the press,²³⁸ as have Lizz Phelps, Rebekah Phelps-Roper, and Rachel Hockenbarger.²³⁹ They agree that they were "appropriately

²³⁸ "Allegations of Abuse Denied," Associated Press, *Topeka Capital-Journal* August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps12.shtml.

²³⁹ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "We Weren't Beaten, Phelps Siblings Say," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps23.shtml.

disciplined” and that they were occasionally spanked, but they deny the violence that Nate Phelps alleges. “[D]id we get beat, like they described? No,” Margie Phelps said in an interview in Topeka’s *Capital-Journal*. “Nor were they, for that matter.”²⁴⁰

Church members discount any possible reconciliation between their version of their childhood and their estranged brothers’. For example, though Nate Phelps recognized that he received “70 percent of everything [Fred Phelps, Sr.] dished out,” in part, he says, because of his questioning nature and admittedly rebellious attitude,²⁴¹ his siblings deny that he was singled out for physical abuse. Nate Phelps admits, and his siblings agree, that he was more of a troublemaker than his siblings, including brother Mark, and Margie recognized that Nate Phelps was disciplined more frequently, though, she contends, no more harshly, than his siblings.²⁴² His siblings likewise reject the theory that Nate Phelps could have been physically abused to the extent to which he claims without their knowledge, and they deny that their father’s parenting style changed over the rearing of his thirteen children.²⁴³

In the end, they all deny the physical abuse that Nate and Mark Phelps claim, though Shirley Phelps-Roper admits that the punishments that her parents used on her generation of children were probably harsher than those used on her peers and harsher than she and her siblings or her children or nieces and nephews use on theirs.²⁴⁴ Abigail Phelps, the youngest of Fred and Margie Phelps’ children, further notes that their sister Kathy Phelps-Griffin, who has also left the church, has likewise denied such claims, even though she is no longer a church member and thus has no motivation to deny the charges if they were true. Abigail Phelps argues

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ Taschler and Fry, “No Sparing of the Rod, Sons Recall.”

²⁴² Taschler and Fry, “We Weren’t Beaten, Phelps Siblings Say.”

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

that if her brother Nate's physical abuse was as extensive as he claims, he should "be in the graveyard."²⁴⁵

Nate Phelps' siblings contend that his accusations are motivated by profit. "He's been pimping a 'book' for 20 years," says Abigail Phelps dismissively in response to her brother's speaking campaign,²⁴⁶ which sister Lizz Phelps calls his "God-is-too-extreme for me tour."²⁴⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper notes that Nate Phelps' audience of outraged Americans is eager to hear tales of horror about the church. "Nathan is selling a book," she says, and "he will say anything because he knows that you (as in Doomed America) will take anything he says and run with it."²⁴⁸ Nate and Mark Phelps' father saw a different motive in a 1994 newspaper interview: "They're trying to justify their backsliding. I feel sorry for them."²⁴⁹ Years later, Abigail Phelps accepted that as an explanation, too, saying that Nate Phelps left the church, finally, because he wanted to marry a divorced woman, and his recent anti-church activism has been fueled by his defensiveness over what she sees as a similar issue: his divorce from his first wife, with whom he had two children and a step-child, and move to Canada in order to be with a woman he met online and avoid paying child support.²⁵⁰ This explanation echoes one her father offered in 1994:

Those boys didn't want to stay in this church. It was too hard. They took up with girls they liked, and the last thing them girls was gonna do was come into this church. These boys wanted to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. I can't blame them. I just feel sorry for them that they're not bound for the promised land.²⁵¹

²⁴⁵ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ Elizabeth Phelps, email to the author, April 17, 2010.

²⁴⁸ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 13, 2010.

²⁴⁹ Taschler and Fry, "We Weren't Beaten, Phelps Siblings Say."

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Taschler and Fry, "Life in a 'War Zone'."

His children agree that their brothers' accusations stem from theological and disciplinary disagreements. Argues Fred Phelps Jr., "There's a real, gut, strong visceral disagreement they have with what we believe in and with what we stand for." Margie Phelps concurs: "They're angry about it. They just don't agree with what we believe," and as long as that disagreement continues, Mark and Nate Phelps will continue to make false claims, they believe.²⁵²

Current church members are quick to note that Nate Phelps has not had firsthand experience with the church since he left decades ago,²⁵³ though Nate says that he is in contact with other defectors, including his sister Kathy Phelps-Griffin, brother Mark Phelps, and several nieces and nephews. Some of Nate Phelps' information—such as his inclusion of his sister Kathy as a peripheral member—is outdated.

The presence of nine of the thirteen siblings who remain and have an apparently happy relationship with Fred Phelps is invoked by church members to counter the claims of their estranged brothers. Counting his blessings in a 1994 interview, Fred Phelps included the facts that "[t]he wife of my youth abides with me still. That's great. Nine of my 13 children love me—too much—and hover around me. Almost every day, I get awakened by some little happy grandchild jumping on the bed."²⁵⁴ To this day, the patriarch of the church spends the moments after the sermon holding, hugging, and engaging his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The continued presence in the church of the siblings who he claims witnessed physical abuse saddens Nate Phelps, who wonders, "How difficult is it for them to simply call me a liar in the face of all this. I am certain that at some very profound level in their brain they do not consider it a lie."²⁵⁵

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Taschler and Fry, "We Weren't Beaten, Phelps Siblings Say."

²⁵⁴ "'Pure Happiness' Can Leave Phelps Sleepless," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps19.shtml.

²⁵⁵ Nate Phelps, email to the author, July 26, 2010.

Like his siblings who deny the physical abuse, Nate Phelps has no satisfactory way to reconcile their conflicting stories and remains frustrated with those inside the congregation:

There is a part of me that struggles terribly with "turning on my family". There is a part of me that rages at my siblings [sic] dismissal of what amounts to classic, brutal abuse. There is a part of me that sincerely wonders how they justify a public lie when they fashion themselves as god's [sic] only true believers.²⁵⁶

Though Nate Phelps rightly points out that, when he left at age 18, he was without the emotional or material support of his family and that in itself discourages departing,²⁵⁷ the siblings who remain are all established adults who could live independently of their father; indeed, as their father ages, he needs more care from them than he provides for them. Daughter Margie Phelps looks to the interactions between her father and the children of the congregation for evidence of his abusive nature and finds none, saying “There's a lot of interaction between my dad and his grandchildren, and it's good interaction.”²⁵⁸

To assess the claim of physical abuse differently, while Nate and Mark Phelps' claims are difficult to validate, there is no evidence of physical violence among Fred Phelps' grandchildren and great-grandchildren beyond spanking practices that are similar to those occurring in other conservative Christian churches, and the only evidence even for these is through the testimony of parents and children, not eyewitness accounts; in other words, during my research, I never saw or heard a child treated with any level of violence during a church service, at family gatherings, in the homes of interviewees, or while on a picket, even as I did witness the misbehavior of children.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center.

²⁵⁸ Taschler and Fry, “We Weren't Beaten, Phelps Siblings Say.”

In church services, the children's attention is organized either toward the service through the use of sermon notes or toward small, quiet toys. Children who are disruptive or inattentive are not currently, as Nate Phelps describes during his growing up years, punished with violence in the church setting. Instead, parents redirect them or remove them to an adjoining room where the parent can care for them while still hearing the sermon. Those younger people who have left the church in recent years, including Libby Phelps, daughter of Fred Phelps Jr., and Betty Phelps, and Lauren Drain, daughter of Steve and Luci Drain, have spoken publically about their exits but have not made claims of physical abuse. This is not to dismiss Nate and Mark Phelps' claims of physical abuse during their childhood but only to note that the problems that they identify with the church do not seem present today

At the same time, the high level of conformity among church members may be seen as evidence of physical, emotional, or psychological abuse—or, alternatively, of cohesion. For example, recently, Fred and Margie Phelps' children and daughters and sons-in-law, now all adults, recognized that some of their health problems were due to weight, which prompted a church-wide discussion about what their weight reflected about the church. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper:

[W]e got into the scriptures and a lot of people weighted in on the matter, and we realized that letting our moderation show forth to all men INCLUDES the concept of not having people that are grossly overweight. So—in the last two months or so every last person that fits into that category set about to put their affairs in order in that regard.

Shirley Phelps-Roper links behavior to religion: the church's Biblical focus on "letting our moderation show forth to all men" requires a behavioral change. As a unit, the church made this

choice. Notably, the goal is to not have people who are obese; Shirley Phelps-Roper does not specify if this included the possibility that those who refused to cooperate or who failed at their weight loss would be excluded. Shirley Phelps-Roper does, however, recognize the initial difficulty of bringing the group to consensus:

You will understand as you talk to some of us—we are a group of educated and strong minded people. The down side is to that kind of people is strong independence—not wanting anyone to tell us what to do—sort of.

However, members note repeatedly, all people within the church have a duty to bring their thoughts and behaviors “into captivity to Christ,” meaning that their thoughts and actions must adhere to the church’s agreed-upon interpretation of scripture and its application to their individual and collective lives. The result, for those who align their thoughts and behaviors easily, is harmony with and support from the church body. For example, those who found themselves the target of the church’s campaign against excess weight—as Nate Phelps did during his growing up years—were also supported in their efforts, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, who noted that those with only a little extra weight soon dieted “just to support those that needed to” because “the best thing we have to offer each other is our example.” Church members organized potlucks with healthier food and labeled the nutritional content of items they brought. As members lost weight, they offered congratulations to each other.²⁵⁹

The process of disciplining members—first, by finding scriptural passages that address a problem, then providing a structure and support network for making a change, then celebrating the change, all the while allowing the potential theological and social consequences for failure to change to loom—is quite effective. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper,

²⁵⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, April 6, 2005.

It's really awesome to watch the way issues like that come about and resolve themselves. Not in any hostile fashion, but with good solid words that have a foundation in the scriptures and in reason and common sense.

This process can be explicit, as it was for the church's weight loss efforts, or a subtle kind of pressure. In the end, though, those who remain in the church unite in many choices, from the kind of minivan the families choose (Honda Odysseys) to the jobs they take (overwhelmingly in law, nursing, and computers) to the houses they buy (nearly all within walking distance of the church). For those who view these choices as evidence of cultish mind-control, church members have easy answers: Honda's minivan is the best in its class; the jobs they take are respectable, well-paying, and secure; and the choice to live near each other makes serving the church easier and reinforces their sense of community.

Proximity to the church building is important because members spend considerable time in service to the church's mission. Rachel Hockenbarger, Fred and Margie Phelps' twelfth child, estimates that she spends one to two hours per day doing church work, in addition to her job as a lawyer and her mothering of seven young children, with more time spent on church work on the weekends.²⁶⁰ In addition, in living close to the church, church members consequently live close to each other and can provide each other with assistance. For example, Betty Phelps, wife of Fred Phelps Jr., provides in-home childcare for younger children of the church, and older children, when school is not in session, are organized into work teams. Depending on their age, they are dispersed throughout the homes in the area to complete ability-appropriate jobs such as weeding flower beds, painting, or staining fences.²⁶¹ One result is that children who grow up in the church learn a variety of home-repair skills, and parents in the congregation, all of whom

²⁶⁰ Rachel Hockenbarger, interview with the author, July 24, 2010.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

work in addition to rearing large families, are supported by the labor of their children. This frees some time for them to care for each other's children, too; for example, church members organize their schedules so that if children are too ill to attend school, a single church member cares for all sick children so that multiple parents do not miss work. Similarly, they work together on home repairs, such as plumbing, that can only be completed by adults.

The effect is that the church property, where Fred and Margie Phelps live, and adjoining homes are less like a compound, as they are commonly described,²⁶² and more like a commune, where much of the work of raising children, caring for houses, and generating food is shared. Church members have built a privacy fence around the perimeter of the block where the church sits. Inside, a full basketball court, a volleyball court, a pool, a trampoline, and a jungle gym are accessed via the backdoors to the homes of several of the church's families. Others live across the street in their own homes, but the area enclosed within the fence is accessed by all. From without, the image is of a tightly controlled space—the church door, after all, is always locked, and the doorbell does not work—but from within, it is seen as a sanctuary and a place of harmony. According to the church's website, those who join the church are promised a pleasant life:

Go with us; the way is good! THIS is a good land, a favored land, and a land of life, health, and happiness to anyone that would obey the Living and True God, the God that created all things seen and unseen!²⁶³

²⁶² For example, a reporter for the *Santa Fe Reporter* notes, "Critics of the church simply call it The Compound because they see hints of Waco (or just wacko) when they look over the walls" (Nathan Dinsdale, "Father Knows Best," *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872.) Church members are familiar with the accusation that Westboro Baptist Church is a cult and find the description insulting (Mike Hall, "Phelps Offended by 'Cult' Remark," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, December 28, 1995).

²⁶³ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQS: How Do I Join You?" *God Hates Fags*, http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Eat_Babies. Bold in original.

Anyone who views this community from the inside, assures Sam Phelps-Roper, sees how the people value and serve each other. If anything, he suggests, members might feel a temptation to stay within the church because it is a place of security and happiness, where their needs are met, rather than for theological reasons. However, those who are motivated to stay merely because of the comfort that the community provides eventually leave, he says.²⁶⁴

In a letter to Topeka's Capital-Journal's editor, Sam Phelps-Roper and fourteen other young adults of the congregation contrast their lives with the lives of their peers outside the church:

We know that our peers have been taught all their lives to mock God, his standard and his people. We know they fornicate early and often, and all their thoughts and "prayers" are about what they want. They've been taught to "pray" amiss, for their lust, which conceives sin, which brings forth death - spiritual and often literal. We know they've been aggressively taught it's OK to be gay. We see they are disrespectful and unhappy, with no clarity or moorings. Their lives are marred by abortion, STDs, sexual assaults, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, financial uncertainty, unfaithful parents and other woes. Not to mention what they face after life. It's truly sad.²⁶⁵

Further, they claim, "We have no interest in the 'friendly social contact' of this world - been there, done that, not interested. We are happy, thankful, settled, clear-headed and pure-hearted. How many of your children can honestly say that?"²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

²⁶⁵ Mara Phelps, Ben Phelps, Jennifer Phelps-Roper, Sam Phelps-Roper, Sara Phelps, Jabez Phelps, Jael Phelps, Megan-Phelps Roper, Joshua Phelps, Rebekah Phelps-Roper, Jacob Phelps, Isaiah Phelps-Roper, Hezekiah Phelps, Zacharias Phelps-Roper, and Taylor Drain, "Just Ask Us" (Letter to the Editor), *Capital-Journal*, April 19, 2010, http://cjonline.com/opinion/2010-04-19/letter_just_ask_us.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

For those who are more independent, though, the high level of discipline required to live within the confines—literally and figuratively—of the church’s domain is too intrusive for comfort. Church members are quick to label any who walk outside what they see as God’s precepts as “rebels”—one of the worst and most frequent labels that church members offer. Current members frequently refer to the “rebellious” nature of ex-members, citing their failure to adhere to church rules—for example, by dating non-members—as evidence of a deeper internal and spiritual failure to obey God’s standards. In speaking about the standards of the church, which are equated with the standards of God, Sam Phelps-Roper notes that these standards are not a burden for believers but a joy.²⁶⁷ These standards are reinforced whenever the church gathers.

Church Services at Westboro Baptist Church

Primitive Baptist churches are very democratic, and advanced schooling in theology is considered to be a threat to that democracy. Moreover, theological training implies that the Holy Spirit is insufficient in preparing ministers for their work, they argue. Primitive Baptists note that Jesus did not set accreditation standards for his gospel ministers, and, in any case, schools of theology virtually guarantee unwanted exposure to liberal doctrines. Though Fred Phelps does, in fact, have some theological training, his church adopts the goal of simplicity articulated by other Primitive Baptists, though their worship is slightly different in detail from that of most Primitive Baptist congregations.

The central value in worship and organization is simplicity. In his February 2, 2010 sermon, Fred Phelps reminded his listeners that, unlike the Catholic church, which is “all very Satanically complicated,” Westboro Baptist Church models “the humble simplicity that attends

²⁶⁷ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

the workings of the Lord Jesus and to his church militant on earth.”²⁶⁸ This means that the church service, held each Sunday at 11:00, 11:30, or 12:00, depending on whether the service includes communion, which church members refer to as the Lord’s Supper, and the pre-church picketing schedule, is similar each week in its organization and minimalist in its content.

Fred Phelps’ preaching style has frequently been described by outsiders as incoherent, repetitive, or disturbing,²⁶⁹ with frequent references to Biblical citations aimed at overwhelming the listener. Such characterizations reveal less about Fred Phelps’ style, though, than the listeners’ unfamiliarity with Primitive Baptist sermon style, which has a rhetorical tradition of stringing together Bible citations as evidence for a sermon’s thesis and preachers’ tone.²⁷⁰

Church members remind listeners not to mistake zeal for anger when they hear the passion of Westboro Baptists.²⁷¹

At Westboro Baptist Church, services begin with a congregational hymn, accompanied by piano and organ. In its use of musical instruments, Westboro Baptist Church is different from traditional Primitive Baptist congregations, though Progressive Primitive Baptists introduced instrumental accompaniment in the early 1900s. Hymns are taken predominantly from the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal*, a text that has been unchanged for over 140 years. After the singing, an adult male offers an introductory prayer, always using King James’ English. After this, Fred Phelps takes the pulpit and often spends the first few minutes discussing the news of the week as it affects the church, including any appearances of church members in the media. He then

²⁶⁸ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 14, 2010.

²⁶⁹For example, in his commentary on the church, *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist and talk show host Michael Smerconish describes “how disturbed [Fred Phelps’] fiery eyes left me,” saying that Phelps reminded him “more of Lucifer” than “a man of God” (“Head Strong: Free (and Hateful) Speech vs. the Right to Gather,” *The e-Inquirer* March 14, 2010. http://www.philly.com/inquirer/opinion/20100314_Head_Strong_Free_and_hateful_speech_vs_the_right_to_gather.html.)

²⁷⁰ For an example of this in writing, see James Petigru Boyce’s 1887 *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, which is basically a list of Biblical passages “proving” Calvinist principles of election (Escondido, CA: Den Bulk Christian Foundation, 1996).

²⁷¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview by Tyra Banks, *The Tyra Banks Show*, Warner Brothers, October 5, 2006.

launches into a sermon, which invariably concludes with the words “I love you. Amen,” which signal a second congregational hymn. As often as the majority of the church members are gathered, the Lord’s Supper is shared, with two adult males praying over and then distributing unleavened bread and a single cup of wine, which congregants share as Fred Phelps reads the story of the Last Supper from one of the Gospels. The service lasts approximately one hour. Sermons may seem disorganized to listeners more comfortable with preaching that focuses on a single text or exhorts the listener to more positive living. Primitive Baptist sermons are often extemporaneous, “frequently not even having a particular text as a basis,” as John G. Crowley, historian of Primitive Baptists, notes,²⁷² but sermons at Westboro Baptist Church are, at this stage, written in advance, and a full text is provided for congregants; later, the text is posted online, as is a recording of the message.

“[A]llegorical ‘type and shadow’ preaching has always been much in favor among Primitive Baptists,” notes Crowley, describing preaching that looks to Biblical history, especially the books of the Old Testament, for “types” that correspond to present day or future events or people.²⁷³ Old Testament stories are frequently central in illustrating some point. “Has God forgotten these stories, even if we don’t preach them?” Fred Phelps asked his congregation one Sunday during a service, noting his love for the often violent imagery of the historical and prophetic texts.²⁷⁴

Proof-texting, the bringing together of various scriptural passages to prove a theological point, is a common organizational strategy, with the focus of the sermon being on a theological thesis rather than on understanding a particular text in more detail. A particular sermon may include up to two dozen different scriptural references, including texts from the Old and New

²⁷² Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” 178.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 7, 2010.

Testaments, including at least one per sermon from the gospels, for example, in support of its thesis. Within fundamentalist preaching more broadly, “the preacher bases his address on a biblical text, and the more adept he is at cross-referencing his primary text with other scriptural passages the better his sermon is considered to be.”²⁷⁵ Westboro Baptist Church fits this model, but for listeners unfamiliar with this strategy of organization, sermons may appear disorganized. Some scholars of theology and preaching suggest that such a scattershot approach to scriptural study—what the church calls “connecting the dots” between passages but that critics call proof-texting, or stringing together passages taken out of context to support a thesis that might not be supportable through systematic study of the scripture—is an abuse of scripture.²⁷⁶ However, this would not be understood as a criticism by Westboro Baptists, who highly value familiarity with Biblical passages but adopt, generally, a “common sense” approach to interpretation. Mere citation of Biblical passages might seem to be a dodge to those unfamiliar with the texts, but Westboro Baptists are familiar with commonly-cited as well as obscure passages, and they are expected to respond promptly and accurately when their pastor asks them from his pulpit to cite a Bible passage during the service, as sometimes happens.

Sermons take as their focus a relatively narrow set of topics, for “Primitive preaching heavily emphasizes predestination and election,” notes Crowley, adding, “Indeed, the core beliefs in the divine sovereignty cannot be expressed too starkly.”²⁷⁷ In the case of Westboro Baptist Church, sermons, regardless of the Scripture being addressed, address the following themes each week: the hopeless state of the world, the hoped-for election of Westboro Baptists,

²⁷⁵ Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 13.

²⁷⁶ For a fuller articulation of how proof-texting has been used to support anti-gay interpretations of the Bible, see L. William Countrymen, “The Bible, Heterosexism, and the American Public Discussion of Sexual Orientation” in *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, edited by Kathleen M. Sands (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003):167-185.

²⁷⁷ Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” 179.

and the persecution of Westboro Baptist Church as evidence of its chosen role in God's plan for humanity. "The content of [Primitive Baptist] sermons reflects devotion to their core doctrines and their almost total disassociation with the outer world,"²⁷⁸ Crowley notes. Westboro Baptist Church's sermons generally follow this model, though they address issues of national and global concern—most frequently abortion, gay rights, political leadership, international conflict, and Catholic priests' sexual abuse of children in their care—frequently citing them as evidence for God's impending destruction of the world. The repetition of themes and evidence serves to reinforce key elements of theology—the limited atonement of Jesus Christ and the perseverance of the saints, for example—while also providing believers with language they can use to share the church's message publicly.

In their ethnography of Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge, James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson Jr., describe the congregants this way:

The congregation's attention is avid. Seldom do they look to either side. Very rarely do they whisper to a neighbor.... Attention is focused and steady during the sermons.... Until the fellowship ritual that concludes the service, members communicate with each other by attending to the voice and words of the preachers.²⁷⁹

With their attention commonly held by the preacher, congregants build a relationship with each other. The same is true at Westboro Baptist Church, where the service is unusually quiet for those familiar with more interactive relationships between preacher and audience or those accustomed to the distraction of noisy children, nursery workers entering or exiting the room, or ushers attending to congregants. Congregants do not encourage the pastor with "amens" or

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 108.

“hallelujahs,” though they do laugh at his jokes, which are sometimes at the expense of outside groups, are sometimes aimed good-naturedly at members of the congregation, and are sometimes self-deprecating. In the past, congregants brought their Bibles to the service and flipped through them as the sermon was read, keeping pace with the pastor as he quoted scriptures, but now entire sermons, including the scriptures, are provided in advance of the service. Attention is focused intensely on the sermon and the preacher.

Even if congregants wanted to focus on something else, little appears in the sanctuary to distract them. The sanctuary includes two columns of pews, separated by an aisle that is interrupted with pillars that support the ceiling. The only windows in the place are located in the rear of the sanctuary, as is the clock, so that congregants would have to turn around to look out of them; in any case, they are curtained at all times. Pews are padded for comfort, and each is outfitted with a collection of three hymnals, including *The Primitive Baptist Hymnal*. On the east side of the room, a door leads to the office, where, during services, someone monitors the recording of the sermon and the security cameras that have monitored the property since June 2010. On the west side are doors leading to the nursery, where nursing mothers and mothers of disruptive babies and toddlers can still hear the sermon (See Figure 14.), and doors to the restrooms as well as a door to the kitchen of Fred and Margie Phelps, whose home is attached to the sanctuary, and a doorway exiting the building.



Figure 14. An early Westboro Baptist Church sign, before the church had standardized its message to be “God Hates Fags” or perfected its sign-making ability, decorates the wall beside the crib in the nursery, presumably so that even pre-literate infants can learn the church’s beliefs about homosexuality. Photograph taken July 18, 2010, courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin. All rights reserved.

Decoration is minimal. A photograph of the church from the 1950s hangs on one wall, and two or three church placards rest on easels at the front of each aisle; these are rotated, but they all highlight the main messages of the church: God hates gay people, God hates America, and God hates the world. (See Figure 15.) Sometimes, images of admired figures, such as the eighteenth century hymnist Isaac Watts, appear on placards, and a large sign spelling the acronym “TULIP”—one letter for each of the five points of the Calvinist theology that the church espouses (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints), as will be discussed in chapter 3—always hangs behind the pastor. The pulpit, along with an organ to the left and a piano to the right, are on a small raised

stage, and a microphone hangs over the pulpit so that the pastor's voice can be heard throughout the sanctuary and recorded. Below the pulpit, off stage, is a wooden communion table with the words "Do this in Memory of Me" inscribed on it; on it rests books that the pastor recommends, held in place by two brass bookends shaped liked ducks' heads.



Figure 15. Church-produced placards are placed at the front of the sanctuary. Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin, July 18, 2010. All rights reserved.

Religious iconography of any kind is considered idolatrous; no crosses, pictures of Jesus, or other symbols appear in the sanctuary or, for that matter, on the clothing, cars, or jewelry of congregants. "Anyone should destroy anything that stands between them and salvation," explained Abigail Phelps at the church's September 11, 2010 Quran and U.S. flag burning, and that includes the Quran, Catholic statuary, Orthodox icons, crosses, and crucifixes. That is also

why the church includes no images of Jesus (who, as God, should never be depicted as a “graven image”) in its sanctuary or literature. This is not surprising, for, according to Peter J. Thuesen, “Predestinarianism presupposed the utter transcendence and hiddenness of an all-determining God. It is not coincidence that the strongest predestinarians have often been equally strong iconoclasts,” forbidding any images of God, including Jesus.²⁸⁰

Other Services

Fred Phelps has preached at every Sunday service that Westboro Baptist Church has held since its inception in 1955. Attendance at Sunday services is expected of church members, as is participation in other church events, including picketing and Bible readings. The church does not sponsor Sunday school, declaring that the Bible provides no model of age-specific instruction. Church members do gather, though, almost daily for Bible readings. All gathered members sit in concentric circles and read the selected Bible text or, occasionally, approved commentary, aloud, stopping if someone raises a question or comment about the text, for, as Shirley Phelps-Roper notes, they are instructed to “help each other” as they have “gifts that vary.”²⁸¹ For example, in a group reading of Benjamin Keach’s exposition of the parable of the persistent widow from Luke 18, Brent Roper stopped the person who was reading when the reader quoted Keach as saying “They that restrain prayer from God, are estranged from God, and at last God will be a stranger unto them, and not know them when they cry to him in their distress.”²⁸² Brent Roper saw the state of Louisiana’s recent Day of Prayer for the Gulf Coast, then in the midst of an oil spill caused by a broken British Petroleum well, as an example of the vain prayers of the unfaithful, prayers that would be ignored by God. Shirley Phelps-Roper, his

²⁸⁰ Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

²⁸¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010.

²⁸² Benjamin Keach, *Exposition of the Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1991), 445.

wife, added the reminder that God “doesn’t hear the prayers of the wicked.”²⁸³ In this group reading, half a dozen members, all adults, commented on the reading, and several asked children questions aimed at measuring reading comprehension.

In addition to Bible reading, Bible memorization is valued by the congregation, and children are quizzed on memorized material. Families read the Bible together, and individuals also read the Bible. Many days when school is not in session, children participate in two sessions of Bible reading per day, overseen by an adult. If someone finds something of interest to the group while reading, he or she shares it, sometimes via email. In sum, texts are central. This is because the scriptures are central to the faith: “fundamentalists are bound to view correct interpretation as a matter of eternal life or death,” notes Kathleen C. Boone in her analysis of fundamentalist Christian rhetoric. “If one’s eternal destiny depends on a right relationship with God, and if that God is reliably known only through the Bible, it follows that one must read, and read correctly.”²⁸⁴ Immersion in scriptures and frequent public discussion of them is how Westboro Baptist learn Biblical passages and how they come to understand them within the church tradition.

Liturgical Life

Like other Primitive Baptists and many Protestants generally, Westboro Baptists do not adhere to a liturgical calendar. Like some Primitive Baptists, they do not celebrate Christmas and Easter, decrying them as Catholic interpretations of pagan traditions.²⁸⁵ When Fred and Margie

²⁸³ Shirley Phelps-Roper, Bible reading, July 18, 2010.

²⁸⁴ Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, 13.

²⁸⁵ For example, Primitive Baptist Arthur W. Pink has published an essay on Christmas instructing pastors to discourage the celebration of Christmas among church members. He instructs them to “[s]eek grace to firmly but lovingly set God’s truth on this subject before your people, and announce that you can have no part in following Pagan, Romish, and worldly customs.” (Christmas,” *Old Line Baptist Churches*, http://www.olpbc.com/Romans_16/Christmas.htm).

Phelps' children were young, this sometimes created tension for them in school settings.

Jonathan Phelps recalls one teacher who was so “crazy for Christmas” that he assumed his whole life that she was Catholic, only to find out via her obituary that she was Baptist. She required the class to decorate the classroom for the holiday, he said, and when he protested, she made him draw the snow, which was as irreligious a task as she could find for him.²⁸⁶ Today, though, the children are simply removed from the classroom on holidays. In fact, other churches' recognition of holidays such as St. Valentine's Day or St. Patrick's Day prompt Westboro Baptist Church protests, and American civil religion organized around Christmas is a special target. For example, the church has designed a “Santa Claus will Take You to Hell” poster, which includes the lyrics to their parody of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” and argued for its display in government offices of “Doomed America,” alongside other quasi-secular religious holiday displays. In this way, the church calls attention to the preferential treatment that some branches of American religion have received in public spaces while also articulating their own distinctive theology.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ Jonathan Phelps, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

²⁸⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, “Santa Claus will Take You to Hell,” *Christmas Placard for the Washington State House*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/library/displays/santaclauswilltakeyoutohell.html>

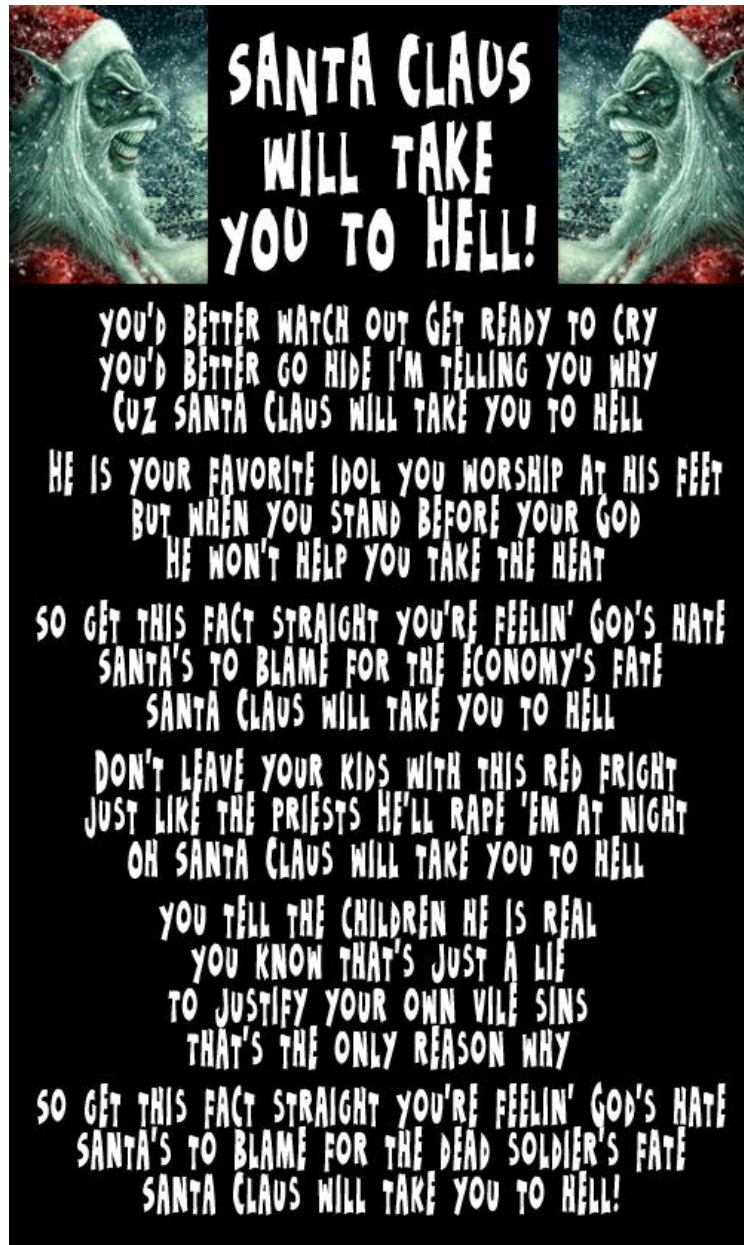


Figure 16. Westboro Baptists argue that, as Christmas is a blend of Catholic and pagan traditions without Biblical precedent, authentic Christians should not celebrate it. They use the event as an opportunity to critique the broader Christian church for its acquiescence to pagan culture, as suggested by their parody of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” and this poster, which they propose erecting in government offices during the holiday season, alongside menorahs and Christmas trees. The poster was released in December 2008.

Likewise, the church does not celebrate national holidays, holding that the nation has so offended God that celebration is unwarranted, and national holidays, with their tradition of

invoking God’s blessing on the nation, are both violations of the church-state separation that the church holds dear and an inappropriate prayer for a nation at odds with God. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, icons and rites of civil religion, including the U.S. flag, are forbidden,²⁸⁸ and church members do not sign “The Star Spangled Banner,”²⁸⁹ The only events celebrated by the church are birthdays, which are celebrated monthly with a church-wide potluck following the Sunday service, complete with cake and bags of small gifts for the youth of the church, and anniversaries, which are recognized in the newspaper and celebrated privately.

Lifecycle milestones such as marriages and funerals are commemorated with special church services, though no funerals have been held in a generation, and no marriages have been performed since 2002. Baptisms, the only ordinance besides the Lord’s Supper that the church celebrates, are cause for celebration. They are only for those who have been judged by the congregation to have an adult understanding of faith—generally, older children, teens, or adults. They occur in the swimming pool located in the communal backyard shared by the church and church members who live on the block.

Organization of Westboro Baptist Church

Demographics

As of July 2010, Westboro Baptist Church includes about sixty members, people who have been baptized as professed believers whose behavior is in accordance with church standards and in doing so joined Westboro Baptist Church as members. Because baptism is “a privilege,

²⁸⁸ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, September 11, 2010.

²⁸⁹ Jonathan Phelps recalled a time when a fellow spectator at a professional sporting event threatened him with physical violence for failing to stand during the national anthem. According to Jonathan, his fellow fan stopped harassing him when Jonathan noted the many church members who were also not rising for the anthem, suggesting that the patriotic man would have to fight them all (interview with the author, July 17, 2010).

not a right,²⁹⁰ not all who attend the church service are members. This includes the many young children of the church as well as some who have joined in worship but have not yet been baptized, either because of their own hesitancy or the church's. As Megan Phelps-Roper, daughter of Shirley Phelps-Roper, notes, the church will “lay hands on no man suddenly”—meaning that the church community has a duty to deliberate on accepting new members, who must not only adhere to the church's rules regarding proper living but must be willing to preach its message.²⁹¹ This number represents a decrease in membership since May 2004, a time of increased exclusion among church members. When the church was founded in 1955, two key families—the Phelps and the Hockenbargers—comprised the majority of adherents, and members of the families have married each other.

Occasionally, people outside the church join, either as individuals or families. One notable case is Steve Drain, who, while studying theater and film at the University of Kansas, produced a documentary about the group. Originally titled *Fred: The Movie*, Drain renamed it *Hatemongers* when he joined the congregation. According to Drain, he had completed his degree and returned to his home state of Florida to edit the documentary and, during the process, had a conversion experience. He moved his unwilling wife and daughters to Topeka, Kansas, and, eventually, the entire family joined the church, though his oldest daughter, Lauren, left in 2008. Since joining the church, he and his wife have had two more children. Another notable case is that of Jeff,²⁹² a young single man who moved from California to join the church in 2008. Though he has purchased a home across from church property, he is not yet a church member. Likewise, a sometime-participant, Joe,²⁹³ travels from Wichita to join pickets. Joe had been

²⁹⁰ Megan Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² The participant's name has been changed.

²⁹³ The participant's name has been changed.

active the protests of Operation Save America, a Christian anti-abortion group, against Dr. George Tiller, a Wichita abortion provider who was murdered while at church in 2009. Joe turned his attention to Westboro Baptist Church in 2008, upon the election of Barack Obama, who he identifies as a Muslim threat to America. Like Jeff, Joe is not a church member. The majority of attendees who are adults, though, are.

Those who are members are expected to participate in both Sunday services and pickets, and church members who fail to do either soon find themselves threatened by exclusion from Westboro Baptist Church and, hinted Fred Phelps in a sermon, eternal exclusion from heaven. It is important to God, he says, “that each time the church assembles, with a few exceptions, each member has a solemn obligation to be there and worship, and encourage his loved ones. I tell you, it is a might dangerous thing to forsake the assembling and ignore the thrilling call of the Silver Trumpet of God,” for what if, in turn, “God neglects to give you a Silver Trumpet call to the Rapture?”²⁹⁴ As a result of this pressure, church members attend church or are excluded, and most who attend are members. This is in contrast to most Primitive Baptists, for whom “emphasis upon salvation as an unconditional covenant transaction before the foundation of the world makes church membership absolutely unnecessary for salvation in their view.”²⁹⁵

Among the church participants are nine of Fred and Margie Phelps’ thirteen children. Sons Mark and Nate Phelps left in their teen years, in the 1970s. Neither has a relationship with church members now. Daughter Dortha, who left in 1990, continues to live in Topeka where she practices law, but she has changed her last name to avoid being attached to the church, and daughter Kathy Phelps-Griffin, though she returned and left the church several times, is also currently not a participant in the church.

²⁹⁴ Fred Phelps, sermon, July 18, 2010.

²⁹⁵ John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 167.

Those married members of the church do not use birth control, and family size, consequently, is large. The smallest families have four children, while several families have ten or more. The church does not discourage women from seeking employment outside the home. For example, all nine of Fred and Margie Phelps' daughters obtained law degrees, and some have additional graduate degrees. Though the church values marriage, it does not promote marriage, believing, as one young woman in the church said, that members should focus on God's work since "we're living in the last days anyway."²⁹⁶ Single parenthood, while not desired, is not a reason for rejection from the church, provided that the single parent repents of the sin of non-marital sex. In all of these ways, then, the church does not neatly mimic the Religious Right's veneration of traditional gender roles.

Despite accusations that marriages within the church are pre-arranged, only a few couples within the church met each other through church. All other couples met while in high school, college, or graduate school, and the non-churched member of the pair then converted. Given the high birth rate of the church and the growing public derision of its activities, spouses may become harder to find for younger members of the church, and no marriages have occurred within the past five years. Within the congregation, the married and unmarried have equal standing.²⁹⁷

Church members are relatively affluent and almost all are well-educated. No one works in a blue-collar job, and all of the women of the church, except for the elderly Margie Phelps, Fred Phelps' wife, work outside of the home. Church members work in nursing, computer science, robotics, law, language translation, and child care, with both men and women working in nursing, law, and computer science, suggesting some flexibility in gender roles outside the

²⁹⁶ Jael Phelps' interview with the author, October 4, 2008.

²⁹⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 28, 2006.

home. Most adult church members are home owners, and most live within a short radius of the church. However, financial success is not linked to value as a church member. Like the historic Primitive Baptists with whom they identify, whose “almost Quaker-like mistrust of institutional religion led them toward an equality within the plain walls of their churches that defied the common understanding of honor as a function of orderly hierarchy,”²⁹⁸ Westboro Baptists do not link church responsibilities or privileges with income.

Gender within the Congregation

As revealed in even a casual perusal of congregants during a Sunday service, Westboro Baptist Church takes a unique stance on gender issues. Women and men sit in the same pew, unlike in many Primitive Baptist churches, which often divide the sanctuary according to gender. Fathers actively attend to their children, assisting older children in reading sermon notes and taking younger ones to the restroom. Because the nursery is used by nursing mothers who may want privacy from men, men do not enter that area if they are caring for a disruptive baby or toddler, but men do otherwise care for distracted or disruptive children. If a mother is ill or for some other reason unable to attend the church service, her husband will bring their children to church and provide for their care.

The gender equality that church members display in the care of their children is in apparent tension with the appearance of women of the church. Women do not cut their hair, ever, and men have short hair. During Sunday services, but not during protests, Bible readings, or other events, all females wear some kind of head covering, either scarves tied either under the chin or at the nape of the neck, or, for infants and toddlers, bonnets to cover their hair, which may be worn up or be free-flowing; no one wears hats. (See Figure 17.) Immediately after the

²⁹⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 107.

closing hymn, before exiting the sanctuary, women and girls remove their head coverings. Head covering was not always part of church practice; instead, says Shirley Phelps-Roper, it is something that members came to adopt over time, once they understood the scriptures to mandate it.²⁹⁹



Figure 17. All females in the church, regardless of age, cover their head during services, though hair may be free flowing beneath the head covering. Women generally wear scarves, while infants wear bonnets. Photograph from July 18, 2010 service courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin. All rights reserved.

However, gender is not indicated by dress in other ways. For example, women wear pants to the church service, and younger women even wear shorts. Though some congregants dress in “church best” clothes, others wear more casual clothing. While congregants dress modestly,

²⁹⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, March 15, 2010

women may wear sleeveless tops, and, especially among young women, fashionable brands are common. Women may wear precious metals or stones as part of their jewelry or eyeglasses, though decoration is never ostentatious. Unisex clothing such as t-shirts is acceptable. This is in contrast to how most conservative churches display gender. For example, among other head-covering churches—the Amish, Mennonite, German Baptists, and other Anabaptist groups—head coverings are generally worn at all times, not just during Sunday services. Additionally, among these groups, gendered clothing is the norm, with women wearing dresses that are designed with capes or aprons to hide the outline of breasts. All of these groups also prohibit the wearing of jewelry. Though Westboro Baptist Church shares the practices of uncut hair and head covering with these other Anabaptist groups, members have freedom to wear clothing that they choose, provided it meets minimum standards of modesty.³⁰⁰

Westboro Baptist Church’s gender distinctions are rooted, they say, in the Biblical mandate that husbands have authority over their wives, that they are “the saviors of their homes,”³⁰¹ just as Jesus Christ is the savior of the church. Fred Phelps linked the two in a wedding sermon he delivered at the marriage of his daughter Shirley and Brent Roper on November 25, 1983:

[S]cissors have never come upon her hair. Because she was persuaded by the Scriptures that a woman’s long hair was a sign, or a symbol that she was in subjection to her father until she left her father and mother and was joined to her husband. And, then, she was in subjection to her husband. And, I hope that

³⁰⁰ Reportedly, Libby Phelps, a young adult in the church who left in 2009, cited a church sign proclaiming “God Hates Bikinis” as evidence of the absurdity of the church’s control of its followers. In support of Libby’s claim that the church disapproves of bikinis, I have never seen an adult or child wearing one, but the clothing that church members wear could be described as “mainstream,” if modest.

³⁰¹ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

scissors never come. And, I will be disappointed first, and not a little bit mad, if now that you have charge of her you change that.³⁰²

Women are thus under the authority of men their whole lives: first, under their fathers, and then, if they marry, under their husbands, whom they must obey. This order is mandated by God for two reasons understandable to humans. Phelps continued:

Adam was first formed, and then Eve. That's reason number one. There's not a thing in the world you can do about that. And Adam was not deceived, but the women [sic] being deceived was in the transgression. That's reason number two. You're bound to be in subjection [to your husband].³⁰³

The Biblical passages of the creation of humans and the fall of humanity, cited here, are commonly used by conservative Christians to justify the subjection of wives to husbands. However, Westboro Baptists quickly qualify that this does not give all men authority over all women but only husbands over wives, that husbands are responsible for the peace of the household, and that women are not compelled to accept physical violence by their husbands. For example, Tim Phelps, son of Fred and Margie Phelps, warns that those husbands who would read the command "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband as unto the Lord" of Ephesians 5:22 as license to bully their wives are abusing scripture, using it to justify their own laziness to avoid fetching their own slippers or making their own supper.³⁰⁴ These people, he notes, are not welcome to membership in Westboro Baptist Church. Sam Phelps-Roper repeats the point, saying that, if an excluded member of the church is a physical threat to his wife, the couple

³⁰² Fred Phelps, "The Charge Given to the Married by the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ: On the Occasion of the Marriage of Brent D. Roper and Shirley L. Phelps (Members of the Westboro Baptist Church) on November 25, 1983." *God Hates Fags*. November 25, 1983. http://www.godhatesfags.com/sermons/19831125_brent-roper-shirley-phelps-wedding.pdf, 1

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰⁴ Tim Phelps, interview with the author, March 10, 2010.

should live physically apart, even though the church does not advocate for married persons, even if one is excluded from the congregation, from living separately otherwise.³⁰⁵ Again, this is quite different from those conservative churches that condone spousal physical abuse through scripture.

In their interactions with their spouses, Westboro Baptists are gentle and kind. Even good-natured spousal teasing is rare, and spouses speak of each other with respect, both for the individual and for their marriage. In dozens of interviews, no spouse complained of the other, and all those who are married to church members spoke positively about their spouse. In response to the accusation that church marriages are arranged by the church, the men of the church laughed, with Fred Phelps Jr. noting, “Well, you can call it *arranged*,” referring to the church’s strong belief in the predestination of all things, even spouses. Jonathan Phelps argued that church members were excited about their marriages, recalling that Brent Roper, a convert to the church as a teenager in the 1970s, had hurried through his undergraduate degree and law school so that he could marry Shirley Phelps. Besides, Sam Phelps-Roper added, the women of the church are too independent to be strong-armed into marriage.³⁰⁶ Indeed, three of Fred and Margie Phelps’ daughters remain unmarried, though the three sons who remain in the congregation are married.

Westboro Baptist Church marriages are marked with love and tenderness, at least at this stage of the church’s history, and men and women share the duties of child care within congregational life. In their personal lives, both men and women work in high-paying and prestigious jobs that defy gender expectations. While women will never preach or pray in the Sunday service, they do lead Bible readings, organize church time, and plan church activities, but

³⁰⁵ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

³⁰⁶ Group interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

men are not absent in these roles. This is because, says Shirley Phelps-Roper, women and men are to be equal partners in God’s work and equally able to do the work. They should be “ambidextrous,” she says, applying a description of soon-to-be King David’s warriors taken from 1 Chronicles 12:2: “They were armed with bows, and could use both the right hand and the left in hurling stones and shooting arrows out of a bow, even of Saul’s brethren of Benjamin.” Like David’s warriors, Westboro Baptists, both male and female, are called to fight with everything they have and are supernaturally equipped to do so. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper,

That is what the servants of the King needed to be able to do. Just as the servants of the King today need to be able to write, speak, build, take care of children, know the laws of God and man, deal with the shark infested waters of the vicious ravaging media and all their parts, etc. etc. etc.³⁰⁷

Church Finances

Information about church finances is difficult to verify because churches, according to the IRS, are not taxable and thus do not file taxes. Westboro Baptist Church critics conceded that, because the church’s activities are rooted in religious belief, its property is not taxable.³⁰⁸ Popular efforts to curtail church activity by attacking its taxable status—such as a Facebook campaign to ask the IRS and federal government to “revoke Westboro Baptist Church’s tax-exempt status for violation of 501(c)3 tax-exempt law for religious organizations” as a “perfectly REASONABLE reaction to the kinds of psychologically violent and abusive (and definitely political) activities Westboro Baptist Church engages in”³⁰⁹—have failed because churches are

³⁰⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, April 1, 2010.

³⁰⁸ Stephen Clark, “Church’s Status Allows Funeral Protestors to Avoid Taxes,” *FoxNews.com*, April 17, 2010, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/04/17/church-status-allows-funeral-protesters-avoid-taxes/>.

³⁰⁹ “Petition to revoke Westboro Baptist Church’s tax-exempt status IMMEDIATELY,” *Facebook*, date of origination unknown, <http://www.facebook.com/RevokeWestboroBaptistChurchStatus#!/RevokeWestboroBaptistChurchStatus?v=wall>.

not taxable to begin with and thus cannot be “exempted.” When Westboro Baptist Church’s tax status has been challenged in court, the court has found that the church is a non-taxable organization, though the truck it uses to carry its signs is taxable.³¹⁰

Given the lack of a tax record for the church, information about church finances can only be garnered through other public documents, and the information provided even in these has frustrated investigators. For example, the church had to post a bond during its appeal of *Snyder v. Phelps* (which will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this dissertation), which ordered them to pay five million dollars to the father of a fallen Marine. Court records revealed that the church and defendants Fred Phelps, Shirley Phelps-Roper, and Rebekah Phelps-Davis had assets totaling about one million dollars, with just under half of that based on the value of the church itself and the rest coming from the homes, cars, and a small amount of cash of the defendants. Rebekah Phelps-Davis had only \$306 in her bank account, while her father had only \$1000. All three defendants had credit card debt. When church members indicated that they lacked funds for the bond, they were forced to post the church property.³¹¹

Others question the accuracy of church members’ claims not to have much money. “When you add up the number of protests they do every year across the country, it really doesn’t jibe with how much they claim to have,” notes Craig Trebilcock, the attorney for the plaintiff in

³¹⁰ “Although we accept Westboro Baptist Church’s contention that its picketing activities represent its sincerely held religious beliefs, we determine that its political activities and secular philosophy, which constitute a significant part of its picketing activities, preclude a tax exemption for its 2002 Ford F-150 truck,” wrote the Kansas Appeals Court in its July 25, 2008’s *In re Tax Exemption Application of Westboro Baptist Church*, available at *Kansas Judicial Branch*, <http://www.kscourts.org/Cases-and-Opinions/opinions/ctapp/2008/20080725/98443.htm>. Even as the Appeals Court affirmed the Board of Tax Appeals’ (BOTA) decision to tax the truck, it found BOTA’s labeling of the church’s signs as “nonreligious” to be an Establishment Clause violation, though it did find *some of* the signs to be rooted in secular, rather than religious, belief. The state had made a similar decision regarding Westboro Baptist Church vehicles twice in the past (Lisa Coble-Krings, “Appeals court rules Westboro Baptist Church’s truck isn’t tax-exempt,” *ABC-KTKA News*, July 25, 2008, http://www.ktka.com/news/2008/jul/25/appeals_court_rules_westboro_baptist_churchs_truck/).

³¹¹ “Maryland Judge Orders Lien on Westboro Baptist Church,” *The Associated Press*, April 4, 2008, *ABC-KTKA*, http://www.ktka.com/news/2008/apr/04/maryland_judge_orders_lien_westboro_baptist_church/.

Snyder v. Phelps,³¹² and the church admits that members spent a quarter of a million dollars each year traveling to picket sites.³¹³ This money does not come from church coffers.³¹⁴ Instead, individuals finance their own participation.

In response to the accusation that church members give a third of their income to the church, a claim that Nate Phelps has made, drawing from data provided by his nieces and nephews who have left the church,³¹⁵ members insist that they tithe ten percent, saying, that tithing is a duty since “[t]hat money is not our money, it belongs to God!”³¹⁶ However, when asked about offerings in addition to tithes, church members stress that they cannot share that information, for offerings are “pursuant to what is in your heart” and thus are not precisely calculated according to a Biblical formula.³¹⁷ In this way, church members can honestly say that they tithe ten percent of their incomes (since tithe means *one tenth*) while still giving much more of their income to the church.

The church does not accept donations from outsiders, according to Shirley Phelps-Roper. “We don't accept donations. We don't want your money. We don't make merchandise of the Gospel,” the church’s website declares,³¹⁸ and donations that are received are returned.³¹⁹ Further, no collection basket is passed during services, preventing visitors from making donations.

Westboro Baptist Co-Belligerents

³¹² David Klepper, “\$11 Million Lawsuit Brings Scrutiny of Phelps Finances,” *The Kansas City Star*, November 23, 2007.

³¹³ Julia Borger, “Anti-gay Church Hounds Military Funerals,” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/apr/18/usa.gayrights>.

³¹⁴ Megan Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

³¹⁵ Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center, April 24, 2010.

³¹⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQS: Can I Donate Money to You? Can I Buy One of Your Awesome T-shirts?” *God Hates Fags*, http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Eat_Babies.

³¹⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

Westboro Baptist Church discourages potential alliances with outsiders, and the church's distinctive theology, which has developed in a church setting where no outside authority has sway, keeps most people away, for even if they share some of the theological tenets of Westboro Baptist Church, they do not share all of them. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper, "Of a truth, we have heard from hundreds of people over these years, I mean hundreds that claim they are [believers according to the standard of Westboro Baptist Church]. Then, upon a VERY SMALL examination, you run into some error."³²⁰ For those who do pass, the next test is willingness to participate in the church's ministry.

Anti-gay sentiment is not sufficient for church participation. According to the church's website, most of those who support Westboro Baptist Church's anti-gay picketing from afar do so without theological justification, instead invoking personal prejudice. If you fall into this category, says the church, you are a "pretender."

You're a rebel against God that happens to think that fags are filthy. *Duh*. You think? You don't care about God's standard (see Rom. 1:18-32);³²¹ you just personally don't like something about fags (e.g. their wallowing and/or eating

³²⁰ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 10, 2010.

³²¹ The King James translation of Romans 1:18-32 reads: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them."

feces, their men behaving like little girls, or some other specific personal distaste of their particular curse from God[)].³²²

Thus, to be a member, one must participate in anti-gay activism for religious, not secular reasons.

While church members clearly deride the sexual activities they attribute to gay people, they themselves treat gay observers with the same respect they give to other observers.³²³ Indeed, their care to do so may be a way to defend against accusations that mere bigotry drives them. They warn potential converts not to confuse human hatred with God's hatred, which, Westboro Baptists say, is holy and not based on prejudice, distinguishing that "God's hatred is not like man's hatred. His hatred is holy, pure, unchanging, while man's hatred is a sinful, fickle emotion."³²⁴

If potential converts to the church do, in fact, share theology and a religiously motivated desire to picket against homosexuality, they then must move to Topeka and join the congregation, a move that evidences their belief, for "if they were like-minded, they would be HERE."³²⁵ Few rarely do, because, as Shirley Phelps-Roper explains,

[I]t is nothing for some people to agree with us, NAY, with GOD on some points. It is a whole other matter to OBEY and put away your huge idol called "MY TIME" and submit yourself to God and to submit yourself to his people.³²⁶

³²² Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQS: How Do I Join You?" *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html>.

³²³ For example, I shared a van ride with six members of the church and one openly gay reporter for a Chicago-based magazine. Church members' interactions with the reporter were kind, generous, and polite. In interviews, church members reiterated that, in their professional lives, they treat gay co-workers, clients, and supervisors with the same respect given to straight people in the same position.

³²⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQ: Doesn't the Bible Say that God Loves Everyone?" *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Hate>.

³²⁵ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 9, 2010.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

For example, a man in Key West, Florida, listens to Fred Phelps' sermons on the internet, has visited the church, and carries on his own picketing ministry in Florida, where he uses signs that direct observers to Westboro Baptist Church's website. He would seem to fit the church's description of one who sees "evidence of God's grace," in that he suffers "for the cause of God and truth,"³²⁷ since he "takes a lot of abuse from those brutes in that city,"³²⁸ and is "on the public streets before the eyes of the world, telling them that their sin will take them to hell."³²⁹ Despite all this, the church labels him a "rebel" and an "unbeliever" because of his unwillingness to join them in Topeka. "There are many such people," affirms Shirley Phelps-Roper, "but this little guy is a little more urgent than most. Further, he understands his duty to submit himself, and he will not."³³⁰ Though he shares the church's theology and members' passion for picketing, those who are understood to be elect must submit themselves to life within the congregation, including church discipline.

Church Discipline

Both current and ex-Westboro Baptists agree that disciplining members is a central function of the church. This happens, first, by organizing life around church activities and functions, including attendance at Sunday services and participation in pickets. For example, one Sunday service attendee who is not a member of the congregation does not participate in pickets, and this is cause for concern among members, who look to him to produce "words" as evidence

³²⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQS: How Do I Join You?" *God Hates Fags*, http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Eat_Babies.

³²⁸ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 8, 2010.

³²⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQS: How do I Join You?" *God Hates Fags*, http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Eat_Babies.

³³⁰ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 9, 2010.

of his election.³³¹ Adherence to church standards is expected, and the result is a high level of compliance, with most of those reared within the church remaining within the church, among both Fred and Margie Phelps' children and grandchildren. This is accomplished, first, within the home. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper:

The children in my house will obey their parents, or they will have no peace. They will serve the Lord or they will have no peace. I find that what you expect from children is what you get. For their sakes, I teach them every day in every way what the Lord their God requires of them.³³²

However, children are also seen as distinct from their parents, and their parents' status within the church is irrelevant to their own; thus, children are not encouraged to be baptized, as that is a claim to belief, but are required to attend church, as obedience is required even if belief is absent. Within the Calvinist doctrine of Westboro Baptist Church, this is not free will but a recognition of the isolation of each person before God. Speaking of her own children, Shirley Phelps-Roper says,

My hope is that the Lord my God will bless them with saving faith and that they will serve and obey God. Mostly, I pray that the will of God will be done—if that involves their salvation or their perdition, it is all fine with me.³³³

Shirley Phelps-Roper, like many of the parents of adult children within the congregation, was forced to contend with this situation when her son Josh, then in his twenties, left the congregation. His departure was not evidence of the failure of the church discipline to retain members, according to church theology, but evidence, instead, of his non-election. “While they live in my house, they will serve God,” says Shirley Phelps-Roper about her children, and if they

³³¹ Megan Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

³³² Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 28, 2006.

³³³ *Ibid.*

depart, “they do as God has ordained for them to do.”³³⁴ After that, church members no longer worry about the excluded, they claim. “Life is too short,” says Shirley Phelps-Roper. “My prospects for eternity are too important to worry about anything else,” including even beloved family members’ salvation, over which neither she nor they have any control.³³⁵ Mark Phelps, though, claimed that his father was far more passionate about his exclusion, recalling that, after he left, his father visited him at his workplace one day. “He came right up to me and said, ‘I hope God kills you.’”³³⁶

Exclusion thus is viewed by members as a mechanism for separating the sheep from the goats, to use a Biblical metaphor, in order to both remind the goats and the sheep of their place in eternity. In the disciplinary structure of the church, it is the most drastic action the church can take in reining in members. Since May 2004, it has also been increasingly common, with eighteen people excluded from May 2004 to March 2010, in contrast to the ten people Shirley Phelps-Roper recalls being excluded in her lifetime prior to that.³³⁷ This kind of disciplining is unusual in most branches of American Christianity today; though it remains part of the Primitive Baptist tradition, “[c]hurch discipline—one of the historic marks of Calvinism—virtually disappeared as far as the layman was concerned, and was seriously weakened among the clergy” after the Civil War, notes Glenn T. Miller, with the result that it often seems cruel or controlling to outsiders today.³³⁸ Primitive Baptist historian John G. Crowley notes a similar change, recognizing that, among Primitive Baptists, “[a]t one time, dancing, drunkenness, failure to pay debts, membership in secret orders, and any sexual irregularities would bring swift action to

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best.”

³³⁶ Taschler and Fry, “Life in a War Zone.”

³³⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010.

³³⁸ Glenn T. Miller, *Religious Liberty in America: History and Prospects* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 125.

exclude the offending members. Today, however, the disciplinary standards are more lax, though by no means forgotten.”³³⁹ Among Primitive Baptists more than most other denominations outside of the Amish, disciplinary action still occurs, and “[g]ross sins will still bring one to the attention of a Primitive Baptist conference, and associational statistics still reveal a respectable number of excommunications from time to time.”³⁴⁰ At Westboro Baptist Church, exclusion occurs in two ways: at the initiation of the church or at the initiation of the individual who is leaving the congregation.

Church members contend that they practice a model of discipline taken from Matthew 18: 15-19, when Jesus instructs believers to confront an individual among them one-on-one if they see him in sin.³⁴¹ If he rejects their effort to correct them, they are to approach him in a small group, and if that engagement fails to produce change, they are to confront him as a congregation. If he still fails to adhere to standards, they are to excommunicate him according to 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, in which Paul directs the church at Corinth “not to keep company” with fornicators, the covetous, extortioners, railers, drunkards, or idolators, saying, “For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore, put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” By placing the offending person outside of the congregation, the congregation indicates its

³³⁹ Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” 181.

³⁴⁰ John G. Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” *The Baptist River: Essays on the Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition*, edited by W. Glenn Jonas, Jr. pgs. 158-181 (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006), 181.

³⁴¹ The King James translation of Matthew 15:18-19 reads: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.”

understanding that that person is failing to live up to God’s standards and is not their responsibility.

Accordingly, one of the reasons cited for the closeness of the community—both in physical space and in lifestyle—is that members can scout for sin in each other’s life and provide corrective advice if some sin is suspected. If that fails to produce change, a larger body addresses the offending individual, and if necessary, the entire church addresses the person. Frequently, though, according to church members, the problem is remedied in dyads or small groups. Even when the entire church addresses a person, the goal is to return that person to good standing within the congregation. For example, when *The Pitch*, a Kansas City alternative newspaper, revealed that Sam Phelps-Roper was conceived out-of-wedlock and that his biological father was not Brent Roper, the man Shirley Phelps married when Sam was a young child, Margie Phelps defended her sister’s continued membership in the church by saying, “She was extremely remorseful. The Lord have mercy on her because she was remorseful... a kind of remorse that most Earth dwellers don’t have the first clue about.”³⁴² Repentance, Sara Phelps stressed in an interview about her aunt’s out-of-wedlock birth, was the reason why Shirley Phelps-Roper could participate in congregational life while others are excluded.³⁴³ If deemed necessary, the decision to exclude is made with the consensus of the entire congregation, minus the offending member.

The goal, throughout, is to maintain the group’s high standards, without the stain of a willfully and repeatedly offending member; this is accomplished either through a change in the member’s behavior or the exclusion of the member. Even if exclusion occurs, the community hopes that it results in a return, and so those who leave are not given up forever. Within

³⁴² Kendall, “The New Fred.” Ellipses in original.

³⁴³ “Talking to the Phelps Fam about beatings, Libby, and Why Standards seem to have Changed” (Interview with Sara Phelps), *YouTube*, October 12, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhOESGugXH8>.

Westboro Baptist Church, various members have been excluded for conduct but did not leave the area and were voted back in when they demonstrated change. The congregation remains open to the return of the excluded—if they properly repent. “That is amazing,” comments Shirley Phelps-Roper, “From start to finish and it is mercy and it is loving kindness.”³⁴⁴ However, the church discourages a revolving door of exclusion and reunion. Shirley Phelps-Roper recalls two individuals who were excluded, then voted back in, only to return “to their old ways with a slightly different presentation and more deceit.” They were eventually excluded again and left the community.³⁴⁵ Exclusion is thus a tool for maintaining group purity and group identity, both through its actual and its threatened use.

Exclusion does not have to be invoked to be an effective tool for directing congregants’ behavior; merely the existence of it—and the practice of it on others and other members’ participation in it—serves to remind would-be dissenters of the consequences of departing from church doctrine and behavioral standards. Because the “distinguishing feature” of fundamentalist religious belief is “the assumption that life has meaning only in relation to certain [symbolic] frameworks,” obedience to the community’s moral precepts is vital to community self-understanding and maintenance.³⁴⁶ Exclusion represents not only a removal from the community—which itself has unpleasant consequences as one is cut off from the emotional and financial support of one’s family—but the tearing away from the framework that holds life together. Everything is in question, and even when ex-members intellectually know that they are safe outside of the community, a visceral fear remains that they are hell-bound, as Nate Phelps notes about his own experiences.³⁴⁷ This is because fundamentalist churches encourage

³⁴⁴ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, April 1, 2010.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ Wuthnow and Lawson, “Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States,” 40.

³⁴⁷ Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center.

members to believe that they “possess a secret road map with regard to past and future, they know there they are located in space (operational and cosmological), and they hold firm answers on questions related to nature (human and physical).”³⁴⁸ Through exclusion, ex-members, if they reject the theology of the community, lose this road map, their location, and their answers. If they keep believing the theology, they are forced to see themselves as outsiders, damned.

Recalls Nate Phelps about his second and final departure from his family, in 1980:

I knew I was going against the will of god, but at that point in time the ability to walk away from the danger was more important then [sic] the risk of incurring god’s [sic] wrath. And believe that I was damned sort of made that a mute [sic] point. I was going to hell...that was understood...so I will leave here to escape the violence and live my life then...go to hell.³⁴⁹

Mark Phelps, Nate Phelps’ older brother who had left the church in 1973, recalled feeling similarly on his first night away from the congregation:

“That night, I stayed at a stranger’s house.... I specifically remember that night when I lay in that bedroom in that bed and was going to sleep. I thought I was going to wake up in hell the next morning. That’s how strongly I believed.... My dad had told me since I was 10, ‘If you ever leave the church, you’re going to hell.’ I so strongly believed that. I did not think I was going to wake up. That’s what I thought was going to happen to me.”³⁵⁰

In this way, exclusion reinforces the boundary between outside and inside. Emmanuel Sivan, describing the enclave that religious fundamentalists create, writes:

³⁴⁸ Sivan, “The Enclave Culture,” 56.

³⁴⁹ Nate Phelps, email to the author, July 31, 2010. Ellipses in original.

³⁵⁰ Taschler and Fry, “Life in a War Zone.”

[T]he enclave must place the oppressive and morally defiled outside society in sharp contrast to the community of virtuous insiders. A sort of ‘wall of virtue’ is thereby constructed, separating the saved, free, equal (before God or before history), and morally superior enclave from the hither-to tempting central community. Who but the depraved would desire to cross such a boundary and join the defectors and the evil outsiders?³⁵¹

Thus, exclusion is the door through which the “reprobates” within the congregation are rejected, and the experience serves to define, for remaining members, the boundaries between the elect and the non-elect. Historically, notes Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “[f]or most Baptists, regardless of the sect, spiritual fellowship...was highly prized. To be excluded from it was for many a plunge into a sea of wretchedness,”³⁵² as the experiences of Nate and Mark Phelps suggest.

This is true even for those who are involuntarily excluded. For example, Karl Hockenbarger, a long-time member, was excluded against his will in 2006 but, months later, continued to follow the church’s rules as he understands them and listens to sermons via the internet, saying, “Whether they accept me or not, I still consider them my brethren.... I’d go back in a heartbeat.”³⁵³ Further, though he disagrees with his own exclusion, he supports the process of exclusion, having apparently voted, in 2004, for the exclusion of his parents, members since 1960, and he likewise accepted the church’s choice to exclude his teenage son for disrespect shortly after his own exclusion.³⁵⁴ His adult daughter remains in the church, as does a minor son.

³⁵¹ Sivan, “The Enclave Culture,” 18.

³⁵² Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 115.

³⁵³ Justin Kendall, “Dead to Fred,” *The Pitch*, November 9, 2006, <http://www.pitch.com/content/printVersion/158048>

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Members are excluded for actions that are seen as signs of a lack of God's grace; thus, disobedience to church rules is equated with non-election, and while the clearly non-elect can attend services, they cannot be members. Church members can therefore say that people are excluded for inappropriate sexual relations, lying, and fraud and that these sins—and, in some cases, crimes—are signs of spiritual rebellion against God, but the excluded can also claim that their exclusion was due to their non-compliance with church rules. For example, Karl Hockenbarger's parents, Bill and Mary, contend that they were excluded for failing to move closer to the church, assist with the remodeling of member's homes, sever ties with outsiders, or demonstrate enthusiasm about pickets.³⁵⁵

Those who vote for the exclusion of their co-congregants are likely to point to behavior problems that undermine the credibility of the group's claim to election as cause for excommunication. For example, Shirley Phelps-Roper recalls a driver who passed the picket line and yelled out information about a young single man in the church who was having an affair with a married woman outside of the congregation. When the church confronted the man about the alleged affair, he chose to leave the congregation rather than end the affair. The affair was not only a sexual sin but a potential weapon that those critical of the church—such as the man who yelled the accusation in public—could use to undermine the church's focus on sexual purity.³⁵⁶

The purity of the church is one of exclusion's many goals. For example, Karl Hockenbarger, who had been a member for nearly his entire life when he was excluded in his early fifties, was excluded for a lack of grace, as evidenced in his occasionally violent behavior on the picket line, behavior he admits and recognizes as wrong but excuses by saying that it was

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2009.

the response of a man who sees his family and loved ones threatened. He recognizes, however, the value of a nonviolent religious presence, as does Shirley Phelps-Roper, who explained the decision to exclude Karl Hockenbarger this way:

“We stand on these streets, day in, day out, year in, year out, and hold these signs and talk to people and tell what the standard is, set by your God.... He said, if they hit you in the face, turn your other cheek and let them hit the other side. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal.”³⁵⁷

If a member cannot meet that standard, he, like Karl, cannot be “a member in good standing of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁵⁸ But theological reasons for nonviolence are not the only concern; the church also needs to maintain its credibility and eliminate its liability. “This generation, this nation, would love nothing more than to say we’re standing on these streets brawling. We are not going to stand on these streets and brawl. We do not do that.”³⁵⁹ Given the tension at church pickets, violence is likely, and church members need to avoid violence that could invoke lawsuits or criminal charges.

Exclusion remains a powerful disciplinary mechanism for Westboro Baptist Church to shape the behavior of members within the group, cut off those who dare leave, and define the boundary between elect and damned. Its severity is what makes it so functional as a guard against defection. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper on a possible reunification with her son Josh, a reunification that Josh would welcome and which would allow his mother to see her grandchildren:

“Before I could have him over and sit and chat.... I would first have to line up these young people who are come to years [her younger children] and are

³⁵⁷ Kendall, “Dead to Fred.”

³⁵⁸ Kendall, “Dead to Fred.”

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

interested in serving God and know the standards set by God and kick 'em, each one, in the shin ... or maybe punch 'em in the stomach, if I was the punching kind of person.”³⁶⁰

Indeed, those other young people are reminded of Josh's absence—and what will happen to them if they dare leave—each time they glance at the refrigerator, where photos of the Shirley Phelps-Roper and Brent Roper's children are lined up in order of their age, with a gap where Josh's Photograph was or when they see a wall hanging of little wooden figures representing their family, the figure with Josh's name painted on it removed from the scene but the space where it hung unclosed, a visible reminder of his absence.

In Leo Booth's framework for abusive religion, exclusion as practiced by Westboro Baptist Church is a form of abuse. Says Booth, when religious groups “restrict their families' lives, continually trying to force them into a belief system under threat of rejection, punishment, or abandonment, it becomes abuse.”³⁶¹ In contrast, Westboro Baptist Church members strongly reject such a characterization, embracing exclusion is a loving way of holding each other accountable to their shared purpose as a church.

Westboro Baptist Church as the Remnant Church

As a church that believes that all events, both good and bad, are ordained by God for the purpose of God's glorification, Westboro Baptist Church identifies its purpose as the glorification of God, specifically through a ministry of internet and street preaching. As a congregation, it seeks to create cohesion among members in order to more readily mobilize its ministry, and it builds that cohesion by repeating its doctrines each time the group gathers and

³⁶⁰ Kendall, “The New Fred.”

³⁶¹ Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug*, 112.

through the practice of exclusion. In these ways, the church reinforces the boundary between itself and the outside world.

Westboro Baptist Church identifies its members as the only people on earth they know of who currently properly interpret and obey God's commands. While this in itself does not guarantee election, it does mean that church members view themselves as distinct from "Earth dwellers," as they refer to non-believers. The isolationist rhetoric of Westboro Baptist Church as a remnant, an authentic community directly descended from the New Testament period, has a long history among Primitive Baptists because, historically, "it provided them with a positive rationale for their schism and played an important part in defining themselves as different from the missionary Baptists."³⁶² Westboro Baptist Church's self-definition as the remnant of the New Testament church provides them with confidence that they are protected from tragedy while alive, that they are the only contemporary group that accurately understands and lives out God's commands, and are thus the only people who have a reason to hope that they will enter heaven. Westboro Baptist Church's place in the lineage of true churches that have been divinely preserved proves to them that God will continue to protect them. Warns Fred Phelps, "Don't mess with Westboro Baptist Church! We've got a garrison of angels watching over us."³⁶³ Though, as spiritual beings living in corruptible bodies, their health will decline with age, Westboro Baptists believe that they are physically protected by God because of their obedience. For example, Shirley Phelps-Roper explains that believing women who follow the church's teaching against family planning of any kind find that they have no reproductive difficulties,³⁶⁴ and church members reiterate that, despite the many physical attacks they have faced on the

³⁶² James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 104.

³⁶³ Fred Phelps, sermon, March 14, 2010.

³⁶⁴ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 28, 2006.

picket line, no one was been seriously injured because God protects them and will reward them for their faithful risk-taking. Explains Steve Drain, “[T]he fact of the matter is the Lord protects us” while on the picket line.³⁶⁵ In a church-produced document detailing an August 20, 1995 pipe bomb explosion at the church, the church explains, “In spite of and through it all, these faithful souls hit the streets every day ‘going forth and weeping, bearing precious seed,’ (Ps. 126:6), knowing the promises of God to sustain us and keep us were good and faithful promises.”³⁶⁶

According to Westboro Baptist Church theology, because they alone obey their detailed interpretation of Scripture, they alone, will enjoy heaven, though faithful of the past will also be present. “Beloved,” Fred Phelps encourages his congregation, “we are the harvest.”³⁶⁷

According to the doctrine of total depravity, which will be explored more fully in chapter 3, they can do nothing to please God on their own. Nevertheless, they are confident that they are “the apple of God’s eye.”³⁶⁸ Like other Primitive Baptist churches, Westboro Baptist Church rejects the idea of an invisible church—a worldwide, pan-historical collection of believers—and instead focuses on the visible church or what Westboro Baptist Church calls the “church militant”—the here-and-now church “decreed by God before time,” which is not a “voluntary gathering of the saved” but “the divinely ordained institution through which and into which God gather the whole of His elect.”³⁶⁹ Westboro Baptist Church sees itself alone as occupying the role of the visible church, though other churches could be the visible church, could be remnant churches, if they obeyed the rules of God as understood by Westboro Baptist Church. In other words, Westboro

³⁶⁵ Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best.”

³⁶⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, *The Bombing of Westboro Baptist Church by America*, August 20, 1995, [http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/bombing/americanbombedWestboro Baptist Church.html](http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/bombing/americanbombedWestboroBaptistChurch.html).

³⁶⁷ Fred Phelps, sermon, March 28, 2010.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 104.

Baptist Church is *in fact* the only church on Earth that includes people who have reason to hope for their election, not because Westboro Baptist Church has had a special revelation but because other churches refuse to obey. If other churches adopted the theology of Westboro Baptist Church—and, consequently, engaged in the same activities as Westboro Baptists—, then they, too, would be in obedience to God and would have some hope for the salvation of their members. Westboro Baptists have concluded that they are likely to be elect:

[D]iscerning the signs of the times in the light of rightly dividing and portioning out relevant Scripture passages, all as considered in the context of 20 action-packed years of 50,000+ open air street-preaching services on a daily basis on the mean streets of America—all this has led us to believe that the Gospel torch has been passed to the saints of God of the Westboro Baptist Church.³⁷⁰

This pronouncement, delivered in a sermon, reminds Westboro Baptists of their remnant status, their role as defenders of a divinely preserved truth, a role manifested by (albeit not deserved because of) their pickets. While it also recognizes that, in previous times, other people and groups had this role, it declares that Westboro Baptists alone have this role today. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper, just as Biblical heroes and the Reformation leaders and Puritans admired by Westboro Baptists were chosen by God to preach obedience, “this is our day, we are the people on the ground that fulfill our part of the prophecies.”³⁷¹

To be “on the ground” means to be a member in good standing, which requires belief in the doctrines of Westboro Baptist Church, attendance at church events, and participation in its

³⁷⁰ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 14, 2010.

³⁷¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, March 13, 2010.

picketing and other ministries. Anything less is insufficient to suggest election, for, as Shirley Phelps-Roper argues, if one believes, then one must act. Drawing from James 2,³⁷² she explains

[Y]our faith alone will NOT get it done. You say faith, but if no works to match that faith, than [sic] your faith is a lie. If you say you believe in God and you do not have works to match that, that is, that you KNOW you must NOT be ashamed of him in this adulterous and sinful generation that will try to squish you like a bug if you don't line up, so knowing that, you keep your mouth SHUT about God in the presence of some defiant rebel. So person stands before you and tells you it is ok to be gay and you remain silent, you are ashamed of Christ and HIS words in this adulterous and sinful generation.³⁷³

Belief, then, requires action—and action, as illustrated by the example provided by Shirley Phelps-Roper, takes the form of preaching against homosexuality. Further, it mandates joining the community of believers, and since Westboro Baptist Church is, as far as it knows, the only church that preaches and acts upon the correct interpretation of the Bible, it is the only church that a believer can join.

If you are loving these doctrines and you are looking around this world and seeing the last hours of the last days of all are upon you, then you look up and you see a little flock following the footsteps of the Lord your God, your beloved King, with

³⁷² In the King James translation of the Bible, James 2:14-26 says, “What [doth it] profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be [ye] warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what [doth it] profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent [them] out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

³⁷³ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, August 10, 2010.

a testimony that they please God, would wild horses keep you from getting out there to greet them? From making contact with them?³⁷⁴

No, says Shirley Phelps-Roper, and that is precisely why a sincere believer *must*—as Steve Drain, who came from Florida, and Jeff, who came from California, did—move to Topeka to join Westboro Baptist Church.

While current members of Westboro Baptists Church deny the authoritarian qualities that former members attribute to them, the church does conform to Almond, Sivan, and Appleby's characterization of fundamentalist religious groups: 1) elect, chosen membership, 2) sharp boundaries, 3) authoritarian organization, and 4) behavioral requirements.³⁷⁵ Westboro Baptists consider themselves literally chosen by God, who likewise winnows the non-elect away from the church over time. Though Westboro Baptists, unlike many fundamentalist believers, do engage the outside world, sharp boundaries are a *de facto* consequence of the demands of church life; even though Westboro Baptist children attend public school and adults work in the secular world, they spend so much time doing the work of the church that little time is left for non-church relationships. The behavioral requirements are detailed, though perhaps not any more so than many other conservative religious groups. Westboro Baptists have considerably more freedom, for example, than the Amish, Hasidic Jews, fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints, or other groups that regulate the appearance and ritual lives of believers; further, Westboro Baptists likely have more freedom in behavior than do participants in other conservative churches, which often demand that women wear skirts or dresses, homeschool their children, and prohibit engagement with popular culture.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby, "Fundamentalisms: Genus and Species" in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 405-414.

Westboro Baptist Church has, over time, evolved in its theology and practices. “To this day, we continue to learn,” Shirley Phelps-Roper explains, and, indeed, Westboro Baptist Church, founded as a missionary effort of an Arminian Baptist church, quickly adopted a Calvinism that increased in its severity over time.³⁷⁶ This evolution is a group effort, Shirley Phelps-Roper says. “We are a work in progress—we have come a long way from where we began. We read and figure things about how our conduct should be and we strive to live that way.”³⁷⁷ According to church members, the development of the congregation was not directed by their own desire to be an infamous congregation but by the providence of God. Now that their mission is clear to them, they see how the talents of individuals fit into the role God designed for them.

“The stones fit the frame,” notes Steve Drain. “Some of our people will spend more time in the workplace because more money is needed either for their family or to take on needs of the church,” and, in contrast, “[s]ome have jobs that aren’t as lucrative but they’ll have more free time to do chores and errands or go on picket trips.”³⁷⁸ The organization of the church—physically around the Westboro neighborhood, spiritually around a commonly held set of unusual tenets, financially around the church’s ministry, and chronologically geared toward the second coming of Christ—reinforce the boundary between elect church members and the damned rest of the world while simultaneously allowing for quick mobilization. Church members are so concretely situated within the church—because they live near it; because their family members belong to it; because it organizes their time and their friendships and love lives; because, for many of them, their livelihoods are associated with it or with other church members—that they are quick to respond to the demands that the church makes on them. These

³⁷⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, June 28, 2010.

³⁷⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, April 6, 2005.

³⁷⁸ Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best.”

demands are couched in its theology, which is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: The Theology of Westboro Baptist Church

Theology plays a significant role in understanding Westboro Baptists' belief, action, and self-understanding; as for many people of other faiths, the life events of church members and the church itself are "framed by systematically explicated doctrine."³⁷⁹ While theology does not explain every aspect of human experience, it serves as a lens through which to view, organize, understand, and rationalize actions both within and outside of individuals' control. Moreover, it addresses the most momentous of life's questions—"questions of life and death, goodness and truth, time and eternity"³⁸⁰—in the context of a meaningful, purposive trajectory. What the answers to those questions are—if a faith tradition embraces *answers* to them at all—vary according to the composition of the group asking them, and factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class, as well as individual psychological makeup, have been given considerable attention from researchers for their role in shaping theology.³⁸¹

This chapter, however, does not offer sociological or psychological explanations for why Westboro Baptists accept certain doctrinal points. Instead, it examines the theology they espouse in comparison to other American religious communities. In doing so, it illustrates how "predestination has been one of the most important but unacknowledged sources of discord in

³⁷⁹ James L. Peacock and Tim Pettyjohn, "Fundamentalisms Narrated: Muslim, Christian, and Mystical," in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 123.

³⁸⁰ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Introduction," in *Theology in American: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, edited by Sydney E. Ahlstrom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company: 1967), 12.

³⁸¹ For a broad discussion of factors that influence fundamentalist participation but that downplays religious faith *per se*, see Martin E. Marty's *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). For some recent examples of specific foci: on race and ethnicity, see, for example, Craig Prentiss, editor, *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2003) or Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); on gender, see, for example, Elizabeth A. Castelli and Rosamond C. Rodman, *Women, Gender, and Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); on class, see, for example, Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For psychological aspects of totalitarian religious belief, see Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "Religious Totalism, Violence and Exemplary Dualism: Beyond the Extrinsic Model," in *Millennialism and Violence*, edited by Michael Barkun (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), 10-50.

churches across the denominational spectrum”³⁸² and suggests that Westboro Baptist Church’s articulation of unfamiliar, unpopular doctrines as much as their activism has earned them public repulsion. Further, the chapter lays the groundwork for an examination of how that theology inspires particular kinds of activism. Comprehension of theology also aids in understanding church organization and self-perception, for theology is understood by believers as being logical and systematic, even if, to outsiders, commitment to that theology appears zealous, dogmatic, or dangerous.³⁸³ Notes Emmanuel Sivan, “In their own eyes, the fundamentalists are reasonable people. It is just that, committed to the revelation,”—that is, informed by and defensive of a particular and often unique theology—“they are pitted in a fight against the outside. . . . Rational yet embattled, it is a self-perception no doubt as sincere as it is deep.”³⁸⁴

To understand how Westboro Baptists see themselves and their actions in the world, then, researchers must understand their theology, for, in their framework, “only doctrine is competent to govern experience.”³⁸⁵ Thankfully, this task is made easier by Westboro Baptist themselves, who are, generally, theologically-informed and articulate, like other Primitive Baptists, for whom

³⁸² Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

³⁸³ For example, Charles Kimball identifies five traits of “dangerous” religions in *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*: 1) absolute truth claims, 2) blind obedience, 2) identifying a future “ideal” time when the world will align with one’s beliefs, 3) accepting that “the end justifies any means,” and 5) declaring holy war (New York: HarperOne, 2008). Almond, Sivan, and Appleby similarly suggest a list of characteristics to describe the religious beliefs of fundamentalists groups worldwide: 1) reactivity to the marginalization of religion; 2) selectivity in defending, selecting, and reshaping elements of the religious tradition, “especially those that clearly distinguish the fundamentalists from the mainstream;” selectivity in affirming and embracing some aspects of modernity; and selectivity in choosing consequences and processes of modernity for special opposition; 3) moral manicheism; 4) absolutism and inerrancy; and 5) millennialism and messianism (“Fundamentalisms: Genus and Species,” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 406). Westboro Baptists share these characteristics with numerous other Religious Right groups, perhaps uniquely selecting modern methods of highly visual and technologically-savvy protest and selecting homosexuality for special opposition.

³⁸⁴ Emmanuel Sivan, “The Enclave Culture,” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 35. Many researchers who spend time among fundamentalists echo the sincerity of belief. (See, for example, Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989], 1.)

³⁸⁵ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 98.

“[d]ebates about the implications of the doctrine of predestination”—the premier theological point of every sermon and many conversations—“continue to preoccupy ... and permeate their lives and conflicts.”³⁸⁶ Indeed, all members of the congregation are expected to be able to “give an account” of their faith, to answer questions clearly and with overwhelming Biblical citations. Among Westboro Baptists, even children are encouraged to speak to the public about their faith.³⁸⁷ “[C]ontrary to what one might expect of a denomination that disapproved of higher learning,... Primitive Baptists have had to this day a strong sense of historical continuity and knowledge of their doctrinal past,”³⁸⁸ notes Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Westboro Baptists are no exception.

History of the Primitive Baptist Church

Westboro Baptist Church is a Primitive, or Old School, or “Hardshell,” Baptist Church.³⁸⁹ Like most Baptist churches, its organizational roots can be traced to the Reformation³⁹⁰ and, more specifically, to the Anabaptist movement that critiqued the Roman

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

³⁸⁷ For example, Shirley Phelps-Roper’s youngest sons, Jonah and Noah, appeared on ABC’s television news magazine *20/20* in 2007, articulating the church’s anti-gay theology. When asked if children are “too young” to be exposed to such strong language and images, Shirley Phelps-Roper said clearly: “No, they’re not young... They’re never too young to hear [the Word of God]” (John Stossel, Ruth Chenetz, and Patric McMenamin, “‘America’s Doomed’: Freedom of Speech or Unlawful Hate Mongering?” *20/20*, November 2, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=3812344&page=1>).

³⁸⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 109.

³⁸⁹ Peacock and Tyson divide Primitive Baptists into three categories: Progressives, who have adopted Arminian theology, Sunday school, and musical instruments; Old Regulars, who are Calvinist and reject the innovations of the Progressives; and Absoluters, who defend a “hyper-Calvinism” that includes a stricter Biblical logic, a belief that “everything in time and nature is predetermined,” and double predestination—that is, the belief that God actively chooses both to elect some people and damn others (120). Westboro Baptists are best described as Absoluters, though they do permit musical accompaniment. Primitive Baptists are also known as Old Baptists, Particular Baptists (because they believe that election is only for “particular” people, in contrast to General Baptists, who believe that salvation is available to all), or “Hardshells,” a pejorative nickname used among Primitive Baptists themselves but not welcome from outsiders.

³⁹⁰ “Despite modern denials by certain Baptists that Baptists are Protestants, the matrix of the Baptist movement had been powerfully shaped by the Protestant Reformation, and some have even claimed that the Baptists are the truly

Catholic Church for its practice of infant baptism, arguing, instead, that baptism was only for confessing believers, and the Catholic and Reformed churches for their desires to collapse church and state.³⁹¹ Importantly, while Primitive Baptists recognize that, organizationally, they developed and were recognized as a historical entity only since a split within American Baptists in 1832, they claim that their church as a spiritual institution begins with Jesus. Most believe in a “literal Baptist ‘apostolic succession’ from the beginnings of Christianity.”³⁹² Tellingly, 19th century Primitive Baptist historians Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell titled their history of the Primitive Baptist church *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist*. Published in 1886, the text locates the origin of the church in the first generation of Christians, noting that, within 100 years, before the first creeds were established,³⁹³ Christians had already invented their own “man-made” additions to the simple and pure—that is, primitive—directions for organization and worship that Jesus had delivered during his lifetime. Everything, then, beyond what Jesus explicitly ordered or modeled—that is, beyond adult baptism by immersion, the breaking of unleavened bread and drinking of wine in memory of his death, footwashing, preaching, and the appointment of male pastors, elders, and deacons—was un-Scriptural and suggested, arrogantly, that humans could better organize a church than God. For this reason, as articulated at the Suwannee River Baptist Association meeting in 1838, most Primitive Baptists by the early 1800s

thoroughgoing Reformers” (James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 6-7).

³⁹¹ Unlike other contemporary Anabaptist groups such as the Amish and Mennonites, however, most Baptists are not pacifists, and many Baptist groups have abandoned traditional Radical Reformers’ arguments for a strict separation of church and state, as Baptist leadership in Religious Right organizations indicates.

³⁹² John G. Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” in *The Baptist River: Essays on the Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition*, edited by W. Glenn Jonas, Jr. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 159.

³⁹³ At the same time that they claim to follow only the example of the earliest church, Primitive Baptists, like all Baptists “adhere to the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines formulated by the first four ecumenical councils [First Council of Nicea in 325, First Council of Constantinople in 381, Council of Ephesus in 431, and Council of Chalcedon in 451] and expressed in the earliest Christian creeds,” and thus have, in fact, adopted theological claims made many centuries after the establishment of the earliest churches (Garrett, *Baptist Theology*, 21).

“had adopted the idea of church successionism, that there had been a continuous, unbroken succession of Baptist churches, ordinations, and baptisms from the days of John the Baptist to the present.”³⁹⁴ Westboro Baptists, like all Primitive Baptists, see themselves as the authentic church of Christ, as organized by his apostles and settled in the United States by God’s providence.

Baptists came to the colonies during early British settlement, populating, most notably, Rhode Island under the leadership of Roger Williams, an early proponent of the separation of church and state who founded the first Baptist church in the colonies before he became a Seeker, a kind of proto-Quaker.³⁹⁵ As a small group of believers whose church was not supported by the state as an “established” church and who, in fact, disapproved of such church-state relationships, early Baptists were political outsiders. Moreover, they were critical of attempts to impose religious law upon state activity, a position that caused them significant problems in Puritan Massachusetts and more broadly after the American Revolution.³⁹⁶ After the creation of the nation, for example, they did not support temperance or Sabbath laws such as those that prohibited mail delivery on Sundays.³⁹⁷

Early American Baptists permitted a certain amount of flexibility within their ranks. Some Baptists were organized into associations, while others shunned large-scale organization. Some were Arminians, believing that God’s call for salvation was a free choice that could be made by an individual, while others were strict Calvinists, believing that only those who were predestined by God for salvation would enter heaven and that they could not, in fact, resist God’s

³⁹⁴ John G. Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” 162.

³⁹⁵ For a fuller treatment of Williams’ religious journey, see Jimmy D. Neff, “Roger Williams: Pious Puritan and Strict Separationist,” *Journal of Church and State* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 529-546.

³⁹⁶ For a history of this tension, see Carla Gardina Pestana, *Quakers and Baptists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³⁹⁷ James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96.

grace, a position that aligned with Puritanism. Indeed, early Calvinist Baptists and Puritans shared much theology; disagreement arose around issues of establishment and the baptism of infants. Over time, some Puritans separated from the Puritan church over their theological differences to join Baptist congregations, but the effect of Puritan theology on Calvinist Baptists was—and is—still deeply felt. Westboro Baptists, like the churches that separated from the separatist Puritans, thus “withdrawing from the withdrawers,”³⁹⁸ continue to draw heavily from Puritan texts in their doctrine and preaching.

By the late 1700s and early 1800s, the diversity of beliefs was creating problems for Baptist congregations, and congregations became divided, at first only in doctrine but soon also physically, a tension that had been brewing since Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, when Reformers met to address Jacobus Arminius’ challenge to strict predestination theology.³⁹⁹ In response to these divisions, latitudinarians, who “valued moderation over zeal and morality over dogma,”⁴⁰⁰ tried to find common ground for the increasingly theologically divided colonial Christians. For Calvinists, however, “unconditional predestination was far from nonessential”⁴⁰¹ and could not be compromised. Though the fiery sermons of Jonathan Edwards—who has been labeled both “the last Puritan”⁴⁰² and an early evangelical⁴⁰³—had confirmed the five points of Calvinist doctrine during the First Great Awakening from 1730 through 1760, the doctrines of depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints

³⁹⁸ Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Intellect: The Aims and Purposes of Ante-Bellum Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 297.

³⁹⁹ *The Articles of the Synod of Dort and Its Rejection of Errors: With the Events Which Made Way for that Synod*, translated and edited by Thomas Scott (Utica, NY: William Williams, 1831), available via Google Books, http://books.google.com/books?id=OfBMYEOMHCEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=synod+of+dort&hl=en&ei=4iEITKXFBsKclgexjKnPAw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false.

⁴⁰⁰ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 81.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁰² David C. Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-Love and the Dawn of the Beatific* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

⁴⁰³ Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America’s Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005).

were threatened by the innovations of the Second Great Awakening of the first third of the nineteenth century, especially a new focus on missionary work and the publication of Bible tracts, and a broader cultural move toward science and reason in understanding natural phenomena.

Since at least the late eighteenth century, the Calvinist message of total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of saints has come into increasing conflict with the buoyancy and optimism that came to embody American culture. Attacks on the “unrelieved negativism, introspectiveness, and baneful formality”⁴⁰⁴ of Calvinism, especially the “hyper-Calvinism”⁴⁰⁵ of John Gill that has so extensively informed Westboro Baptist theology,⁴⁰⁶ increased during the Enlightenment, as science began to be seen as an explanation for previously inexplicable phenomena, from earthquakes to illness. As people gained increased control over the natural world, through technologies as varied as vaccines and lightning rods,⁴⁰⁷ supernatural explanations began to appear superstitious, and the view of God as

⁴⁰⁴ Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 117.

⁴⁰⁵ Generally used derogatorily, “hyper-Calvinism” is an interpretation of Calvin’s theology that concludes that the message of salvation should not be offered to the non-elect, argues that God hates the non-elect, and stresses the secret over the revealed will of God.

⁴⁰⁶ ⁴⁰⁶ Hyper-Calvinism was best articulated by John Gill (1697-1771), a self-taught British Baptist who argued against “free offers of grace”—that is, preaching the gospel message to the non-elect. Called “the only man that ever hunted and drove out Arminianism from the explanation of every verse in the Bible” by nineteenth-century Primitive Baptists Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, he is much admired by Westboro Baptists, though the church has found flaws with some of his claims, such as his argument that marriage to non-Christians is acceptable (*History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist* (Middleton, NY: Gilbert Beebe’s Sons, 1886), 499). Joseph Hussey’s 1707 *God’s Operations of Grace but No Offers of His Grace* is also foundational to the “no-offers” version of Calvinism espoused by hyper-Calvinists (London: D. Bridge, 1707; electronic resource by Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2003).

⁴⁰⁷ Peter J. Thuesen documents how the lightning rod, invented by Ben Franklin, divided believers, with some suggesting that “the new technology interfered with God’s sovereign judgments and might draw even greater wrath from on high.” New Englanders’ efforts to control lightening, “the perfect image of an undomesticated providence,” was punished, some argued, with an earthquake in Cape Anne, Massachusetts, in 1755. In response to the earthquake, pastor Thomas Prince noted that the prevalence of lightning rods in Boston was, no doubt, the reason why the city was so badly shaken, warning, “O! there is no getting out of the mighty Hand of God!” (*Predestination*, 88-89; quoting Prince, *Earthquakes the Works of God, and Tokens of His Just Displeasure* (Boston, 1755)). To this day, many Amish subgroups prohibit the use of lightning rods on their barns and houses (John A. Hostetler, *Amish Roots: A Treasury of History, Wisdom, and Lore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 87).

intimately involved with all the details of human life—a view rejected by the minority Deists for some time⁴⁰⁸—crept into Christianity more broadly. Further, a general optimism about human ability undermined the view of humanity as depraved and God as arbitrarily vindictive. Non-Calvinists began to see in predestination “a peculiar sense of doom...derived from antique sources”⁴⁰⁹ that were inconsistent with modernity.

Of special concern was Calvinist teaching on children, who, like adults, were deserving of hell in the theology preached by Jonathan Edwards, who said of them:

As innocent as children seem to be to us, if they are out of Christ, they are not so in God’s sight, but are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers and are in a most miserable conditions, as well as grown persons.⁴¹⁰

If the doctrine of total depravity was acceptable when applied to adults, whose sins were often evident, it was even more difficult for many Christians, especially those trying to gain mainstream respectability, to apply to children, who were increasingly romanticized in the popular culture of the mid- to late-1800s. For generations after Edwards’ death, Calvinists would try to suppress his views of children,⁴¹¹ but Arminians continued to identify the doctrine of infant damnation as evidence of the cruelties of predestination theology.⁴¹² As the nineteenth century opened, Calvinist precepts were under increasing attack from Arminians who saw

⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, Thomas Jefferson, writing to John Adams in a letter dated April 11, 1823, described Calvin’s God as “a daemon of malignant spirit” (*Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels: “The Philosophy of Jesus” and “The Life and Morals of Jesus,”* edited by Dickinson W. Adams and Ruth W. Lester (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 410).

⁴⁰⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 1027.

⁴¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival: Part III: Shewing in Many Instances Wherein the Subjects or Zealous Promoters of This Work have been Injuriouslly Blamed*, in *Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening*, edited by C.C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 394.

⁴¹¹ Catherine A. Brekus, “Remembering Jonathan Edwards’ Ministry to Children,” in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad: Historical Memories, Cultural Movements, Global Horizons*, edited by David W. Kling and Douglas A. Sweeney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 41.

⁴¹² Thuesen, *Predestination*, 100-135.

Calvinist theology as fatalistic, hopeless, and superstitious, with a vengeful God and humans paralyzed from transforming their society.

In contrast, Arminianism, perhaps best articulated in the theology of Methodist brothers John and Charles Wesley,⁴¹³ empowered believers to do something about their own salvation. While Methodism retained a lively vision of hell, it gave people an option for escaping it: they could opt into the free grace of Christ. While, like their Calvinistic critics, they believed in total depravity and thus held that people, by their natures, did not deserve such grace and could do nothing to earn it, they also believed that it was available to every person and that each person could accept or reject it; thus, for Arminians, salvation was conditional upon the individual's choice to accept it, in contrast to Calvinists, who believed that salvation was available to only a few, could not be rejected by those to whom it was offered, and was not conditional upon the individual but was determined entirely by God. These theological differences caused significant change on the nineteenth century American religious landscape.

Two centuries and a half centuries after Dort, then, religious innovators such as Charles Grandison Finney were preaching a new Christianity—an ecumenical evangelicalism that claimed that salvation was for anyone and that humans could, in fact, be instrumental in their own salvation and in “bringing people to Christ”—in a new way, often involving women praying in mixed-gender meetings, extemporaneous preaching, and the “anxious seat,” where would-be converts could meet with believers for prayer as they worked up their courage to publicly identify themselves as willing to receive salvation. Whether people came to Christ, they certainly came to Finney's mid-nineteenth century revivals, and churches that adopted these new

⁴¹³ While Arminianism, as articulated by Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius, predates Methodism and while some Methodists are Calvinists, Arminianism probably has its strongest presence in Methodism.

methods grew.⁴¹⁴ Moreover, the theology of churches that had previously been Calvinist changed. While Calvinism had taught that humans were totally depraved and thus could not have any interaction with God except through God’s invitation, evangelical Christianity taught that humans, though sinful, had to use their own will to accept the salvific death of Jesus for the remission of their own sins. Calvinism taught that atonement for sins was limited to those who had been predestined by God to receive it, while the new evangelical Christianity taught that the possibility of salvation was universal in its scope, even though not all people would accept it. Calvinism taught that God’s grace was irresistible, that if God had chosen to save a person, then he or she could not refuse God’s call. In contrast, the new evangelical Christianity, with its focus on autonomy, said that salvation was a “choice” to be made—and could thus be unmade—by the individual sinner. Theologians increasingly believed that “the human will was an active, necessary, and determinative participant in the reception of divine grace [and] that the human mind played a decisive role in determining the reality of both natural and supernatural phenomena.”⁴¹⁵ This was a significant departure from the strict Calvinism of the Puritans, in which humanity was imagined as a detestable spider hanging only by a single strand of web over the pit of hell, helpless to save itself and utterly dependent upon a transcendent and inscrutable God.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, argues for the democratizing fervor of the early republic, one that infused the religion as well as the politics of the time (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). “This new religious culture, which sanctioned the right of the individual to go his own way,” he argues, “would have been unthinkable apart from the crisis of authority in popular culture that accompanied the birth of the American republic” (“The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (December 1980): 567).

⁴¹⁵ Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 231.

⁴¹⁶ This particular metaphor comes from Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” (*Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, edited by Harold P. Simonson (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1970), 96-113), but the sentiment is prevalent in both Puritan writing and contemporary Primitive Baptist sermons. Fred Phelps referenced it explicitly in his celebration of the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005, when he said, “The Lord God almighty held that serpent, that spider, that insect, by a slender thread over the fires of hell for 84 years and then

In the early 1800s, this new brand of evangelical Christianity had widespread popular appeal, especially in the context of a rapidly changing society. Writes historian of Primitive Baptists James R. Mathis, “The new evangelical’s language of human ability, progress, science and utility was foreign to Primitive Baptists accustomed to a language of human depravity, divine sovereignty, and adherence to primitive Scriptural models.”⁴¹⁷ At the same time, it was enticing to new Americans’ ideas of individualism and autonomy, whereas Calvinism’s “monarchial God” was a reminder of British rule.⁴¹⁸ Further, this new evangelicalism gave theological justification to innovations such as mission boards, the publishing of Bible tracts, and Sunday schools, each of which aimed to use the newest methods in social science to “win” people to Christ. The trend toward missionary work gained footholds not only in Baptist congregations but across all Protestant denominations, and, similarly, the anti-missionary (also called “anti-tract”) movement was pan-denominational. Among Baptists, as among many Protestant groups, the issue was not only about the role of such boards and societies but the very validity of predestination, which said such innovations were unnecessary.

To conventional Calvinists, the idea of human intervention in the calling of souls to salvation was more than a waste of energy; it defied God’s very orders for how people were to approach the Holy and was therefore insulting to God, for “those doctrines and schemes of divinity that are in any respect opposite to... an absolute and universal dependence on God, do derogate from God’s glory.”⁴¹⁹ Over time, tension within churches over such theological and subsequent organizational issues—Should churches have Sunday schools? Should a parachurch missionary board direct where missionaries are sent? Should a parachurch publisher produce

threw him in!” (Nathan Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872).

⁴¹⁷ Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 67.

⁴¹⁸ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 103.

⁴¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “God Glorified in Man’s Dependence,” *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, 62.

tools to guide people through the salvation experience?—divided congregations and previously associated churches. Indeed, notes historian John G. Crowley, “[I]t is difficult to conceive of the bitterness and acrimony that attended these divisions.”⁴²⁰ The theological debate about human agency in salvation led to long, elaborate, and angry exchanges in denominational newsletters and pulpits.⁴²¹

The differences in theology and practice soon became a measure of one’s authenticity as a “gospel church”—that is, the kind of church Jesus organized before his removal to heaven—in contrast to what Calvinist Baptists called “mean Baptists,” referring to those who would use “human means” to improve upon God’s plan for salvation.⁴²² Wrote soon-to-be Primitive Baptist Joshua Lawrence in his argument for a split among Baptists:

There is, brethren, one radical difference between us and those who advocate these various institutions which we have noticed to which we wish to call your attention. It is this: they declare the gospel to be a system of means; these means it appears they believe to be of human contrivance; and they act accordingly. But we believe the gospel dispensation to embrace a system of faith and obedience, and we would act according to our belief.⁴²³

When Lawrence distinguished the churches according to their vision of God as either working in concert with the human mind and heart to bring people to salvation or working alone in the

⁴²⁰ Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” 165.

⁴²¹ Battles between Arminians, who charged predestinationists with fatalism and “Mahometanism,” on the one hand, and Calvinists, who charged Arminians with usurping the authority of God to determine election and denying original sin, on the other, were lengthy and heated. For example, Methodist John Wesley and Augustus Toplady, member of the Anglican clergy and author of “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” had been friendly until Toplady began a more vigorous defense of Calvinism. They sparred repeatedly in public documents, though, eventually, Wesley refused to publically engage his antagonist, writing to a friend in regards to Toplady: “I do not fight with chimney-sweepers. He is too dirty a writer for me to meddle with. I should only foul my fingers. I read his title-page, and troubled myself no farther.” (“Letter to George Merryweather,” dated June 24, 1770, *Wesley’s Letters: 1770*, Wesley Center Online, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/letters/1770.htm).

⁴²² Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects of America*, Revised Edition (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), 202.

⁴²³ Joshua Lawrence, “The Black Rock Address,” 1832, *The Old School Baptist Website*, <http://www.oldschoolbaptist.org/Articles/BlackRockAddress.html>.

matter, he signaled a division that could not be ignored. This kind of exclusive thinking is common to fundamentalist believers, according to Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson. The difference between fundamentalists and other believers, they argue, “lies not so much in the fact that fundamentalists conceive of polarities but in the way in which these polarities are understood—as sharply opposing contrasts.”⁴²⁴ Such polarities are difficult to reconcile, as the great number of Baptist groups indicates.⁴²⁵

While the split between what would become missionary Baptists and the Primitive Baptists occurred slowly and unevenly across the young nation, it was crystallized when, in 1827, the Kehukee Association of North Carolina passed a declaration that formally declared the split.⁴²⁶ Divorcing churches identified themselves as either missionary churches or anti-missionary, and hence New School or Old School, Arminian or Calvinist, General or Particular. The new nomenclature reveals how, though the split was, on the surface, about the organization of churches, it was also about authority and theology. Primitive Baptists argued for greater control of theology at the local level,⁴²⁷ while those who argued that pastors should be trained at Bible schools and seminaries were, at the same time, inherently arguing that outside information, not just the Holy Spirit, had a role in preparing preachers. Moreover, the soon-to-be named Primitive Baptists argued, the very idea of sectarian colleges “necessarily implies that our

⁴²⁴ Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson, “Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 40.

⁴²⁵ Because Primitive Baptists churches are fractious and autonomous, data about membership, historical documents, demographic information, and financial information are difficult to find—as is a unified voice that articulates a shared theology and vision of the world, though Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell’s *History of the Church of God* offers significant detail about the church in America in the nineteenth century. Most scholarship about Primitive Baptist churches focuses on individual congregations or regional groups—for example, Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge area of Virginia and North Carolina (Peacock and Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox*) or southern Georgia, southeastern Alabama, and the Florida panhandle (John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998]).

⁴²⁶ “The Kehukee Declaration,” *Essential Baptist Principles*, http://www.essentialbaptistprinciples.org/resolutions/kehukee_declaration.htm.

⁴²⁷ Objectors to seminaries called them “a real pest to the church of Christ” in Joshua Lawrence’s “The Black Rock Address.”

distinct views of church government of gospel doctrine and gospel ordinances... are connected with human sciences, a principle which we cannot admit: we believe the kingdom of Jesus Christ to be altogether a kingdom not of this world.”⁴²⁸ This epistemological difference allows little room for compromise and has led to significant differences in the structure of worship, with New School Baptists of all kinds (Southern Baptists, American Baptists, etc.) generally encouraging an educated clergy.⁴²⁹

Primitive Baptists argued that families, not Sunday schools, were the proper educators of children, a theological position that created a more insular church as it discouraged children not associated with adult congregants from attending and did not allow new ideas to enter the church via Sunday School curricula. Significantly, Primitive Baptists argued against Bible and tract societies not because they opposed sharing their faith (though they did object to the means proposed by the missionary Baptists) but because they questioned the motives of the large, funds-hungry organizations that ran them and, especially regarding tracts, which they felt could contain information that is non- or contra-Biblical. Primitive Baptists argued that those religious tools, even if deployed by those with pure intentions, represented an implicit critique of the Bible by suggesting that the Bible was not sufficient for God’s plan for the church. Again, these disagreements arose not because of a general conservatism of Primitive Baptists but because of their position that the innovations being touted by their brethren were extra-Biblical and not only unnecessary but even threatening to the “pure” Bible teachings that they felt their religion had held since the time of Christ. By rejecting the innovations that other early 19th century Baptists were adopting, Primitive Baptists were able to claim greater authenticity as Christians, as followers of first century Christianity and of Jesus Christ. They asserted that “New School”

⁴²⁸ Joshua Lawrence, “The Black Rock Address.”

⁴²⁹ For the development of the seminary among Baptists, see Miller, *Piety and Intellect*.

Baptists had created a human-made system that reflected the fashions of the time, whereas “Old School” Baptists embraced a theology (and engaged in practices that reflected that theology) that was acultural, ahistorical, and timeless.

This strong disdain for anything “extra-Biblical” and denial of the influence of culture on their own beliefs or practices continues to mark contemporary Primitive Baptists, who use “Primitive” to mean “first, earliest, original, simple, primary.”⁴³⁰ Primitive Baptists link theology and practice and thus reject many changes out of concern that changing practice may result in a change in theology⁴³¹—and they accuse New School Baptists of making changes to their theology after the split between New and Old Schools. After the division, the General Baptists—missionary in orientation toward the world, Arminian in theology—would go on to divide into various religious groups, including the largest contemporary U.S. Protestant group, the Southern Baptists, and, at times, disagreements about predestination and election would be raised again.⁴³² For Primitive Baptists, the case was, overall, closed, and strict Calvinism became the rule.⁴³³

Similarly, today’s Primitive Baptists are extraordinarily consistent in their beliefs and do not welcome dissent. Says Timothy P. Weber, “[F]undamentalist unwillingness to expect or provide for sincere differences of options among themselves seems to be at least partially responsible for the movement’s militancy. As a result, fundamentalists have quarreled with each

⁴³⁰ Peacock and Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox*, 88.

⁴³¹ As Betram Wyatt-Brown notes, “[M]odernity in the ways of worship and faith had to be stoutly resisted or they would disgrace their perception of God Himself” (*The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 109).

⁴³² In *Predestination*, Thuesen traces the battles over predestination among twentieth century mainstream Baptists, with special attention devoted to the turnover at Baptist seminaries over the issue (172-208).

⁴³³ The exception to this is the “No-Hellers,” Primitive Baptist Universalists who are Calvinists yet believe that they will enter heaven. They are found in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia (Howard Dorgan, *In the Hands of a Happy God* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997)). Among the few who identify as Primitive Baptist Universalists is bluegrass musician Ralph Stanley, who was baptized in his 70s and now attends Slate Creek Primitive Baptist Church in Buchanan County, Virginia (Ralph Stanley, with Eddie Dean, *Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times* (New York: Gotham, 2009), 394).

other nearly as much as they have quarreled with their enemies,”⁴³⁴ and, even among fundamentalists, Primitive Baptists are known for their divisiveness, resulting in small individual congregations and an overall low membership.⁴³⁵ In 1832, Joshua Lawrence defended the Primitive Baptist rejection of evangelical innovation at the Black Rock (Maryland) Association’s meeting, where anti-missionary, anti-tract, Calvinistic Primitive Baptists split from all other Baptist groups:

Though we may not enjoy the satisfaction of seeing multitudes flocking to Jesus under our ministry, yet instead of going in to Hagar to accomplish the promises of God,⁴³⁶ or of resorting to any of the contrivances of men to make up the deficiency, we would still be content to preach the word, and would be instant in season and out of season; knowing it has pleased God, not by the wisdom of men, but by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. And that his word will not return unto him void, but it shall accomplish that which he please, and prosper in the thing whereunto he sends it. Faith in God, instead of leading us to contrive ways to help him accomplish his purposes, leads us to inquire what he hath required at our hands, and to be satisfied with doing that as we find it pointed

⁴³⁴ Timothy P. Weber, “The Two-Edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 116.

⁴³⁵ Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell estimated that, in 1885, Primitive Baptists numbered about 100,000 members in 3,000 churches (*History of the Church of God*, 630). Elmer T. Clark estimated 65,000 in 1949 (*Small Sects of America*, 203). No Primitive Baptist leader would speak on record, but all estimated the current number to be no more than 40,000-50,000.

⁴³⁶ Here Lawrence refers the story of Hagar, Abram, and Sarai (whose names will soon be changed to Abraham and Sarah) that begins in Genesis 16. Abram, who was not able to produce a son with his wife Sarai, impregnated her maidservant Hagar, who bore Ishmael. Abram was unwilling to wait for God’s promise of a son through his wife, though God later delivered on this promise, blessing the aged Abram and Sarai with Isaac. Lawrence is encouraging the developing Primitive Baptists churches not to attempt to increase the church through means outside of God’s will, as Abraham tried to secure himself a son with Hagar, but to wait for God’s plan to bear fruit, as it did with the birth of Isaac.

out in his word; for we know that his purposes shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure.⁴³⁷

Lawrence's words encapsulate Primitive Baptists' defense of the local church against any form of ecumenism; for example, they practice only what they term "close" communion, that is, communion only with other baptized members of "orderly" (that is, acceptable to the individual congregation) Primitive Baptist churches.⁴³⁸ They do not ecumenically partner with churches from other denominations, even in the pursuit of commonly-held political goals. This has protected them from the influences of other, more liberal, theologies and has permitted their theology to remain virtually unchanged since their organization. As Mathis notes, "The leaders of their churches preach these same doctrines their predecessors preached."⁴³⁹ Indeed, their isolation, which is understood as "merely a manifestation of the inscrutable will of God,"⁴⁴⁰ solidifies their theological views. "If anything, their views of the doctrines of election and predestination grew more stringent over time," notes Mathis, and have "provide[d] a permanent and safe home for a particular strain of Calvinism."⁴⁴¹ The next section of this dissertation examines that Calvinism as it has been preserved by Westboro Baptist Church.

Westboro Baptist Church Theology

By identifying themselves with the New Testament church, those receiving the letters of Paul and Timothy and the other New Testament writers, today's Primitive Baptist churches

⁴³⁷ Joshua Lawrence, "The Black Rock Address."

⁴³⁸ Primitive Baptists distinguish between "close" communion, in which Primitive Baptists from different congregations in good standing to take communion together, and "closed" communion, in which only members from a congregation can take communion in that church.

⁴³⁹ Mathis, *Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 149.

⁴⁴⁰ Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 163.

⁴⁴¹ Mathis, *Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 150.

affirm their authenticity as “gospel churches”—and make demands on and promises to their members accordingly. Writes Nancy T. Ammerman, “By placing life into a mythic context, people can claim their special role in creating the future.”⁴⁴² Westboro Baptists view their own role in God’s plan for the world as divinely ordained, and they spend considerable time in church sermons and Bible readings discerning what that role is and how they can best fulfill it.

Referring to the promise that “ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust,” taken from 2 Peter 1:4, pastor Fred Phelps rallies his congregation with the reminder that Peter’s words are “are intended directly and expressly for us, at this hour, in this humble church—or they are no longer intended for anybody, except for mildly interested ancient history professors. *We* are vitally interested.”⁴⁴³ To understand the promises in which they are “vitally interested,” Westboro Baptists, like other Primitive Baptists, turn to the theology of John Calvin and those who followed him.

Calvinism

“Primitive Baptists have been reluctant to frame and adopt new confessions of faith,”⁴⁴⁴ notes James Leo Garrett, Jr. Similarly, *Primitive Baptist Web Station*, a website that archives essays, sermons, and radio broadcasts about the faith, reminds visitors that “Primitive Baptists claim the scriptures as their sole rule of faith and practice, and therefore, are not bound to creeds of faith” though some churches and associations have summarized key beliefs in articles of faith that “differ in wording but not in substance.”⁴⁴⁵ These are drawn heavily from the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), the Midland Confession of Faith (1655), the London Confessions of

⁴⁴² Nancy T. Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms: Social Dynamics and Rhetorical Strategies” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 168.

⁴⁴³ Fred Phelps, sermon February 4, 2010, bold in original.

⁴⁴⁴ Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four Century Study*, 209.

⁴⁴⁵ “Primitive Baptist Creeds of Faith,” *Primitive Baptist Web Station*, <http://www.pb.org/creeds.html>.

Faith (1644 and 1689), and the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742).⁴⁴⁶ Each of these articles of faith heartily defends the critical five points of John Calvin’s theology, as described below.

However, today, Primitive Baptists reject the label “Calvinist” because, as churches that see themselves as influenced *only* by the first-century church, they cannot accept labels that were invented *after* that period.⁴⁴⁷ For example, on their websites, many Primitive Baptist churches answer the question “Are Primitive Baptists *Calvinists*?” with a decisive *no*, for, the church believes, “[Primitive Baptists] and their ancestors have maintained their identity since the days of Jesus Christ and the Apostles. John Calvin was a Protestant Reformer who seceded from the Catholic Church and started Presbyterianism. Baptists derive their existence from Jesus Christ and the Apostles and as such, predate Catholics and have maintained separate existence even through the Dark Ages, hence the name, ‘Primitive.’”⁴⁴⁸ Further, they follow Anabaptist

⁴⁴⁶ Of course, Primitive Baptists are not the only Christians who adhere to these texts. The brand of Calvinism that they espouse is linked to biblical inerrancy and fundamentalism across denominations (Thuesen, *Predestination*, 192-193).

⁴⁴⁷ While all Primitive Baptists espouse some form of Calvin’s ideas about predestination, not all self-describe as Calvinists. According to the website of West San Antonio Primitive Baptist Church, “We embrace the biblical doctrines of salvation (soteriology) commonly known as Calvinism, but are distinguished from ‘reformed’ churches by our insistence [sic] that these principles pre-date the reformation and are explicitly taught throughout the scriptures.” For this reason, the church says, “We prefer to describe our teaching as ‘Calvinistic’ to avoid the presumptions that usually attend the Calvinist label” (“Are Primitive Baptists Calvinists?” *Frequently Asked Questions*, West San Antonio Primitive Baptist Church, <http://www.westsapb.org/faq.htm>). Because labeling Primitive Baptists as Calvinists denies their authenticity as direct descendents of the first century church, some are insulted by the terminology. Elder Michael N. Ivey complains that “[i]ncorrect identification of Primitives as Calvinists is a common trap most religious historians seem to fall into” (“A Welsh Succession of Primitive Baptist Faith and Practice,” *The Primitive Baptist Web Station*, <http://www.pb.org/pbdocs/chhist5.html>). However, even those who find the term *Calvinism* problematic subscribe to the five points of Calvinism as put forth by John Calvin, though they do not agree with him on some other positions, most notably infant baptism and church-state relations. Further, some Primitive Baptists accuse Calvin of theological points about predestination different from those they hold; thus, for example, Liberty Primitive Baptist Church (South Smithville, Georgia) claims that Calvin argued for absolute predestination in all things, not just salvation, and double predestination (God’s choice not only to elect some to salvation but God’s choice to damn those who are not elect), but claims that these two beliefs are not in line with Primitive Baptist belief (“Ten Reasons why Primitive Baptists are not Calvinist,” *Liberty Primitive Baptist Church*, http://www.libertypbc.org/docs/Articles_Sermons/Ten%20Reasons%20Primitive%20Baptist%20are%20not%20Calvinist.pdf). However, a study of other Primitive Baptist confessions of faith show that at least some Primitive Baptist churches believe in absolute predestination and double predestination.

⁴⁴⁸ See, for example, the websites of Ebenezer Primitive Baptist Church of Faith and Order (Westover, Alabama) at http://www.ebenezerpbc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48:qa&catid=34:articles and Bethlehem Primitive Baptist Church (Echola, Alabama) at <http://www.bethlehempbc.org/about-primitive-baptists/>.

traditions regarding believers' baptism and church-state separation, rejecting Calvin's defense of infant baptism and intimate church-state ties. Their religion, though, is like Calvin's in that it is "radically theocentric,"⁴⁴⁹ which points to "God as the first Cause and last End of all things."⁴⁵⁰ Unlike a Christianity that focuses on human behavior or human attainment of salvation, explains historian William A. Scott,

[m]an fits into Calvin's concept of religion in terms of his relation to God. What is important is that man learn of God's plan for the world and, having learned it, that he fits himself into the divine scheme of things. It is not for man that God exists; rather the contrary is true and the supreme act of religion for man is to accept this and submit himself humbly to the absolute sovereignty of the all-holy God.⁴⁵¹

Because God is sovereign, in Calvin's scheme, all else exists for God's glory (*solo Dei Gloria*). Jonathan Edwards preached these tenets frequently, capturing them in sermon titles such as "The Excellency of Christ" (in contrast to the depravity of humanity) and "God Glorified in Man's Dependence." From these doctrines comes "the inevitable corollary" of predestination, a doctrine nearly synonymous with Calvin's name.⁴⁵² For Westboro Baptists today, as for other Primitive Baptists as well as Calvinists within other denominations, predestination—the idea that one is chosen for salvation by God at the start of time and independent of anything one does—is grounded in the five principles of Calvinism, as outlined below. These tenets are so central to

⁴⁴⁹ William A. Scott, *Historical Protestantism: An Historical Introduction to Protestant Theology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 37.

⁴⁵⁰ Samuel Willard, "What is the Duty that God Requires of Man?" Sermon CXLVII, Question XXXIX, from *Compleat [sic] Body of Divinity* (Boston: B. Green and S. Kneeland, 1726; electronic resource by Farmington Hills, MI: Thomas Gage, 2003).

⁴⁵¹ Scott, *Historical Protestantism*, 37.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*

worship at Westboro Baptist Church that they are displayed prominently in the sanctuary. (See Figure 18.)

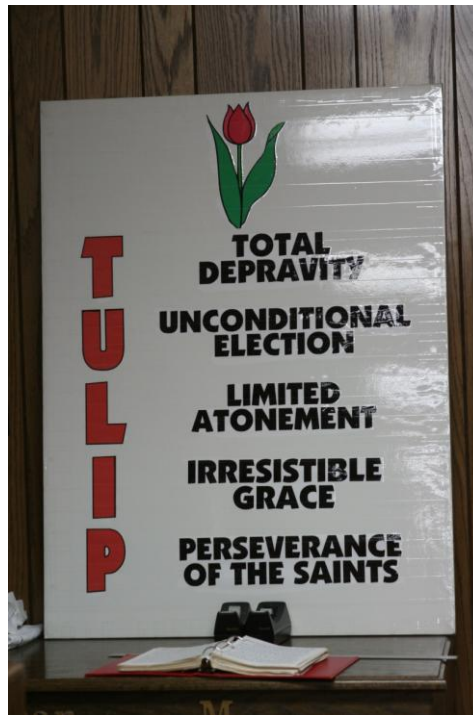


Figure 18. A sign explaining the five tenets of Calvinist theology stands at the front of the church sanctuary, directly behind the pulpit. Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin. July 18, 2010.

Total Depravity

At the core of Calvinism, as with other forms of Christianity, is the doctrine of original sin, the claim that humans “inherit” the sinful nature of Adam. Thus, before individuals ever transgress the moral codes espoused by their faith, thus committing *a* sin, they are distanced from God because of their very natures, which are sinful. Among Calvinists, this belief precludes any individual ability to seek God; that is, human nature is totally depraved, with no ability to turn toward the holy. Jonathan Edwards notes, “[W]e are not only without any true excellency, but are full of, and wholly defiled with, that which is infinitely odious. All our good is more apparently from/God, because we are first naked and wholly without any good, and

afterwards enriched with all good.”⁴⁵³ The focus on the depravity of humanity, though, does not necessarily create hopelessness or paralyzing feelings of worthlessness. Instead, it is liberating, for it places all responsibility on the divine.⁴⁵⁴ What seems like a brutal system is, indeed, a comfort. “Only within contexts where this notion of original sin is taken for granted does predestination become for its most ardent believers a doctrine of mercy,”⁴⁵⁵ notes Peter J. Thuesen. Indeed, the gap between absolutely depraved humanity and an absolutely holy God is a measure of God’s graciousness in saving anyone.⁴⁵⁶

Limited Atonement

One of the most controversial tenets of Calvinism is its insistence that Christ’s death, understood in many forms of Christianity to be a substitute for the blood sacrifice required for depraved humanity to be reconciled to a holy and unapproachable God, was intended only for those unconditionally elected by God; its power does not extend to all those who live according to Christian morality, all those who self-identify as Christians because of their culture, all those who engage in sacraments, or all those who claim to believe. When John 3:16, a favorite verse of evangelicals, says that “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son,” it

⁴⁵³ Jonathan Edwards, “God Glorified in Man’s Dependence,” *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, 51-52.

⁴⁵⁴ Seventeenth century Scottish Calvinist Hugh Binning explains in his essay on predestination that the apostle Paul, in Romans 9:15, in response to the charge that God is unkind in predestining Esau for hell and Jacob for heaven while the twins were still in Rebecca’s womb, says that the apostle did not deny the human interpretation of this unconditional election as unfair but instead quoted from God’s words to Moses: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Says Binning, “[T]hat is the supreme rule of righteousness, and hitherto must we flee, as the surest anchor of our hope and stability.” (“On Predestination (I),” in *The Works of the Pious, Reverend, and Learn’d Mr. Hugh Binning* (Glasgow: John Robb and Robert Duncan, 1768; electronic resource by Farmington, MI: Thomas Gage, 2003).

⁴⁵⁵ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 5.

⁴⁵⁶ This is the central thesis of Jonathan Edwards’ “God Glorified in Man’s Dependence” (*Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, 45-64).

means, for Calvinists, that God so loved his world of his elect, not the universe of humanity.⁴⁵⁷

This elect has gathered in the true church of every age, and so, when the elect ascend to heaven, the group will include those from the time of Adam and Eve onward.

For many Calvinists, the doctrine of limited atonement does not undermine the duty to preach the gospel message to all people, even if, in doing so, many non-elect will hear it. Primitive Baptists, however, understand the “free offer” of the gospel, the claim that “the benefits of the atonement should be offered indiscriminately to all hearers[,] as a denial of the doctrine of particular redemption, that Jesus Christ died for the elect only,”⁴⁵⁸ and, as a consequence, they do not support missionary work or efforts to seek converts. This does not prohibit them from speaking freely and publically about their faith, however; instead, it means that, when they do so, they do not proselytize.⁴⁵⁹

The anxiety of Puritanism, according to Max Weber, was the consequence of the adherent’s insecurity about his election. Even though to search oneself for signs of election is a sign of election, to excessively question God’s logic in limited atonement is, itself, a blasphemous impossibility. Writes Calvin:

For [God’s] will is and rightly ought to be the cause of all things that are. For if it has any cause, something must precede it, to which it is, as it were, bound. This is unlawful to imagine. For God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness

⁴⁵⁷ Writes Elder Tim McCool, “This verse of scripture is often taken out of context to attempt to prove that Jesus died for all the inhabitants of the world. Taken in context, Jesus is making a factual point to Nicodemus, a Jew who erroneously believed that eternal salvation was limited to the physical nation of the Jews. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that God so loved the world (Greek *kosmos* -- created order), and NOT just the Jews, that He gave His only begotten Son. The purpose of His Son being given was that *whosoever* -- which is a definitive group and not mankind in general -- believeth on him should not perish but have eternal life” (“Questions & Answers about Primitive Baptists,” *Lexington Primitive Baptist Church*, <http://www.lexpbc.org/Q24.html>). Westboro Baptists make a similar case against extending John 3:16 to all of humanity (“FAQ: Doesn’t the Bible Say that God Loves Everyone?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq.html>).

⁴⁵⁸ Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” 164.

⁴⁵⁹ Says Crowley, “Belief in regeneration as a prerequisite to understanding Primitive doctrine made proselytizing, even of one’s children, seem presumptuous, if not useless” (*Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 167)

that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous. When, therefore, one asks why God has done so, we must reply: because he has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why he so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found.⁴⁶⁰

Rather than being an unfair system, limited atonement is understood by Primitive Baptists as a gracious act, for God, in his justice, owes depraved humanity nothing. That he extends himself to anyone is cause for hope. Thus, Fred Phelps reminds his congregants, who, he believes, have a "hope" for salvation, and, if election⁴⁶¹ is suspected, joy: "[W]e are his jewel, the apple of his eye."⁴⁶² God's majesty is increased in the atoning death of Jesus Christ for the elect and is not diminished in his exclusion of other equally undeserving sinners from that gift. Indeed, his injured majesty is equally exalted when he casts the reprobate into hell.

Moreover, the limited extension of atonement makes the saints happy, not mournful, even when those cast into hell are those who, on earth, they loved. "When they see others who were of the same nature," Jonathan Edwards wrote in "Eternity of Hell Torments," "and born under the same circumstances, plunged in such misery,... O, it will make them sensible, how happy they are."⁴⁶³ They cannot feel pity for a sinner who received his just punishment, only relieved that they escaped their own.

⁴⁶⁰ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, from *The Protestant Reformation*, edited by Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 202.

⁴⁶¹ God's "great project," writes Binning, "is not simply to manifest the glory of his goodness, but of his gracious and merciful goodness, the most tender and excellent of all; and therefore man must be miserable, sinful, and vile, that the riches of his grace may appear in choosing and saving such persons" ("On Predestination (I)").

⁴⁶² Fred Phelps, sermon, March 28, 2010.

⁴⁶³ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 85, quoting Edwards from "Eternity of Hell Torments."

Westboro Baptists today feel the same about those they believe are among the non-elect, even those friends and family members who have left Westboro Baptist.⁴⁶⁴ ““What can we do?” ask people,” Fred Phelps says from the pulpit, imitating a bystander at one of the church’s pickets. He happily replies to his imaginary bystander: ““Nothing. God is through with you. I’m through with you. Westboro Baptist Church is through with you.””⁴⁶⁵ For the helpless sinner, only the atonement of Jesus Christ will secure salvation, but, for those for whom it was not extended, nothing can be done to achieve it—and that delights the elect, “not as evils and miseries simply considered, nor from a private affection; but as the glory of divine justice is displayed therein.”⁴⁶⁶ Indeed, Fred Phelps rather gleefully preaches, echoing Edwards’ delight, “We’re going to pray for you—that you’ll go to hell, that you’ll be smitten.”⁴⁶⁷ Indeed, to offer any *other* prayer for those who God destined for hell would be to suggest that God is changeable and ought to change his plans according to human desire and would thus be blasphemous.⁴⁶⁸

Unconditional Election

The doctrine of total depravity says that no one deserves salvation or can do anything to initiate it, but the doctrine of limited atonement says that some will be saved. The doctrine of unconditional election explains how: without consideration of human merit, for reasons known

⁴⁶⁴ For example, Sara Phelps denounced her sister, Libby Phelps, who left the church in 2009, in an interview captured on video and posted online. (“Talking to the Phelps Fam about Beatings, Libby, and why Standards Seem to have Changed,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhOESGugXH8>).

⁴⁶⁵ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 7, 2010.

⁴⁶⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Why Do You Have Signs Saying ‘Thank God for 911,’ ‘Thank God for AIDS,’ ‘Thank God for Katrina,’ ‘Thank God for IEDS,’ ‘Thank God for Dead Soldiers,’ and Otherwise Thanking God for Things that Humans Think are Bad?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile.faq.html>.; quoting John Gill’s exposition of Psalm 58:10.

⁴⁶⁷ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 7, 2010.

⁴⁶⁸ Binning encouraged the Calvinist who questions the doctrine of predestination to “[p]onder that well, who thou art who disputest; who God is, against whom though disputest—and if though have spoken once, though wilt speak no more—what thou art, who is as clay formed out of nothing; what he is, who is the former; and hath not the potter power over the clay?” (“Of Predestination (II),” in *The Works of the Pious, Reverend, and Learn’d Mr. Hugh Binning* (Glasgow: John Robb and Robert Duncan, 1768; electronic resource by Farmington, MI: Thomas Gage, 2003)).

only to God. God's will thus seems arbitrary to humans,⁴⁶⁹ who cannot be assured that God has chosen them and can do nothing to persuade God to choose them. Unlike Arminians who argue that God foresees human willingness to believe, Calvinists do not believe that God considers future behaviors or beliefs in his selection of his elect; indeed, in the supralapsarian (also called antelapsarian) vision of unconditional election, God chooses the elect prior to the creation of humanity (and thus prior, or *supra* or *ante*, to the fall, the "lapse," of Adam and Eve), which means that sin has not yet even entered the world.⁴⁷⁰ Writes Jonathan Edwards, "There is nothing that keeps wicked men"—which, by their nature, includes *all* men and women—"at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God."⁴⁷¹ Church membership, moral living, one's personal experience of spirituality—these are irrelevant in God's decision to elect or damn a person, though they may be signs of one's election or damnation.

Because humans are entirely without merit, because their "righteousness is as filthy rags,"⁴⁷² they cannot engage in their own salvation. This is unlike other forms of Christianity, which, to varying degrees, suggest that humans, as beings created in the likeness of God, can participate in their own redemption, though the mechanisms for that participation vary across denominations. While many branches of Protestantism have criticized Catholicism for its "salvation by works"—that is, the idea that particular behaviors, ranging from taking communion to confessing sins to a priest to reciting prayers, contribute to one's salvation—, strict Calvinists decry even other Protestants for suggesting that any human effort, including "accepting Jesus

⁴⁶⁹ Binning warns people not to question God's will regarding predestination, saying, "Predestination is a mystery, indeed, into which we should not curiously and boldly inquire beyond what is revealed; for then a soul must needs lose itself in that depth of wisdom, and perish in the search of unsearchableness." Predestination "is rather to be admired than conceived." ("Of Predestination (I)").

⁴⁷⁰ In contrast, the infralapsarian (or postlapsarian or sublapsarian) view of unconditional election argues that God elected people after the fall. Otherwise, infralapsarians argue, God would have been the author of original sin.

⁴⁷¹ Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, 97 (96-113).

⁴⁷² Rebekah Phelps-Davis, interview with the author, March 14, 2010.

into your heart” or “making a choice for Jesus” or “praying a sinner’s prayer,” is not only ineffective in generating salvation, it is blasphemous, for it suggests that salvation can be affected by human will. Or, to quote Shirley Phelps-Roper: “Rebels say, I accepted Jesus as my own personal savior, [even though] Jesus said - YOU DID NOT CHOOSE me, but I choose you!”⁴⁷³ People who make this claim are not merely mistaken but are rebellious, claiming an authority and agency in salvation that totally depraved humans do not have and cannot take from God and is thus either a denial of the depravity of humanity or an attempted usurpation of God’s sovereignty.

Among Calvinists, there is debate regarding “double predestination” or “double election”⁴⁷⁴—whether God *chooses* to damn people just as he chooses to save people or whether God chooses his elect and simply *allows* the non-elect to fall into hell; whether, to say it differently, God damns people or whether he allows them to damn themselves. For Westboro Baptists, as for other “high” (or “hyper”) Calvinists (those who take a strict interpretation of Calvin’s views), God does, indeed, actively both damn and elect. Those hesitant to attribute an apparent mean-spiritedness to God skirt the issue by explaining that, due to their depraved nature, all people deserve damnation, so in not electing them, God does not harm them but merely does not extend an undeserved grace to them. This does not undermine the image of God as loving and gracious any more than the failure of a governor to pardon *all* death row inmates undermines the graciousness he demonstrates by pardoning *some* of them.⁴⁷⁵ To do so does not

⁴⁷³ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, June 28, 2010.

⁴⁷⁴ A second but less common debate occurred between those who defended the traditional view that election was absolute and unconditional and those who believed that, though election to eternal salvation is unconditional, obedience to God’s commandments in this life can result in “conditional time election,” a respite from the anxiety of worrying about one’s election (Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South*, 135-136).

⁴⁷⁵ Or, as Binning writes, “May he [God] not do with his own as he pleases? Because he is merciful to some souls, shall men be displeased, and do well to be angry? Or, because he, of his own free grace, extends it, shall he be bound by a rule to do so with all? Is he not both just and merciful, and is it not meet that both be showed forth? If he punish thee, though canst not complain, for though deserves it; if he show mercy, why should any quarrel, for it is

impute God with any wrong, for “when a man is made holy, it is from mere and arbitrary grace; God may forever deny holiness to the fallen creature if he pleases, without any disparagement to any of his perfections.”⁴⁷⁶ As with the doctrine of total depravity, unconditional election is, for Calvinists, not an optional position; instead, it is central to their view of humanity at the mercy of an all-powerful and inscrutable God.

The status of one’s eternity—whether a person is elect or reprobate—was a central concern for Puritans and resulted, for some, in a near constant cycle of self-examination. As Peter K. Thuesen chronicles, the search for evidence in one’s life for election was a brutal one for many Puritans, and many sermons were devoted to managing the balance between the congregants’ senses of worthlessness and hope that God, in his holiness and mercy, would elect the professed believer. At the same time, many Puritans seemed relatively unbothered by the question,⁴⁷⁷ and even Increase Mather implied that those within the church and their own children were likely among the elect.⁴⁷⁸ Whether, as Max Weber famously argued, the Puritan’s compulsion to prove to himself that he was among the elect fueled early capitalism in the colonies,⁴⁷⁹ it certainly drove many Puritans and latter-day Primitive Baptists to serious introspection.⁴⁸⁰

free and undeserved grace. By saving some, he shows grace; by destroying others, he shows what all deserve” (“On Predestination (II)”).

⁴⁷⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “God Glorified in Man’s Dependence,” *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards*, 51.

⁴⁷⁷ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 45-72.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibidi.*, 67.

⁴⁷⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003).

⁴⁸⁰ For such introspection in the life of Jonathan Edwards, see George Marsden’s *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

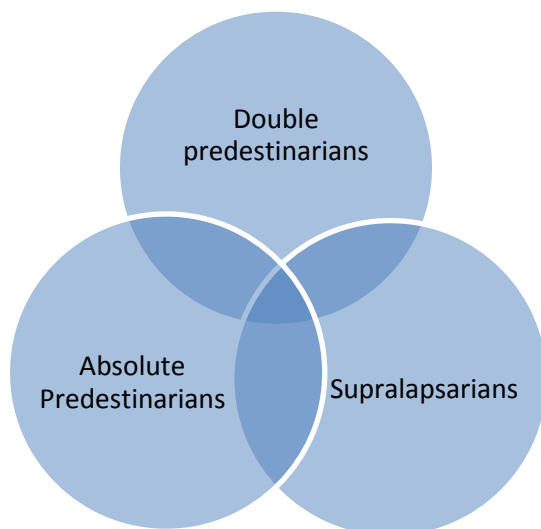


Figure 19. Many Protestant denominations have Calvinist strains, but *all* Primitive Baptists are Calvinists. Among those Primitive Baptist Calvinists, some are double predestinarians, believing that God both actively elects and actively damns people, while others argue that God only elects and does not actively damn people. Some Primitive Baptists are absolute predestinarians, arguing that God foreordains every earthly event, while others believe that God foreordains only salvation and does not foreordain other events, such as natural disasters. Some Primitive Baptists are supralapsarians, arguing that God foreordained salvation (and, if they are double predestinarians, all events) before the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden, while infralapsarians believe that God foreordained salvation (or, if absolute predestinarians, all events) after the fall. Westboro Baptists are absolute, double, supralapsarian predestinarians. In the diagram above, they would thus appear in the area where all three circles overlap.

As with Puritan spiritual writing, conversion narratives among Primitive Baptists suggest that “[t]he elect individual’s soul is... a battlefield between God and Satan.”⁴⁸¹ Given that election occurred at the start of time, there is no chance that Satan will win, but the individual, unsure of his condition, may be tormented with worry that he is damned. Because the doctrine of total depravity declares that sinners can do nothing of their own volition to move toward God, strict Calvinists might lack optimism about their election, but they have more hope, they argue, than if their salvation depended upon their own depraved natures. Moreover, the elect may seek signs of their election, finding, first, that in their concern for their election is their hope for their

⁴⁸¹ Mathis, *Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 132.

election. Within early Calvinist churches, for example, “ordinarily a preacher urged repentance on those hearing the gospel for the first time, a strategy that seemed to suggest that repentance... was an initial rather than a final phase of sanctification. But actually, anguish and remorse, ingredients for what Elizabethan pietists termed ‘godly sorrows,’ were the first signs of election and sanctification.”⁴⁸² In other words, conviction of one’s depraved nature was a sign of one’s election, not a step toward it, since it was already determined since the start of time. Since, still, despite one’s deep desire for it and one’s efforts to obey God, one is never worthy of salvation, believers can never state firmly that they are elect; instead, they refer to themselves as having “a hope” in their election.

When accused of believing that they are the only people who have hope of going to heaven, Westboro Baptists remind their accusers that they are part of an “invisible church” as well as the visible church of Westboro Baptist. That is, they are in a long line of other heaven-bound people. Moreover, while they cannot be certain of their own election, which would always be undeserving, they can be sure of who is *not* among the elect; thus, they can say with surety who is in hell.⁴⁸³ While election does not depend upon moral living, immoral living, as defined by the church, is a sign that one is not elect. Thus, they can say, to charges of hypocrisy, that they do not believe that they are “better” than others or “without sin”—only that, in recognizing and repenting of their depravity, they see signs of God’s working in their lives. Such signs are absent, though, in the lives of people who do not recognize and repent of their depravity.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸² Peter Iver Kaufman, *Prayer, Despair, and Drama: Elizabethan Introspection* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 20.

⁴⁸³ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: If God Hates Homosexuals as a Group, Why Do you Sometimes Aim Signs at Individual People, Not at the Group? How Can You Say that an Individual is in Hell?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Join>

⁴⁸⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Are You a Sinner? If So, Does This Mean You Will Burn In Hell, Or Are You Better Than These People?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Join>

Irresistible Grace

Just as unconditional election declares that God's elect can do nothing to persuade God to choose them, irresistible grace declares that there is nothing that God's elect can do to reject their election. When called by God, people cannot refuse that calling. "Nothing is done or undone without God's order or his permission, which are the same thing,"⁴⁸⁵ Fred Phelps reminded his congregation one Sunday in a sermon. Not only does God foreordain every action on earth in Westboro Baptist Church's absolute predestination theology, but he also gives people no option except to obey his will. For this reason, an evangelical Christian's claim that he "asked Jesus into his heart" is an object of Westboro Baptist scorn. "It's all right with me if you want to think you made up your mind, but I know the Lord Your God is a great mind maker upper!"⁴⁸⁶ Fred Phelps chortled one day from the pulpit, reinforcing, as he does in every sermon, the absolute sovereignty of God, not only in human and natural events but in human thoughts.

Instead of "asking Jesus into their hearts" as the first step toward their salvation, Westboro Baptists, in line with their Puritan forerunners, experience "effectual calling"—"a work of God's Holy Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery, and enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills... he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel," a calling that is effectual "because it always gains the Sinner to accept of, and close in with it."⁴⁸⁷ Just as unconditional election removes from humans the burden of salvation, irresistible grace insures that, if that election is there, it will be received by them. Together, these two doctrines provide a defense against apparent hopelessness of total depravity and limited atonement.

Perseverance of the Saints

⁴⁸⁵ Fred Phelps, sermon, March 14, 2010.

⁴⁸⁶ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 21, 2010.

⁴⁸⁷ Samuel Willard, "What is Effectual Calling," *Sermon CXV, Question XXXI*.

Theologies that suggest that human beings are heaven-bound because of their partaking of sacraments, their moral living, or their willingness to “accept Jesus into their hearts” always keep their believers under a dark threat, according to Calvinism: if salvation depends upon the individual, then it can be lost when the individual fails to partake of the sacraments, fails at moral living, or loses faith. For Calvinists, the belief that God alone controls salvation brings comfort in the corollary that God will not withdraw salvation. God chooses whom he chooses, and he does not change his mind. “Will the Lord Repent of His Choice? Never; never. ’Tis unalterable,” encouraged Cotton Mather.⁴⁸⁸

God’s unchanging nature does not mean, however, that one who is elect is permitted to continue a life of sin. When he does sin, God will rebuke and correct him, often through the church:

It may be that we are sinful; but God did not love us for our goodness, neither will he cast us off for our wickedness. Yet this is no encouragement to licentiousness, for God knows how to put us to anguishes and straits and crosses, and yet to reserve everlasting life for us.⁴⁸⁹

Thus, the elect will still suffer the natural, earthly consequences of his sin in this lifetime, and he will still be punished by God in this lifetime.

However, as the elect continues, like Christian in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, he rejects sin. Indeed, by his changed nature, one who is elect *cannot* continue a life of sin. The doctrine of saintly perseverance is not equivalent, then, to the phrase “once saved, always saved,” which indicates that salvation cannot be lost regardless of the behavior of the individual. Instead, one who is elect will necessarily be a changed person, as evidenced in his or her

⁴⁸⁸ Cotton Mather, “Free Grace Maintained and Improved” (Boston: B. Green, 1706; electronic resource by Farmington Hills, MI: Thomas Gale, 2003).

⁴⁸⁹ John Cotton, *An Exposition of First John* ([No city]: Jay P. Green, Sr., 2003), 484.

actions.⁴⁹⁰ If upright living does not result, then the sense of election is false,⁴⁹¹ for “[i]f he hath appointed thee to life, it is certain he also has ordained thee to fruits, and chosen thee to be holy.”⁴⁹² Thus, the church can exclude a member who continues to sin on the grounds that, despite his baptism, membership, and confidence in his election, he is a reprobate. This outcome is terrifying for the excluded member—akin to the terror of the virgins who, because they failed to secure the oil for their lamps before the bridegroom’s arrival were locked out in darkness and to whom Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, I know you not.”⁴⁹³ For those excluded, the shame of being forced out of the community may be less psychologically difficult to bear than the assurance that they are among the reprobate. For example, Karl Hockenbarger, who was excommunicated from Westboro Baptist Church in June 2005 for “lack of grace,” said of his experience:

I was terrified.... My expectation was not to live long enough to get home. And this is not an indication of suicidal thoughts or desires, but I’d rather be dead than in this situation.”⁴⁹⁴

It would be cold comfort for Karl Hockenbarger to remember that, as long as he is alive, he may be hell-bound but is not yet in hell. According to the theology that he has adhered to since his baptism at age nine, as a reprobate, that is his eternal home.

⁴⁹⁰ Writes Binning, “His eternal counsel of life is so far from loosing the reins to men’s lusts, that it is the only certain foundation of holiness; it is the very spring and foundation from whence our sanctification flows by an infallible course” (“Of Predestination (II)”).

⁴⁹¹ Puritan preacher Samuel Willard noted three responses of those who “come within the sound of the Gospel”: 1) those who “stop their ears, and turn their backs on it,” 2) those who “give external entertainment to the Gospel, and make a profession of Faith and Repentance, and so becomes members of a visible Church, and enjoy the external privileges [sic] of it; but yet their hearts were never thoroughly changed, nor they broken off from their sins,” and 3) those in whom “the habits of Sanctification...are wrought in Effectual Vocation, which are afterwards carried on in progressive Holiness” (“What is Effectual Calling?”)

⁴⁹² Binning, “Of Predestination (II).”

⁴⁹³ Matthew 25: 12.

⁴⁹⁴ Justin Kendall, “Dead to Fred,” *The Pitch*, November 9, 2006, <http://www.pitch.com/content/printVersion/158048>.

In contrast to Karl Hockenbarger, for those who remain secure in their election, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is a beautiful if undeserved gift. Writes Scott,

His conviction of salvation is rooted in the divine will and that is unchangeable. Even though life in its passage may bring frequent doubt, sin, failure, or temptation, these can always be countered and overcome by the recollection of the divine changelessness, God's fidelity to his decree of election. He does not choose on the basis of what a man does; so too He will not change His choice because of what a man does. One may rest secure in the divine fidelity to His own will.⁴⁹⁵

In the end, then, Westboro Baptists will reach heaven not because of their own merit but because of the inscrutable, irresistible, and unchangeable will of God.

The five points of Calvin's belief coalesce into the doctrine of predestination, which is viewed, among those Christians who remain familiar with it, as "either... the rock of Christian certainty, without which no true hope is possible, or... the most dangerous of doctrines, one that risks negating the 'come unto me' of Jesus' gospel promise."⁴⁹⁶ The unpopularity of predestination, as measured in the outrage of Westboro Baptist Church counterprotesters who argue both that church members' pickets are uncivil and that the theology that drives church members to declare who is in heaven and hell is blasphemous, prompts Westboro Baptists to defend it in sermon after sermon. Among all Primitive Baptists, "[t]hese theological tenets are starkly explicit"⁴⁹⁷ in preaching, and they are explained as matters of fact, not debate, that are derived from infallible readings of the Bible. "Fundamentalist discourse," generally, argues

⁴⁹⁵ Scott, *Historical Protestantism*, 40.

⁴⁹⁶ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 3.

⁴⁹⁷ Peacock and Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox*, 28.

Kathleen C. Boone, “is in fact marked by an unrelenting rationalism.”⁴⁹⁸ Among Primitive Baptists, “deep mysteries are ordered by a severe theological rationalism”⁴⁹⁹ and even the most sensitive matters are organized by the “ruthless logic of doctrine.”⁵⁰⁰ In the end, admits Betram Wyatt-Brown, “It might be said that the Primitive Baptists placed justice before love in their understandings of Christianity.”⁵⁰¹ In assessing God’s mercy and his justice, they do not hesitate to remind listeners that God’s mercy can only be desired, never deserved.

This theology, argued Primitive Baptist founder Joshua Lawrence, should be faithfully defended because it is the beliefs God prescribed and God promises that good will result for those who adhere to it:

Ye believe in the power of God to accomplish his purposes, however contrary things may appear to work to your expectations. So believe in my power to accomplish the great work of saving my people. In a word, as the dispensation of God by the hand of Moses, in bringing Israel out of Egypt, and leading them through the wilderness, was from first to last calculated to try Israel's faith in God, so is the dispensation of God by his Son, in bringing his spiritual Israel to be a people to himself.

The Primitive Baptist investment, like the Westboro Baptist Church investment more specifically, has not yielded great returns.

The gap—both in church membership size and in theology—between strict Calvinists and non- or quasi-Calvinists grew over the first decades of the nineteenth century, with a resulting decline in Primitive Baptist congregations since then. However, their small size does

⁴⁹⁸ Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, 11.

⁴⁹⁹ Peacock and Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox*, 29.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵⁰¹ Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 126.

not undermine belief among Primitive Baptists, nor among Westboro Baptists in particular. Indeed, it is viewed as a sign of their correctness, for “many are called but few are chosen.” Though they cannot be sure that God has chosen them, they have a hope that he has, and they are confident that, whether or not God has selected all the individuals in the congregation for eternal salvation, they all, like all humans, elect and reprobate, have a duty to live obediently.

The Duty of Man: Theology in Action

Critics of predestination theology question how it can inspire moral living, given that it declares that one’s eternal destination is entirely predetermined and independent of one’s actions. What motivation do reprobates have for good behavior if, regardless, they are hell-bound, and likewise, what motivation do the elect have for good behavior if, regardless, they are heaven-bound? Samuel Willard, seventeenth century colonial pastor and president of Harvard, provides the answer to the question by referencing the first item in the Westminster Longer Catechism, “What is the chief and highest end of man?” His answer expounds on the catechism’s answer: “Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” In this theocentric system, the duty to glorify God, not fear of hell or hope of heaven, is to be the motivation for moral living. Westboro Baptist Church expresses it this way: “God does not exist to serve you, you exist to serve him.”⁵⁰² Hugh Binning answers a similar criticism regarding the purpose of prayer if God is entirely unchanging. Says Binning,

But suppose there were nothing to be expected by prayer, yet I say, that is not the thing thou shouldst look to, but what is required of thee, as thy duty, to do that simply out of regard to his majesty, though thou shouldst never profit by it. This is true obedience, to serve him for his own pleasure, though we had no

⁵⁰² Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Doesn’t God Forgive Everyone?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq.html>.

expectation of advantage by it. Certainly he doth not require thy supplications for this end, to move him, and incline his affections toward thee, but rather as a testimony of thy homage and subjection to him; therefore, though they cannot make him of another mind than he is, or hasten performance before his purposed time—so that in reality they have no influence upon him—yet in praying, and praying diligently, thou declares thy obligation to him, and respect to his majesty, which is all thee hast to look to, committing the event solely to his good pleasure.⁵⁰³

The purpose of prayer—or church attendance, or scripture reading, or holy living—is not to impress God, who will never be impressed by human endeavor, or to persuade God, who will never change, but to “respect his majesty, which is all thee has to look to.”

In their adherence to the hyper-Calvinism of John Gill, their denominational independence, their church organization and discipline, their focus on moral living as a sign of election, and many, though not all, of their practices regarding worship, Westboro Baptists are Primitive Baptists, drawn from the separatist, anti-establishment branch of Puritans. In this way, they are not so much an anomaly on the American religious landscape as an anachronism—or, as Westboro Baptists say, “Although these doctrines are almost universally hated today, they were once loved and believed.”⁵⁰⁴ They still believe them.

Westboro Baptist Church as an American Religious Anachronism

While other religious groups are quick to denounce Westboro Baptist Church as not truly Christian and the group is popularly labeled a “cult,” with frequent comparisons to groups such

⁵⁰³ Binning, “Of Predestination (II).”

⁵⁰⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Who Are You, What Do You Do, and Why Do You Do It?” *God Hates Fags*, <https://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq/html>.

as the KKK⁵⁰⁵ and the Branch Davidians of Waco, Texas,⁵⁰⁶ Westboro Baptist Church sees itself, as do almost all other Christians, as “constituting the true apostolic church.” The claim to be in a line of direct descent with Jesus Christ is a bold one, but Westboro Baptist Church’s claim that it teaches a theology that was once taught by major American religious figures is valid.

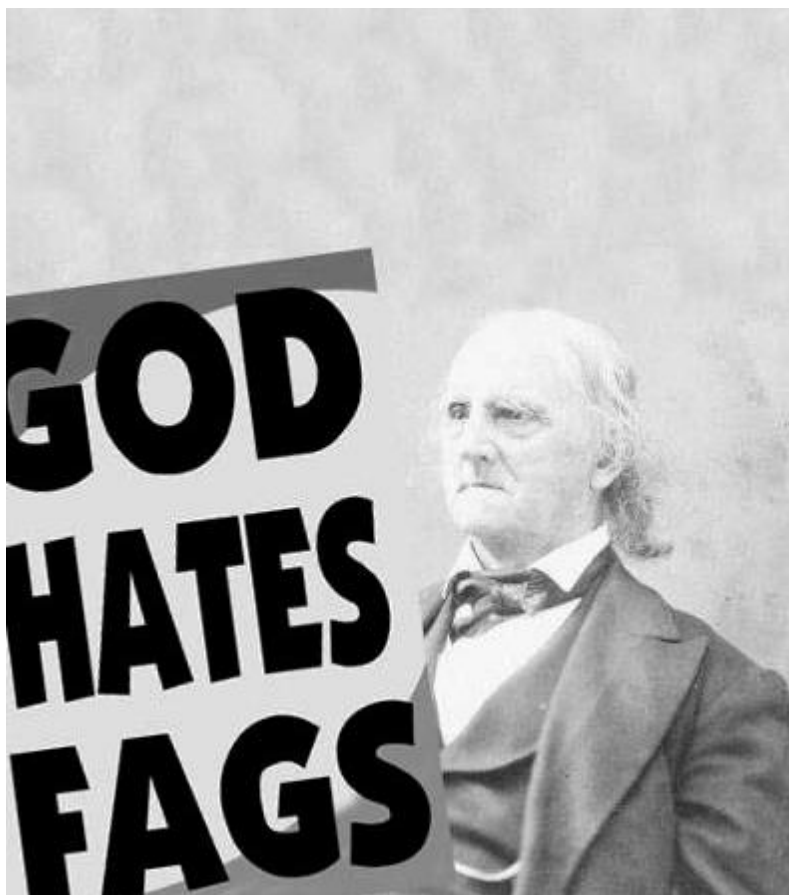


Figure 20: Gilbert Beebe, editor of the Primitive Baptist periodical *The Signs of the Times* for more than forty years, starting in 1832, the year of the Black Rock Address. Westboro Baptists have superimposed one of their own signs into Beebe’s hand, imaginatively invoking his approval of their pickets. Westboro Baptists included this image in their open letter to Primitive Baptist churches from December 10, 2009.

⁵⁰⁵ For example, the Phelps family is frequently referred to as “the Phelps clan” in news reports. The rhetorical association between the groups prompted Ku Klux Klan, LLC (incorporated in 2003 in Arkansas) to release the following statement on its website: “The Ku Klux Klan, LLC. has not or EVER will have ANY connection with The ‘Westboro Baptist Church’. We absolutely repudiate their activities” (“News Release,” *KKK Homepage*, <http://kukluxklan.bz/>). Even here, the racist group uses quotation marks to undermine the authority of Westboro Baptist Church to call itself a church.

⁵⁰⁶ The church property and the homes that adjoin it are commonly described as a “compound,” conjuring comparisons both to the Branch Davidians of Waco and, more recently, to the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints’ Yearning for Zion ranch near Eldorado, Texas.

Pictures of religious figures such as hymnist Isaac Watts appear near the pulpit at Westboro Baptist Church, though any images of God, including images of Jesus, are forbidden in accordance with the commandment against graven images. Every sermon includes references to the lives of heroes in the faith, mostly seventeenth and eighteenth century English separatists and early Baptists, who are depicted as faithful despite persecution. For example, in his June 27, 2010 sermon, pastor Fred Phelps told the story of William Shirreff (1762-1832), a Presbyterian minister who refused to perform infant baptisms. Shirreff became part of “a handful of small and poor Baptist churches and poorer still Baptist pastors [who] could not be bought off.” Reading from the memoirs of such leaders, pastor Fred Phelps reminds his congregants that they are part of a long and longsuffering religious line and suggests that, if the Primitive Baptist forerunners were still alive, they would support Westboro Baptist Church’s activities. (See Fig. 3.)

Sermons also include direct quotations from the theological writings of Puritans and other early Calvinists, as well as lyrics from hymns and poems—again, almost exclusively from the late 1600s to the early 1800s, when Protestant predestination theology was still popular. Jonathan Edwards and earlier Puritan leaders are quoted, their books—some of which sit in a row on the communion table beneath the pulpit—recommended, and their spirits invoked. During Bible readings—church-wide study sessions in which all ages gather in concentric circles and take turns reading the Bible, listening to commentary, and discussing what they are learning—commentary is drawn from Bible scholars from the same period, just as it is when commentary is incorporated into the sermons.

Through these means, Westboro Baptist Church not only keeps alive once widely-read but now neglected authors; it also maintains in congregants a sense of belonging to a select, well-respected American tradition, for although Puritanism is, generally, no longer preached, its

power in America's imaginative history is strong. By stressing its ties to an anti-establishment branch of Puritanism, Westboro Baptist Church also reminds itself that it is in tension with the state and the culture, that it is a separatist group, like the Puritans who rejected state funds.

Puritan theology was falling out of favor by the early 1800s, and, as Jonathan Edwards' grandson discovered when he edited his grandfather's work for a Victorian audience and as countless eleventh-grade American literature students have learned, predestination theology is difficult for modern audiences to grasp, appreciate, or believe. This difficulty, though, does not bother Westboro Baptist Church, which interprets the disdain that most Americans feel for predestination theology—especially the absolute and double predestination theology of Westboro Baptist Church—as evidence of the election of church members and the non-election of outsiders. God has not permitted “heretic Arminians” to understand the beauty of predestination theology, even though, as pastor Fred Phelps frequently comments, this is the theology that was common among early Americans. One group, though, does carefully maintain the teachings of colonial Puritans, and that group is the one with which Westboro Baptist Church has perhaps its most ambiguous, difficult relationship: other Primitive Baptists.

Westboro Baptist Church as a Primitive Baptist Church

Not surprisingly, other Primitive Baptist churches do not like being categorized with Westboro Baptist Church. Elder David Montgomery, writing on behalf of *Primitive Baptist Online*, says,

PB-Online and the Primitive Baptist Church do not recognize the ministry of “pastor” Fred Phelps, nor do we have fellowship with the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, which styles itself as an Old School (or Primitive)

Baptist Church. We find the actions of these people to be deplorable and against the very Scriptures they claim to believe. Let it be firmly noted that the Primitive Baptists do not and will not endorse, condone, or support the base actions of this group.⁵⁰⁷

Like other Christian detractors, Elder Montgomery uses quotation marks to indicate that Fred Phelps is not a real pastor, and he uses the words “styles itself” to suggest that Westboro Baptist Church’s has usurped the name “Old School” or “Primitive” and does not properly deserve it. No scriptural evidence is provided for these claims—an oddity in a denomination that answers nearly every question with a Biblical citation. Elder Montgomery’s declaration seems defensive rather than informative, for it provides no explanation of the difference between Westboro theology and the theology of the Primitive Baptist churches for whom Elder Montgomery claims to speak—itsself a problem since Primitive Baptists are so independent.

Elder Ben Winslett, writing a conservative blog from Huntsville, Alabama, similarly attempts to speak on behalf of Primitive Baptists, identifying himself as a fourth generation Primitive Baptist with “Primitive Baptists in my genealogy in both sides since my ancestors stepped foot on ‘The New World’” and as the pastor of Alabama’s oldest Primitive Baptist congregation, host of a Primitive Baptist radio program, and webmaster of a Primitive Baptist website. After he establishes his credentials to speak on behalf of Primitive Baptists, Winslett stresses,

Please take it from me, that **Primitive Baptists have no fellowship or association with Fred Phelps**. He is no Primitive Baptist Elder. He has taken it

⁵⁰⁷ Elder David Montgomery, “Disclaimer,” dated September 9, 2008, *Primitive Baptist Online*, http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1434.

upon himself to use our name.... Westboro Baptist “Church” is a **counterfeit** Primitive Baptist group.⁵⁰⁸

Elder Winslett, like Elder Montgomery, like other Christians who fear being painted with the same brush as Westboro Baptist Church, denies fellowship with Westboro Baptist Church, denies that Fred Phelps has a claim to a designation as a church leader, uses quotation marks to indicate that Westboro Baptist Church is not a real church, uses bold to stress the outsider status of Westboro Baptist Church, and complains that Westboro Baptist Church is unfairly using the name “Primitive Baptist.”

The frustration of Elders Montgomery and Winslett is clear and shared by many other Primitive Baptists. “Our sentiment has been universal,” says Winslett, “coast to coast.” “[E]very time this group is publicized in the media, our people cringe.... We do not want to be associated in the minds of Americans with Westboro or their heinous antics,” he complains. However, like Elder Montgomery, he fails to explain how authentic Primitive Baptists differ from the “counterfeit” Westboro Baptist Church. Winslett notes only that “Our order of faith does not condone the actions of Phelps. In fact, we DETEST his behavior.” Undoubtedly, Primitive Baptists do likely detest Westboro Baptist Church’s protests at the funerals of fallen soldiers and sites of national tragedy, even if they agree in whole or in part with Westboro Baptist Church’s view on sexuality. For example, in 1993, the publisher of *The Primitive Baptist Newsletter*, pastor W. H. Cayce, commented, “Lord knows there’s something that needs to be done [about homosexuality], but personally I wouldn’t think that adding to anyone’s grief or sorrow at a

⁵⁰⁸ Elder Benjamin C. Winslett, “Fred Phelps And Westboro Baptist ‘Church’ Are *Not* Primitive Baptists,” *The Huntsville Patriot* [Blog], <http://thehuntsvillepatriot.com/2010/04/fred-phelps-and-westboro-baptist-church-are-not-primitive-baptists/>. Winslett’s blog is devoted to right-wing politics and survivalist information. Bold in original.

funeral would be the right approach.”⁵⁰⁹ In other words, funeral protests are an ineffective approach to a real problem for other Primitive Baptists.

However, the claim that the Primitive Baptist faith does not “condone” the actions of Westboro Baptist Church is more complex. Certainly, many Primitive Baptist churches are both absolute predestinarians and double predestinarians, so they would share Westboro Baptist Church’s claims that all actions are foreordained by God and that those in hell are there because God selected them to be there. In their admiration of Puritan writers and theologians, many Primitive Baptists would agree that preachers can preach on the themes of the eternal damnation of the non-elect and the undeserved eternal salvation of the elect. In their very own sermons, they quote from people, like Jonathan Edwards, who preached earthly punishment for sin. What they may dislike, then, is Westboro Baptist Church’s choice to make this theology public in justifying the practices that have brought them such notoriety. That is, other Primitive Baptists may likely believe that Matthew Shepard is in hell, but they are unlikely to show up at his funeral. They may likely believe that God punishes a nation for its sexual sins, but they are unlikely to see that punishment in the form of military deaths and even less likely to show up at a military funeral to say so.

Winslett ends his letter this way:

True Primitive Baptists love the Lord and love His people. We believe in the salvation of sinners by Sovereign Grace. We worship in a simple, New Testament pattern. We are in no way related to or like Westboro “Church.”

Again, Winslett emphasizes the difference between “true” Primitive Baptists and the “counterfeit” Westboro Baptist Church. However, in defining Primitive Baptists as people who

⁵⁰⁹ Chris Bull, “Us v. Them: Fred Phelps,” *The Advocate*, November 2, 1993.

love the Lord and love His people,” believe in salvation by sovereign grace, and worship in a simple, New Testament pattern, Winslett fails to distinguish his vision of Primitive Baptists from Westboro Baptist Church’s. Like Winslett, Westboro Baptists claim to love God and to love “His people”—language that reveals that both Winslett and Westboro Baptists believe that Christian love is reserved for one’s fellow elect, not for the broader world. Both believe in salvation by sovereign grace—that is, the doctrine of unconditional election. Both claim to adhere to a New Testament model of worship, though, admittedly, Westboro uses musical accompaniment and prepared notes for preaching, though Winslett’s claim that the two churches are unrelated does not rest on those differences.⁵¹⁰ Even Winslett’s declaration that “We have no fellowship or association with them” is not particularly meaningful, considering how fractured fellowship is among Primitive Baptists. For example, some Primitive Baptists will likely see Winslett’s radio broadcasts as a missionary activity that would result in his own failure to adhere to the model of the New Testament. Thus, Winslett’s denunciation that Westboro Baptists “do not represent mainstream Primitive Baptists in any sense, period” rings rather untrue.⁵¹¹

The Primitive Baptist responses to Westboro Baptist Church are indicative of the broader response of the Christian community, which seldom denounces the anti-gay sentiments or even the predestination theology of the church. Rather, other Primitive Baptists appear uncomfortable sharing any label—“Primitive Baptist,” “Baptist,” or even “Church”—with Westboro congregants because of the church’s funeral pickets, especially pickets at the funerals of soldiers and those who have died in national tragedies. Similarly, other Baptist churches are quick to note

⁵¹⁰ The use of musical instruments would be acceptable in Progressive Primitive Baptist churches, but Westboro Baptist Church’s absolute predestination would not. On the other hand, Primitive Baptist churches that adhere to absolute predestination would not permit musical instruments. Likewise, Westboro Baptist Church’s rejection of footwashing would be reason for disfellowshipping them from some Primitive Baptist Associations but not others.

⁵¹¹ Elder Benjamin C. Winslett, “Fred Phelps And Westboro Baptist ‘Church’ Are *Not* Primitive Baptists,” *The Huntsville Patriot* [Blog], <http://thehuntsvillepatriot.com/2010/04/fred-phelps-and-westboro-baptist-church-are-not-primitive-baptists/>.

that Westboro Baptists are not “real” Baptists, and non-Baptist Christians remind their audiences that Westboro Baptists are not “real” Christians.⁵¹² The issue is not merely one of being tainted by association with Westboro Baptist Church in the eyes of the broader culture, either. Westboro Baptist Church uses offensive language and images and exploits media to draw attention to its message. The general impression to those who know Westboro Baptist Church only through its public activism is that it is loud, offensive, and self-promoting. These qualities do more than alienate the broader public. For those seeking evidence of Westboro Baptists’ spirituality, it suggests that church members are cruel and self-righteous. Evidence of this attitude may be the cause for other Primitive Baptists’ suspicions about Westboro Baptist Church, despite their theological similarities.

However, because Westboro Baptist Church self-identifies as a Primitive Baptist Church, because it shares with other Primitive Baptists a vision of itself embracing an anti-establishment, anti-infant baptism Puritanism, and because its doctrines and its organization and discipline are identical to at least some Primitive Baptist churches’ doctrines, organization, and discipline, the descriptor “Primitive Baptist” is appropriate, even if it causes other Primitive Baptists to cringe. In its public activism—and in the cruelty that other Primitive Baptists see in that activism—, Westboro Baptist Church is quite different from other Primitive Baptist churches, and, in that difference, it angers them and brings them public scrutiny that they might not prefer.

In an open letter addressed to all Primitive Baptist churches, dated December 10, 2009, Westboro Baptist Church takes an urgent tone in asking “Are There Any Candlesticks Left

⁵¹² Dwayne Hastings, the Southern Baptist Convention’s director of communications for the religious-liberty commission, distances his own group from Westboro, emphasizing that their difference is not just in tone but contending that Westboro Baptist Church is “unscriptural,” while Southern Baptists “stand on the word of God”—that is, one is more authentically Christian (as they are more fixed in the Bible) than the other. (Robert Stacy McCain, “Condemn Sin – and Sinner,” *Insight on the News* 15, no. 30 (August 16, 1999), 32). At times, other mainstream Baptist churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention or American Baptists simply drop the word “Baptist” from reporting about Westboro Baptist Church, as if to deny Westboro Baptist Church its historical or theological ties to their denomination.

Among the Primitive Baptist?”—referring to the church’s opinion that Primitive Baptists have “hid their light under a bushel.” “This letter,” Westboro Baptists write, “is meant to provoke you unto love and to good works (Heb. 10:24) and to exhort you with longsuffering and doctrine (2 Timothy 4:2).”⁵¹³ Repeatedly in the letter, the church reminds the broader world of Primitive Baptists that they share much in common, including, for example, Calvin’s five points and “the tenets of the Bible (also known as the doctrines of the Old School Baptists and Primitive Baptists).” In contrast to Elder Winslett, who denies any relationship between Westboro Baptist Church and other Primitive Baptists, Westboro Baptists identify their identical theological positions. The letter invokes shared heroes, including Primitive Baptist writer Gilbert Beebe, again highlighting a similarity. After asking Primitive Baptist churches twenty-seven questions aimed at proving whether they are acting in accordance with the special role God has given them, the letter ends “with great news!” Readers are reminded that they still have time to join in Westboro Baptist Church’s efforts, for, as stated in the parable of the workers in Matthew 20, “The reward for those that only worked one hour is the exact same as them that worked 12 hours and bore the head of the day!” Again, in this way, Westboro Baptists are identifying a common mission with Primitive Baptists and thus underscoring the legitimacy of their inclusion in the Primitive Baptist tradition.⁵¹⁴

Westboro Baptist Church does see a difference between itself and other Primitive Baptist churches: its activism. It chides other churches for failing to join it in its preaching about sexual sin in particular. For Westboro Baptist Church, the duty of *all* humanity, not just those within the

⁵¹³ In the King James version of the Bible, Hebrews 10:24 says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Second Timothy 4:2 says, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.”

⁵¹⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “Open Letter to All Primitive Baptists from Westboro Baptist Church,” *God Hates Fags*, http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/written/letters/20091210_open-letter-to-primitive-baptist-churches.pdf.

church, to live in order to glorify God has taken on a particular focus: human sexuality. For that reason, a fuller explanation of Westboro Baptist Church's theology of sexuality is warranted.

Westboro Baptist Church's Theology of Sexuality

Homosexuality and tolerance and acceptance of gay people are key issues for all Religious Right groups. However, Westboro Baptist Church's views on homosexuality are markedly different from the views of many other groups, which claim to judge feminism, homosexuality, abortion, and "deviant" heterosexual sex (including non-marital and extra-marital relationships and anal and oral intercourse) to be similar sins, even though anti-gay rhetoric is usually more virulent than rhetoric attacking feminism and, for example, divorce. Moreover, Westboro Baptist Church's theology bans only homosexual sex; it does not dictate the details of married heterosexual sex as many other conservative religious groups do,⁵¹⁵ though it does disapprove of the use of birth control, for "the womb business is God's business" and those who fear the health risks of pregnancy should remember that if they "serve the Lord your god and obey him, he will take care of all such details."⁵¹⁶ According to Sam Phelps-Roper, all sexual acts that occur within the context of marriage are acceptable. "Once you're married," Shirley Phelps-Roper's oldest child notes with merriment, "you can swing from the lights!"⁵¹⁷

Sexual intercourse, according to the church, is reserved for men and women in their first marriages—an ideal held by all major denominations. Romantic physical contact of any sort prior to marriage is discouraged. For example, when Shirley Phelps-Roper hinted that her son

⁵¹⁵ See, for example, the level of detail about marital sex acts in Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1998) or Oral Roberts' unwittingly hilarious attempt to define appropriate sex as only vaginal-penis contact (Oral Roberts, undated sermon, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BxqfAM1Ag>).

⁵¹⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 28, 2006.

⁵¹⁷ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, August 13, 2005.

Sam might have kissed his wife before they married, Sam clearly and discreetly let his mother know that the two had never touched, which relieved his mother's mind. Asks Shirley Phelps-Roper, "What possible value is there to such conduct except to get you into trouble—taking fire into your bosom and getting into some kind of fornication or otherwise?"⁵¹⁸ Within marriage, though, sexuality is private, respected, and enjoyed, as various church members shared.

Remarriage after divorce is equated with adultery, as Fig. 3 illustrates. Church belief in this principle is so strong that it was the topic of the marriage sermon at the wedding of Brent Roper and Shirley Phelps-Roper, when Fred Phelps reminded the couple that marriage "is the only legitimate place for sex. That bed is undefiled. Marriage is honourable in all, and the marriage bed undefiled. All the others are whoremongers and adulterers that God will judge."⁵¹⁹ Moreover, the law firm of Phelps-Chartered, staffed only by members of the church, will not serve as counsel in divorce proceedings in their first marriages, though the firm will do so for those who have previously been divorced, interpreting their second marriages as invalid in God's eyes anyway.⁵²⁰ Sexual intercourse prior to marriage is a form of fornication, just as sex with someone other than one's spouse during marriage is adultery.⁵²¹ Sexual fidelity in marriage is the overarching mandate. "Remember," noted Fred Phelps at the start of the church's anti-gay picketing, "I've preached more and harder against adulterers than I have fags."⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, September 28, 2006.

⁵¹⁹ Fred Phelps, "The Charge Given to the Married by the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ: On the Occasion of the Marriage of Brent D. Roper and Shirley L. Phelps (Members of the Westboro Baptist Church) on November 25, 1983." *God Hates Fags*. 25 November 1983. http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/written/sermons/19831125_brent-roper-shirley-phelps-wedding.pdf.

⁵²⁰ Rebekah Phelps-Davis, interview with the author, March 14, 2010.

⁵²¹ *The Most Hated Family in America*, Television Documentary, written by Louis Theroux and directed by Geoffrey O'Connor (2007; London: BBC, 2007).

⁵²² Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "Faxes, Pickets, Politics Carry Phelps' Message," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994.



Figure 21: Paulette Phelps, articulating the church’s position on divorce. Divorce for any reason—even adultery—is not permissible, and remarriage after divorce while the previous spouse is still alive is considered adultery. In cases where a spouse is a spiritual or physical danger to his or her family, the church will encourage separation of the household but not legal separation or divorce. Undated photograph provided by Westboro Baptist Church.

This outline of ideal sexual expression is shared among many religious denominations in the United States, including Catholics, conservative Protestants, and mainline Protestants.

Indeed, Westboro Baptist Church makes no prohibitions against particular sex acts, as do many denominations, provided that they occur within marriage and only with one’s spouse. What makes Westboro Baptists different from other religious groups is that the sexual sins of members are a reason for church discipline. Only rarely do other denominations discipline members for sexual transgressions. While Catholicism calls for the instant excommunication of women who have abortions, few women are actually formally excluded for this act.⁵²³ The Amish practice

⁵²³ For an explanation of excommunication as a consequence of having, performing, or cooperating in an abortion, see Fr. Frank A. Pavone, “Never to Reject, Never to Kill,” *Priests for Life*, <http://www.priestsforlife.org/preaching/never.html>. The notable exceptions to the failure to excommunicate over the

shunning for a variety of reasons, but this is a minority group whose practice of exclusion is unfamiliar in most other congregations.⁵²⁴

At Westboro Baptist, however, sexual transgressions are reason for church members to address a congregant individually and, if necessary, exclude him or her from the church, and, as recounted in Chapter 2, such an exclusion was central in Westboro Baptist Church's understanding of split between East Side Baptist Church and Westboro Baptist Church. Years after that exclusion, Shirley Phelps-Roper, in her early 20s, herself gave birth to a son out-of-wedlock. Her oldest child, Sam, was adopted in childhood by Shirley's husband, who married Sam's mother when the child was four.⁵²⁵ While Shirley's pregnancy prior to marriage was a concern for the church, it did not require her exclusion because Shirley recognized it as a sin and repented of it. Similarly, a second woman in the church has a son born out of wedlock and has never married but is welcomed into the full life of the congregation.⁵²⁶ In these cases, the disciplinary mechanism of the church functioned to reinforce the transgressive nature of the sexual sin and, apparently, discouraged future misbehavior. At the same time, it allowed for remorseful participants to remain in or return to the church. In contrast, in recent history, a single male member was excluded for having an affair with a married woman from outside of the

issue include a few high profile cases involving Catholic doctors or Catholic hospitals. For example, when a nine-year old Brazilian girl was impregnated with twins by her step-father and received an abortion, the Catholic church excommunicated the girl's mother and all hospital workers who assisted with the procedure—but not the girl (because of her age) or her stepfather. (Gary Duffy, "Rape Row Sparks Excommunication," *BBC News* March 5, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7926694.stm>. In another example, a New Jersey nun who approved of an abortion as her work with a Catholic hospital "excommunicated herself" merely by approving the procedure for a pregnant woman suffering from pulmonary hypertension, with Sister Margaret McBride argued was life-threatening ("Catholic Sister Told Phoenix Bishop Abortion was Allowed by Church Teaching," *Catholic News Agency* (May 18, 2010), <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic-sister-told-phoenix-bishop-abortion-was-allowed-by-church-teaching/>).

⁵²⁴ For more on Amish shunning practices, see Justin K. Miller, "Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't: Religious Shunning and the Free Exercise Clause," *The University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 137, no. 1 (Nov. 1998), 271-302.

⁵²⁵ Shirley Phelps-Roper's out-of-wedlock birth was first reported in Kansas City's *The Pitch* (Justin Kendall, "The New Fred" *The Pitch*, November 2, 2006, <http://www.pitch.com/content/printVersion/155699>).

⁵²⁶ Anonymous interview with the author.

congregation and has not returned to the church because he refuses to repent publically to the congregation.⁵²⁷

Westboro Baptist Church is concerned not only with the sexual transgressions of its own members but also with what it sees as a cultural tolerance, acceptance, and even celebration of homosexuality. Homosexual sex is a sin, according to the church, drawing from the same religious scriptures that are understood to prohibit same-sex acts in other denominations, particularly Leviticus 12:30 (“If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”) and Romans 1:26-27 (“For God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.”). Given their opposition to theological schooling and rejection of Higher Criticism, Westboro Baptist Church will not consider any translations of the Bible except the King James translation or consider alternative understandings of these texts.⁵²⁸ Such language, posits Robert N. Minor, is another form of rebuffing doubts or even intellectual engagement among members. “[T]he archaic language of the King James Bible with its ‘thou’ and ‘ye’ contributes to the

⁵²⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008. In these cases, Shirley Phelps-Roper’s analysis of the story of the woman caught in adultery is illustrative: “First, the men who wanted to kill the woman – while letting the man (one of them) off Scott free [she didn’t commit adultery with herself] – were vile sinners who pretended they were religiously righteous.... Second, they wanted to rely upon the law, so Christ bound them with the law. It takes two or three witnesses to convict the woman. None of them were witnesses. They were just self-righteous liars trying to trick Christ with their slippery ways. They didn’t care about the woman or her soul.... Third, the woman was remorseful. Christ, being part of the trinity, knew the condition of her heart.... He knew she was one of God’s elect, who was ashamed of her sin, and was not going to return to it. That’s why the entire account ends with the statement from Christ to this woman, “Go and sin no more.” He did NOT say go march in an adulterer’s pride parade; go and jabber about being a ‘Christian’ while you sit in the pew in your own sinful state, with a preacher in her own sinful state, and demand God love you no matter what.” Shirley Phelps-Roper, “Rancid Reno Girly-Men Need To Stop All The Lying - And Check Out These Videos Of Your Crimes ... Oops, Your Bad!,” *Spare Not*, [blog of Shirley Phelps-Roper], <http://blogs.sparennot.com/index.php/dearshirley/?title=rancid-reno-girly-men-need-to-stop-all-t-1&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1>

⁵²⁸ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010.

thought-numbing nature of the experience. It gives the language an authority that the current everyday speech of plain human beings just doesn't have."⁵²⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper agrees with part of Minor's judgment: King James' English *does* take the language out-of-the-ordinary, allowing it to be one form of expressing respect for God. However, Minor's argument that the language is "mind-numbing" dismisses the aesthetic pleasure that some listeners—and speakers—derive from the experience. Further, Westboro Baptist Church members are quite comfortable with the language, with even the children demonstrating an understanding of its grammar and rhetoric.⁵³⁰ Moreover, as with fears that changes in practice will lead to errors in theology, Westboro Baptist Church has concerns that a change in language may soften their theology, especially regarding "God's righteous hatred which is his determination to send the unrepentant to hell" and sexuality.⁵³¹

If Westboro Baptist Church shares with other denominations a belief that homosexuality is a sin, the church's understanding of the nature of sin is quite different from what many others believe. In a post-Great Awakening America, predestination theology, with its denial of free will, is unfamiliar to many people. Today, even those who do not attend religious services hear, predominantly, Arminian theology mixed with what Peter J. Thuesen calls "providence-without-predestination,"⁵³² a general sense of having a "Purpose Driven Life," to quote a recent bestseller,⁵³³ in which God assigns the purpose but people do the driving. The conservative

⁵²⁹ Robert N. Minor, *When Religion is an Addiction* (St. Louis: HumanityWorks!, 2007), 64.

⁵³⁰ For example, after a church-wide study session on the parable of the persistent in Luke 18 on Sunday, July 4, 2010, a child in upper elementary school was responsible for demonstrating his knowledge of Revelation 9, taken from the King James translation, to Shirley Phelps-Roper. While church members are supposed to memorize scripture, mere rote recitation is insufficient to demonstrate mastery. For this reason, Shirley interrupted the child after nearly every verse of the 21 verse chapter to quiz him on the meaning of words, ask him to explain why the writer chose to repeat a phrase, or ask for a cross-reference. After he ably answered each of her concerns, the child quickly picked up his recitation at the verse where he had been interrupted.

⁵³¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010.

⁵³² Thuesen, *Predestination*, 215.

⁵³³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

Protestantism preached today on radio airwaves and television asks sinners to repent of their own volition, whereas Westboro Baptist Church theology denies that any sinner—which is to say, no one—can repent without previously being regenerated, that is, having God elect this person and create an internal change in him or her. Other religious groups say that God loves gay people but hates homosexuality (the “love the sinner, hate the sin” paradox), a framework that then gives them permission and incentive to preach to gay people, pray for their conversion, and even work with them in therapeutic settings to help “strugglers” (i.e. those fighting against unwanted same-sex attraction) reorient themselves.⁵³⁴ They believe that those who do not repent of their same-sex intercourse will be damned to hell in the afterlife; that is, God, who loves them, is forced to send them to hell because they have not repented of their sins.

In contrast, Westboro Baptist Church does not preach that God hates people because they are gay but rather, in a move that confounds Arminian believers, that they are gay *because* God hates them. That is, God chose at the beginning of time who was among elect and who was not, in total disregard for the worth or obedience of the individual. Hugh Binning contrasts the Arminian and Calvinist theses on the matter:

Hath he chosen us because he did foreknow that we would be holy, and without blame, as men think? Or hath he not rather chosen us to be holy and without blame? He cannot behold any good or evil in the creatures, till his will pass a sentence upon it; for from whence should it come?⁵³⁵

Because of total depravity, humans cannot be good enough to be chosen for salvation; only by being chosen for salvation can they be holy.

⁵³⁴ Cynthia A. Burack, “Compassion Campaigns and Antigay Politics: What Would Arendt Do?” *Politics and Religion* 2 (April 2009), 31-53.

⁵³⁵ Binning “On Predestination (I).”

In choosing his elect, God also chooses the reprobate—those who will be eternally damned and will thus likely live unholy lives on earth. This double predestination, “the grand doctrine that razes free will to the ground,”⁵³⁶ means that God abandons some people before they are even born, and, in their abandonment, some people pursue homosexuality. Again, Westboro Baptist Church cites the Romans 1:25, which describes people who “changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever.” Verse 26 of the King James translation continues: “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.”

In this text, God’s “giving up” of individuals occurred *prior to*, not after, their “unnatural” acts of homosexuality. Homosexuality becomes evidence, not the cause, of God’s damnation; God gives gay people up to be gay, not because they are gay. Indeed, those who engage in same-sex activity do not even recognize it as sin, for “[t]he wicked have no practical, prevalent knowledge of the malignity of sin, because they have no such knowledge of God.”⁵³⁷ Furthermore, there is nothing any gay person can do about it, for “[t]he sinner doesn’t see [God’s word] and doesn’t hear it, and he never will.”⁵³⁸

However, even within Westboro Baptist Church’s theology of sexuality, those who engage in same-sex intercourse can repent—or, rather, they *will* repent, if they are drawn through God’s irresistible grace to do so. This is in accordance, not in conflict, with the doctrine of unconditional election “because if Christ died for them, the Holy Spirit will surely call them, God will in fact draw them, they will leave off that uncleanness, vile affections, and reprobate

⁵³⁶ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “Phelps Flock: Afterlife is Prearranged,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994.

⁵³⁷ Richard Baxter, “Directions for Hating Sin,” in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1 (London: George Virtue, 1838), 89.

⁵³⁸ Fred Phelps, sermon at Westboro Baptist Church, February 21, 2010.

mind, and the inevitable result will be that they will inherit heaven and not hell.”⁵³⁹ As with all sinners, according to Westboro Baptist Church logic, the only hope for homosexuals is in their election. Their non-election causes them to pursue homosexuality, and God’s election will invariably lead them away from it.

Given Westboro Baptist Church’s belief that gay people were hell-bound before they engaged in same-sex intercourse, the impetus for their activism is not clear to those who understand Christianity only in terms of Arminian theology. Christians who believe that God judges people based upon their actions, rather than the Westboro Baptist belief that people’s actions reflect God’s pre-judgment of them, try to reorient gay people toward celibacy or heterosexuality in order to align them with God’s plan for them.⁵⁴⁰ Westboro Baptists argue that homosexuals are already engaging in God’s plan for them—a plan for their eternal damnation. According to this theology, any activism seems unwarranted, and, indeed, church members have no goal of gaining new converts or stopping people from engaging in same-sex acts. In response to the question “Have any homosexuals repented as a result of your picketing?,” the church provides a decisive answer:

Yes, but this doesn't matter. Christianity is not a game, consisting of who can get the most people to repent. Our job is simply to preach, and by the foolishness of our preaching, we hope that people will be saved. However, Jesus is the Savior, not us. No man can come unto Him unless the Father in heaven draws him, and He will call His sheep.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: How Do You Feel about People who Confess and Realize Their Sins?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq.html>.

⁵⁴⁰ Cynthia A. Burack, “Contesting Compassion: Love Wins Out in the Ex-Gay Movement” (Paper, Western Political Science Association, Albuquerque, NM, March 16-18, 2006 (accessed at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/9/7/6/0/pages97608/p97608-1.php).

⁵⁴¹ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Have Any Homosexuals Repented as a Result of Your Picketing?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq.html#Repent>

This answer is precisely in line with the “no free offers” hyper-Calvinism of Westboro Baptist Church hero John Gill and much of Primitive Baptist belief today. As double predestinationalists, Westboro Baptists go further than refusing to offer the gospel message to non-elect, recognizing, as Steve Drain noted, “[I]f the Lord has it that these people won’t believe in him, there’s nothing I can do for them”⁵⁴²; they refuse to pray for the non-elect, including gay people, because “[y]ou simply cannot read the accounts given throughout the scriptures without recognizing that those who are clearly condemned of God are beyond any hope of intervention by prayer.”⁵⁴³ To pray for them would not only waste church members’ time; it would suggest that God’s design to send those people to hell was erroneous and thus would be an affront to God’s sovereignty. Thus, concludes the church, “[W]e would not dare to do so.” Especially for those who are gay, the church asks, “What arrogance would we display to pretend we could pray them back into the good grace of Him who has given them up?”⁵⁴⁴

Despite the belief that their preaching is not aimed at converting people to their church or changing people’s sexual orientation, members still picket seven days a week. As Steve Drain, a member who joined the church after it began its anti-gay activism, smilingly confessed as he stood outside St. David’s Episcopal Church, which has had a temporary restraining order in effect against Westboro Baptist Church since 1993,⁵⁴⁵ “I just have to be here!”⁵⁴⁶ The next chapter of this dissertation will consider the forms of activism that Westboro Baptist Church

⁵⁴² “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005

⁵⁴³ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: ‘Do you Ever Pray for the Salvation of Those you Feel are Condemned?’” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Condemned>.

⁵⁴⁴ The church quotes John 17:9, in which Jesus says, “I pray for them [the elect]: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou has given me; for they are thine.” The church understands Matthew 5:44 (“Pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you.”) as a recognition that there are elect outside of the church who do need to hear its message, just as Saul of Tarsus, before his conversion, was an enemy of Christians (Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: Do you Ever Pray for the Salvation of Those you Feel are Condemned?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Condemned>).

⁵⁴⁵ Roy Bragg, “Topeka has Little Love for Hateful Preacher,” *San Antonio Express-News*, April 10, 2005.

⁵⁴⁶ Steve Drain, interview with the author, April 11, 2010.

theology takes, specifically examining how the church uses its anti-gay theology to justify protests at the funerals of deceased servicemen and –women and sites of national tragedy.

Chapter 4: The Means, Ministries, and Mission of Westboro Baptist Church

While the Religious Right's organized anti-gay activism emerged in the 1970s and developed in the 1980s, the 1990s provided challenges to anti-gay activism that required the movement to shape itself differently if it hoped to maintain its successes and avoid offending moderate Americans who were uncomfortable with same-sex sexuality and opposed to gay rights but generally resistant to seeing themselves as intolerant. As Americans increasingly came to understand sexuality to be an identity rather than merely a set of behaviors,⁵⁴⁷ as the public increasingly accepted the model that sexuality is innate and immutable,⁵⁴⁸ as missionaries returned home from Africa with stories that depicted innocent women and children as victims of the AIDS,⁵⁴⁹ and as gay activists effectively depicted homosexual Americans as "normal" and therefore deserving of respect and dignity,⁵⁵⁰ outright homophobia became less publically

⁵⁴⁷ Peter B. Wood and John B. Bartkowski, "Attribution Style and Public Policy Attitudes Toward Gay Rights," *Social Science Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (March 2004): 71.

⁵⁴⁸ Americans are increasingly likely to believe that sexuality is innate, and more than half of Americans today subscribe to this position. For example, a 2003 Gallup poll reported Americans were roughly divided about whether homosexuality is an innate characteristic (Linda Lyons, "Teens on Homosexuality: Nature or Nurture?" *Gallup*, March 18, 2003, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/8005/Teens-Homosexuality-Nature-Nurture.aspx>); four years later, more than half of Americans believed that sexuality is due to "nature" than to "nurture," and "the long-term pattern shows a clear increase in the view that one's sexuality is determined at birth" (Lydia Saad, "Tolerance for Gay Rights at Water-High Mark," *Gallup*, March 29, 2007, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27694/tolerance-gay-rights-highwater-mark.aspx>).

⁵⁴⁹ Stephen Inrig, "Evangelical Views on Condom Use in Response to HIV/AIDS" (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association, Philadelphia, PA, October 11, 2007).

⁵⁵⁰ Religious Right activists have noted the effort that gay rights activists have made to "demonize" them, in particular by equating them to racists who resisted civil rights for African Americans. They frequently cite Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen's *After the Ball: How America will Conquer its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the '90s* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) as a handbook for the "normalization" of gay Americans.

acceptable.⁵⁵¹ In response, anti-gay rights groups had to adopt what David Ehrenstein calls “kinder, gentler homophobia.”⁵⁵²

As noted in Chapter 2, this included a shift from anti-gay rhetoric that was outright hostile to one that was pitying and a shift from the use of theology to the use of science and social science to argue against homosexual sex. At the same time, national, state, and municipal legislation and policy was increasingly sought to prevent the extension of gay rights to areas where gay people had traditionally been denied access, such as the U.S. military, which enacted President Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” executive order in 1993. The Defense of Marriage Act, signed into law by Clinton in 1996, legally defined marriage as between one man and one woman in federal law and allowed states to deny marriage rights to same-sex couples married in other states.⁵⁵³ Such efforts articulated and solidified long-held public sentiment on these topics. Though such legislation represented a “win” for anti-gay rights activists because they extended anti-gay rights laws, they were also a recognition that long-held assumptions about the fitness of gay soldiers for service or the desire for gay people to marry were being questioned. By solidifying national policy, the government acknowledged that the gay-accepting cultural tide that was rising in America needed to be quelled if the heterosexist status quo was to be protected.

This is the setting in which Westboro Baptist Church launched its first anti-gay campaign. According to *Hatemongers*, a church-approved documentary film about Westboro Baptist Church, church members were walking in Gage Park in Topeka one day in 1991 when

⁵⁵¹ Erin Ruel and Richard T. Campbell make a compelling argument that increased awareness of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and early 1990s led to increased intolerance of gay Americans. I have uncovered no work addressing how post-1991 HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns that worked to raise public concern about the disease among heterosexuals may have countered this trend or if, indeed, a link between HIV/AIDS awareness and homophobia has continued to the present (“Homophobia and HIV/AIDS: Attitude Change in the Face of an Epidemic,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (June 2006): 2167-2178).

⁵⁵² David Ehrenstein, “Kinder, Gentler Homophobia,” *The Advocate*, April 6, 2006, <http://www.advocate.com/article.aspx?id=43756>

⁵⁵³ The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which aims to “define and protect the institution of marriage,” according to the text of the bill, became public law 104-199 on September 21, 1996.

Fred Phelps' school-aged grandson was propositioned by a gay man in the park; such encounters, in this public park, according to church members, were recurring.⁵⁵⁴ In response, the church sent a letter to the city requesting the city's laws against public sex be applied more forcefully, especially since the park had been named as a "cruisy" area in a gay sex tourbook.⁵⁵⁵ "I can't imagine anyone wanting their picnics interrupted by fags making out. I thought it wouldn't take but a time or two" of picketing, Fred Phelps recalled in a 1994 interview.⁵⁵⁶

When the city failed to respond in what the church saw as an adequate way—for example, by cutting down a grove of trees church leaders believed was used to provide cover to gay men engaging in sex—⁵⁵⁷, Phelps concluded that the city was controlled by gay rights interests, and he began researching the topic of the gay rights movement in America. He recalled in a *Washington Post* story:

It was breathtaking how far down that road this country's gone.... And the more I found out the more resolute I got and began to look upon myself gradually as the last, best hope of this miserable, godforsaken country.⁵⁵⁸

Soon, the church began what it termed "The Great Gage Park Decency Drive"—a campaign, starting in the spring of 1991, to draw attention to illegal homosexual encounters happening in the park and by what church members saw as the failure of local government to address the

⁵⁵⁴ *Hatemongers*, VHS, directed by Steve Drain (2000; <http://www.hatemongers.com/clips.html>).

⁵⁵⁵ Allegations of Gage Park as a "cruisy area" were supported by excerpts from *Bob Damron's Address Book*, '92, a listing of gay-friendly establishments and places where casual gay sex was available (as reprinted in a letter to Mayor Butch Felker and Police Chief Bob Weinkauff from Westboro Baptist Church, dated August 31, 1992). Further, Max Movsovitz, a gay man who agreed to consensual oral sex with an undercover police officer in a case that Movsovitz and gay rights activists hoped would overturn Kansas anti-sodomy laws, was arrested in Gage Park in 1995, furthering the impression that Gage Park was an area where gay sex was common (Deb Taylor, "Nightmare in Gage Park," *Liberty Press*, October 1998).

⁵⁵⁶ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, "Faxes, Pickets, Politics Carry Phelps' Message," *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994.

⁵⁵⁷ Annie Gowan, "Holy Hell," *The Washington Post*, 12 November 1995, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=NewsBank&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=0EB28567A53ABC9A&d_place=WPIW&f_subsection=sSTYLE&f_issue=1995-11-12&f_publisher.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

issue.⁵⁵⁹ In these days before widespread internet use, the church used faxes, media outlets, and public forums⁵⁶⁰ to decry public toleration of homosexual acts, which were, until the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* decision, illegal in the state of Kansas.⁵⁶¹

Since then, the church has expanded its media output to include a variety of websites, a Twitter account, television and radio appearances, and funeral pickets—demonstrations involving singing Primitive Baptist hymns and parodies of patriotic songs, carrying signs, dragging the American flag on the ground, and, depending on the state, preaching anywhere between 50 and 1000 feet of a funeral—and broadened its targets to include all “fags and fag enablers”—including high profile gay men and women such as celebrities and politicians and those supportive of gay rights—and soldiers, victims of crimes and natural disaster, and Jews. In his documentary film *The Most Hated Family in America*, British documentarian Louis Theroux browses through a collection of Westboro Baptist Church picket signs, noting that the church calls Princess Diana a “Royal Whore in Hell” and Archbishop Desmond Tutu “Fag Tutu.” “There’s no logic here,” he complains to church member Steve Drain, to which Drain replies,

⁵⁵⁹ See, for example, Westboro Baptist Church, “Declare Independence from Gay Oppression,” Press release dated July 1, 1991.

⁵⁶⁰ Jael Phelps, interview with the author, April 18, 2010.

⁵⁶¹ Kansas’ statute 1969 21-3505 made same-sex anal or oral intercourse a misdemeanor punishable with a fine of up to \$1000 and six months in jail. The law, unlike many other states’ anti-sodomy laws, applied only to same-sex couples, and, unlike *any* other state’s laws, did not provide exemptions for minors. The law was at the center of *Matthew R. Limon v. State of Kansas*, a 2000 case that led to the imprisonment of 18-year old Matthew R. Limon, a teenager with slight mental retardation who already had two similar charges against him, for performing consensual oral sex on a fellow male resident, age 14, at a home for teens with mental impairments. Had Limon been found guilty of the same crime with a 14-year-old girl, he would have received a maximum of 15 months in prison, but, under Kansas law, he was originally sentenced to more than 17 years in prison. By the time the ACLU won an appeal of the case, Limon had already served five years of his original sentence. At the original trial, Attorney General Jared Maag, representing the state, defended the state’s right to punish same-sex couples engaging in consensual oral or anal contact without making the same acts between members of opposite sex illegal by saying that the law was aimed at promoting “traditional sexual roles.” “The state argued the reasons for different punishments of similar sex acts was to promote marriage, encourage procreation and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases,” reported Scott Rothschild for *Lawrence Journal-World* (“Judge Ridicules Underage Sex Law,” December 3, 2003, http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2003/dec/03/judge_ridicules_underage/). Kansas’ law, like Texas’, was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2003, with Justice O’Connor making a special note that, even if states *could* make anal sex illegal, applying the law only to same-sex couples violated the equal protection guarantee of the Constitution.

“Actually, there’s plenty of logic. Anybody who’s in the news who supports the filthy fag agenda, we’re going to make a sign about.”⁵⁶² Theroux, like many in the audience of such pickets, understands Westboro Baptist Church pickets only as anti-gay, failing to understand the strict sexual code that the church preaches. Moreover, he fails to comprehend members’ claims that the church’s Calvinistic theology justifies their participation in pickets not only of gay people but of all who do not support their means of communicating their message, ministries, and mission.

Westboro Baptist Church Means

What the *Sante-Fe Reporter* characterized as “the most offensive and ingenious theological campaign in modern memory”⁵⁶³ began in the early 1990s with local picketing and faxing and soon expanded into a national campaign involving a variety of new technologies of protest. Indeed, like many conservative Christians, Westboro Baptists are innovators in their adoption and adaptation of media technologies. “While fundamentalists claim to be upholding orthodoxy (right belief) or orthopraxis (right behavior), and to be defending and conserving religious traditions and traditional ways of life from erosion, they do so by crafting new methods, formulating new ideologies, and adopting the latest processes and organizational structures,”⁵⁶⁴ note Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby. In controlling their own media—through their maintenance of websites, press releases, and video production—Westboro Baptists have greater control over their message, and they are able to quickly respond to current

⁵⁶² *The Most Hated Family in America*, Television Documentary, written by Louis Theroux and directed by Geoffrey O’Conner (2007; London: BBC, 2007).

⁵⁶³ Nathan Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872.

⁵⁶⁴ Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby, “Fundamentalisms: Genus and Species” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 402.

events, including misrepresentations of them in other media. However, Westboro Baptists frequently leave such media misrepresentations of their church uncorrected, for such media misrepresentations isolate them further from the public while insuring that they retain some media attention.⁵⁶⁵ As Shirley Phelps-Roper says, “Any news story about us is going to say ‘God Hates Fags.’ If that’s the only thing they [the reporters] get right, we’ve done our job.”⁵⁶⁶ Church members thus make outside media into an accomplice in spreading their message.

In a church blog, a church member explains that the outside media are there for Westboro Baptist Church’s use. Writing about Louis Theroux, who filmed a popular documentary on the church for the BBC, the writer doubts that Theroux truly intended to understand Westboro Baptist Church but explains why the church accepted the risk that it would be misrepresented:

He [Theroux] did not want to learn our ways, he wanted to make a program, he intended to exploit the hatred that this generation has toward God and the requirement that you OBEY HIS COMMANDMENTS! We permitted him to do that, because we KNOW, from reading the Word of God that we will be permitted to preach this pure Word of God to this generation. We know that God sends a guy like him, so we are very thankful, and we submit ourselves to his nonsense, because he is the unclean vessel that will carry the words!⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁵ Moreover, correcting misrepresentations would require a lot of time, as it is common in reports about Westboro Baptist Church. Fred Phelps does, however, address inaccurate reporting on the church at the start of many of his sermons. For example, he took issue with Mark Enoch’s reporting, from October 12, 1991, in Topeka’s *Capital-Journal*, especially his failure to understand the “age-old theological dispute between Calvinists and Arminians,” though he expressed no confidence in Enoch’s ability to understand theology, saying, “[Y]ou are too morally depraved even to comprehend this old-time gospel I preach.” (Fred Phelps, letter to Mark Enoch, 31 Oct. 1991).

⁵⁶⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

⁵⁶⁷ “We Are Thankful For & Submit To Unclean Media Ravens Because They Are Vessels To Carry The Words – We ARE Preaching To The Whole World, After All!!” *The Workmen* [blog], <http://blogs.sprenot.com/index.php/workmen/?title=we-are-thankful-for-aamp-submit-to-unclean-media-ravens-because-they-are-vessels-to-carry-the-words-andash-we-are-preaching-to-the-whole-world-after-all&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1>.

In part, then, church members admit that they are “media-hungry”—but only to the extent that they want to draw attention to the message, not to themselves, they say.



Figure 22. Sam Phelps-Roper picketing at a Nebraska-Missouri football game on October 4, 2008. In a “field report” from the scene, a church member wrote:

The saints of God picketed for several hours at the stadium. The rebels of Doomed america yelled every manner of cursing in the English language. F-this, F-that, F-you, you get the picture – they weren’t much on vocabulary, but remember most of them could barely walk. One of the prophetesses stated that the Missouri quarterback would mop up the cornhuskers for the first time in Lincoln in 30 years. Sure enough the LORD God made her words come true. Missouri beat the Nebraska asses 52-17. The Missouri quarterback stated after the game that Nebraska is the dirtiest team he has played including one cornhusker player spitting on him. Yep, that’s what we experienced outside the Stadium – an altogether worthless bunch of people, good for nothing....

The elect of God departed from Lincoln rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name (Acts 5:41). They also rejoiced that they were leaving before the game let out, because it must be ugly when the drunks hit the highways. :)⁵⁶⁸

In addition to the free publicity provided by outside media coverage, Westboro Baptist Church itself employs multiple means to transmit its message, including the distribution of press releases announcing upcoming pickets or addressing contemporary local and national news. The church also pickets arts events, sporting events, parades, church services, graduation ceremonies,

⁵⁶⁸ Photograph and field report by Westboro Baptist Church. “Field Report—Lincoln, NE—10.04.08—Balaam’s Ass is MUCH Smarter than the Nebraska Asses,” *The Workmen* [blog] October 11, 2008, <http://blogs.sporen.com/index.php/workmen/?title=field-report-lincoln-ne-10-04-08-balaam-&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1>.

funerals, and scenes of national calamity, events that often garner the church media coverage and inspire counterprotest. (See Figure 22.) The church has a robust multimedia ministry, including a number of high quality websites that provide podcasts of sermons; sermon texts; church-produced news videos; music videos; and blogs, and a Twitter account. Each of the church's means for communicating its message has a distinct history, but all have the same aim: to disseminate the message of Westboro Baptist Church and engage an unbelieving public.

Fax Campaign

Westboro Baptist Church's fax campaign began in the early 1990s, before internet access was widely available. The church produced daily or nearly-daily faxes, distributing them broadly to businesses, organizations, and individuals. The faxes, like internet-distributed press releases of today, included offensive graphics, reputation-damaging accusations, and challenges to local authorities. In particular, faxes focused on the immorality of homosexual sex and the way in which allegedly closeted gay men and women—in short, nearly everyone who crossed the church—lied, church members claimed, about their sexuality. In this way, the church “outed” gay men and women or forced heterosexual people to publically affirm their sexuality while they sidestepped the issue of their support for gay rights. The accusations were often cruel but effective, and they were also manipulated by outsiders. For example, faxes included medical information drawn from anonymous sources.⁵⁶⁹ Inspiration for claims about local politicians or public figures was sent “in the mail or sometimes...left in the mailbox outside the church. Some information [came] from longtime city, county, or state politicians,” according to the church, though the church did require two corroborating sources for any anonymously-supplied information.⁵⁷⁰ For example, blood bank records of city council member Beth Mechler, a

⁵⁶⁹ Taschler and Fry, ““Faxes, Pickets, Politics Carry Phelps’ Message.”

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

candidate who was once supported by Fred Phelps, were left in the church's mailbox, and Fred Phelps published faxes about Mechler suggesting that she was HIV-positive. The records indicated that Mechler had been rejected as a blood donor because she tested positive for hepatitis B. "Well that's something *like* AIDS!" defended Fred Phelps in 1995 interview with *POZ*, a magazine about HIV/AIDS. "So I put out a flyer saying, 'Does she have AIDS?' I used a question mark." Such grammatical nuance escaped recipients of the fax, says Mechler, for whom the faxes were devastating, as co-workers and family members found themselves confronted with doctored images of Mechler with Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions, which often affect those with AIDS.⁵⁷¹ In these early faxes, the church established its reputation for offensive graphics, personal attacks, and specious accusations.

In response to Westboro Baptist Church's activities, the state of Kansas expanded its laws against telephone harassment to include harassment by fax in 1992. The next year, District Attorney Joan Hamilton and the Shawnee County Sheriff's Department worked together in a raid of the church building and confiscated the church's fax machines. The church remembers this as evidence of persecution:

[T]he corrupt law enforcement known as the Shawnee County Sheriff's Department along with the lawless District Attorney set it upon themselves to persecute the Westboro Baptist Church by raiding their church property. They knew full good and well that there was NO criminal activity taking place, the only reason they participated in that raid was to STOP the word of God from being

⁵⁷¹ Donna Minkowitz, "Dancing on Your Grave," *POZ*, December 1994/January 1995, http://www.poz.com/articles/2106_13378.shtml.

preached. They failed as will everyone else who try to stop God. His arm is not shortened and He will retaliate!⁵⁷²

Two years later, Kansas Attorney General Robert Stephan participated in an effort to cut the church's fax lines, but the effort failed.⁵⁷³ The church maintained an active faxing campaign through the advent of the internet, and it continues to use faxes as a means of transmitting its message, especially in its preparations to picket events across the nation.

Picketing

Church members began their picketing campaign when local government leaders failed to respond to the church's satisfaction to the concerns that church members shared in letters and, then, in public forums; indeed, in response Westboro Baptists' dominance at city council meetings, the council shortened public speaking time.⁵⁷⁴ Fred Phelps defends picketing as preaching, saying "Picketing is just preaching, what I've been doing for 40-some years. We picket because it is the only avenue left to us, and it is so powerful."⁵⁷⁵ The act is justified, theologically, by a Bible verse from the prophet Habakuk: "And the LORD answered me, and said, 'Write the vision, and make it plain upon tablets, that he may run that readeth it.'"⁵⁷⁶ In writing their words on posters that they display at busy intersections, Westboro Baptists can spread their message quickly to a variety of passersby.

Pickets involve teams of various sizes—often as many people as can fit into a church member's van—holding church-produced poster-sized signs with graphics and words articulating the church's main beliefs; these signs are produced on church property. Picketers

⁵⁷² Westboro Baptist Church, "America Persecutes the Saints of God," *God Hates America*, <http://www.godhatesamerica.com/>.

⁵⁷³ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Fred Phelps Timeline," *Intelligence Report*, Spring 2001, <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?sid=184>.

⁵⁷⁴ Jael Phelps, interview with the author, April 18, 2010.

⁵⁷⁵ Taschler and Fry, "Faxes, Pickets, Politics Carry Phelps' Message."

⁵⁷⁶ Jael Phelps, interview with the author, April 18, 2010.

include church members of all ages, and because so many of the members are minors, children are often on the picket line. Picket teams include both men and women.

While on the picket line, picketers may stand still or walk, and they remain on public areas such as sidewalks. They are careful to obey state laws regarding public space and “time and distance” rules that limit the picketing of church services and funerals to certain hours and distances from the scene of the event. Picketers dress appropriately for the weather and are careful to stay connected with each other via cell phone so that they can report potential dangers to each other. The threat of danger is real, and church members are directed to “retreat until they can retreat no more” if attacked and, if necessary, defend themselves by covering their bodies with their signs.⁵⁷⁷ Though picketers are always met with hostility—expressed through revved engines and squealing tires, glares, vulgar hand gestures, profanity screamed by drivers, or more overt violence—the mood on the picket line is generally upbeat, with picketers chit-chatting about movies they recently watched or their plans for the day. “I go on the theory that outdoor exercise is good, preaching the Gospel is good, helping the country is good,” explained Fred Phelps about the pickets in an interview with Topeka’s *Capital-Journal*. “There’s just so much good stuff attending those things that I can’t hardly wait for the next one to come.”⁵⁷⁸ Since the church claims that it has performed more than 40,000 pickets to date, members do not have to wait long for the next one; pickets occur daily.

In Topeka, picketers maintain a regular schedule of picket sites, rotating past other churches, government buildings, and the local newspaper, the *Capital-Journal*, and they also picket local cultural events. Travel to out-of-area pickets takes considerable time for church

⁵⁷⁷ Rebekah Phelps-Davis, interview with the author, July 18, 2010.

⁵⁷⁸ Taschler and Fry, “Faxes, Pickets, Politics Carry Phelps’ Message.”

members, who choose picket sites according to the cost and difficulty of travel and the likely media coverage of the event.⁵⁷⁹

Funeral pickets began in late 1992 or early 1993, recalls Shirley Phelps-Roper, and they initially focused on people who had died of AIDS-related causes. These were soon followed, though, by pickets at the funerals of “fag enablers”—straight people who either supported gay rights or failed to oppose gay rights. This included Ronald Reagan, whose friendship with fellow actor Rock Hudson, who had died of an AIDS-related illness, made him a target, as well as Fred Rogers (of the children’s television program *Mr. Rogers*), who preached that children were good and acceptable, in contrast to the Calvinist message of total depravity, and Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The group gathered national attention and, eventually a place in the play *The Laramie Project*—for its picketing of Matthew Shepherd’s funeral in 1998. Shepherd’s death, which was ultimately ruled not to be a hate crime by the Wyoming court that convicted his killers, as well as the activism of his mother Judy Shepherd, drew national attention to the violence that can result from homophobia and kept attention on the church. At that picket, Romaine Patterson organized a grassroots counterprotest, Angel Action, in which friends of Matthew Shepherd and supporters of gay rights wore angel costumes and lifted their “wings” to block Westboro Baptist Church from the sight of funeral attendees, a form of counterprotest that has subsequently been used in other settings as well. On June 15, 2005, church members performed their first picket of a military funeral, at the funeral of Army Spc. Carrie L. French of Idaho.⁵⁸⁰ Such pickets would soon prompt federal action, as will be discussed in chapter 7. Funeral pickets, whether the deceased is gay or straight, soldier or civilian, famous or not, are always justified as free

⁵⁷⁹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 18, 2010.

⁵⁸⁰ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 1, 2009.

exercises of religion and speech and efforts to preach to the living when they are most vulnerable to hearing God’s message.

Radio Program

In the mid-1950s, Fred Phelps hosted a radio show on KTOP-AM, a Topeka radio station,⁵⁸¹ and he also hosted a thirty minute program, *The Old School Baptist Hour*, on WREN-AM 1250, in the mid-1990s, early in church’s anti-gay campaign, but the show was cancelled after only four weeks when the station became fearful of defamation lawsuits.⁵⁸² Soon, the church learned that it would need to maintain its own outlets if it wanted its message to continue to circulate in the public. The internet would provide that.

Church Websites

In 1996, the church launched its flagship website under the direction of then-college student Ben Phelps. The Matthew Shepherd funeral picket had drawn national attention to the church, and the signs that picketers held at the funeral, neon signs proclaiming “God Hates Fags” (See Figure 23), drove traffic to the website, where the group’s no-holds-barred rhetoric appalled visitors.⁵⁸³ Visitors who returned to the site found “epics” explaining why each person the church had picketed—from local folks to national figures—was in hell. These included Diane Whipple, a California woman savagely mauled by two dogs in the stairwell of her apartment. Lurid descriptions of her death and her sins—including lesbianism—were detailed. These documents provided the template for future epics about each of the funeral pickets in which church members would participate.

⁵⁸¹ Phil Anderson, “Phelps Radio Show Returns to WREN,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, September 8, 1995.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*

⁵⁸³ For a history of public response to website, see “Hate, American Style,” Synapse, *Wired*, July 2, 1997, <http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/1997/07/4872>.



Figure 23. In 1998, members of Westboro Baptist Church picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard in Casper, Wyoming. Prior to the funeral, the city quickly passed a law prohibiting pickets within fifty feet of a funeral. Here, Fred Phelps stands behind a barricade with signs both theological and political. Shepard's face is marked with an inverted pink triangle, the symbol Nazis assigned to homosexuals in concentration camps. The other sign anticipates laws that extend the definition of hate crimes to include crimes against gay people. Indeed, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was signed into law in October 2009. Photograph available at "Countdown to Westboro Baptist Church at Stanford: Meet Fred Phelps," *Fiat Lux*, January 25, 2010, <http://blog.stanfordreview.org/2010/01/25/countdown-to-westboro-baptist-church-at-stanford-meet-fred-phelps/>.

The church's web presence has expanded greatly since then, and websites now include blogs, video footage of pickets, press releases, schedules of upcoming pickets, photographs, frequently asked questions, sermons, documentary-style videos providing commentary on news events, songs, music video parodies, and more. Further, different websites promote different aspects of the church's theology. For example, *Beast Obama* details the church's argument that the current president is the Anti-Christ and outlines the church's ideas about the end of the world. *God Hates the World* includes an interactive map that visitors can use to select different

nations of the world; when users click on an area, they are provided with information about why God hates that particular nation. *Signs Movies* allows users to click on various signs that church members hold during pickets to learn the theological justification for the claims made on them. *Jews Killed Jesus* details the church's reasons for believing that 144,000 Jews will soon repent and convert. *Priests Rape Boys* outlines the church's arguments against Catholicism. *Blogs.SpareNot* catalogues church members' blogs and responses to reader questions. More websites are in development. After years of struggling to find a server that could securely host its website, the church now maintains its own server. The quality of websites is professional, which is especially impressive given the small size of the church. The sites are constructed and maintained by church members with skills in information technology and media design.

Twitter

Megan Phelps-Roper, who shortens her name to Megan Phelps when she tweets, provides instantaneous commentary about current events in abbreviated form on her microblog on Twitter. She interprets breaking news for her followers, explaining how events such as hurricanes and oil rig explosions are evidence of God's anger. Currently, she has more than 3,000 followers, and she engages in on-line arguments with famous people who also Twitter, including movie director Kevin Smith.⁵⁸⁴

The process of developing so many outlets for preaching was organic, assures church members. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper, "We didn't go out with a game plan or a strategy, we just had some words on some signs and we stood in the public places and were obedient to the laws of God and man!" Out of their obedience to God, they were blessed, not with new converts or monetary donations, but with assurance. "Our God taught our hands to engage in this warfare

⁵⁸⁴ Justin Kendall, "Megan Phelps-Roper v. Kevin Smith, Round II," *The Pitch*, January 6, 2010, http://blogs.pitch.com/plog/2010/01/kevin_smith_vs_megan_phelps-roper_round_ii.php.

and our fingers to fight—that is to say—in the details and the minutia,”⁵⁸⁵ Shirley Phelps-Roper notes. They learned what they were doing as they went along, adding new places to preach and new media and developing and articulating their message more fully.

Regardless of their method for preaching, Westboro Baptists display a high level of message discipline, articulating the same theology in press releases and faxes, at pickets, and in their internet activities. The language and images are consistent across media used and speaker. Church members stress Jude 1:23, provides instructions for two ways of reaching an audience: on some, church members should “have compassion, making a difference,” but they should approach others as unpleasant and potentially contaminating things. These people, too, need to hear the message of Westboro Baptist Church, so church members continue to address them “with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.” Westboro Baptists preach to these people with a message that is consistently bold, graphic, and offensive. Westboro Baptists place themselves in the lineage of other prophets with outrageous messages and outrageous media. As Fred Phelps notes repeatedly, everyone thought Noah was crazy when he was building the ark, but God saved him and his family from the flood. Likewise, God demanded bizarre behavior of his Old Testament prophets, ways of acting that made little sense to their contemporaries. “If they think our signs are outrageous,” Fred Phelps tells his congregation, “they should see what God said for Ezekiel to do”: make bread using human dung. Ezekiel’s message to God’s people was the same as Westboro Baptist Church’s is to the world today: “You are filthy.”⁵⁸⁶

Indeed, the materials produced by Westboro Baptist Church might be described as “*hardcore Protestant pornography*,” the description Daniel Raeburn applies to the artwork of

⁵⁸⁵ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, April 1, 2010.

⁵⁸⁶ Fred Phelps, sermon at Westboro Baptist Church, February 7, 2010.

Christian tract author Jack Chick.⁵⁸⁷ Cynthia Burack calls Chick, who uses his short but dense comic-style tracts to preach a conservative evangelical Christianity, and Phelps “brother[s]s-in-arms,”⁵⁸⁸ and the two preachers do share a common vision of an America doomed by its tolerance of homosexuality, though Chick’s tracts are hopeful about individual salvation and always conclude with directions for the reader to “[t]hrough prayer, invite Jesus into your life to become your personal Saviour.”⁵⁸⁹

Westboro Baptist Church publications, with their focus on destruction and sexuality, ironically, represent a handbook to transgressive sexual practices. For example, picket signs often include images of stick figure men engaged in anal sex, and sermons describe the details of same-sex intercourse vividly.⁵⁹⁰ Nate Phelps is likely correct when he says that “there was absolutely no discussion of sexuality in any sense, other than that condemnation from behind the pulpit,”⁵⁹¹ but the message from behind the pulpit, along with the images on picket signs and graphics in videos and on websites, is explicit. This is deliberate, not to harm people but to help them, according to the church, which defends its use of harsh language and explicit imagery, contending that

the truth is harsh. We use great plainness of speech, and will not beat around the bush when it comes to someone's eternal soul. Watch out for those people who tell you that it's okay to be gay - they'll take you to hell with them.

⁵⁸⁷ Daniel K. Raeburn, editor, *The Holy Book of Chick with the Apocraphya and Dictionary-Concordance*, King Imp Edition (Chicago: Daniel K. Raeburn, 1998): 7; italics in original.

⁵⁸⁸ Cynthia Burack, “From Doom Town to Sin City: Chick Tracts and Antigay Politics,” *New Social Science* 28, no. 2 (June 2006): 176.

⁵⁸⁹ Directions for becoming a Christian, as Jack Chick understands the experience, are provided on the last pages of each Chick Tract. Examples are available at *Jack Chick*, http://www.chick.com/reading/tracts/1065/1065_01.asp.

⁵⁹⁰ I once brought an interested undergraduate to a church service with me. During the sermon, Fred Phelps described anal-oral between gay men in great detail. The student took copious notes, writing a list of unfamiliar words “to look up later,” she said. I cautioned her that, if she really wanted to research the terms, she should do so in a private space so as not to break rules about viewing pornography in a public computer lab.

⁵⁹¹ *The Standard*, Television Series, hosted by Peter Klein (2010; Vancouver: VisionTV) <http://vimeo.com/10584739>.

Indeed, upsetting people is precisely the goal, a kind of theatrical, theological shock to their system that forces them to confront Westboro Baptist Church's message and vote, either by agreeing or disagreeing with the church, on their election. The process is unpleasant for listeners, who are virtually guaranteed they will be challenged. "I'm here to fray them,"⁵⁹² declared Jonathan Phelps at a picket in front of the Metropolitan Community Church in Topeka, referencing Zechariah 1:21 and describing the experience of the congregants, who see members from Westboro Baptist Church outside their church regularly: irritated, unraveled, worked over until they fall apart.

The message that those being picketed are hell-bound is so important that Westboro Baptist Church members believe it justifies tactics that otherwise seem cruel. For example, church members have defended sending letters to the parents of young adults who have died of AIDS-related diseases, picketing the funerals of murder victims, or yelling cruel words to a father about his pre-teen daughter's attempted suicide as "appropriate."⁵⁹³ Like earlier Calvinists, Westboro Baptists describe their apparent cruelty as the only act of true love. Explains Brent Roper, "'Love thy neighbor' means rebuking him."⁵⁹⁴ This is consistent with the thinking of Puritan divine Jonathan Edwards, who encouraged parents to describe humanity's totally depraved nature and the consequence of hell even to children:

Will those children that have been dealt tenderly with in this respect, and lived and died insensible of their misery till they come to feel it in hell, ever thank parents and others for their tenderness, in not letting them know what they were in danger of? If parents' love towards their children was not blind, it would affect

⁵⁹² Jonathan Phelps, interview with the author, April 18, 2010.

⁵⁹³ Steve Fry, "Picketers Defend Their 'Duty' to Preach," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, November 28, 1995.

⁵⁹⁴ Brent Roper, "Love Thy Neighbor Equals Rebuke," *Signs Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/signmovies/index.html>.

them much more to see their children every day exposed to eternal burnings, and yet senseless, than to see them suffer the distress of that awakening that is necessary in order to their escape from them, and that tends to their being eternally happy as the children of God.⁵⁹⁵

The only true love for one's neighbor, then, is preaching the shocking, upsetting message of his or her sin and likely damnation.

Westboro Baptists who find the public's response to their public ministries upsetting are encouraged remember that God's prophets have always been misunderstood and accused of "disturbing the peace"—precisely because they were delivering an uncomfortable, unpopular message that challenged complacent, willful sinners.⁵⁹⁶ Westboro Baptist Church places itself in line with these prophets—even up to Jesus, whose parables were often misunderstood by his disciples. If the public responds to Westboro Baptist Church messages by claiming that they are homophobic, racist, or anti-Semitic, then the church only responds by noting that those whom God elects will understand the words they share.

Theories of Westboro Baptist Church's Public Ministries

Explanations for the behavior of Westboro Baptist Church members have often dismissed them as mentally ill,⁵⁹⁷ an accusation that has followed Fred Phelps since he was removed from John Muir College's campus as a 21-year old evangelist,⁵⁹⁸ or concluded that the church is "a

⁵⁹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival: Part III: Shewing in Many Instances Wherein the Subjects or Zealous Promoters of This Work have been Injuriouslly Blamed*, in *Jonathan Edwards: The Great Awakening*, edited by C.C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 394.

⁵⁹⁶ Fred Phelps, sermon at Westboro Baptist Church, February 7, 2010.

⁵⁹⁷ Jerry Falwell is famously credited with calling Fred Phelps a "first class nut," to which Phelps replied, "Thank you, Brother Falwell. It means I'm preaching the truth" (Julia Lieblich, "Conservative Christians Protest Anti-Gay Protestor," AP, 24 October 1998).

⁵⁹⁸ According to a report of the incident in *Time Magazine*, "Students were delighted with the story that Phelps had been ordered to consult the school psychologist, a middle-aged lady, and that he had turned the tables on her by

publicity-hungry group,” as the Anti-Defamation League calls them, composed of people whose primary goal is to be in the news.⁵⁹⁹ Others suggest dangerous personality disorders, and Fred Phelps, in particular, is described as obsessively vengeful. Says daughter Dortha, who has left the church, “He only started picketing in 1991, but I want people to understand that nothing's changed, he's been like this all along.” She says, “My dad is an egomaniac,” describing him as “a spoiled child” who “will stop at nothing to get attention.”⁶⁰⁰ Estranged son Nate Phelps echoes his sister's words, saying, “[A]t every stage of that man's life he has willfully and deliberately violated and abused all those around him. His theology and campaign today is just the latest iteration of that cruel nature.”⁶⁰¹

Others have suggested that Westboro Baptist Church's public ministry is a form of revenge that its pastor is taking on Topeka for his own failures. “It hasn't got a thing to do with sodomy, the Bible, free speech or anything else everyone has been squealing about,” wrote one local citizen in a letter to the editor of the city's *Capital-Journal*. “What it really comes down to is the fact that this is Fred's way of paying the court back for disbaring him years ago.”⁶⁰² John Michael Bell suggests “addiction to hatred” as the source of energy for anti-gay activism, even

‘psychoanalyzing’ her. Gloated an admiring coed: ‘I hope he did. They had no right to suggest that he's off his stick. Just because you're religious, it doesn't mean you have to be crazy’” (“Repentance in Pasadena,” *Time*, June 11, 1951, <http://find.galegroup.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/gtx/retrieve.do?contentSet=IAC->

Documents&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&qrySerId=Locale%28en%2CUS%2C%29%3AFQE%3D%28JN%2CNone%2C6%29%22Time%22%3AAnd%3ALQE%3D%28DA%2CNone%2C8%2919510611%24&sgHitCountType=None&inPS=true&sort=DateDescend&searchType=PublicationSearchForm&tabID=T003&prodId=AONE&searchId=R3¤tPosition=55&userGroupName=ksstate_ukans&docId=A197127841&docType=IAC).

⁵⁹⁹ Anti-Defamation League, “Westboro Baptist Church,” *Special Report*, http://www.adl.org/special_reports/WestboroBaptistChurch/default.asp.

⁶⁰⁰ *Southern Poverty Law Center*, “A City Held Hostage,” *Intelligence Report* 101, Spring 2001, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2001/spring/a-city-held-hostage?page=0,1Spring>.

⁶⁰¹ Nate Phelps, response to a post by sister Katherine Phelps-Griffin, *Nate Phelps*, May 21, 2009, <http://natephelps.com/32549.html>.

⁶⁰² John V. Watkins, “Phelps' Real Motive” (Letter to the Editor), *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 2, 1996.

titling his early 1990s report on the church *Addicted to Hate*,⁶⁰³ and Elizabeth Birch, former director of the Human Rights Campaign, has reportedly called Fred Phelps “a walking hate crime.”⁶⁰⁴ Estranged daughter Dortha considers her father a “rageaholi,”⁶⁰⁵ while estranged son Mark Phelps argues that his father “simply wants to hate and to have a forum for his hate”⁶⁰⁶ and so turned to religiously-justified anti-gay activism. Fundamentalism is rooted in hatred, according to Richard Hofstadter, who argues that such faith is held by people who “live by hatred as a kind of creed.”⁶⁰⁷ Such views explicitly or implicitly theorize that strongly held religious belief is pathological or anti-social, an assumption that appears in scholarship on conservative religion generally.⁶⁰⁸

However, some scholars, without becoming apologists for the movement, have questioned the view that the members of the Religious Right are pathological. Kathleen M. Blee, in her study of members of the Ku Klu Klan, notes that though many racist activists exhibit paranoia and other mental and emotional problems, “these may be *outcomes* rather than

⁶⁰³ John Michael Bell was hired by Stauffer Communications, owner of Topeka’s *Capital-Journal*, in the early 1990s to write an in-depth investigation of Westboro Baptist Church. Bell, with apparent agreement from Stauffer Communications, continued his work to create a book-length draft of a manuscript, but Stauffer Communications refused to publish it but did not recognize Bell’s claim that it was his intellectual property. Bell sued Stauffer Communications for the right to publish the book, and the text of the book was submitted as evidence in June 1994. Before the court, at the urging of Stauffer Communications, could seal the evidence so that it would not be publically available, copies of it were distributed around Topeka, and the text, *Addicted to Hate*, now circulates online, too. The *Topeka Capital-Journal* soon printed a less-sensational series by Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, and Bell dropped his suit. When asked why she thought that Stauffer Communications refused to publish the manuscript but also contested Bell’s claim that he had the right to publish it himself, Abigail Phelps, youngest daughter of Fred and Margie Phelps’ children, noted that it was because the text was factually inaccurate (interview with the author, October 10, 2009).

⁶⁰⁴ As quoted in Nathan Dinsdale “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872.

⁶⁰⁵ Dortha changed her last name to distance herself from her family of origin, and I have chosen not to include it here in order to maintain her privacy. This quotation is taken from K. Ryan Jones’ documentary film *Fall from Grace* (2008; New York: DOCURAMA, 2008).

⁶⁰⁶ Mark Phelps, “A Letter from a Son who Left,” dated May 19, 1993; *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994.

⁶⁰⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 118.

⁶⁰⁸ Clyde Wilcox, Ted G. Jelen, and Sharon Linzey, “Rethinking the Reasonableness of the Religious Right,” *Review of Religious Research* 36, no. 3 (March 1995): 263. For examples of examinations of Religious Right activity that rely on pathological explanations, see Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Richard Hofstadter, “Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited: A Postscript—1962,” *The New American Right*, edited by Daniel Bell (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1963), and Robert N. Minor, *When Religion is an Addiction* (St. Louis: Humanity Works!, 2007).

predictors” of participation. Likewise, Westboro Baptists’ motivation for their ministries does not have to be grounded in an organic mental illness, but the display of uncivil behavior may be instead a result of a life in the congregation that supports and demands it.

According to Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey’s review of research on the Religious Right, pathological explanations do not account for Religious Right participation,⁶⁰⁹ and Clyde Wilcox’s earlier work suggested that pathological explanations could not be sustained in empirical research.⁶¹⁰ Though Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey focus their work on the Religious Right generally, their observation is applicable even to Westboro Baptist Church, as the judges of the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2009 noted when reversing the original decision against the church in *Snyder v. Phelps*. The decision notes that “as distasteful as these signs are, they involve matters of public concern, including the issue of homosexuals in the military, the sex-abuse scandal within the Catholic Church, and the political and moral conduct of the United States and its citizens. Such issues are not subjects of ‘purely private concern,’ but rather are issues of social, political, or other interest to the community.”⁶¹¹ When framed as one way of addressing commonly held concerns about issues of national importance, the actions of Westboro Baptist Church may be defined as unusual without being defined as insane. The need the church is trying to meet may not be unreasonable (or at least uncommon), even if the methods members use to meet it are deemed by others to be uncivil.

Like many believers who adopt a fundamentalist or conservative theology, Westboro Baptist Church members appear to be struggling to make sense of a broader American culture that seems to them to reject foundational truth, dismiss supernatural authority, and advocate

⁶⁰⁹ Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey, “Rethinking the Reasonableness of the Religious Right,” 263.

⁶¹⁰ Clyde Wilcox, “Popular Support for the New Christian Right: A Test of Alternative Hypotheses,” *Social Science Journal* 26, no. 1 (1989): 55-63.

⁶¹¹ The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals’ decision can be found at <http://pacer.ca4.uscourts.gov/opinion.pdf/081026.P.pdf>; internal citations omitted.

cultural relativism.⁶¹² Conservative Christianity's former status as *the* (or even *an*) authority on life's biggest questions may have eroded. More specifically, a contemporary understanding of sexuality as something other than God-given (whether that is socially constructed or genetic or something else) is unacceptable to a church that adopts absolute predestination. In the context of post-modernity, Westboro Baptists could adopt a different means of defining themselves, but they are unchanging and use tactics the general public finds offensive. This does not mean, however, that their feelings about the changing nature of the world are necessarily incomprehensible, even if they are expressed in ways considered cruel by others.

Westboro Baptists share with the Religious Right more than their concern about shifting sexual mores and declining prestige for religion. Members participate in American culture broadly, and the families involved with the church are of the sort that would make *Focus on the Family* listeners envious—forthright, hardworking, polite, respectful. Individual church members and families are often described as “for the most part, kind and sensitive people” in their interactions with the outside world.⁶¹³ Notes Louis Theroux, who spent three weeks with the church while filming his BBC documentary,

In some ways they're a model family. All these things that you associate with the breakdown of families, like the dad's gone to the pub all the time or they just watch TV and the parents don't talk to the kids, well you can't put that on this family. They spend all their recreational time together and they all look out for each other. They don't really have friends outside the church because all their best

⁶¹²The impression that America devalues fundamentalist beliefs is widely espoused in conservative Christian rhetoric. Summit Ministries, for example, claims that “[t]oday countless Christian youth have fallen victim to the popular ideas of our modern world. Most have adopted these ideas into their own worldview, while still others go on to renounce their Christian faith altogether.” The organization offers classes and camps that train young people to counter the influences of Marxism, feminism, and cultural relativism (“About,” *Summit Ministries*, <http://www.summit.org/about/>).

⁶¹³*The Most Hated Family in America*, Television Documentary, written by Louis Theroux and directed by Geoffrey O’Conner (2007; London: BBC, 2007).

friends are in the church. It's important to recognise the good qualities of the family as it helps explain why so many of them have stayed in it and embraced the hateful stuff.⁶¹⁴

By all measures except for their public ministries, they are exemplary citizens and employees.⁶¹⁵

Also, notably, Westboro Baptist Church members have not retreated from secular culture. The children attend public schools. They all use modern technology and enjoy contemporary entertainment and popular culture, from video games to trendy fashions. In fact, many church members are employed by the state of Kansas,⁶¹⁶ and they participate in politics at all levels.⁶¹⁷

Church members' tension with the secular world rests upon what they perceive as its tolerance of homosexuality, not any general disdain for popular culture (except in its supposed tolerance for homosexuality). Westboro Baptist Church members' anti-gay ministry cannot be dismissed wholesale as rooted in psychological problems afflicting individual church members.

For Westboro Baptists, the emergence of secular modernism and post-modernism represent a threat to the place of fundamentalist Christianity, a trend that Fred Phelps was preaching against at the start of his career,⁶¹⁸ and the success of the gay rights movement in

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶¹⁵ For example, Margie Phelps received an award from the state for her outstanding work in corrections in 2005. (Alex Friedmann, "Hate-Filled Religious Fanatics Find a Home in Kansas Corrections," *Prison Legal News* n.d., https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/11027_displayArticle.aspx).

⁶¹⁶ Lizz Phelps, ninth daughter of Fred and Margie Phelps, was a lawyer for the sheriff's department before returning to school to earn an MA in public administration. She now works for the state in insuring compliance with Medicaid for people with mental health impairments and disabilities. Margie Phelps, fourth child of Fred and Margie Phelps, works in corrections in addition to consulting with the family law firm. Brent Roper, husband of Shirley Phelps-Roper, is director of human resources for the National Association of Insurance Commissioners and has written textbooks on the use of computers in law offices (*Using Computers in the Law Office*, Florence, Kentucky: Cengage, 2007) and the management of law offices (*Practical Law Office Management*, Florence, Kentucky: Cengage, 2006).

⁶¹⁷ For example, Ben Phelps, son of Fred Phelps, Jr., and Betty Phelps, made a \$500 donation to the 2002 campaign of Kansas' Attorney General Phil Kline. In 2006, when Kline's then-opponent Paul Morrison noted that Kline had accepted the contribution, Kline promptly donated \$500 to the Patriot Guard Riders, a motorcycle brigade that stages counterprotests at military funerals where Westboro Baptists picket (Scott Rothschild, "Kline Makes Donation to the Patriot Guard Riders," *Lawrence Journal-World* (Lawrence, Kansas), Aug. 16, 2006).

⁶¹⁸ "Repentance in Pasadena," *Time*.

winning increased broader public acceptance of gay people has given Westboro Baptist Church the evidence it needs to say that fundamentalist Christianity has lost its place in America.⁶¹⁹ The tension between tradition and change was instrumental in the birth of Primitive Baptism in the 19th century, and, similarly, Westboro Baptist Church forged its identity amid changes to the traditional concepts of sexuality in the late 20th and early 21st century.⁶²⁰

While Westboro Baptist Church has not been effective in harnessing the resentment of those who share its hostility toward gay rights, the broader Religious Right has gained political power through the use of “status politics.”⁶²¹ For church members, Westboro Baptist Church’s identity as the lone prophet of God’s word has prevented them from allying with other groups that hold similarly anti-gay beliefs;⁶²² moreover, other proponents of similarly anti-gay theology refuse to align with Westboro Baptist Church’s tactics,⁶²³ so that, according to William R. Hutchison, the Religious Right has generally avoided the isolation that comes from extremism,⁶²⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, on the other hand, has embraced that isolation. In order to manage

⁶¹⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, “Filthy Manner of Life,” *God Hates America*, <http://www.godhatesamerica.com/filthymanneroflife.html>.

⁶²⁰ The Primitive Baptist church’s formation was, in part, a response to innovation in worship style and church evangelical outreach, as outlined in chapter 3. For example, folklorist John Bealle notes that the Primitive Baptist hymnal *Primitive Hymns*, which does not include music for instruments—was compiled at the moment when the genre of a *capella* singing was losing popularity and organs and other instruments and choirs were being used more frequently—precisely in order to defend tradition against innovation. “[I]t was along this very fault line of American Protestantism that *Primitive Hymns* emerged and was assured its tenure,” he notes (John Bealle, “Introduction,” in *Benjamin Lloyd’s Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*, edited by Joyce H. Cauthen (Montgomery: Alabama Folklife Association, 1999), 2).

⁶²¹ Gerard A. Brandmeyer and R. Serge Denisoff, “Status Politics: An Appraisal of the Application of a Concept,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 5-11.

⁶²² For a time, Westboro Baptist Church had a relationship with a small church in Indiana that held similar beliefs, but that church dissolved amid leadership problems.

⁶²³ For an interesting defense of Westboro Baptist Church’s theology and right to espouse it, see *The Right to Be Wrong*, a blog maintained by Canadian Alyzza Martin, available at <http://www.therighttobewrong.net>. Despite Canada’s law 2002 against discrimination based on sexual orientation (C-415) and the nation’s 2003 law making hate speech a criminal offense, known as the Fred Phelps law (C-250), Martin defends the right of the church to engage in funeral pickets. She identifies as a Christian but, because of her theology, she would never be accepted by Westboro Baptist Church. Texts of the Canadian law are available at “House Publications—Private Members’ Bills,” *Parliament of Canada*, <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HouseBills/BillsPrivate.aspx?language=E&Parl=37&Ses=1#C-415>.

⁶²⁴ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2003), 219.

their anxiety about a decline in their prestige, members of the Religious Right have sought political power, hoping to legislate a permanent place for themselves in the American hierarchy of prestige. In contrast, because of its demand for doctrinal purity, Westboro Baptist Church has refused to build the alliances that would make a politics of resentment successful and, like other Primitive Baptist churches that “view the numerical decline of their church as part of the mysterious outworking of divine providence,”⁶²⁵ is unbothered by the lack of alliances.

Westboro Baptist Church represents itself as so at-odds with society that the respect of society matters little to it, and, in fact, social rejection affirms its unique role in God’s plan.⁶²⁶ A politics of resentment, then, cannot be built by a group that sees the society that despises it as hopelessly in conflict with the group’s goals; Westboro Baptist Church does not seek the respect of the broader culture. For this reason, rather than seeking political reform that would advance the church’s own teachings on sexuality with any hope that it would be met with voter approval, Westboro Baptist Church flies the American flag, upside down—a sign of sinking ship.⁶²⁷ (See Figure 24.) The church’s mission is not to transform the culture or to increase the size and influence of the church but to purify its own ranks and warn the broader culture of the consequences of its sins.

Westboro Baptist Church is well-equipped for this task, in part because of its theology of predestination and its willingness to discipline members and in part because of its human resources. Resource mobilization theory explains the general rise of the Religious Right in the

⁶²⁵ John G. Crowley, “The Primitive or Old School Baptists,” in *The Baptist River: Essays on the Many Tributaries of a Diverse Tradition*, edited by W. Glenn Jonas, Jr. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006), 181.

⁶²⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “Welcome Depraved Sons and Daughters of Adam, *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com>.

⁶²⁷ According to 4 U.S.C. § 8 (a), “The flag should never be displayed with the union down, except as a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property” (United States Government Printing Office, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=browse_usc&docid=Cite:+4USC8).



Figure 24. Westboro Baptist Church flies the American flag upside down, along with the flags of various nations identified as places of particular sin—often the sin of opposing God’s prophets, Westboro Baptists. Canada and England both have laws that prohibit the church from crossing their borders, so flags from both countries are often flown upside down, as is the Israeli flag, shown here, as Israel is the Jewish homeland and the church has an anti-Jewish picketing ministry, as discussed in Chapter 4. Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin, July 18, 2010. All rights reserved.

1980s as a result of the increase in resources of believers.⁶²⁸ Such an increase, though, must be synchronized with a public tolerance of the utilization of such resources. For Religious Right groups in the 1980s, their increase in resources occurred at a time when politicians were generally hospitable to religious leadership and the public was, broadly speaking, tolerant of

⁶²⁸ For more on resource mobilization theory, see, for example Stephen D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamney, “Mobilizing Support for the Moral Majority,” *Psychological Reports* 56 (June 1985): 987-94 and Corwin Smidt, “Introduction” in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2003).

religion in public life.⁶²⁹ As Gaines M. Foster recounts, Christian lobbyists had, since the Civil War, been trying to legislate morality and “outlaw sin,”⁶³⁰ the 1980s were a time of renewed effort in this area, with continued engagement in the “culture wars” through the present day. Westboro Baptist Church’s anti-gay campaign, which began in the early 1990s, started during a time of much public debate about sexuality and the roles of gay men and women in public life and found itself, if not welcome in the debate, at least articulating concerns that resonated with its audience. Despite its contentious relationships with other churches in Topeka, Westboro Baptist found itself sharing a message about the danger of public toleration of homosexuality. As late as 2003, Ron Lassiter, pastor of Topeka’s Faith Temple, wrote in a letter to the editor in the city’s *Capitol-Journal*

Wouldn’t it be humbling and shocking in the end to find that God’s wrath was diverted from Topeka (even though many of the churches allow, condone and sympathize with homosexuals) due to Rev. Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church’s open protestation[s], however strong and graphic they are?⁶³¹

In a climate of general disapproval of homosexuality and toleration of religious input on social policy, Westboro Baptist Church emerged as both vocal and resource-rich—in terms of the intellectual, financial, and educational abilities of church members. Its resources include a high birth rate among church members, what University of Kansas journalism professor Rick Musser

⁶²⁹ Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke, “Introduction,” in *Representing God at the Statehouse: Religion and Politics in the American States*, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), vii-viii.

⁶³⁰ Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality: 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

⁶³¹ Rev. Ronald K. Lassiter, “Lassiter Responds,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 29, 2003, http://vv6tt6sy5c.cs.serialssolutions.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/resultFrameset.jsp?SS_LibHash=VV6TT6SY5C&atGroupList=default&searchBy=database&field=Keyword&dbID=EAP&dbID=WOS&dbID=MUP&term=attributi on+style+and+public+policy+attitudes&Submit=Search.

has called the “holy war resolve” of members of the Phelps family law firm,⁶³² the information technology skills of its members, the rhetorical ability of its members, an effective disciplinary mechanism that keeps church members within the congregation, and stable financial resources.

Central to the building of this human capital—as the literal father of many congregants, the leader of the earliest anti-gay campaign, and the inspiration for the legal education of more than a dozen church members—is patriarch Fred Phelps. As noted in Chapter 2, Phelps was born into a respected family, excelled at school and athletics as a youth, and demonstrated respect for civic duty as a teenager; he was highly ambitious in his work as a preacher and built his preaching skills through zealous revivals and door-to-door preaching.⁶³³ His verbal abilities aided him as an ambitious law student and new lawyer. He modeled determination for his children, most of whom also pursued law degrees⁶³⁴ and some of whom continue the work of the firm that Fred Phelps founded.⁶³⁵ Some have advanced degree in public administration,⁶³⁶ and other church members have degrees in theater and film,⁶³⁷ computer science,⁶³⁸ and medical fields.⁶³⁹

⁶³² Rick Musser, “Fred Phelps versus Topeka” in *Culture Wars and Local Politics*, edited by Elaine B. Sharp (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 171.

⁶³³ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “The Transformation of Fred Phelps,” Special Section, *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://www.cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps01.shtml.

⁶³⁴ All of Fred Phelps’ daughters have law degrees; six earned them at their father’s alma mater, and the other two earned their degrees from Oklahoma City University. Three of Fred Phelps’ sons have law degrees. In sum, then, eleven of his thirteen children have law degrees (Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 1, 2009).

⁶³⁵ Daughters Rebekah A. Phelps-Davis, Shirley Phelps-Roper, and Rachel I. Hockenbarger and son Jonathan B. Phelps work for the firm, and Margie J. Phelps works as a sole practitioner who sometimes consults with the firm. (“Attorneys,” *Phelps Chartered*, <http://www.phelpschartered.com/Attorneys.htm> (accessed April 28, 2009).

⁶³⁶ “Margie Phelps,” *Phelps Chartered*, <http://www.phelpschartered.com/MargieJPhelps.htm>.

⁶³⁷ Steve Drain received a MA in philosophy from the University of Kansas and left the theatre and film program from KU before completing his dissertation (Steve Drain, interview with the author, June 19, 2005). While at KU, he was awarded the Odd Williams Award for Film Studies. He has also won numerous awards from the Kansas Association of Broadcasters (Kansas Association of Broadcasters, “2005 Awards,” *KAB.net*, October 17, 2005, www.kab.net/KABAdditionalInformation/KABTransmitterNewsletters/Downloads_GetFile.aspx?id=4175).

⁶³⁸ For example, Ben Phelps, son of Fred Jr. and Betty Phelps, earned a MS in computer science at the University of Kansas, where he met his wife, Mara, also a computer scientist currently working on robotics (Mara Phelps, interview with the author, March 14, 2010).

⁶³⁹ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

As a whole, then, Westboro Baptist Church is resource-rich. Since 2006, the church has shrunk in size by about fifteen percent, although most of the children born to church members remain church members into adulthood and some people outside of the original founders have joined, bringing in both new energy and new possibilities for marriage. Given that members are not encouraged to use birth control, natural growth remains high, with approximately fifty-percent of the church under age 18.

In 1993, members of the Phelps family won \$43,000 in legal fees from the city of Topeka after District Attorney Joan Hamilton confiscated \$37,000 worth of office equipment, including fax machines, from Phelps-Chartered; though the decision was reversed on appeal, the statute of limitations had expired, and the law firm kept the award.⁶⁴⁰ Such winnings contribute to the ability of the group to finance their pickets.⁶⁴¹ Many critics, including the U.S. military, have suggested that money is the church's motivation for such pickets. Officers of the U.S. Northern Command directed an advisory memorandum to military bases in July 2007, suggesting that attendees at military funerals do not engage Westboro Baptists. "They will employ written and verbal inflammatory language ... to elicit desired responses. This group will then file a civil action in an effort to reach a settlement in order to fund future activities," warned the memo.⁶⁴² Indeed, the church was awarded \$16,500 in legal fees from Albert Snyder, father of fallen Marine Matthew Snyder,⁶⁴³ in a decision reviewed by the Supreme Court in October 2010.⁶⁴⁴ In August 2010, the city of Bellevue, Nebraska, paid Shirley Phelps-Roper \$17,000 in exchange for

⁶⁴⁰ For details of the case, see *Phelps v. Hamilton*, No. 94-3066, 1996.

⁶⁴¹ Westboro Baptist Church admits that it uses lawsuit winnings to finance further pickets (Leonard Pitts, "A Court Ruling that will Turn your Stomach," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2010).

⁶⁴² Josh Belzman, "Behind Their Hate, A Constitutional Debate," *MSNBC.com* January 23, 2008 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12071434/>.

⁶⁴³ Emmanuella Grinberg, "Dead Marine's Father Ordered to Pay Protestors' Legal Costs," *CNN.com* March 31, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/03/30/westboro.baptist.snyder/index.html>.

⁶⁴⁴ Robert Barnes, "High Court: Justices to Consider 'Funeral Protests' in Free-Speech Case," *Washington Post*, March 31, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/30/AR2010053003018.html>. Decision pending.

dropping her lawsuit against the city for allegedly violating her rights when police arrested her on suspicion of flag mutilation and other charges,⁶⁴⁵ and in September 2010, a court awarded legal fees totaling \$8,000 to Megan Phelps-Roper in relation to a flag desecration case; \$3,500 will be paid by the state on behalf of Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning and Nebraska State Patrol Commander Bryan Tuma, and the rest is owed by the Sarpy County attorney, the Douglas County attorney, and the chief of the Omaha Police Chief.⁶⁴⁶ Even when these awards are considered, however, the church's aggressive public ministry is not a profitable enterprise, and the fees awarded seldom cover the costs associated with lawsuits. For example, though Snyder owed the church \$16,500 after the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the original ruling, the church estimates that it has invested about a quarter of a million dollars in the case.⁶⁴⁷ Further, members insist that they picket not to instigate lawsuits that win them money but because their message is "this world's last hope"⁶⁴⁸—not to help people find eternal salvation but to reveal to the world God's message of impending damnation.

Moreover, the church itself does not collect funds during the Sunday services or accept donations from outsiders, though church members do contribute to the church coffers.⁶⁴⁹ Lawyers for Albert Snyder, who won an initial \$10.9 million lawsuit against the church, estimate the yearly cost of traveling to be around \$250,000, all of which is provided by church members.⁶⁵⁰ At the same time that the church is resource-rich in terms of the energies, talents, and donations of its members, it protects information about its financial resources very

⁶⁴⁵ Craig Nigrelli, "Bellevue Settles Lawsuit, Pays Funeral Protestor \$17,000," *Action 3 News*, July 27, 2010, <http://www.action3news.com/global/story.asp?s=12881223>.

⁶⁴⁶ Margery A. Beck, "Taxpayers to Pay \$8,000 in Flag Case," Associated Press, September 4, 2010, <http://www.kansas.com/2010/09/04/1477855/taxpayers-to-pay-8000-in-flag.html>.

⁶⁴⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 18, 2010.

⁶⁴⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, "Welcome, Depraved Sons and Daughters of Adam," *God Hates Fags*, [http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/Westboro Baptist Churchinfo/aboutWestboro Baptist Church.html](http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/Westboro%20Baptist%20Churchinfo/aboutWestboro%20Baptist%20Church.html).

⁶⁴⁹ Sam Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 17, 2010.

⁶⁵⁰ David Klepper, "\$11 Million Verdict Brings Scrutiny of Phelps Finances," *The Kansas City Star*, November 24, 2007.

carefully.⁶⁵¹ Son Nate Phelps, who now speaks against the activities of Westboro Baptist Church, recalls that church members regularly gave ten percent of their income to the church during his childhood, and, through conversations with others who have recently left the church, he believes that current participants give upwards of thirty percent of their income to church activities.⁶⁵² However, that figure is a well-protected secret.

For example, the church won an appeal of *Snyder v. Phelps* and with the reversal of that decision, more than \$16,000 in court costs but, even if the Supreme Court reverses the decision in its forthcoming decision, it is not clear that Albert Snyder will collect much money because the congregation is so careful in protecting its assets. According to the church's defense attorney, Fred Phelps is an unpaid pastor, while Shirley Phelps-Roper is a part-time employee and mother of eleven children and Rebekah Phelps-Davis is a low-paid attorney with only \$306 in the bank at the time the original verdict was delivered.⁶⁵³ By deliberately keeping the church's liquid assets low, Westboro Baptist Church is able to avoid payment of such awards. According to Shirley Phelps-Roper, attempts to collect money from her are pointless. She contends, "I have nothing at risk" because the court cannot confiscate her home, the only property she owns.⁶⁵⁴ The attorney for Snyder agreed with the defense lawyer, at the time of the original ruling, that raising the entire amount of the award during the appeal process was unrealistic.

During the *Snyder* appeal process, defendants Shirley Phelps-Roper and Rebekah Phelps-Davis were responsible for posting their bonds. Because the sisters were unable to pay the \$225,000 amount, according to the documentation they submitted to the church, the court

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵² Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center, April 24, 2010.

⁶⁵³ Matthew Dolan and Julie Bykowicz, "Huge Award in Funeral Lawsuit," *The Baltimore Sun*, November 1, 2007, <http://xml.baltimoresun.com/news/local/bal-marine1101,0,970249.story?page=1>.

⁶⁵⁴ Mike Hall, "Walls Close in on Phelps," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, April 4, 2008, http://www.cjonline.com/stories/040408/loc_264906171.shtml.

demanded an agreement that the property that could be used in generating money for the award—the church structure and attached parsonage and the office building where Phelps Chartered is located—could not be used for collateral in loans or sold during the appeal process.⁶⁵⁵ During the appeal process, though, Westboro Baptist Church remained economically viable and continued to picket soldiers’ funerals, even picketing at Arlington National Cemetery the day before the Supreme Court arguments for the case (See Figures 25 and 26.), despite Albert Snyder’s intended goal of deterring funeral pickets. In an interview after the original settlement was announced, Snyder told reporters, “I hope it [the \$10.9 million award]’s enough to deter them from doing this to other families. It was not about the money. It was about getting them to stop.”⁶⁵⁶ Indeed, his lawyer, Craig Trebilcock, encouraged jurors to award an amount that would send the message ““Do not bring your circus of hate to Maryland again.””⁶⁵⁷ Though the church did not have financial resources to pay the award, it did have the human resources and knowledge of the law to appeal the decision, and, as predicted by many legal theorists, the defendants did have the law on their side⁶⁵⁸--at least during the appeal process.

⁶⁵⁵ Brendan Kearney, “Federal Judge Orders Liens, Bonds in Topeka, Kan.-based Westboro,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, April 4, 2008, http://www.cjonline.com/stories/040408/loc_264906171.shtml.

⁶⁵⁶ Jon Hurdle, “Kansas Church Liable in Marine Funeral Protest,” Reuters, 31 Oct. 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN3134225120071031>.

⁶⁵⁷ “Father Wins Millions from War Funeral Pickets,” *MSNBC.com* October 31, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21566280/>.

⁶⁵⁸ See, for example, Ronald K. L. Collins and David L. Hudson, Jr., “A Funeral for Free Speech?” *Legal Times*, April 17, 2006 or Eugene Volokh, “Burying Funeral Protests,” *National Review Online*, March 23, 2006, <http://nationalreview.com/comment/volokh200603230730.asp>.



Figures 25 and 26. On October 5, 2006, the day before the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Snyder v. Phelps*, members of the church picketed at the entrance of Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. Church members were given a carefully measured space in which to hold their picket. Directly across the street, opponents were given the exact same amount of space for their counter-protest. In the Photograph at left, Margie Phelps, who argued the church's position before the Supreme Court, wears a flag upside down while holding a sign that links homosexuality to national destruction and the death of soldiers. In the Photograph at right, Betty Phelps, wife of Fred Phelps, Jr., expresses the church's gratitude for improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which kill many American soldiers and Marines. Photographs by Rebecca Barrett-Fox. All rights reserved.

Westboro Baptists are likely to avoid the enticement of political success that frequently undermines the distinctiveness of Religious Right lobbyists. Warn Kevin R. den Dulk and Allen D. Hertzke, “[A]s Christian Right activists assimilate into the political process... they risk the loss of what often happens when movements are institutionalized, namely the loss of a distinctive and independent critical voice in American politics.” Political success brings with it

“the question of whether they can speak as prophets and politicians at the same time.”⁶⁵⁹ Even if Westboro Baptists successfully defend the appellate court’s ruling in *Snyder v. Phelps*, they will never have popular support or see their suggested policies, such as capital punishment for same-sex acts, enforced.⁶⁶⁰ However, because the lack of popular support only serves to further cement the church’s idea of itself as a prophet, such failure is not a failure at all. Thus, the church, unlike other religious organizations that aim to persuade a perhaps doubtful public to accept its position, does not need to use resources on campaigns aimed at currying political favor or winning voter approval.

While Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey suggest that conservative social principles correspond to support for Religious Right causes, members of Westboro Baptist Church have identified publicly as Democrats and were active in Al Gore’s initial presidential campaign in 1988,⁶⁶¹ a relationship that continued as late as 1992 when Fred Phelps, Jr., was invited to President Clinton’s inauguration.⁶⁶² Fred Phelps has declared himself a liberal on social issues apart from same-sex relations and interpreted his arrival in Kansas on May 17, 1954, the day that *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* was handed down by the Supreme Court, as a sign that he should work on behalf of civil rights litigants.⁶⁶³ Rebekah Phelps-Davis has worked for the state’s Human Rights Commission, investigating claims of discrimination in housing and

⁶⁵⁹ Kevin R. den Dulk and Allen D. Hertzke, “Conclusion,” in *Representing God at the Statehouse: Religion and Politics in the American States*, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 237.

⁶⁶⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “All Nations Must Immediately Outlaw Sodomy (Homosexuality) & Impose the Death Penalty” [press release], *God Hates Fags*, December 3, 2002, http://www.godhatesfags.com/fliers/archive/20021203_outlaw-sodomy.pdf.

⁶⁶¹ Georgia Log Cabin Republicans, “Al Gore Political Ties to ‘God Hates Fags’ Founders Uncovered,” *Log Cabin Republican News*, October 25, 2000, <http://www.lcrga.com/news/200010251159.shtml>.

⁶⁶² In the next five years, Westboro Baptist Church changed its position on Gore. In 1998, Westboro Baptist Church picketed at the funeral of Gore’s father (Southern Poverty Law Center, “Fred Phelps Timeline”).

⁶⁶³ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “Fate, Timing Kept Phelps in Topeka,” Special Section, *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://www.cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps13.shtml.

public services.⁶⁶⁴ Apart from their views on human sexuality, church members are often liberal, not conservative, in their politics, which tends to confound observers, who expect the church's anti-gay ministry to adhere to the broader Religious Right agenda.

No single theory explains why every individual member of Westboro Baptist Church remains in the church or is active and to what degree. Theories of status defense and political resources and issue-based explanations yield some insights, especially when considering Westboro Baptist Church in the context of other anti-gay religious movements in the United States, but the church's own explanatory framework—theology—must be considered. As Nate Phelps, Fred and Margie Phelps' sixth child, who left the church in his youth, notes, his father understands the Bible to say that “homosexuality is the ultimate defiance of God and that's the source of this.”⁶⁶⁵ Indeed, Westboro Baptist Church looks to the Bible and finds in it a standard of human behavior that is not met by most of the world, and it is that failure to adhere to the church's interpretation of Scripture that, members claim, both brings down God's wrath on the world and inspires their public ministry; homosexuality is seen as an especially egregious expression of humanity's defiance of God. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper, “[A]t the end of the day—the subject matter of the sodomites is so pervasive in the scriptures—and it bears so directly on so many other things—that you can't hardly address the Bible and preach a sermon in this current environment without including the implications of the sodomites and their activities.”⁶⁶⁶ Thus, though church members' address other issues of public concern, they focus

⁶⁶⁴ Rebekah Phelps-Davis' position was, ultimately, untenable. In the 1980s, during her time there, Phelps-Davis was exempted from investigating any cases involving alleged discrimination based on a positive HIV-test, but, still, the conflict between her personal and professional life was seen as an insurmountable difficulty (interview with the author, March 15, 2010).

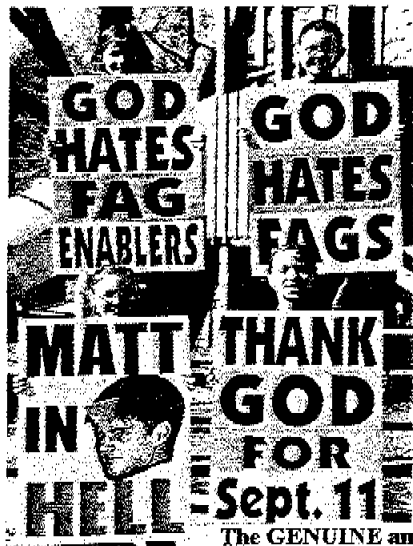
⁶⁶⁵ *The Standard*.

⁶⁶⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, April 4, 2005.

Westboro Baptist Church

(Since 1955)

3701 SW 12th Street Topeka, Kansas 66604 785-273-0325 www.godhatesfags.com



December 3, 2002

All nations must immediately outlaw sodomy (homosexuality) & impose the death penalty!

"And if a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." Lev. 20:13,22.

WBC puts all nations on notice! A warning from God!

A full-color 4" x 6" card with the photo at left on one side and the message below on the other side has been delivered to each ambassador to the U.N. in New York and each ambassador to the U.S.A. in Washington – and to the world's media. AIDS is the least of their worries. The Great Day of the Lamb's wrath will soon come.

"And who shall be able to stand?!" Rev. 6:17.

The GENUINE ambassadors for the truth of God in this wicked and sinful generation send the only sign promised by the Lord Jesus Christ of the imminent Great General Judgment. (Matt. 16:4)

GOD HATES FAGS - Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination. (Lev. 18:22)

THANK GOD FOR SEPT. 11 - A small foretaste of God's wrath against a nation that embraces sin - Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it? (Amos 3:6)

MATT IN HELL - Used, worldwide, as a 'poster boy' to push fag filth as merely an innocent, alternative life-style, Matt Shepard died while trolling for strange flesh, and was given up by the only power that can draw a man to Christ. (Romans 1)

GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS - Worse than fags - worthy of death. (Romans 1:32)

HERE IS TODAY'S MESSAGE!

1. Repent or Perish - Any nation that condones, promotes, or protects homosexuality will be utterly destroyed by God.
2. All nations must immediately pass and enforce laws that make sodomy a CAPITAL CRIME - punishable by DEATH! This would be proof of genuine repentance! See Matthew 3:8 and Leviticus 20:13
3. All nations must cease and desist the making of laws threatening God's preachers with prison for denouncing sodomite sins. See 2 Chronicles 36:16

THIS GOSPEL MESSAGE IS BEING SENT TO EVERY NATION'S AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS AND MUCH OF THE WORLD'S FREE PRESS!

godhatesfags.com
fredthemovie.com
godhatesamerica.com

Figure 27. Westboro Baptist Church press release, dated December 3, 2003, arguing for the imposition of the death penalty for homosexuality.

on homosexuality and relate the tolerance of homosexuality that they see in the broader U.S. culture to their other concerns. The church has expanded its audience in recent years by building new websites, engaging new social media, and picketing at a broader range of events, but throughout, says Shirley Phelps-Roper, members have sought the widest possible audience:

If we begin to pick and choose who we will talk to, we will be WRONG! Christ said to preach this gospel to EVERY creature. If they are wrong, and they hear words of truth and they repent, YAY, if not, YAY! Our job is to say the words to everyone. We don't research them to see what their particular form of perversion is. This life is a proving ground.⁶⁶⁷

As evidenced in this quotation, church members view their ministry in the context of the hyper-Calvinist doctrine of the absolute predestination of all things. They expect their public ministry to change nothing but continue to do it because to do so is to provide evidence of their hope for their own election. In contrast to evangelical Christians, who identify the primary purpose of their preaching to be the saving of *other* people's souls, Westboro Baptists act, first, to fulfill their duty to God as they understand it, with the hope but not the expectation that listeners will be saved through their preaching. Says the church:

First, our goal is to preach the Word of God to this crooked and perverse generation. By our words, some will repent. By our words, some will be condemned. Whether they hear, or whether they forbear, they will know a prophet has been among them. It is the solemn job of a believing Christian to preach the Gospel to every creature, and warn them to flee from the wrath to come....

Second, our goal is to glorify God by declaring His whole counsel to everyone.

⁶⁶⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, May 12, 2010.

Third, we hope that by our preaching some will be saved. As Jude said, on some have compassion, making a difference, but others save with fear.⁶⁶⁸

Westboro Baptists view themselves as a kind of sorting mechanism, forcing listeners to recognize whether they are sheep or goats, wheat or chaff. By a listener's response to their message Westboro Baptists will predict that person's eternal destination. In their response, listeners reveal whether they are people who repent or people who are condemned, whether God has elected them or damned them. Regardless, the church notes, every listener is confronted and forced to admit his or her position, for or against Westboro Baptist Church and thus for or against God. Because so very few do respond positively to Westboro Baptists Church's message, the church, as it makes people aware of their hell-bound status, also reinforces its own boundary with people outside the church. It does not seek, then, to conquer, transform, or re-create the world, which it has labeled as hopeless and beyond redemption, but to renounce it. World renouncers, in the categorization of Almond, Sivan, and Appleby, are "a relatively rare mode of fundamentalism," who seek "purity and self-preservation more than hegemony over fallen outsiders."⁶⁶⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, unlike other world-renouncing groups such as the Amish, both renounce the outside world and engage in it, even as they do so hopelessly, without any confidence that it will change. This paradox—the "consistent logic of purity and contamination"⁶⁷⁰ that nonetheless enters the contaminated zone for pickets—is an unconquerable difficulty for Westboro Baptist Church opponents, who wonder why church members bother to picket if they have no expectation that their targets will change. The answer

⁶⁶⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQ: What are You Trying to Accomplish?" *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq.html>.

⁶⁶⁹ Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby, "Explaining Fundamentalisms" in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 429.

⁶⁷⁰ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 99.

comes back to theology: because Westboro Baptist Church prizes obedience to the inscrutable will of God, a will that demands their public ministry to the world but has predestined that change, if it occurs at all, will not be culture-wide, as the world moves toward the end of time.

Scenes of Westboro Baptist Church Public Ministry

Fred Phelps, like many in the congregation, generates an image of himself as delighting in the destruction of his fellow Americans, but a closer analysis of interviews with some church members reveals that many of them approach it as a necessary and loving act. Shirley Phelps-Roper, for example, recounts a time when the mother of the deceased grabbed her hand at a funeral. The woman pulled Phelps-Roper close to her and asked her how she, herself a mother, could interrupt the grief of the family with a picket. Tearing up during the retelling, Phelps-Roper responded that she was there *because* she is a mother; she feels a duty to warn all mothers not to “raise their children for hell” by allowing them to align with a culture that she believes condones homosexuality and a military that supports that culture.⁶⁷¹ Similarly, she reports feeling “so sad” as she drove toward the funeral of fallen Marine Matthew Snyder, recalling how, in media appearances, his father had called him “the love of his life,” a feeling that Shirley Phelps-Roper shares about her own children.⁶⁷² While many consider Phelps-Roper’s method uncivil and her central thesis that God hates gay men and women objectionable, her story—as well as the theology espoused in sermons and in church publications—illustrates that members of the church are not, at least in their view of themselves, inspired by hatred but are driven by a religious mission to love others. Though “compassion is itself a contested dimension of Christian Right politics,” remind Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, and though it may be

⁶⁷¹ Shirley Phelps Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

⁶⁷² Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with David Pakman, *Midweek Politics Radio*, March 11, 2010, <http://www.midweekpolitics.com/shirley-phelps-roper/>.

used strategically, researchers should none-the-less “judge these [compassion] projects in the full knowledge of the affective and theological commitments of their proponents.”⁶⁷³ In other words, Shirley Phelps-Roper’s claims to identify, as far as she is able, with the feelings of those mourning can be both strategic and sincere. Indeed, those sincere feelings can be motivation for what she views as a loving act.

Moreover, when Westboro Baptists rejoice in the tragedies of others, they are expressing gratitude to God, for the just suffering of other depraved people reminds them of how deserving they are of the same punishment and of how much God loves them to withhold it. Jonathan Edwards describes the reaction of the elect to the suffering of others this way: “When they see others who were of the same nature, and born under the same circumstances, plunged in such misery,...O, it will make them sensible, how happy they are.”⁶⁷⁴ Or, as one member of the congregation explains a church-produced video titled, “Thank God for 9/11,”

Not one innocent person died on September 11, 2001, even a woman who was carrying child that who died, even a newborn babe... You thank God for September 11. You thank God for September 11 because you weren’t killed that day. You were given the chance to see that God is taking his vengeance upon this evil nation and repent of your sins and serve the Lord your God.⁶⁷⁵

Preaching the message of total depravity along with gratitude for escaping deserved destruction, though the message feels cruel to the listener, is thus actually an act of love for one’s neighbor and worship of God.

⁶⁷³ Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, “Origin Stories,” in *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right* by Cynthia Burack (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 89.

⁶⁷⁴ Peter J. Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85, quoting Edwards from “Eternity of Hell Torments”

⁶⁷⁵ “Thank God for 9/11,” *Sign Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.net/videos/signmovies/index.html>.

While the church does not make clear in its picket signs that they consider their public activity an act of love (and reporters and producers, untrained in theology, inattentive to detail, and unconcerned about accurate depictions of attention-grabbing stories either do not grasp or report on this distinction themselves), they do make this clear in their publications and sermons. Where observers are likely to call the church hateful and quote Biblical passages about the love of God to counter Westboro Baptist Church passages preaching damnation of unrepentant sinners, church members see their ministry as evidence of their obedience to God and a way of glorifying God, an act of love to their listeners. Or, as Fred Phelps wrote in an open letter requested by the *Capital-Journal*, “We are the only people who truly love you -- enough to tell you the truth. The highest form of love from one human to another is to care, genuinely, for the state of a man's soul.”⁶⁷⁶ This theology is preached at a variety of scenes, to the widest audience possible, and Westboro Baptists are expected to be able to speak articulately about their faith generally—and this particular dimension of it specifically—wherever they go.

Anti-gay Ministry

Westboro Baptist Church members understand Biblical passages that they say condemn homosexuality in the light of what they view as their strict adherence to Calvinist doctrines: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints.⁶⁷⁷ These tenets are held by a variety of believers, of course, many of whom believe, like Westboro Baptist Church, that homosexuality is an individual sin that can result in God’s wrath. Further, many believers, including non-Calvinists, from college campus

⁶⁷⁶ Fred Phelps, “A Message to Topeka from Fred Phelps,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, no date, <http://www.capital-journal.com/webindepth/phelps/phelpsresponse.shtml>.

⁶⁷⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, “Manifesto of Westboro Baptist Church,” *God Hates Fags*, [http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/Westboro Baptist Churchinfo/tulip.html](http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/Westboro%20Baptist%20Churchinfo/tulip.html).

evangelist “Brother Jed”⁶⁷⁸ to Tea Party participants,⁶⁷⁹ make this message of God’s wrath as a response to individual and collective sin public. Indeed, at the start of their anti-gay campaign, Westboro Baptists were not always distinguishable from anti-gay Religious Rights protestors, many of whom argued that AIDS was God’s punishment for homosexuality, either as divine punishment for the sin of gay sex⁶⁸⁰ or as a natural consequence of gay sex⁶⁸¹ (See Figure 28); that gay people threatened the security of the nation’s blood supply (See Figure 29);⁶⁸² that homosexuality should be punished with death (See Figure 30);⁶⁸³ that people with AIDS should

⁶⁷⁸ Jed Smock is a fundamentalist street preacher who views college campuses, especially large state universities, as his primary mission field, though he has also written books and maintains a website that shares his message. Smock explicitly praises Pat Robertson for his analysis of Sept. 11 and, later, for how he preached that both Hurricane Katrina and the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti were signs of God’s displeasure. (Jed Smock, “Was the Haiti Earthquake God’s Judgement? [sic],” *The Campus Ministry USA*, <http://www.brojed.org/commentary.php>.)

⁶⁷⁹ For example, at a recent Tea Party event titled “Taking Back Our Country,” held at the Sprint Center in Kansas City, Missouri, one activist held a sign that listed the “homosexual agenda,” including “gays in the military, same sex marriage, pedophilia, and civil unions,” as primary examples of how American has become a “Moral and Ethical Cesspool.” The sign also called for a return to “Christianity—not conservatism” and “Jesus Christ—not Ronald Reagan,” suggesting that Westboro Baptist Church is not alone in its skepticism that the politics of the Religious Right are sufficient to address the moral needs of the nation (Scott Spychalski, photographer, “Taking Back our Country Tour, (slide 1),” *The Pitch.com*, April 10, 2010, <http://www.pitch.com/slideshow/taking-back-our-country-tour-april-10-at-the-sprint-center-29656082/1/>).

⁶⁸⁰ This position is expressed in Westboro Baptists signs that say “AIDS = DEATH,” a slogan that mimics ACT-UP’s “SILENCE = DEATH” slogan. The stance was held by Christians beyond Westboro Baptist Church, though. For example, in 1987, the first time the question was asked by Pew Research, 60% of white evangelicals agreed that “AIDS might be God’s punishment for immoral sexual behavior.” Currently, 38% of white evangelicals agree with this statement, while 23% of the general public does (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “23% See AIDS as God’s Punishment for Immorality,” *The Databank*, <http://pewresearch.org/databank/dailynumber/?NumberID=311>).

⁶⁸¹ Asked Ronald Reagan on April 2, 1987, “When it comes to preventing AIDS, don’t medicine and morality teach the same lessons?” (Gerald M. Boyd, “Reagan Urges Abstinence for Young to Avoid AIDS,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 1987). Echoing Regan’s position that AIDS-related deaths were an appropriate punishment for “unnatural” behavior, his communications director, Pat Buchanan, called AIDS “nature’s revenge on gay men” (David W. Webber, “John Robert’s Queer Reasoning on AIDS,” *The Nation*, September 26, 2005).

⁶⁸² Argued Pat Robertson on a 1995 episode of *The 700 Club*, “[Homosexuals] want to come into churches and disrupt church services and throw blood all around and try to give people AIDS and spit in the face of ministers” (as quoted in People for the American Way, “Gays as Enemies of Faith,” *Anti-Gay Politics and the Religious Right*, 1998, <http://www.pfaw.org/media-center/publications/anti-gay-politics-and-the-religious-right#deathpenalty>).

⁶⁸³ Westboro Baptist Church articulated this position in “All Nations Must Immediately Outlaw Sodomy (Homosexuality) & Impose the Death Penalty.” Peter J. Peters of *Scriptures for America* has articulated this position in “Intolerance of, Discrimination Against, and the Death Penalty for Homosexuals is Prescribed in the Bible” (Laport, CO: Scriptures for America, 1992). Gene Robinson, an openly gay and sexually active Episcopal priest who now serves as Bishop of New Hampshire, recalls his horror when, during an appearance on a radio call-in show, a self-identified Christian calmly explained to him why he supported the Biblical mandate for executing those who engage in same-sex contact. When he was nominated to be bishop in 2003, he received numerous death threats, including some that invoked these passages (*For the Bible Tells Me So*, DVD, directed by Daniel Karlslake (2008; New York: First Run Features, 2009)). Since his consecration, he has continued to face such threats and wears

be “humanely quarantined,” as Fred Phelps suggested in his 1994 campaign for governor;⁶⁸⁴ and that homosexual sex was unnatural and sinful.⁶⁸⁵ Much of the same rhetoric continues to circulate in anti-gay religious activism (See Figures 31 and 32.), though few anti-gay activists go so far as to link specific national tragedy with gay rights, as does Westboro Baptist Church, and few others are willing to use the phrase “God Hates Fags,” perhaps fearful of being associated with the Topeka church.

Westboro Baptist Church has been preaching its anti-gay message outside the church since the early 1990s, though the message was preached from the pulpit decades earlier. In 1993, around the time that psychologists were debating homosexuality’s removal from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, Phelps advertised the church’s sixteenth anniversary with a sermon that examined whether homosexuality was a “sickness or a sin.”⁶⁸⁶ For many years, the church was not alone in its protests at gay pride parades, as conservative religious believers all over the United States protested in response to the gay culture many of them were witnessing for the first time. The Wichita gay pride parade was a frequent target for Westboro Baptist Church,

a bullet-proof vest during some public appearances (“Williams Criticized by Gay Bishop,” *BBC News*, April 30, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7374662.stm).

⁶⁸⁴ “Vote Randall Lt. Governor,” undated flier. In 1992, then-Senate candidate Mike Huckabee, who was a Republican presidential primary candidate in 2008, responded to an AP questionnaire about HIV/AIDS policy by saying, “[W]e need to take steps that would isolate the carriers of this plague.... It is the first time in the history of civilization in which the carriers of a genuine plague have not been isolated from the general population, and in which this deadly disease for which there is no cure is being treated as a civil rights issue instead of the true health crisis it represents.” Though Huckabee has since said that he was not suggesting a quarantine, his endorsement of “isolation” certainly was interpreted that way by listeners (AP, “Huckabee AIDS Comment Alarms Victim’s Mom,” *MSNBC*, December 11, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22197928/>).

⁶⁸⁵ The dehumanization of gay people is repeated in Westboro Baptist Church rhetoric, with gay men and women compared to animals, called “beasts” and “brutes” and, in particular, lesbians called “mutts.” The Southern Baptist Convention likewise disallows the consideration that same sex activity or desire are natural human behavior, saying “God, the Creator and Judge of all, has ruled that homosexual conduct is always a gross moral and spiritual abomination for any person, whether male or female, under any circumstance, without exception” (Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Domestic Partner Benefits,” June 2007) and that “even desire to engage in a homosexual sexual relationship is always sinful, impure, degrading, shameful, unnatural, indecent and perverted” (Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Homosexual Marriage,” June 2006).

⁶⁸⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, fax dated August 11, 1993.

businesses that cater to gay consumers, including gay bars; businesses that employ openly gay or lesbian employees; churches that permit gay members or clergy; and even churches that host reparative therapy (“ex-gay”) conferences. Even if other anti-gay protestors will not stand on the street next to Westboro Baptists at these events, they show up to lodge their own protest against what they see as the moral decline of America. For example, when Topeka was considering a repeal of the city’s ordinance that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in municipal hiring and firing, three protests occurred outside of the City Council: one by supporters of the ordinance; one by Westboro Baptists, who argued for the repeal of the law; and one led by other conservative Christians who also wanted to repeal the law but did not want to be associated with Westboro Baptist Church.⁶⁸⁷ These groups are quick to point out that, unlike Westboro Baptist Church, they are active in the anti-gay rights movement because they love gay people and want them to escape from sin and the natural and supernatural consequences of it.

Not so, says Fred Phelps. First, he defends Westboro Baptist Church against charges that its members hate gay people. “We never said that we hate fags,”⁶⁸⁸ he noted in a 2005 interview, and the point is repeated by other church members; the church thinks that *God* hates gay people, and because human hatred, unlike the hate of God, is not holy, they are not to hate gay people.

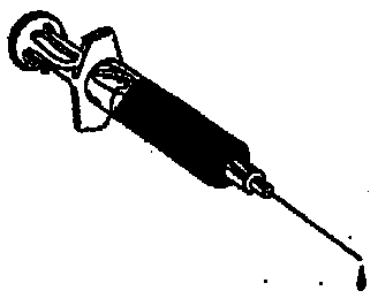
⁶⁸⁷ Jodi Wilgoren, “Vote in Topeka Hangs on Gay Rights and a Vitriolic Local Protestor,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/01/national/01topeka.html>.

⁶⁸⁸ Nathan Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872.



Figure 28. Westboro Baptists argue that gay sex invokes both divine and natural punishment in an undated photograph provided by the church.

**HOMOSEXUALITY
and the AIDS threat
to the nation's blood supply**



A HOMOSEXUAL DISEASE

AIDS is overwhelmingly a homosexual disease. In every Western country in which AIDS has been reported, gays are the first persons to be stricken. In time, others become infected.

AIDS is thought to have started in the U.S., and U.S. homosexuals account for 73% of all AIDS victims.

In Europe to which AIDS has been transported by American gays, about 85% of victims are male homosexuals.


 Please copy

Figure 29. An excerpt from a July 23, 1002 press release Westboro Baptist Church press release warning of the threat to the national blood supply cause by gay men and women.



Figure 30. A child holding a sign stating the church's wish for capital punishment for same-sex contact. Date unknown. Photograph courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.



Figure 31. Ruben Israel of Official Street Preachers, a group with 55 chapters across the country, identifies AIDS as a punishment for the sin of homosexuality. This theme is not uncommon among fundamentalist Christians, even if few of them preach it publicly at gay cultural events. Undated Photograph courtesy of Ruben Israel. All rights reserved.



Figure 32. A picketer not affiliated with Westboro Baptist Church preaches that gay sex is both sinful and dangerous at Chicago’s gay pride parade in 2007. He is met by a counterprotestor with a sign intended to humorously undermine the condemnation of same-sex contact. Photograph courtesy of Duane Moody. All rights reserved.

Indeed, “[w]e’re the only ones who love the filthy little perverts,” says Fred Phelps.⁶⁸⁹ Church members argue that the best way to “love thy neighbor” is to be honest with him, to warn him as he wanders near to danger and, if necessary, to hurt his feelings to save his soul. Says Fred Phelps in regards to a story about him that ran in *The Advocate* in the 1990s, “I didn’t ask for it, but circumstances, in the Providence of God, appear to have made me chaplain to the international fag community, and I cheerfully accept the job.”⁶⁹⁰ He contrasts himself to other pastors who substitute toleration of sin for the brutal love he advocates, pastors who would allow

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁰ Fred Phelps, letter to Jeff Yarbrough, editor of *The Advocate*, October 26, 1993; Kansas Collection at the Spencer Research Library.

a congregant to sin rather than correct him. “I warn you... these kissy-poooh fag preachers telling you it’s OK to play with gerbils and worship the rectum will send you to Hell! And Fred Phelps is the best friend you fags have got in this world,”⁶⁹¹ he says about his relationship to gay people, and, at every opportunity, he provides evidence for his claim to honest preaching.

Even money-grubbing hucksters like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell will lie to you for lucre. But not Fred Phelps. Old School Baptists never take collections at their meetings or beg for money on TV, following the patriarch Abraham who eschewed the taking of so much as a worn shoelace from the King of Sodom lest the gospel of salvation by free grace alone be compromised. (Gen. 14:23) So I happily serve as Chaplain to the Fags free of charge.⁶⁹²

Contemporary preachers, such as Joel Osteen, will “blow hot air up your keister,” as one church-produced parody of *The No-Spin Zone* promises,⁶⁹³ and, just as the Israelites preferred false prophets who promised them wealth and abundance, gay people prefer to hear a “kissy-poooh” message of tolerance. Instead, says Westboro Baptist Church, they need to hear about hell.

No time is better for preaching hell than during mourning, and no space is better than a funeral, says Fred Phelps, for “[d]ying time is truth time. These poor homosexual creatures live lives predicated on a fundamental lie. It seems to me to be the cruelest thing of all to stand over their dead, filthy bodies keeping the lies going.”⁶⁹⁴ Thus, after they become interested in the issue of homosexuality, church members quickly moved to preach about the deaths of people who died of AIDS-related illnesses, preaching, if possible at their funerals. For example, when Kevin Oldham, an Overland Park, Kansas, native who had moved to New York to pursue a

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*

⁶⁹³ Westboro Baptist Church, “The O’Reilly Factor” [parody], *Signs Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/news/index.html>.

⁶⁹⁴ Chris Bull, “Us v. Them: Fred Phelps,” *The Advocate*, November 2, 1993.

career as a composer, died of AIDS-related complications in 1993, his parents, who remained in the Kansas City area, received a letter from the church. Expecting a note of condolence, they were shocked to read a fax that Westboro Baptist Church distributed widely soon after. It included a picture of Oldham's face with the words "KEVIN OLDHAM, DEAD FAG" beneath it and declared that by "[d]efying the laws of God, man and nature, KEVIN OLDHAM played Russian roulette with a promiscuous anal sex and lost big time when he died of AIDS March 11." The church picketed Kevin Oldham's memorial service a few weeks later.⁶⁹⁵

Even in the early days of funeral pickets, though, the church was mobile. An early event was the funeral of Randy Shilts, an openly-gay reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and author of *The Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, who died in 1994. The church's picket was met with a 1500-person counterprotest that included egg and fruit throwing, and the ten-person picket group left within minutes of beginning.⁶⁹⁶ Still, church members recall it as a time when they gained national attention to their cause, testifying to the many "amazing events of that day."⁶⁹⁷

Though the church made national news for its short-lived picket of Randy Shilts' funeral, it was their October 1998 picket Matthew Shepard's funeral in Casper, Wyoming—and the subsequent traffic that their appearance there drove to their new website, *God Hates Fags*—that cemented their isolation from other anti-gay religious groups. While Shilts had died of complications related to AIDS, a disease that, in the minds of many in the Religious Right, was a consequence, if not a punishment, for homosexual intercourse, Shepard was immediately constructed as a more innocent victim. Young and physically slight, he had been a victim of a

⁶⁹⁵ "Grieving Family Forced to Deal with Phelps," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps06.shtml.

⁶⁹⁶ David Tuller and Suzanne Espinosa Solis, "S.F. Farewell to Randy Shilts," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 23, 1994.

⁶⁹⁷ Shirley Phelps-Roper, email to the author, October 13, 2008.

robbery and a vicious beating and left to die in a crucifix-like pose. His parents spoke publicly about their pain and mounted a public campaign to end violence against sexual minorities. Very quickly, Matthew Shepard's death became a symbol for hate crime. To picket his funeral was outrageous, even to those who agreed that Matthew Shepard was likely in hell. When people searched for the church online after the funeral, they found one of the church's most inflammatory online publications: a "perpetual memorial" to Matthew Shepard that counts the days that the young man has spent in hell and subtracts them from "eternity," noting that Shepard still has an eternity to spend in hell. When viewers scroll over Shepard's face, which dances above animated flames, they hear the message that Fred Phelps always puts in the mouths of the deceased: "For God's sake, listen to Phelps!"⁶⁹⁸ (See Figure 32.)



Figure 33. At the online "Perpetual Gospel Memorial to Matthew Shepard," viewers hear Shepard scream from hell and warn viewers to listen to the message of Westboro Baptist Church.

The style of this "perpetual memorial" predates Matthew Shepard; Westboro Baptist Church used similar language, for example, in a 1993 fax announcing their opinion of Gary Brown, who had died of AIDS-related causes, saying that if Brown could "return from Hell now and speak for 1 minute on national TV, he's say: LISTEN TO PHELPS! For God's sake,

⁶⁹⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, "Perpetual Gospel Memorial to Matthew Shepard," *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/memorials/matthewshepardmemorial.html>.

LISTEN TO PHELPS!”⁶⁹⁹ However, the website version of the “perpetual memorial” was available on-demand to viewers, whereas the faxes sent previously were limited to those to whom Westboro Baptist Church sent them.

Westboro Baptist Church gained further attention when it sought to erect a real monument to Shepard in a park in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The monument, which Fred Phelps pointed out would have to be permitted because the city allowed, at that time, other religious texts to be displayed, would have included a bronze plaque that read “Matthew Shepard, Entered Hell October 12, 1998, at age 21, In Defiance of God's Warning: ‘Thou shalt not like with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination.’ Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.”⁷⁰⁰ The outrageousness of the request—and the way that it forced Christians who defended the practice of erecting monuments such as Protestant and Jewish translations of the Ten Commandments on public property to re-argue their case in such a way as to prohibit religions they disliked from having access to public space without giving up their access—angered and embarrassed the Religious Right community, which was already having to cope with claims it had contributed to a climate of bigotry that allowed Shepard’s murder to occur.⁷⁰¹ In that context, Westboro Baptist Church’s focus on hell—the question of which forces evangelical Christians to explain how a God who loves everyone but still eternally punishes some—illustrated the apparent cruelty of all forms of Christianity that espouse a literal hell. That literal hell keeps Westboro Baptist Church’s focus on sin, say members. “If hell-fire be not good, then sin is not good,” declared

⁶⁹⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, “Filthy Face of Fag Evil,” fax dated September 8, 1993; Kansas Collection at the Spencer Research Library.

⁷⁰⁰ Kelly Milner, “Phelps Offers City \$10K to Place Hate Monument,” *Wyoming Tribune-Eagle*, May 4, 2004.

⁷⁰¹ Fred Phelps denied that Westboro Baptist Church was culpable in Shepard’s murder, saying, that the church was “not urging anybody to kill anybody” (Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “The Gospel According to Fred,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994).

seventeenth century English Puritan Richard Baxter,⁷⁰² and it is, argue Westboro Baptists, their love for others that makes them speak out so loudly about the prospect of hell.

Even though Westboro Baptist Church is not alone in its vision of a literal hell, it is alone in its perceived calling to publicly preach this message at funerals. Moreover, the church's dogged focus on absolute predestination, unfamiliar and incomprehensible to many Americans and offensive to the evangelicals who often otherwise share with Westboro Baptist Church positions on homosexuality, inspires it to preach its message of impending apocalypse with a twist. While other churches preach that sinners must repent, thereby "stamping out large-scale sinfulness, the kind of sin that prevailed in Sodom and Gomorrah and that persuaded God to destroy mankind while saving Noah and his family,"⁷⁰³ Westboro Baptist Church preaches that it is too late to repent, that God will destroy the United States, as is his prerogative as the creator and sovereign ruler of all creation, regardless of how individuals hearing the church's words respond. The only hope for the individual listener is that God has elected him and will allow him to hear the truth of Westboro Baptist Church's words, turn his wayward heart and mind to the church, and enable him to live by its doctrines; even then, salvation is not guaranteed. For the rest—just like the 16,000,000,000 people the church believes were killed in the flood while Noah and his seven family members floated to safety⁷⁰⁴--destruction is imminent. These include not only gay people but all those who support gay people or merely fail to preach the message of Westboro Baptist Church.

Westboro Baptist Church's theological objections to homosexuality frame same-sex acts, approval or toleration of them, or failure to speak out against them not as mere personal affronts

⁷⁰² Richard Baxter, "Directions for Hating Sin," in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1 (London: George Virtue, 1838), 89.

⁷⁰³ Burack, "From Doom Town to Sin City: Chick Tracts and Antigay Politics," 175.

⁷⁰⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, "Numbers," *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com>

to God but as national sins that threaten to bring the wrath of God to the entire nation. It is that threat to the entire nation, as well as the church's belief that God has ordered them to picket, that motivates them, they say. They find support for their position that America has come to tolerate homosexuality in the celebration of the lives of gay people and gay rights supporters at their funerals and, more broadly, in American popular culture. For this reason, and because such events provide church members with large audiences, they also have a ministry that focuses on cultural events.

Ministry around Cultural Events

Many Kansans first heard the Westboro Baptist Church message as they attended a play at the Topeka Performing Arts Center, a rock concert at Kansas City's Sprint Center, a speaker at the University of Kansas' Lied Center, or a high school graduation. All these events are sites where Westboro Baptists picket and events that they deride in faxes and on their websites. At the same time, church members also participate as audience members in some of these events. For example, church members both picket and attend sporting events, saying "we know the difference between using a recreational event and abusing it—think drunken surfeiting of the tailgating variety"⁷⁰⁵—and when children from the church graduate from high school (as they do every year because of the many young people in the church), parents start the evening by picketing the event, then enter school property to watch graduation and cheer for their children. Westboro Baptist Church extends its criticism of popular culture beyond Topeka, though, often adding pickets at local cultural events to their schedule when they are in an area to picket a funeral. Cultural events are chosen for three reasons: 1) they draw large crowds, sometimes tens

⁷⁰⁵ Elizabeth Phelps, email to the author, October 26, 2010. For example, the church has picketed at the Cotton Bowl twice, the Fiesta bowl once, a Big 12 championship game; sporting events at the University of Kansas, Kansas State University, and Nebraska; an ice skating competition; and professional baseball and hockey games (online discussion with Shirley Phelps-Roper, Charles Hockenbarger, Elizabeth Phelps, Fred Phelps, Jr., and Steve Drain, October 26, 2010).

of thousands, and receive media coverage, 2) they are often celebrations of behavior that the church considers sinful, and 3) even if the performers are not celebrating sin, they are failing to use their influence to preach against it.

Nationally-known entertainers are frequently cited by the church for their promotion of sexual practices of which the church disapproves. For example, the pop singer Lady Gaga has received much Westboro Baptist Church scorn for teaching young listeners to be “proud whores,”⁷⁰⁶ and the church has produced parodies of two of her songs and music videos, calling attention to her vague and gay-affirming theology and her hyper-sexualized lyrics and performance. (See Figure 34.) Sara Phelps’ songs and music videos, Megan Phelps-Roper’s tweets about the performer, and church pickets of several of her concerts have prompted the singer to address the issue. In a tweet, she cautioned her fans that, in coming to her concert, they might face “[I]ude [sic] and violence language and imagery,”⁷⁰⁷ and on her Facebook page, she warned, “[T]his group in particular to me is violent and dangerous. I wanted to make my fans aware of my views on how to approach, or rather not approach, these kinds of hate activists.”⁷⁰⁸ As she notes in her post, though, Lady’ Gaga’s recognition of Westboro Baptist Church’s ministry against her draws attention to it.

While some cultural events—such as Lady Gaga concerts, which include many gay fans; productions of *The Laramie Project*; or the nomination of a gay homecoming king or same-sex prom king and queen—clearly violate the church’s theology of sexuality, other events are not explicitly about sexuality yet catch Westboro Baptist Church’s attention. For example, teen singer Justin Bieber is a target for the church’s ministry, not, like Lady Gaga, because of his

⁷⁰⁶ Sara Phelps, “Ever Burn” (parody of “Telephone” by Lady Gaga), *Westboro Baptist Church Music Videos*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/music/index.html>.

⁷⁰⁷ Lady Gaga, Tweet, *Twitter*, July 17, 2010, <http://twitter.com/ladygaga/status/18791306606>.

⁷⁰⁸ Lady Gaga, “At the Risk of Drawing Attention to a Hateful Organization” (posting), *Facebook*, July 17, 2010, http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=417876234034&id=10376464573.

Westboro Baptist Church

(WBC Chronicles -- Since 1955)

3701 S.W. 12th St. Topeka, Ks. 66604 785-273-0325 www.GodHatesFags.com
Religious Opinion & Bible Commentary on Current Events

Tuesday, December 22, 2009

NEWS RELEASE

(Supplemental info: background, photos, audio sermons & hymns, & video footage – available free at www.JewsKilledJesus.com,
www.SignMovies.com, www.GodHatesTheWorld.com, www.PriestsRapeBoys.com, www.BeastObama.com & BlasphemyNot.com)

GOD HATES "LADY" GAGA.

**WBC to picket this sleazy God-hater at the
 Fox Theatre (527 N. Grand Blvd., St. Louis, MO) on
 Thursday, Jan. 7, 2010, from 6:30 – 7:30 PM**

**"Thou hadst a whore's forehead, thou refusedst
 to be ashamed...Will He reserve His anger for
 ever? Will He keep it to the end? Behold, thou
 hast spoken and done evil things as thou
 couldest." Jer. 3:3,5.**

"Art" and "fashion" are the euphemisms, the guise under which proud whore Lady Gaga teaches rebellion against God (incidentally, her claim to the title of "Lady" is sound only if she tacks on "of the night," thereby alluding to another euphemism for what she is). As much as she'd like to pretend otherwise, there's nothing new or different about this particular hussy's pretentious prancing. Does the simple slut truly think that she can change God's standards by seducing a generation of rebels into joining her in fist-raised, stiff-necked, hard-hearted rebellion against Him? Get real!

Even as she gives lip service to "liberating" her young fans, Lady Gaga brings them into slavery to their own corruption, teaching them to glory in their shame. She hates you! *"For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness...While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption."* 2 Pet. 2:18-19.

YOU'RE GOING TO HELL.

Figure 34. Press release criticizing pop singer Lady Gaga for her promotion of immoral sexuality. Dated December 22, 2009.

hyper-sexualized lyrics or performances but because he fails to preach the church's message. Bieber, says the church, "has a platform given to him by God to speak to this world; he has a duty to teach obedience by his actions and words." Like all people, Bieber has a duty to obey and to preach God's word as the church understands it, but instead Bieber, a "whoremonger in training," "teaches millions of impressionable brats that God is a liar when he solemnly proclaims his standard."⁷⁰⁹

Ministry Aimed at Other Religious Groups

Westboro Baptist Church wages campaigns against churches that are both gay-friendly and those that are simply not sufficiently, in Westboro Baptist Church's assessment, anti-gay. Hyper-Calvinism "emphasizes irresistible grace to such an extent that there appears to be no real need to evangelize [because] Christ may be offered only to the elect."⁷¹⁰ Because of Westboro Baptist Church's belief in supralapsarianism—the belief that God's decisions about election were made before the introduction of sin into creation—, the church does not pray for anyone outside the church, rhetorically asking, "What arrogance would we display to pretend we could pray them back into the good grace of Him who has given them up?"⁷¹¹ Moreover, the church says, "[W]e certainly know that we have absolutely no power or ability to show anyone where he or she went wrong. Everything begins and ends at the commandment of God and we are

⁷⁰⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, "Westboro Baptist Church to Picket Whoremonger in Training Justin Bieber at the Sprint Center" [press release], *God Hates Fags*, July 2, 2010, http://downloads.westborobaptistchurch.com/listDirectory/linklokurl.php?linklokauth=ZGxpbmRleC5waHA%2FZGlyPUZsaWVyX0FyY2hpdmUvLDEyODQwNjQxNDQsNzUuMzkuMTM4LjE5NywwLDEsTExfMCwsZmYzZGIyMTNhMDA3ZjJhZDhiNTIiYjQwOTA3MWMzNjU%3D/dlindex.php?dir=Flier_Archive/.

⁷¹⁰ Peter Toon, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1988), 324.

⁷¹¹ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQ: 'Do you Ever Pray for the Salvation of Those you Feel are Condemned?'" *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Condemned>.

altogether content to leave all matters of the heart to Him.”⁷¹² This “no offers” form of Calvinism, in which non-believers are not “offered” the salvific message of Christ’s death and resurrection, does not prevent Westboro Baptist Church from relaying the message that all non-believers are hell-bound. This includes all non-Christians, Catholics, Mormons, and even other Protestants who reject the church’s teachings.

Jews

Non-Christians are dismissed as hell-bound because they reject Jesus as the savior of those humans who receive salvation. Jews, in particular, are targeted because, according to the church, Jews literally rejected Jesus and demanded his execution, promising Pilate, in Matthew 27:25, that “his blood be on us, and on our children,” a responsibility that first century Jews accepted when they approved Jesus’ execution. The church highlights this claim repeatedly in pickets (See Figures 34 and 35) and on the website *Jews Killed Jesus*.

Since the death of Jesus, says Westboro Baptist Church, Jews “have never repented, and they try to bully into silence anyone who states that fact.”⁷¹³ Further angering God, they have continued to deny the necessity and effectiveness of Jesus’ death by constructing a complicated and legalistic form of religion, working “‘orthodox’ false religion like a cripple’s cane, for which God hates [them],”⁷¹⁴ and have become “famous worldwide for being fag-enablers, babykillers, pornographers, adulterers, fornicators, and greedy idolaters.”⁷¹⁵

These are claims that the church supports with images of Jewish entertainers famous for their outrageous or offensive performances, such as Gene Simmons of the band KISS,

⁷¹² Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: ‘Why don’t you Leave it up to God and Stop Wasting your Time Telling People that They are Wrong?’” *God Hates Fags* <http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Wrong> .

⁷¹³ Westboro Baptist Church, “Jesus was a Jew—and You Killed Him,” *Jews Killed Jesus*, <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/>.

⁷¹⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “Naughty Figs,” *Jews Killed Jesus*, <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/>.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*

comedienne Sarah Silverman, or actor Adam Sandler. Church depictions of Jews rely heavily on stereotypes of Jews as greedy and dirty, and the church pronounces them “the basest of men,”⁷¹⁶ recalling racial hierarchies of the early twentieth century (though the church does, in fact, use this term to describe various groups, including gay people). Westboro Baptist Church depictions of Jews are drawn from stereotypes imported to the United States from Europe when the first Christians came to the New World.⁷¹⁷ Catholic historian Father Edward Flannery has identified four kinds of anti-Semitism: political and economic anti-Semitism, theological or religion (anti-Judaism), nationalistic anti-Semitism, and racial anti-Semitism. Westboro Baptist Church depictions of Jews are rooted in economic and religious anti-Semitism. Additionally, some Westboro Baptist Church depictions of Jews resonate with racial stereotypes of Jews as sub-human—for example, Jews as “filthy”⁷¹⁸—but, since these words are also used by church members to describe non-racialized groups such as Swedes,⁷¹⁹ politicians, and rock stars, members likely do not think of themselves as using racist language. (Perhaps because they are anti-nationalistic themselves, Westboro Baptists are unconcerned about Jews as “foreign” to the nation.) Such entrenched stereotypes, which appear in anti-Jewish discourse from the Western and Islamic worlds, do not have to occur simultaneously with religious anti-Semitism, and Christian theologians have attempted to distinguish between illegitimate stereotypes of Jews and fear-mongering about their presence among Christians and rejection of Judaism as valid religion equivalent to Christianity, arguing that rejecting Judaism as a religion is no more anti-Semitic

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁷ America, argues Leonard Dinnerstein, is currently not very anti-Semitic and has never been as anti-Semitic as Europe. Those stereotypes that do circulate remain in fringe groups, so anti-Semitism is no longer a respectable prejudice (*Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)).

⁷¹⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, “Come Together Good Figs” [parody of the Beatles’ “Come Together”], *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/audio/index.html>.

⁷¹⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, “Sweden’s Filthy Manner of Life,” *God Hates Sweden*, <http://www.godhatesSweden.com/filthymanneroflife.html>.

than rejecting Islam is anti-Muslim.⁷²⁰ If Westboro Baptist Church's anti-Semitism were purely of the religious variety—that is, if Westboro Baptists criticized *only* the religious aspects of Judaism and did not depict Jews as greedy or dirty—then the anti-Semitism of the group might be less worrisome.

For Westboro Baptists, as for many other conservative Christians, Jews' most egregious sin is their failure to fulfill their duty to obey, which means repenting of their sin of murdering Jesus and becoming Christians, according to Westboro Baptist Church. The standard of God should be clear to Jews, argues Westboro Baptist Church, for they share important Biblical texts that outline God's laws:

The Torah is clear about fags:

Leviticus 18:22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it *is* abomination.

Leviticus 20:13 If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood *shall be* upon them.

“What!” the rabid Jew splutters, “You are saying gay people should get the death penalty!” Yes, rebellious raging reprobate Jew; that's the standard of God and that's the standard of your Torah; and you have a theocracy in Israel which is justified *only* if you are following the good statutes given you by God. (And they're not gay; they're contentious cruel filthy miserable smelly rotten brutes – like you! Did I mention fags are Jews and Jews are fags? Read Romans 1 and

⁷²⁰ For an argument about the distinction between religious anti-Judaism and other kinds of anti-Semitism, see Gavin Langmuir, “Reflections on Medieval Anti-Judaism, 4. Anti-Judaism as the Necessary Preparation for Anti-Semitism,” *Viator* 2 (1972): 383-290.

see if you don't notice your reflection in that mirror, contrary naughty fig Jews!⁷²¹) Take your squally quarrel up with God; that's his standard!⁷²²

Because Jews are familiar with these Scriptures and claim to obey them, both as individuals and as the theocratic nation of Israel, they should not be offended by them, says Westboro Baptist Church, and those Jews who are offended only expose the fact that they are not one of the “good figs” whom God has elected. These damned Jews have created the nation of Israel on the pretense that, because God had a special covenant with their forefathers, they have a claim to land in the Middle East. Westboro Baptist Church explains Israeli history this way:

[After the Holocaust,] you put your heads together with the brutish Brits – after terrorizing and badgering them into agreeing to your scheme – and grabbed the land that is not yours, WITHOUT OBEYING GOD. You didn't attain unto it by obedience or thankfulness to God; or by seeking his forgiveness. You didn't purge yourself of your filthy manner of life.

You and the Congress of doomed-america think to change the rules of engagement with God, with your push for a “Jewish National Home” since the late 1800's, and your American-Zionist imperialism. You brutally mistreat the Palestinians and lie to the whole world about it. You both have the blood of

⁷²¹ Westboro Baptist Church distinguished between elect Jews and non-elect Jews by calling them “good” and “naughty” figs respectively, drawing from Jeremiah 24. This language is used by other conservative Christian groups and is particularly stressed in Christian Identity circles. See, for example, Bertrand L. Comparet's sermon “The Good and the Bad Figs. The Budding of the Fig Tree. Gathering of Tares,” *Kingdom Study Bible Tapes*, <http://www.kingidentity.com/audio.htm> or Mark Downey, “Why We Hate Jews,” *Kinsman Redeemer Ministries*, <http://www.kinsmanredeemer.com/WhyWeHateJews.htm>.

⁷²² Westboro Baptist Church, “Jews, Always Fags,” *Jews Killed Jesus*, <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/jewsandfags/index.html>.

deceit, rebellion and disobedience dripping from your hands; you will not have the land in the end, because God did not give it back to you and he never will.⁷²³

Westboro Baptist Church points to the Holocaust as the hand of God guiding his once-beloved people back to obedience. Instead of responding to the Holocaust this way, Jews continued their disobedience by organizing Israel as “a savage hypocritical nation of filthy sinners before God, disproportionately engaged in sodomy, abortion, pornography and idolatry, while claiming to be the chosen people.”⁷²⁴ Consequently, goes Westboro Baptist Church logic, Israel will never have peace.

Further, Westboro Baptist Church calls Jews “the biggest enablers of fags in the world today,” claiming that “the loudest voice in the ‘religious’ community for fags is the rabbis; and the most aggressive bunch of fags and fag-enablers on this planet are the Jews.”⁷²⁵ Indeed, whenever they depict a Star of David, a traditional symbol of Judaism, Westboro Baptists insert a pink triangle—a symbol of gay pride, though in gay pride depictions, the triangle is inverted—inside the star. Both symbols, of course, were used to label victims of the Holocaust and have been reclaimed as positive symbols by their communities.

Jews have some reason to hope, for according to Westboro Baptist Church eschatology, God has promised that 144,000 living Jews will be rescued from hell. (See Figure 37.) These “elect Jews”—which the church also calls “good figs,” in contrast to the “naughty figs” who are damned—will repent for killing Jesus and obey God. However, Jewish support for gay people, combined with Jewish refusal to repent for killing Christ, means that most Jews will be destroyed

⁷²³ Westboro Baptist Church, “The Last 100 Years,” *Jews Killed Jesus*, <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/antisemitismfraud/last100years.html>.

⁷²⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “144,000 Elect Jews,” *Jews Killed Jesus*, <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/144000electjews/index.html>.

⁷²⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “Jews and Fags,” *Jews Killed Jesus*, <http://www.jewskilledjesus.com/jewsandfags/index.html>.

in an earthly war when “[a]ll the nations are going to fight against Israel and persecute the Jews like never before in their history, until the indignation of the Lord is fulfilled.”⁷²⁶ During their soon coming annihilation, Jews “will pine for the days of a good-old-fashioned Holocaust when God is through!”⁷²⁷

Since June 2009, Westboro Baptists have been actively searching for the “good figs.” This targeted attention is due to church members’ sense that, as evidenced by the election of Barack Obama (the Anti-Christ) to the presidency, the end of the world is nearing and the Jews who will convert to Christianity, as described below, are thus ready to be found. To find them, they picket synagogues, Jewish schools, and Jewish cultural centers, but, so far, reports Shirley Phelps-Roper, no Jews have repented because of their preaching, so far as the church knows.⁷²⁸ The church has also sent a DVD of materials explaining their theology about Jews to Jewish religious leaders, but, again, it was not successfully received. Additionally, the church directs its message through its website *Jews Killed Jesus*, which includes web news videos called “Jew News” about issues of concern to Jews worldwide but especially those in the United States and Israel.

In those settings, Westboro Baptist Church, deploys images of racist, economic, and theological anti-Semitism, but it will retract them for the Jews members anticipate will convert to Christianity as the end of the world nears. In this way, the anti-Semitism of Westboro Baptist Church is unlike worldwide and historic anti-Semitism, which makes Jews suspect both before and after conversion. For Westboro Baptists, God loves some Jews, and God has guaranteed that he will save some Jews (perhaps greater than the number of Christians he has elected!). The paradox of the church’s anti-Semitism—the belief that God loves some Jews and will save them

⁷²⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “144,000 Elect Jews.”

⁷²⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, “Naughty Figs.”

⁷²⁸ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 18, 2010.



Figures 35 and 36. At left, a picket sign that articulates a theme that has been repeated in much anti-Semitic Christianity. The pink triangle links the gay rights movement with Judaism, though the triangle is inverted in gay rights symbology. Image courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church. At right, at an October 5, 2010 picket at Arlington National Cemetery, Jonathan Phelps wears an Israeli flag splattered with paint to look like blood to remind Jews that their ancestors placed responsibility for Jesus Christ's death upon them and, consequently, upon Israel.. Photograph by Rebecca Barrett-Fox. All rights reserved.



Figure 37 Charles Hockenbarger provides the only message of hope available to Jews: that they are among the 144,000 who will repent of the murder of Jesus. Dates unknown. Images courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.

and the church's willingness to deploy hateful stereotypes about Jews as a racial and ethnic group—might be resolved by remembering the church's strategy of using whatever offensive, in-your-face tactics it can use to garner the attention of its intended audience. Church members know that stereotyped images of Jews will draw Jewish attention to its message—and, indeed, the Anti-Defamation League has been carefully tracking Westboro Baptist Church's anti-Semitic activity⁷²⁹—but also believe that the “good figs” will convert regardless.

Catholics

Catholic churches have been targets of Westboro Baptist Church pickets for decades, but recent sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church worldwide have given Westboro Baptist Church new ammunition in tirades against Catholics and allowed them to declare that the phrase “priests rape boys” is “an air-tight, three word case against the Catholic church.”⁷³⁰ While Catholic theology has always placed Catholics outside of the realm of the elect for Westboro Baptists—just as many conservative Christians do not believe that Catholics are Christians--, cover-ups of sexual abuse by priests are understood by Westboro Baptist Church as confirmation that the Catholic Church's secretive, hierarchical organization is unholy. According to Westboro Baptist Church, popes have special responsibility for this problem, and Westboro Baptist Church has preached about papal responsibility for ignoring it. (See Figures 38 and 39). Priests, too, are responsible for the problem, and they are consistently mocked as pedophiles (See Figure 40) and supporters of “the largest, most well-funded and organized pedophile group in the history of man!”⁷³¹ Asks Westboro Baptist Church rhetorically:

⁷²⁹ Anti-Defamation League, “2009 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents: Westboro Baptist Church,” *Anti-Defamation League*, http://www.adl.org/main_Anti_Semitism_Domestic/2009_Audit.htm?Multi_page_sections=sHeading_8

⁷³⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “Priests Rape Boys,” *Priests Rape Boys*, <http://www.priestrapeboys.com/>.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*

[A]re there any priests preaching against this horrendous sin from the pulpit, denouncing the 'church' and demanding that his parishioners have nothing to do with it? Every member of the Catholic clergy, without exception, is a minister of Satan.⁷³²

In the Westboro Baptist Church perspective, Catholic clergy are guilty not only of their false religion but of sexual abuse, covering up sexual abuse, or failing to reform their church from within.



Figures 38 and 39. At left, Steve Drain and, at right, Jonathan Phelps, blame the Pope for his failure to prevent child sex abuse within the Catholic Church. Jonathan Phelps links this, with the sign in his left hand, to the pending destruction of America. Dates unknown. Images courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.

⁷³² Westboro Baptist Church, "All Parishioners of the Roman Catholic Church are Pedophile Rape Enablers," *Priests Rape Boys*, <http://www.priestsrapeboys.com/parishioners.html>.



Figure 40. An image on the church's website *Priests Rape Boys*, shows a scared child about to be molested by a priest—an image common in Westboro Baptist Church critique of the Catholic Church. Date unknown. Image courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.

Further, even parishioners are responsible for the problem of sexual abuse of children within the church, for

Every time any person gives any amount of money to the Catholic Church, that person is paying the salary of pedophile rapists. Not merely looking the other way, mind you, but actually paying the salaries of thousands of criminal, sexual deviants, who try to pass themselves off as men who have moral authority, but who are, in fact, the *basest* of men (Dan. 4:17). Who would rationally conceive of actually paying the salaries of pedophile rapists? And yet, that is exactly what all the parishioners of the Catholic Church are doing today.⁷³³

All Catholics, then, from parishioners on up to the Pope, are guilty of perpetuating or ignoring the crimes and sins of their leaders. Westboro Baptist Church carries this message to Catholic

⁷³³ *Ibid.* Bold in original.

churches and schools as well as scenes of papal visits and promotes this message of its websites, especially *Priests Rape Boys*.



Figure 41. Jacob Phelps stands near the Metropolitan Community Church of Topeka, a congregation affiliated with a gay-affirming denomination. July 18, 2010 photograph by Ailicia Ruscin. All rights reserved.

Other Protestant Churches

Despite differences in theology, Westboro Baptist Church anticipated that its early anti-gay campaigns would be met with the support of other churches. Quickly, though, the church found that even churches that did not support gay rights or welcome gay congregants distanced themselves from Westboro Baptist Church. Indeed, says Lizz Phelps, members of other churches were some of the most vigorous counterprotestors at the church's earliest pickets in

Topeka's Gage Park.⁷³⁴ Though Westboro Baptist Church briefly had a relationship with a like-minded church in Indiana, it currently has contentious relationships with all other Christian churches.

All churches that participate in ecumenical councils with Catholics are “more guilty of the sins of the Catholics priests than the priests *themselves!*”⁷³⁵ because they do not have the excuse of lust to justify their failure to reprimand Catholics, according to Westboro Baptist Church. All churches that knowingly include gay clergy—such as the Episcopal church—are targeted, as is Topeka's Metropolitan Community Church, which was organized as a pro-gay church. (See Figure 41.) Westboro Baptist Church messages repeat that denominations that allow gay leaders or do not exclude gay leaders are “fag churches,” even if the particular church that members are picketing has no gay members or leaders. (See Figures 42 and 43). Mainstream churches that fail to loudly denounce homosexuality are also considered “fag-enabling churches.”

When faced with evidence that should compel them to speak, Steve Drain says to churches that do not speak against homosexuality, “you whores get lockjaw.”⁷³⁶ When these pastors do speak, they convolute the clear meaning of the Scripture, making it “impossible for a single soul to hear and obey.”⁷³⁷ Instead, participants in mainstream churches remain confused

⁷³⁴ Abigail Phelps, interview with the author, November 4, 2009.

⁷³⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “Other Christian ‘Churches have gone *Awhoring* after Strange Gods,’” *Priests Rape Boys*, <http://www.priestsrapeboys.com/otherchurches.html>.

⁷³⁶ Steve Drain, “Beast Watch: Lying False Prophets are to Blame.”

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*



Figures 42 and 43. Church members critique other Protestant churches for permitting openly gay clergy, allowing openly gay members, and refusing to speak against homosexuality. Date unknown. 40 and 41 courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.

about the Biblical standard of sexuality, argue church members. Instead of serving a prophetic purpose, churches spend time “cultivating a phony motivational speaking and 12 step Moose Lodge program,” complains Drain, warning, “It’s a social club, people!”⁷³⁸

Westboro Baptist Church is critical of mega-churches, wealthy pastors, and those preaching the prosperity gospel, warning against those “snake oil hawkers”⁷³⁹ who are “preaching for a salary, preaching for a pension” because they refuse to state that God’s blessings are dependent upon obedience since this message would offend their audience. “If these pastors told you what the Bible really said about your sin and your manner of life and the eternal prospects for your soul, you wouldn’t be in the pews when the plate gets passed,” remarks Steve Drain, declaring that “[t]he churches in American today work like a whorehouse.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*

You pay them some money and they make you feel good.”⁷⁴⁰ Even other Primitive Baptist Churches have been rebuked by Westboro Baptist Church for producing a message that is “irrelevant, inconsequential, out of touch, and completely lukewarm” on the issue of the destruction of the sinful world.⁷⁴¹

Most other Christian churches fail to properly address sin because “the pastors lie and the people want them to lie.”⁷⁴² The biggest “big lie,” says Steve Drain, is that “God loves you.”⁷⁴³ This lie is profitable for pastors because congregants prefer to believe a “very attractive lie...that God loves them no matter what kind of a filthy sinner they are”⁷⁴⁴ since this “lie” allow them to continue comfortably in their sins. These pastors are guilty for the sins of their congregants because these preachers “taught people they could fornicate and that God would still love them.”⁷⁴⁵ In the end, though, argues Westboro Baptist Church, this message is not at all loving. Says Drain, “This is deadly serious stuff. Every one of these lying whore false prophets is way more than a just bungling Bible mangler. Each one of them is a minister of Satan himself.”⁷⁴⁶ So-called “false churches” do have a place in God’s plan for humanity, though, argues Westboro Baptist Church: God creates deceptive churches to lead people astray because God, in Westboro Baptist Church’s hyper-Calvinist view that espouses a strict limited atonement, does not want all people to believe.⁷⁴⁷ Further, God is destroying these churches through their own disobedience to God’s commandments on homosexuality. Says Steve Drain in a news video produced by the church, mainstream churches that have failed to aggressively meet the gay rights movement “are

⁷⁴⁰ Steve Drain, “Your Pastor is a Whore,” *Signs Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/signmovies/index.html>.

⁷⁴¹ Westboro Baptist Church, “Open Letter to Primitive Baptist Churches,” December 10, 2009, http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/letters/20091210_open-letter-to-primitive-baptist-churches.pdf.

⁷⁴² Steve Drain, “Fag Church,” *Signs Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/signmovies/index.html>

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁵ Steve Drain, “Beast Watch: Lying False Prophets are to Blame.”

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁷ Steve Drain, “Fag Church,” *Signs Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/signmovies/index.html>.

getting their asses handed to them by militant fags on every front.”⁷⁴⁸ According to this logic, because they tolerate gay people, these churches will be brought down by gay people. This includes gay people within their own congregations, especially anti-gay gay preachers. When journalist Joshua Kors asked Fred Phelps his opinion about anti-gay activists Ted Haggard and George Rekers, both of whom were publically outed as gay, Fred Phelps replied:

I know more about these preachers than anybody else does. I've been paying close attention for 64 years, and my question is, what's taken them so long to come out? I believe that about half of these preachers and priests are closet homosexuals — I mean practicing homosexuals. “Priests Rapes Kids”: that's one of our favorite signs.⁷⁴⁹

The sexual sins of his fellow pastors, then, does not surprise Fred Phelps, who extends his critique that “priests rape boys” to include non-Catholics and even non-Christian clergy. Such behavior is a consequence of teachings that stress God’s unconditional love for everyone and do not preach stridently against sexual sin.

Westboro Baptists refer to pastors in other denominations as “liars” and “whores” in their pickets of church services and on their websites. For example, while traveling to funeral picket sites, Westboro Baptists will frequently stop at other churches nearby in order to picket, and they participate in dozens of pickets at other Christian churches in Topeka each week. Members maintain a rotating schedule of Sunday morning pickets of Topeka churches that includes St. David’s Episcopal Church, the Metropolitan Community Church, St. Matthew’s Catholic Church, Topeka Bible Church, and Light of the World Christian Center.

Ministry Aimed at the Government

⁷⁴⁸ Steve Drain, “Beast Watch: Lying False Prophets are to Blame.”

⁷⁴⁹ Joshua Kors, “‘God Hates Fags’: Q & A with Pastor Fred Phelps,” *Huffington Post*, August 10, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joshua-kors/god-hates-fags-qa-with-pa_b_689430.html.

Early in their public ministry, Westboro Baptists targeted their message at members of Topeka's city government. Members picketed the Topeka City Council as well as the homes of council members, and city council members were profiled in Westboro Baptist Church faxes. Political opponents saw their personal lives publicized and their sexuality questioned or ridiculed. As a consequence, city officials lived in a state of fear; for example, the mayor's 1998 choice for city planning director, Darrell Lewis, rejected the job, openly citing Fred Phelps as his reason for not taking it.⁷⁵⁰ As the church expanded its audience nationwide, it extended its criticism to national politicians, from Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, who ran as Gerald Ford's running mate in the 1976 presidential election and for president himself in 1996, to Bill and Hilary Clinton to George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Frequently, politicians saw their (alleged) sexual histories broadcast, and in other cases, their political decisions were judged through the lens of Westboro Baptist Church's theology and found to be damning, as was George W. Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina. Calling him "God's great curse on America," "Mr. Liar President," and "President LazyAss," they linked the tragedy of Katrina and the war in Iraq to Bush's appointment of gays and lesbians in his administration. More specifically, the church argues that former President George W. Bush's occasional worship at St. John's Episcopal Church, which is located near the White House and has been a popular choice for presidents when they attend services, is in defiance of God because the Episcopal church includes an openly gay and sexually active bishop, Gene Robinson. Because his presence gives credibility to the Episcopal Church, President George W. Bush was punished by God, who enacted a complicated system of deceit, including lying counselors and lying military intelligence, to "dupe" the president into a mistaken war.⁷⁵¹ (See Figure 44.)

⁷⁵⁰ Darrell Lewis, "Outwitting Fred Phelps," *The Advocate*, February 17, 1998, pg. 9.

⁷⁵¹ Fred Phelps, "Fag Pimp" [news video], *Signs Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.net/videos/signmovies/index.html>.

Westboro Baptist Church

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Mongrel Bush and His Battle of New Orleans

“Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not; The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the pransing horses, and of the jumping chariots.” Nahum 3:1,2.

The Sovereign Horseman rides in New Orleans

“The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear; and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcasses; and there is none end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses.” Nahum 3:3.

God’s great curse upon America – i.e., George Bush – tells his Cabinet to think outside the box, and no idea is off the table. Well, Mr. Liar President, here’s a novel idea for you:

Get Right With God!

You are pouring gasoline on the raging infernos of God’s wrath in Iraq and New Orleans. You have filled your administration with fags and dykes, you idiot – and you propose to add the flaming faggot Izzy Hernandez to your Cabinet. You are living for the devil in blatant defiance of your Creator and leading the country to Hell in a faggot’s handbasket. It is now time for you to follow the lead of the king of Nineveh who led his nation to profound repentance upon the preaching of Jonah: *“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.”* Jonah 3:6-10. Let no one deceive you, Mr. President: **THERE’S NO OTHER WAY OUT.**

And – President LazyAss – you must be sincere and humble before God, for the first time in your pampered life. Your repentance must be utterly sincere and complete. And – as John the Baptist put it -- You must bring forth fruits (solid evidence) demonstrating your repentance to be genuine:

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.” Mat. 3:7,8.

The only fruits meet for repentance in today’s circumstances are these: Completely rid your administration of fags and dykes; and, recriminalize sodomy and abortion, and impose the death penalty for these crimes. Nothing less will do. Otherwise, we warn you again: Expect worse and more of it from that Outraged God your sins have mightily offended.

Figure 44. A 2005 Westboro Baptist Church press release linking Hurricane Katrina and military deaths in Iraq to President George W. Bush’s failure to obey God.

President Barack Obama

President Obama, in particular, has been criticized by Westboro Baptist Church as a Muslim—an accusation that circulates in the Religious Right more broadly.⁷⁵² Westboro Baptist

⁷⁵² During the first two years of his presidency, Barack Obama was increasingly likely to be seen as a Muslim by voters of both parties. Pew Research Center found that eighteen percent of Americans think the president is a

Church, though, has leveled this accusation—plus more—at the president directly in an open letter, saying,

Your pitiful attempt to make silk purses out of your sows' ears parents is embarrassing. As is your effort to distance yourself from the Muslims. You simply need to repent of your monstrous sins. It is too late for your parents to repent of theirs. They are in Hell. You seem proud of your sins—filling two books in your recitation of them. Tell the truth, Mr. President. You are a Muslim. Your mother was a promiscuous white female tramp, and your father was a run-of-the-mill, black, deadbeat dad who abandoned you and your mother and fled to more fertile breeding grounds in Africa. The way you treated your wife leads us to believe that you, too, like father like son, have the morals of an alley cat.

“Except you repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” Lk. 13:3.⁷⁵³

The letter brings together accusations about President Obama's parents' sexual histories, racist stereotypes, accusations that the president is secretly a Muslim, and conjecture about the president's fidelity in his own marriage. Soon, the church would add another claim: that President Obama is the anti-Christ.

This claim, like the claim that the president is secretly a Muslim, circulates more broadly. Though a poll by Harris Interactive suggested that up to fourteen percent of Americans think that the president is or could be the Anti-Christ⁷⁵⁴ have been criticized as unreliable,⁷⁵⁵ they

Muslim, and many are not sure of his religious affiliation. Only about one third of Americans know that the president is a Christian. (“Growing Number of Americans Say Obama is a Muslim,” *Pew Research Center Publications*, August 19, 2010, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1701/poll-obama-muslim-christian-church-out-of-politics-political-leaders-religious>).

⁷⁵³ Westboro Baptist Church, “Open Letter to President Obama,” February 9, 2009, http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/fliers/archive/20090209_open-letter-obama.pdf.

⁷⁵⁴ Harris Interactive, “‘Wingnuts’ and President Obama,” *Harris Polls*, March 23, 2010, <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/223/Default.aspx>.

undoubtedly do reveal an anti-Obama undercurrent in American conservative religion.⁷⁵⁶

Indeed, the number of internet forwards and Youtube videos seeking to “prove” that President Obama is the Anti-Christ prompted a refutation by the internet-hoax detectives at *Snopes*.⁷⁵⁷

In this interpretation of religion and current political events, Westboro Baptists continue to believe that President Obama, along with Pope Benedict and Satan, is part of the “Unholy Trinity” of the eschatological future. (See Figures 45 and 46.) the American public are guilty in perpetuating the president’s fraudulent claim to Christianity. Writes Westboro Baptist Church:

Beast Obama knew that he could not become president of doomed america without pretending to be a Christian. He quickly realized that this would be a simple task, because the so-called “Christians” of doomed america are Bible-dumb simpletons, who like the Bloody Beast himself, worship themselves above all. He concocted together different religious systems, Hindu’s, a little bit of Muslim and he stirs in a little bit of Malcolm X, he stirs in a little bit of United Church of Christ, little bit of Universalist Unitarian, little bit of Methodist, little bit of Baptist and he voila comes up with a religion to sell it to a so-called Christian nation. It’s a religion that he can sell to the masses of the Bible ignorant

⁷⁵⁵ For example of the criticism, see “Obama is not the Anti-Christ—and Nobody Really Thinks He Is,” *The Gaggle* [blog], March 26, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/blogs/the-gaggle/2010/03/26/obama-is-not-the-antichrist-and-nobody-really-thinks-he-is.html>.

⁷⁵⁶ Jonathan Alter, “‘The Illustrated Man’,” *Newsweek*, August 28, 2010.

⁷⁵⁷ “Obama as Anti-Christ,” *Snopes*, August 3, 2009, <http://www.snopes.com/politics/obama/antichrist.asp>.



Figure 45. Paulette Phelps stands in front of Topeka’s Metropolitan Community Church with a sign illustrating that Barack Obama is the Anti-Christ. Revelation 16:13-14, cited on the sign at left, says, “And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.” Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin, July 18, 2010. All rights reserved.

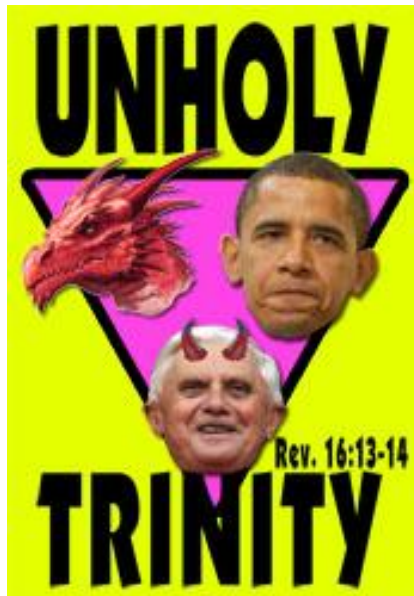


Figure 46. A depiction of President Barack Obama as the Anti-Christ, a member of the unholy Trinity of End Times, which will include Pope Benedict and Satan. Courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.

and it is antichristic because all his religious principles are against the teachings of Christ; and a nation that doesn't know any different will lap it up because he uses some of the same words that sound like Christianity.⁷⁵⁸

In other words, President Obama's claim to Christianity was a public relations strategy aimed at appealing to a wide audience that, according to the church, demands a nod to Christianity but actually hates authentic Christianity. Voters chose him because they prefer vague religion to a religion that calls them to specific obedience, as does the religion of Westboro Baptist Church.

The president further provoked Westboro Baptist Church's ire when, at a National Prayer Breakfast, he encouraged listeners, "[L]et us remember that there is no religion whose central tenet is hate."⁷⁵⁹ Since the Southern Poverty Law Center named Westboro Baptist Church a hate group and the president, as Senator, "voted with a unanimous Senate to silence Westboro Baptist Church's preachments outside of the internationally published worship-fests when God strikes a soldier dead on the battle field,"⁷⁶⁰ members understand that the president was talking about them, and the president's desire to work with other religious believers to "begin to crowd out the destructive forces of zealotry"⁷⁶¹ was interpreted as his desire to curtail Westboro Baptist Church's public ministry.

Westboro Baptist Church believes that President Obama wants to silence them as part of his greater plan to end religious freedom as the Anti-Christ.⁷⁶² This plan relies on the support of

⁷⁵⁸ Westboro Baptist Church, "Changing Times and Laws," *Beast Obama*, <http://www.beastobama.com/timesandlaws/index.html>.

⁷⁵⁹ Barack Obama, speech at National Prayer Breakfast, February 5, 2009, *WowOWow: Women on the Web*, <http://www.wowowow.com/post/national-prayer-breakfast-transcript-joshua-dubois-obama-office-faith-based-initiatives-197118>.

⁷⁶⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, "Can Anyone Say 'Irony'?" *Beast Obama*, <http://www.beastobama.com/byhiswords/firstamendment.html>.

⁷⁶¹ Barack Obama, speech at National Prayer Breakfast, February 5, 2009, *WowOWow: Women on the Web*, <http://www.wowowow.com/post/national-prayer-breakfast-transcript-joshua-dubois-obama-office-faith-based-initiatives-197118>.

⁷⁶² Westboro Baptist Church, "Changing Times and Laws."

gay people, and so the president caters to gay voters, according to the church. The church cites, for example, President Obama's declaration of June 2009 as Gay Pride Month, as evidence of his obeisance to gay people.⁷⁶³ Because of America's acceptance of a president supportive of gay rights, Westboro Baptist Church predicts a future of violent gay soldiers enacting the will of their Anti-Christ President:

As Commander in Chief, Antichrist Obama will not simply lift the “don't ask, don't tell” ban (the myth that it is), he will quickly fill all ranks of all military branches with ravenous fags – arming them to the teeth! Fags will be his malicious minions when the time comes to exercise all his world power.⁷⁶⁴

In this way, Westboro Baptist Church enumerates fears about President Obama that a wider American audience shares: about his race, nation of origin, family history, religious beliefs, sexuality, and commitment to gay rights. However, the church's eschatological vision ends sadly for President Obama:

The Beast will lead a vile fag-infested army of goulsh [sic] freaks in battle against Christ and his Church, at which time he will be put down permanently, cast alive into the lake of fire. Proclaiming the days of his religion, and the days and times all mankind must bow down to him, will give him absolutely no comfort at that hour.⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶³ Westboro Baptist Church, “Beast Watch: Fag Love in Chief,” *Beast Obama*, <http://www.beastobama.com/beastwatch/index.html>.

⁷⁶⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “Fag Enabler in Chief,” *Beast Obama*, <http://www.beastobama.com/obamanation/obamanationfagenabler.html>.

⁷⁶⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “Changing Times and Laws.”

Westboro Baptist Church preaches this message at pickets at various places, including the White House (See Figure 47.), as well as on the website *Beast Obama*. The church also maintains “BeastWatch,” an online repository for documentary-style videos about the president.⁷⁶⁶



Figure 47. Brent Roper, husband of Shirley Phelps-Roper, connects homosexuality and gay rights with national sin at a picket of the White House on October 5, 2010. Photograph by Rebecca Barrett-Fox. All rights reserved.

Judicial Systems and Legislatures

Westboro Baptist Church members have argued in front of judges inside and outside of courthouses and have likewise aimed their public ministry at state and federal legislatures and legislators. In December 2005, as states began to formulate anti-picketing laws in response to

⁷⁶⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, “Beast Watch,” *Beast Obama*, <http://www.beastobama.com/beastwatch/index.html>.

increased church pickets at the funerals of fallen servicemen and women, Westboro Baptist Church released an open letter reminding legislators of their duty to uphold the Constitution, and protect free speech or risk lawsuits. Further, the church declares, God will always secure a place for its message:

So pander for votes if you must; but stay within the bounds of the constitution [sic], and leave us the proper room to publish our message to our intended audience. Above all, remember that he who holds the Key of David...opens doors of utterance, and no man—including all men combined—can shut [them].⁷⁶⁷

Legislators who violate what Westboro Baptist Church members perceive as their right to freedom of speech soon find their state laws challenged, and the church frequently wins such challenges, as it did in August 2010 in Missouri when that state's funeral anti-picketing laws were ruled overly broad and without a compelling government interest by a federal court.⁷⁶⁸

Because their challenges to laws frequently end up in court, Westboro Baptists have targeted state and federal courts in their public ministry. For example, church members picketed outside each court that has so far considered *Snyder v. Phelps*, including the Supreme Court when that court heard the case on October 6, 2010. (See Figure 48.) Prior to that, members completed a driving tour named "The I-70 GodSmack Tour from Westboro Baptist Church to DC," with a variety of pickets along the way, celebrating their assessment that "[a]ll roads lead to the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS)!"⁷⁶⁹

⁷⁶⁷ Westboro Baptist Church, "A Message from Westboro Baptist Church (Westboro Baptist Church) to Lawmakers on Legislation Regarding Her Counter-Demonstrations at Funerals of Dead Soldiers," *God Hates Fags*, http://www.godhatesfags.com/letters/20051212_legislation-message.pdf.

⁷⁶⁸ "Free-Speech Conundrum Demonstrated," *Jefferson City News-Tribune*, August 19, 2010.

⁷⁶⁹ Westboro Baptist Church, "Upcoming Picket Schedule," *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/schedule.html>.



Figure 48. As his sister Margie Phelps argued before the Supreme Court on October 6, 2010, Jonathan Phelps picketed outside the building, asking God to kill more American servicemen and women. Here, the sign draws attention to Matthew Snyder’s identity as someone’s (in this case, plaintiff Albert Snyder’s) child, but rather than offering sympathy to the parents of the fallen, it asks God for “more dead kids.” Photograph by Rebecca Barrett-Fox. All rights reserved.

Recently, the church focused its public ministry on the Nebraska judicial system, as Shirley Phelps-Roper’s arrest on various charges related to flag desecration were being addressed. To highlight their message against the judges, prosecutors, police, and legislators involved in the case, church members picketed hearings as well as the funeral of a retired Nebraska judge, and the church released video footage of Shirley Phelps-Roper’s arrest under the

provocative title “Why Nebraska is Funding Westboro Baptist Church’s Picketing Ministry” on *God Hates Fags*.

Anti-Military Ministry

The primary scene of Westboro Baptist Church anti-military ministry has occurred at funerals of members of the military killed during war or at funerals of members of the Patriot Guard Riders, an organization of military supporters, many but not all of whom are veterans, who attend the funerals of fallen servicemen and women. When the occasion presents itself, they also picket at sites associated with military tragedy, such as when they picketed, holding picket signs designed to look as if they were splattered with blood, at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, after thirteen people were killed and another thirty injured by a shooter. The church has stated that the deaths are a reminder to members of the military to “FEAR GOD, OBEY HIM and give the glory of the 13 dead at the hands of their fellow war-monger, TO GOD!”⁷⁷⁰ Westboro Baptist Church criticisms of the military rest on two premises: 1) that the military defends and fights for a nation at war with God and will thus be destroyed and 2) that the military is, itself, filled with gay people and people who are tolerant of gay people. Anti-military pickets will be discussed in detail in chapter 7.

Ministry around Scenes of National Tragedy

Besides their pickets of military funerals, no other scene of Westboro Baptist Church public ministry has prompted such public outrage as that around what the church has come to term “GodSmacks”—acts of God that contribute to human suffering and so reveal God’s anger toward the world, illustrating the absolute predestination of all things for the purpose of sorting

⁷⁷⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “God Sent the Shooter...to Ft. Hood, and So Many Other Places...Keeping You Rebels Impotently Fretting,” *The Workmen: Aholiab and Bezaleel* [blog], November 9, 2009, <http://blogs.sporen.com/index.php/workmen/?title=god-sent-the-shooter-to-ft-hood-and-so-many-other-places-keeping-you-rebels-impotently-fretting&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1>.

the elect from the damned, as believed by hyper-Calvinists. The church calls these acts “God’s Wrath Revealed,” saying:

You know there's no “Mother Nature” just randomly running around with her magic wand and floaty crown thing magically making earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, blights, floods, blizzards, hail storms, droughts, mall shootings, postal shootings, multi-car pileups, kidnappings, apartment fire[s] and every other ass-kicking you get dealt to you by the LORD your God happen. You know God is in control. He's doing it. Just admit it. Just because you won't admit it and fear Him, and PRAISE Him, doesn't mean we aren't going to put every one of these events right in front of your nose. Read the words. Fear Him.⁷⁷¹

Here, “Fear Him” strikes a double meaning, to be awed by God and to be afraid of God, for he uses violence, suffering, and death to exercise “his right to do whatsoever he will amongst the inhabitants of the earth.”⁷⁷²

Westboro Baptists picket scenes of national disasters and produced commentary in the form of press releases and web videos about such events, including terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001; the Columbia space shuttle explosion in February 2003; the Sago Mine disaster in West Virginia in January 2006; the shooting of Amish school girls in Pennsylvania in October 2006; shootings at Virginia Tech in April 2007; the I-35 bridge collapse in Minnesota in August 2007; and the mining explosion at Upper Big Branch Mine in West Virginia in April 2010.⁷⁷³ Sites are chosen based on the media attention likely to be given to them and the accessibility of the site, but all tragedies, whether

⁷⁷¹ Westboro Baptist Church, “God’s Wrath Revealed,” *GodSmacks* [blog], <http://blogs.sparennot.com/index.php/godsmacks/>.

⁷⁷² Steve Drain, “Beast Watch: Lying False Prophets are to Blame.”

⁷⁷³ Westboro Baptist Church, “God’s Wrath Revealed Against America,” *God Hates America*, <http://www.godhatesamerica.com/godswrath.html>.

they are picketed or not, are understood to be expressions of God's anger toward individual, the community, the nation, and the world.

In response to these events, Westboro Baptists are to express gratitude for God for five reasons: 1) because people should be thankful for all of God's judgments, 2) because God promises to curse the wicked and bless the obedient, and disasters reveal that God keeps this promise, 3) because all humans, including Westboro Baptists, deserve death due to their absolute depravity, and any who escape death should be grateful 4) because God has promised to avenge his prophets, and by generating disaster for America, God avenges Westboro Baptist Church, and 5) because people can find physical proof of God's anger in disasters.⁷⁷⁴

Despite its unpopularity today, the interpretation of disaster as God's judgment for sin was common throughout much of Christian history and certainly in the United States. Writes Peter J. Thuesen about seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century American believers:

Nothing fell outside of God's control, which he exerted either directly (through miracles such as the biblical manna from heaven) or indirectly (through kings and kingdoms and other early instruments). Whether working directly or indirectly, however, God engineered all historical developments toward the preservation and ultimate glorification of his church. Even the oppression and other calamities periodically endured by the church were all part of God's plan for his elect people, to whom he gave the power, through the Holy Spirit, to interpret the providential significance of events. Puritans and other Calvinists thus engaged in

⁷⁷⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, "FAQ: Why do you have signs saying 'Thank God for 911,' 'Thank God for AIDS,' 'Thank God for Katrina,' 'Thank God for IEDs,' 'Thank God for Dead Soldiers,' and Otherwise Thanking God for Things that Humans Think are Bad?," *God Hates Fags*, http://www.godhatesfags.com/faq.html#Thank_God.

a kind of Spirit-enabled divination in which they attempted to read everything from politics to the weather for signs of God's electing favor.⁷⁷⁵

Like the Puritans they admire, Westboro Baptists interpret the “signs of the times” and “connect the dots” to explain how God's anger is manifested in disasters. Further, while Puritans and other Calvinists spent their energies looking for signs of their own election, Westboro Baptists, at least in their public ministry, give attention to finding signs for the damnation of others. This does not mean, however, that Westboro Baptists do not concern themselves with signs of their personal election, only that they use pickets, websites, and other technologies to preach the message of the damnation of others. In the process of identifying how God punishes others, they see how God preserves and glorifies Westboro Baptist Church. And, in fact, the church has seen relatively little disaster; no children have died, and none of the attacks on the church property or church people have resulted in serious injury.

Individual disaster, then, is viewed as a means of God communicating to the person suffering or his or her loved ones. Again, this way of understanding disaster has deep roots in American religion. For example, among Puritans, people who died suddenly “were popularly assumed to be under some divine judgment for sin.”⁷⁷⁶ Puritan sermons revealed that preachers, just as Fred Phelps does now, took the opportunity of a funeral to proclaim that death was the consequence of sin, both blaming the deceased for their failings and attributing their deaths to God. For example, in 1696, Increase Mather delivered “A Discourse Concerning the Uncertainty of the Times of Men” on the occasion of the deaths of two Harvard students who had fallen through the ice while skating, reminding the parents of deceased children that “[i]t is a bitter aggravation of the death of children when there is no ground to believe that they have gone to a

⁷⁷⁵ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 83.

⁷⁷⁶ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 62.

better world.”⁷⁷⁷ While Mather saw hope for the election of the deceased in that particular case, he looked at the death scene for evidence of election or damnation, noting of one of the dead students, “Had Death found him sinning, the evil which fell upon him suddenly... would have been much sadder.”⁷⁷⁸ In other words, the manner of death can reveal whether the deceased in heaven- or hell-bound.

In seeing themselves as prophets—not in the sense that they are delivering a new revelation or predicting future events but in the sense that they interpret current events in light of their understanding of God—, Westboro Baptists insert themselves into a cosmic story. James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr. note this inclination among Primitive Baptists more broadly, as Primitive Baptists view their individual lives “within a richly perceived historical stream, one which is interlaced with doctrinal issues seen as significant not merely in a single time but for the eternal fate of humankind as willed by God.”⁷⁷⁹ Thus, Westboro Baptists are confident in the connections they make between individual deaths, public morality, and God’s wrath. This, again, was common among Puritans, who, “given their concern for moral order, civic duty, and the general welfare,... sometimes envisaged the body politic or commonwealth as being collectively in covenant with the Lord for a special corporate task in the world.”⁷⁸⁰ Tragedies in the public realm are manifestations of God’s corrective anger at the body politic’s failure in its corporate task. Indeed, in this framework, God can even bring disaster to a single person in order to illustrate his anger toward an entire community. For example, in 1995, when Topeka police officer Tony Patterson was killed in a drug raid, a church-produced fax identified the officer as

⁷⁷⁷ Increase Mather, “A Discourse Concerning the Uncertainty of the Times of Men,” electronic text copied from Harvard University Library, Early English Books Online, http://eebo.chadwyck.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/search/full_rec?SOURCE=pgimages.cfg&ACTION=ByID&ID=V106060.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁹ Peacock and Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox*, 47.

⁷⁸⁰ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “Introduction” in *Theology in American: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, ed. Sydney E. Ahlstrom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company: 1967), 28-29.

“a friend to Westboro Baptist Church” and declared its intention to “send flowers to his funeral and gifts of money to his little family in honor and respect to his memory” but also explained that Officer Patterson “died for Topeka’s sins against Westboro Baptist Church” and that he “was part of a corrupt system that has wrought systemic, and sustained, state-sponsored, bloody persecution against the sheep and lambs of God’s flock.”⁷⁸¹ From the Westboro Baptist Church’s perspective, Officer Patterson received God’s wrath for the behavior of the entire police department.

God also punishes the entire nation through disaster. Westboro Baptist Church is not alone in understanding disaster to be God’s way of disciplining or punishing the world. Disaster is used by God to draw attention to the absolute dependency of humans on God and to illustrate his absolute sovereignty in order to inspire the elect or to punish the damned. These points are made by other conservative preachers during times of natural disaster. For example, after Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans in 2005, Rev. Franklin Graham, son of the evangelist Billy Graham, argued that the hurricane was a means for God to correct a sinful city and inspire repentance, saying that, possibly, “God is going to use that storm to bring revival.”⁷⁸² Michael Marcavage of Repent America, a Religious Right group, said explicitly that “this act of God destroyed a wicked city,” citing, in particular, the gay-culture event Southern Decadence as evidence of New Orleans’ wickedness.⁷⁸³ Anti-abortion activist Steve Lefemine, who circulated a weather map of the hurricane that he suggested included the image of a fetus, considered the hurricane a judgment for abortion, and on the answering machine message of his pro-life

⁷⁸¹ Dick Snider, “Time for Topekans to Fight Fred Phelps’ Fire with Fire,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, October 20, 1995.

⁷⁸² “Katrina: Wrath of God?” *Morning Joe*, October 5, 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9600878/>.

⁷⁸³ “Hurricane Katrina Destroys New Orleans Days Before ‘Southern Decadence’,” *Repent America: Press Releases*, August 31, 2005, http://www.repentamerica.com/pr_hurricanekatrina.html.

organization, he simply declared, “Providence punishes national sins by national calamities.”⁷⁸⁴

These contemporary speakers seem to be in agreement with Puritans and earlier Calvinists like Puritan pastor Thomas Foxcroft, who argued in 1756, “It would be Atheism to ascribe these Events to meer Casualty or Chance.”⁷⁸⁵

Foxcroft’s claim emerges from his belief—shared by Westboro Baptists—in the predestination of all things, not just election, and the engagement of God in human affairs. As a result of this belief, individuals can be judged to be elect or damned depending on their presence or absence of blessings or curses in their lives, and, likewise, nations can be assessed as blessed or cursed by God, according to the “GodSmacks” afflicting them. “Only one theory explained the grave disparities in national and individual fortunes,” argues Thuesen of earlier American Christians: predestination.⁷⁸⁶ For Westboro Baptists, individual sins are punished with individual pain from God, and national sins likewise result in national punishment. Says Steve Drain, “GodSmacks are ringing throughout this land, from sea to shining sea”⁷⁸⁷ as evidence of God’s displeasure with America broadly: its people, who are gay, support gay rights, or fail to act against gay rights; its government; and its religious believers and leaders. Particular blame is reserved for religious leaders. “You” accuses Drain, “open your blasphemous sludgeholes and lie on God over and over again.”⁷⁸⁸ In contrast, say church members, Westboro Baptist Church, in its faxes and pickets, on its websites and in outside media, tells the truth.

⁷⁸⁴ Alan Cooperman, “Where Most See a Weather System, Some See Divine Retribution,” *Washington Post*, September 4, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090301408.html>.

⁷⁸⁵ Thomas Foxcroft, “The Earthquake, a Divine Visitation: A Sermon Preached to the Old Church in Boston, January 8, 1756” (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1756).

⁷⁸⁶ Thuesen, *Predestination*, 181.

⁷⁸⁷ Steve Drain, “Beast Watch: Lying False Prophets are to Blame.”

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

The Mission of the Message

Though it is notorious for its picketing ministry and flagship website, Westboro Baptist Church remains incomprehensible to many who encounter it. This is in part because the church lacks a mission that is clearly linked to individual or political change, which the public might expect of such an active group. “We’re not here to persuade people but to let them know that God has a standard for them,” explained Sara Phelps at a Sunday morning picket at a neighboring church.⁷⁸⁹ The goal is not to change people’s minds, for only God can do that. Writes John Gill, an eighteenth century theologian and the best articulator of the hyper-Calvinism embraced by Westboro Baptist Church:

[The gospel] is not a call to them to regenerate and convert themselves... which is the pure work of the Spirit of God ... nor to any spiritual vital acts, which they are incapable of, being natural men and dead in trespasses and sins. Nor is the gospel-ministry an offer of Christ, and of his grace and salvation by him, which are not in the power of the ministers of it to give, nor of carnal men to receive; the gospel is not an offer, but a preaching of Christ crucified, a proclamation of the unsearchable riches of his grace.... Yet there is something which the ministry of the world, and the call by it, have to do with unregenerate sinners: ... the fullness, freeness, and suitableness of this salvation, are to be preached before them; and the whole of it to be left, to the Spirit of God, to make application of it as he shall see fit.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁹ Sara Phelps, interview with the author, April 18, 2010.

⁷⁹⁰ John Gill, *Body of Divinity* (London, 1769), 387-388; available through Eighteenth Century Collections Online, [http://find.galegroup.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=EC COArticles&doDirectDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale\(en%2C%2C\)%3AFQE%3D\(BN%2CNone%2C7\)T153223%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R1¤tPosition=1&userGroupName=ksstate_ukans&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=&bookId=0451600701&collectionId=T153223&relavancePageBatch=CW119973519](http://find.galegroup.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/ecco/retrieve.do?resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSet=EC COArticles&doDirectDocNumSearch=false&qrySerId=Locale(en%2C%2C)%3AFQE%3D(BN%2CNone%2C7)T153223%24&inPS=true&sort=Author&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&searchId=R1¤tPosition=1&userGroupName=ksstate_ukans&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&showLOI=&bookId=0451600701&collectionId=T153223&relavancePageBatch=CW119973519).

Westboro Baptist Church preaches that salvation is unconditional, desirable, and impossible for humans to achieve through their own efforts. It leaves humans with a mandate to obey but without the guarantee that obedience will bring salvation. Listeners understandably struggle with the paradox of no-offers hyper-Calvinists both preaching to them and also saying that they are hopeless sinners. Church members do not concern themselves with the conversion of others, believing, like their early nineteenth century predecessors who split from the Separate Baptists, that God alone, not Bible tracts or Sunday Schools or missionaries, inspires conversion. Says Shirley Phelps-Roper, “We don’t want to reform the devil. What we want to do is deliver a faithful message of the Scriptures. After that, we’ve done our job. We don’t care how you receive it.”⁷⁹¹ In this sense, Westboro Baptists’ public ministry is more about them than it is about the listener.

This is because, in their understanding of the elect, Westboro Baptist Church members are “intended by God to give themselves unceasingly to His service. By election He has forged Himself an instrument for the manifestation of His glory.”⁷⁹² For Westboro Baptists, being an instrument in the public sphere means, primarily, being a mouthpiece. Promises the church’s website that organizes members’ blogs, “We will ‘cry aloud’ and ‘spare not’ in our preaching to you,”⁷⁹³

for we are expressly commanded to do so, however it is received. As God thrice reminds Ezekiel: “Whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear (for they

⁷⁹¹ Nathan Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872.

⁷⁹² William A. Scott, *Historical Protestantism: An Historical Introduction to Protestant Theology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 40.

⁷⁹³ Westboro Baptist Church, “Blog Summary,” *Westboro Baptist Church Blogs*, <http://blogs.sparenot.com/index.php?blog=1>.

are a rebellious house), yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them.” (Ezekiel 2:5; 2:7; and 3:11).

Westboro Baptist Church’s view that those they believe are outside of God’s irresistible saving grace are to be their audience but not their mission field may explain the explicit rhetoric they use when addressing them; they are not faxing, picketing, tweeting, or publishing websites so that people convert but so that their viewers are made unmistakably aware that they have heard “the word of God,” and the words and images of the church are both unmistakable and unforgettable. When hyper-Calvinism’s focus on damnation and tendency to divide the world into the known, hopeless reprobate and unknown elect is the lens through which seemingly anti-gay Biblical passages are read, the result, for Westboro Baptist Church members, is the crystallization of a religious mission to preach God’s impending judgment on a degenerate nation: “Listen to God. If you are one of His elect, you’ll hear.”⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹⁴ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: ‘Why don’t you Leave it up to God and Stop Wasting your Time Telling People that They are Wrong?’”

Chapter 5: Religious Right Anti-Gay Activism

Conservative religious belief is marked by passionate unity around issues of socio-moral concern, especially sexuality. As Rhys H. Williams, notes, “religious conflict in the U.S. has more often been about contested morality than about theological disputes.”⁷⁹⁵ More than theological beliefs, more than organizational strategies, more than denominational ties, more than historical groupings, attitudes toward sexuality—the main issue at play in the contemporary culture wars—define conservative Christianity. Groups self-identifying as conservative Christians are organizationally different; some grant the pastoral leadership great authority, while for others, authority rests with congregants; some are small house-churches, while others are megachurches of more than fifty thousand members. They are denominationally different; they include Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, many Catholics, and Covenant Evangelicals as well as a growing number of non-denominational churches and churches that belong to more traditionally liberal denominations (e.g. Episcopalians, Methodists) but have splintered from them. They are denominations that have existed in the present-day United States for nearly three hundred years as well as groups that developed only recently.

What defines them as conservative Christians is not their ethnic roots, their use of liturgy, or their understanding of theology. It is not their historical connections to the Vatican, Martin Luther, or John Calvin. It is not even so much their conservative theological beliefs, grounded in what conservative Protestants term a literalist biblical tradition that “fantasizes an innocent exegesis of scriptural meaning.”⁷⁹⁶ Though these beliefs matter, agreement among conservative

⁷⁹⁵ Rhys H. Williams, “The Language of God in the City of Man: Religious Discourse and Public Politics in America,” in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*, edited by Corwin Smidt, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 176.

⁷⁹⁶ Cynthia Burack, “Getting What ‘We’ Deserve: Terrorism, Sexuality, and the Christian Right,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston Marriot Copley Place, Sheraton Boston & Hyynes Convention Center, Boston, Massachusetts, August 28, 2002 http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p65079_index.html: 4.

believers about theological details is not required. Instead, what is required is agreement about social issues, particularly those involving sexuality and family life. Thus, conservative Catholics, Protestants, Mormons, and Jews have become co-belligerents guarding a border between the sexually acceptable and the sexually unacceptable. Together, they form the Religious Right: the loose affiliation, which emerged in the late 1970s, of those Protestant believers and affiliated Mormons, Catholics, and Jews, who find motivation and support for their conservative political principles in their conservative religious principles. While the Religious Right has long had room for non-Protestants, the language of those who participate is overwhelmingly inflected with Protestant tradition, and any conservative Jew, Mormon, or Catholic who participates is not welcome to express his or her faith except through terms understandable and inoffensive to conservative Protestant sensibilities.⁷⁹⁷

A “loose affiliation” includes those who might not belong to an official “Religious Right” organization such as parachurch organizations or conservative Christian churches. Ronald E. Hopson and Donald R. Smith note that “ideological alliances” can hold people together, even if they do not formally join a Religious Right organization, and the Religious Right is “not best evaluated through the fate of a particular group, or specific legal victories, but rather through the extent of ideological networking and the diffusion of their political ideals and rhetoric

⁷⁹⁷ In their contribution to the 1998 *Annual Review of Sociology* titled “Fundamentalism Et Al: Conservative Protestants in America,” Robert D. Woodberry and Christian S. Smith detail the scholarly difficulties in current scholarship on those people who are, sometimes haphazardly, labeled “conservative Protestants.” They distinguish between several groups of conservative Protestants: fundamentalists, a small subset that “emphasize[s] a strict literal interpretation of the Bible, dispensational theology, premillennial eschatology, and institutional separation from ‘apostasy’ (i.e. liberal Protestants and Catholics)”); evangelicals, who adopt “a more open, intellectually engaged version of classical Protestantism”; Pentecostals, a separatist wing that emphasizes religious experience, especially miraculous signs; and charismatics, who use some of the worship style of Pentecostals while retaining a denominational affiliation with non-Pentecostal churches, including Catholic churches. Woodberry and Smith further note that these differences are inflected by regional variations and class as well, and most scholarship on conservative Protestantism analyzes African-American Protestantism separately from the white branches. Given the theological, regional, class, and racial diversity among conservative Protestants, scholars should be careful in their deployment of terms (28-33).

throughout the political landscape.”⁷⁹⁸ Thus, “the Religious Right” refers to those who maintain, participate in, and welcome the “the political ideals and rhetoric” of theologically and politically conservative Protestantism, even if they do not belong to an “official” Religious Right organization such as Focus on the Family or Concerned Women of America. Participants agree significantly on the key issues of the Religious Right. Despite some theological variety, their strongly held similar beliefs on social issues make members of the Religious Right significant political actors.⁷⁹⁹

For thirty years now, the Religious Right has focused its activism on issues it terms “family values”—specifically, sexuality, gender, and reproduction—and has effectively forced all political players to acknowledge such values, so much so that, says Kathleen M. Sands, they have “mint[ed]...family values as the new currency of politics.”⁸⁰⁰ Rhys H. Williams suggests, “For many Americans, the ‘private sphere’ is seen as religious particular purview and great passion can be summoned for issues relevant to that domain.”⁸⁰¹ Because religion has never held official legal authority over the United States government, American religion, specifically conservative religion, has turned its domination to areas of individual behavior, including the most intimate of relationships: between sexual partners, between married people, and between children and parents. Sexuality, gender, and reproduction—the central issues of “family values”—were particularly vulnerable to being used to agitate the “heart of the American polity

⁷⁹⁸ Ronald E. Hopson and Donald R. Smith, “Changing Fortunes: An Analysis of Christian Right Ascendance within American Political Discourse,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38 no. 1 (March 1999): 6.

⁷⁹⁹ Charles F. Hall, “The Christian Left: Who Are They and How Are They Different from the Christian Right?” *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 1 (September 1997): 34.

⁸⁰⁰ Kathleen M. Sands, “Introduction,” *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, edited by Kathleen M. Sands (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

⁸⁰¹ Williams, “Language of God,” 182.

itself,”⁸⁰² and appropriating those values as one’s own has been of strategic political importance. “If an issue can not only be placed in the moral realm, but also condemned,” observes James Darsey in his analysis of radical rhetoric in America, “it is moribund.”⁸⁰³ Moreover, the people with the greatest stake in changing the Religious Right-supported status quo are those with the least power in contemporary culture, people who are easily demonized and marginalized and defeated: women, people living in families outside the celebrated nuclear structure, and gay people. In particular, those advocating what the Religious Right terms a “gay rights agenda” have become the target of Religious Right political activism.

Legislating Morality

Though many opponents of Religious Right anti-gay activism characterize those agitating against gay rights as attempting to illegally bridge the separation of church and state by “legislating morality,”⁸⁰⁴ United States’ history includes many examples of religious leaders mobilizing believers using religious rhetoric and logic to address secular problems, most famously around abolition, Prohibition, and civil rights. These men and women have often been celebrated for their moral leadership and their courage in advocating change that legislators were unwilling to initiate. Religious leaders and their followers made religious appeals to end the slave trade;⁸⁰⁵ likewise, they worked for the abolition of slavery.⁸⁰⁶ Some argued to limit the

⁸⁰² Didi Herman, “The Gay Agenda is the Devil’s Agenda: The Christian Right’s Vision and the Role of the State,” in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, edited by Craig A. Rimmerman, Kenneth D. Wald, and Clyde Wilcox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152.

⁸⁰³ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University, 1997), 177.

⁸⁰⁴ For a lively discussion on the issue of “legislating morality,” see the essays that comprise The Symposium on Legislating Morality, associated with George Washington University’s Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and published in *The Responsive Community* v. 11, no. 4 (Fall 2001).

⁸⁰⁵ See, for example, Methodist Bishop Gilbert Haven’s *National Sermons. Sermons, speeches and letters on slavery and its war: from the passage of the Fugitive slave bill to the election of President Grant* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869); republished digitally by the University of Michigan Press in 2006. Of course, countless sermons were also preached in defense of slavery.

⁸⁰⁶ See, for example, John Wesley’s *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, written in 1774 and published in London by R. Hawes, which focused on the morality of the slave trade, or Charles Rappleye’s *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers*,

abusive power of capitalism,⁸⁰⁷ and a few identified as Christian socialists.⁸⁰⁸ They fought for the end of prostitution, which they saw as exploiting women;⁸⁰⁹ women's suffrage,⁸¹⁰ the end of child labor; the creation of minimum wages; the development of safe working conditions for laborers;⁸¹¹ the protection of animals from cruelty,⁸¹² and temperance, which they hoped would alleviate the suffering of women and children abused and impoverished by male alcoholism.⁸¹³ Most notably in the twentieth century, led by religious leaders such as Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and vocal believers such as Malcolm X and supported by countless Black Christians, Black Muslims, Jews, and liberal Christians, religious advocates took great personal risk in the fight for civil rights for African-Americans.⁸¹⁴ In each case, religious activists were galvanized not only because they believed that their fight would lead to a better social situation but because they were religiously motivated to act for a certain cause. Though, of course, each of these causes was complicated and motivations for fighting for them seldom simplistic, religious leaders and believers were often successful in generating change, and they are remembered—

the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), which tells the true story of two brothers, one an abolitionist who was central in the fight for the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1794 and the other a slave trader who was the first person tried under the new law.

⁸⁰⁷ See, for example, Henry C. Carey's memorial about Stephen Colwell, read before the American Philosophical Society on November 17, 1871. Colwell was one of the few "contrarians" who challenged Protestant Christianity's quiet acceptance of capitalism, according to Stewart Davenport in *Friends of the Unrighteous Mammon: Northern Christians and Market Capitalism, 1815-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁸⁰⁸ Robert T. Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," *Church History* 21, no. 1. (March 1952): 39-54.

⁸⁰⁹ See, for example, Alan Hunt's *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸¹⁰ See, for example, Carmen Heider, "Suffrage, Self-Determination, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union in Nebraska, 1879-1882," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 85-107. See also Evelyn A. Kirkley, "This Work is God's Cause: Religion in the Southern Women's Suffrage Movement, 1880-1920," *Church History*, 59, no. 4 (December 1990): 507-522.

⁸¹¹ These were only a few of the concerns of Walter Rauschenbusch, author of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: McMillan, 1907), *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: McMillan, 1912), and *Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1917).

⁸¹² See, for example, Craig Buettinger's argument that the women of the antivivisection movement were inspired by the atmosphere of Christian activism in "Women and Antivivisection in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History*, 30 no. 4 (Summer 1997):857-852.

⁸¹³ For one such analysis, see Ruth Bordin's history of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, *Woman and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981).

⁸¹⁴ See, for example, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the American Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, edited by Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006).

both within the world of religion and in the secular world—for their advocacy and, at times, even heroism.⁸¹⁵

In *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1880-1920*, Gaines M. Foster suggests that the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, radically redefined the power of the federal government to legislate morality. Christians lobbying for federal laws against alcohol, prostitution, and divorce saw in abolition a precedent for federal support of their own causes. Notably, they did not have to support abolition in order to support the principle of the Thirteenth Amendment: that the federal government can make laws to uphold a moral good. Says Foster, “Few of these lobbyists actually embraced the abolitionists’ goal of expanding human freedom; instead they exploited what might best be called an antislavery precedent to outlaw sin, not to promote justice or equality.”⁸¹⁶ While politically active Christians generally failed to create permanent federal legislation regarding their causes, they “convinced the federal government to accept a far greater role in regulating moral behavior”—a task that could not be accomplished prior to the Civil War because Southern legislators opposed interventions that would have undermined the slave system.⁸¹⁷ After the loss of the Civil War, legal and *de facto* oppression of African-Americans were tolerated and even encouraged by white Northerners, so white Southerners were able to end their blockade of legislation that might have previously called their enslavement of African-Americans “immoral.” Indeed, the perceived threat of African-American people—especially the perceived threat of sexual violence by African-American men against white women and the perceived threat of

⁸¹⁵ Notably, each of these causes was also opposed by people with other religious beliefs—including, for example, those who justified slavery on religious grounds or who worked against women’s suffrage on religious principle. Their presence only further proves the point that religious activists have long had a role in public debate about social and moral issues.

⁸¹⁶ Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality: 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

interracial marriage—were cited by legislators as reasons *for* extended federal powers.⁸¹⁸

Moreover, the immorality of slavery was compared to other immoralities, ones that, apparently, were seen as more of a threat to white civilization, motivating support for these other causes. Foster gives the example of Gordon J. Russell, a Texan who argued for the Mann Act, which prohibits the interstate trafficking of women for “immoral purposes.” According to Foster, Russell offered this comparison between African-American slavery and white prostitution:

More than forty years ago this country was drenched in fraternal blood and offered up the lives of nearly a million of the very pick and flower of its citizenship in the struggle to abolish the slavery of the black man. In God’s name, can we do no less now than pass this bill, which will be a step toward abolishing the slavery of white women?⁸¹⁹

The tenacity of racism assured white Southerners that they could continue Jim Crow practices and even invoke racism in the argument for increased moral policing. The environment of legalized racism, the status quo through the mid-twentieth century, gave this argument moral credence until only recently, and, by the end of legalized segregation, the expectation that the federal government could, would, and should consider legislating Christian morality was well-established.

The success of the abolitionist movement, combined with a post-millennialist optimism that held that Jesus’ Second Coming would be ushered in by social reforms that improved the human condition, provided motivation for continued efforts to “legislate morality.” In real terms, then, the work of religious activists changed the American political, social, and economic landscape while also firmly establishing slavery as a moral evil.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

The legislation of morality—and activism on behalf of laws framed specifically as moral laws, even when they have social or economic implications as well—has, then, a longer history than opponents of the Religious Right might like to imagine, and Religious Right activists are quick to point to the inconsistency of arguments that both appreciate the work of Martin Luther King and other heroes of American religious protest and denigrate the work of contemporary activists.⁸²⁰ The differences in methods are hard to detect; for example, the Birmingham bus boycott successfully used economic pressure to change segregationist public transit policies and is celebrated as an innovative protest tactic. Alternatively, contemporary pro-life activists have been described as engaging in “political harassment” when they boycott contractors who build abortion clinics.⁸²¹ The difference in public response may be primarily due to the content of the political goal. While earlier reforms efforts were aimed, at least rhetorically, at the protection and advancement of those perceived today as weak, such as slaves, women, and workers, today’s activism is understood by its critics as aimed at maintaining the status quo, including patriarchy and heteronormativity, which excludes and harms the weak. In sum, the tactics of civil rights leaders are easily memorialized as positive demonstrations of First Amendment rights (even if they were not fully accepted at the time), while the tactics of Religious Right activists are deemed infringements of personal liberty, invasions of privacy, and breaches of church and state.

Contemporary Religious Right advocates view themselves in line with these previous heroes, often drawing from the rhetoric of earlier activists and deploying their images in new campaigns. For example, Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott

⁸²⁰ For an assessment of how gay rights activists, in particular, deploy and reject particular interpretations of the image of Martin Luther King, see Ambra Nykol’s “How Liberals and Gay Rights Activists Have Hijacked the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Junior,” *New Black Magazine*, undated, <http://thenewblackmagazine.com/view.aspx?index=477>.

⁸²¹ Alesha Doan, *Opposition and Intimidation: The Abortion Wars and Strategies of Political Harassment* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

King, is an outspoken anti-gay rights activist whose words and images are often used by Religious Right activists, always with the explanation that she is the offspring of Dr. King.⁸²²

The use of images that call to mind the history of celebrated American protest movements, though, is not used solely to identify the group to outsiders as moral activists; the representation is also sincere. For example, anti-abortion activists frequently employ comparisons between slavery and abortion to illustrate the selfishness, immorality, and unconstitutionality of abortion; in this comparison, abortion rights supporters are equated with slave owners, while fetuses are constructed as defenseless slaves and pro-life activists as brave abolitionists resisting the legal but immoral practice of abortion.⁸²³ In this framework, they consider themselves emulating heroes of American social justice, just as they frequently invoke comparisons between their own activism and the work of Biblical heroes.⁸²⁴

Though other scholars consistently fail to consider sincerely held belief as even a partial explanation for activism,⁸²⁵ the words of activists themselves—as well as the risks they are

⁸²² Ellen Barry, “March Clouded by Stand on Gay Unions,” December 11, 2004, *Los Angeles Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/dec/11/nation/na-march11>. Notably, Coretta Scott King, prior to her death, invoked her husband’s image in defense of gay rights. Likewise, former NAACP leader Julian Bond has suggested a comparison between gay rights and Civil Rights, saying, that though African-Americans were the only people enslaved in this nation for two hundred years, “we were far from the only Americans suffering discrimination then and now” (Eartha Melzer, “NAACP Says ‘Gay Rights are Civil Rights,’” *The Washington Blade*, April 8, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060321202124/http://www.washblade.com/2005/4-8/news/localnews/naacp.cfm>).

⁸²³ For example, former Arkansas governor and presidential contender Mike Huckabee, when delivering a speech at a pro-life fundraiser on March 24, 2009, asked the crowd:

What are we saying to the generation coming after us when we tell them that it is perfectly OK for one person to own another human being?... I thought we dealt with that 150 years ago when the issue of slavery was finally settled in this country, and we decided that it no longer was a political issue, it wasn't an issue of geography, it was an issue of morality. That it was either right or it was immoral that one person could own another human being and have full control even to the point of life and death over that other human being (Vincent Rossmeier, “Huckabee Compares Abortion to Slavery,” *Salon.com*, March 24, 2009, http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/2009/03/24/huckabee/).

⁸²⁴ Characters from the Old Testament are especially popular. For example, the four men convicted of bombing three different Pensacola abortion clinics on Christmas 1984 identified with Gideon (whose name means “Destroyer”), who destroyed those who practiced child sacrifice to Baal. (See Judges 6-8.) See Dallas A. Blanchard and Terry J. Prewitt’s *Religious Violence and Abortion: The Gideon Project* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993).

⁸²⁵ In *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right*, Dallas A. Blanchard (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994) gives four reasons for anti-abortion activism, none of which, I think, would be recognizable to a pro-life activist. While some, such as Blanchard’s claim that pro-life activists wish to control women, are

willing to take, often for unlikely changes in the law—suggest that commitment to a cause often stems from a moral or religious position. At the same time, in a climate when explicitly moral or religious language is increasingly viewed with suspicion by many members of society,⁸²⁶ religious activists have to re-examine how they publically discuss their activism. The Religious Right’s history of anti-gay activism illustrates how such changes occur.

The History of Religious Right Anti-Gay Activism

While religious principles certainly fueled anti-gay action prior to the 1970s, the start of an organized gay rights movement prompted the counter-organization of an anti-gay movement. The anti-gay movement is focused on preventing or repealing advances in gay rights and public acceptance of non-heterosexuality, including homosexuality and bisexuality, as well as transgenderism, as part of a larger “pro-family” defense of heteronormativity. Combatants include local, state, and federal lawmakers; the Supreme Court; schoolboards and textbook manufacturers; and purveyors of popular culture. The goal is to give voice to the perceived “moral majority” that both personally objects to homosexuality and believes that public laws and discussions of sexuality should condemn homosexuality and that seeks to shape law and public opinion to reflect the views of those “values voters.”

Histories of anti-gay activism often begin with the story of Anita Bryant, the first Religious Right figure to clearly and publicly engage what she saw as “under the radar” gay rights advancements that the general public did not notice. Notably, Bryant’s activism was a response to a proposed legal change—in this case, the extension of laws against discrimination to

undoubtedly corollaries of pro-life activism, they are not the reasons that pro-life activists provide to researchers, nor, I think, are the ones that they use to explain their activism to themselves.

⁸²⁶ Research by Louis Bolce and Gerald de Maio reports increasing antipathy toward fundamentalist believers from secularists, cultural progressives, and the highly educated (“Religious Outlook, Culture War Outlook, and Antipathy toward Christian Fundamentalists,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 63, no.1 (Spring 1999): 29-61).

include gay public employees in Dade County, Florida—which suggests that the law prior to this skirmish was decidedly anti-gay. Thus, the story of anti-gay activism begins long before Bryant; she is a notable figure because of her response to the perceived threat that the loosening of anti-gay restrictions represented to her and to her supporters, but she does not represent the first anti-gay legal efforts, which had been in place since the colonial period.⁸²⁷ However, as Nancy T. Ammerman observes:

As societies are dislodged from stable traditional ways of life, some groups find those traditions useful as a rallying point as they reorganize life in a changing and seemingly chaotic world. So long as the tradition is in place, there is no need to organize to defend it. But when the external boundaries and the internal structures of the communities that have sustained the traditions can no longer make them matters of habit and assumption, one of the responses is likely to be a fundamentalist movement that seeks to restate those traditions in ways that take account of the new circumstances.⁸²⁸

Such was the scene in Florida in the late 1970s.

Bryant, a runner-up in the 1958 Miss America pageant, was a minor singing celebrity and spokesperson for Florida orange juice⁸²⁹ when, in 1977, Dade County (now Miami-Dade County), Florida, passed an ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Developing gay rights groups had supported the passage of the ordinance, but they were unprepared for the coordinated, aggressive, and expansive response by gay rights

⁸²⁷ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman detail legal efforts to eliminate or control homosexuality in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁸²⁸ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms: Social Dynamics and Rhetorical Strategies” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 155.

⁸²⁹ Bryant reflects on the early years of her career in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, an autobiography written prior to her anti-gay rights activism in Dade County (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1970).

opponents. Indeed, the ordinance sparked the creation of the nation's first anti-gay activism, which served as a model for future "pro-family" activism.

Prior to the 5-3 passage of the ordinance, anti-gay activists swarmed the city commission's boardroom, picketing outside and, inside, arguing fervently against passage of the law. When the law was nevertheless enacted, anti-gay activists were outraged. Anita Bryant, a member of a Baptist church in the area, and her husband, Bob Green, were tapped to lead a coalition of conservative religious believers and political professionals. Save Our Children⁸³⁰ collected 64,000 signatures, far more than the required 10,000 to secure a referendum vote. In the meantime, the group deployed rhetoric that linked homosexuality to child molestation and claimed that gay rights violated the rights of parents and public safety.⁸³¹ The rhetoric was heated, with Bryant repeatedly arguing that gay people were a threat to the sexual safety of children and calling for the defense of "straight and normal America."⁸³² "There is no 'human right' to corrupt our children," one Save Our Children advertisement declared.⁸³³ At the same time that the language of Save Our Children was aimed at creating fear among Dade County residents, Bryant defended her activism as an act of "love"—for God, for children, and "even [for] homosexuals."⁸³⁴ Later, when several gay people in the area were murdered or committed

⁸³⁰ The name of the group was later changed to Protect the Children after the nonprofit Save the Children filed an injunction against Save Our Children to prevent the anti-gay group from using a name similar to their own. "Anti-Homosexual Group Barred From Use of Name", *The New York Times* (July 16, 1977) p. 6. Throughout this dissertation, the group will be referred to as Save Our Children.

⁸³¹ Bryant famously argued prior to the commission's initial vote that "[t]he ordinance condones immorality and discriminates against my children's rights to grow up in a healthy, decent community." "Bias Against Homosexuals is Outlawed in Miami," *The New York Times* (January 19, 1977), p. 14.

⁸³² *I Just Wanted to be Somebody*, directed by Jay Rosenblatt (2006; Frameline, San Francisco.)

⁸³³ Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 137.

⁸³⁴ Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, 95.

suicide, the rhetoric of Save Our Children was blamed for the violence, a responsibility that Bryant denied.⁸³⁵

The push for gay rights inspired a countermovement that revealed a anti-gay undercurrent that, in a previous time, when gay people were more likely to be closeted and gay rights denied, was latent. When it emerged, it surprised many gay activists with its virulence and its power. Religious leaders as well as politicians supported grassroots anti-gay activism. This alliance worked, and it set the pattern for future anti-gay activism. The referendum to repeal the Dade County ordinance passed overwhelmingly, prompting Bryant to say, “Tonight, the laws of God and the cultural values of man have been vindicated,”⁸³⁶ and anti-gay rights groups in other states adopted some of the strategies Save Our Children had used to campaign against gay rights.⁸³⁷ In Wichita, Kansas, The National Gay Task Force was so demoralized at the prospect of a crushing defeat of proposed gay rights legislation in such a conservative area that it gave no support to the gay rights activists, while the anti-gay rights side raised more than \$50,000.⁸³⁸ In many local battles, a coalition of conservative churches, politicians, and businesses used inflammatory but effective tactics to mobilize support and turn out voters. By contrast, gay rights advocates were smaller in number, with fewer resources and weaker organizational structures to support a broad campaign. Additionally, disagreement among members of gay rights organizations lessened the effectiveness of their activism. For example, gay rights activists in Miami disagreed over whether to support a boycott of Bryant-endorsed Florida orange juice, with some fearing a

⁸³⁵ Bryant was actually named in a lawsuit brought by the mother of a victim of what was apparently an anti-gay crime. Bryant, along with other members of Save Our Children, were later dropped from the lawsuit. “Anita Bryant Is Dropped As Defendant in Lawsuit,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 1977. p. 18.

⁸³⁶ *I Just Wanted to be Somebody*.

⁸³⁷ Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney detail Save Our Children’s campaigns in *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

⁸³⁸ Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, 174-175.

backlash if their activism would depress the local economy.⁸³⁹ Though the Religious Right anti-gay campaign faced some internal conflict as well—for example, the coalition was supported by conservative black and white Protestants as well as Mormons, conservative Catholics, and conservative Jews, groups of people who hold significantly different theological positions and who, historically, have not been allies—its central aim of limiting gay rights was commonly accepted and widely supported.

The anti-gay rights movement overreached, though, when it went beyond working against extensions of civil protections to gay people to supporting legislation that would permit the outright firing of people based on their sexuality. In California, Republican state Senator John Briggs had hoped to use opposition a proposed gay rights ordinance to bolster his standing in preparation for a run for governor. When gay rights losses in other states dissuaded gay rights activists from pushing for pro-gay legislation in California, Briggs proposed a radical piece of legislation in order to drum up conservative support: Proposition 6, also known as the Briggs Initiative, would allow for filing charges against schoolteachers, teachers' aides, school administrators or counselors for “advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging or promoting private or public [homo]sexual acts... in a manner likely to come to the attention of other employees or students; or publicly and indiscreetly engaging in said acts.”⁸⁴⁰

The broad law was opposed by a much better organized gay rights coalition than met the legislation proposed in Florida and Kansas. To the work of a larger community of openly gay men and women; the credibility of Hollywood stars; and the support of the Metropolitan Community Church, a church serving gay and lesbian people, was added the support of Republican politicians who worried about the cost of implementing the law and the problem of

⁸³⁹ Clendinen, and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 301.

⁸⁴⁰ Proposition 6, *School Employees. Homosexuality. Initiative Statute*. 1978, Hastings Law Library, University of California. <http://holmes.uchastings.edu/cgi-bin/starfinder/3032/calprop.txt>

privacy protection that it raised. The response of former governor Ronald Reagan, who declared the law to be “not needed to protect our children” as well as “costly” with the potential for “undue harm,” encapsulated the Republican resistance to the bill.⁸⁴¹ The bill failed overwhelmingly, delivering the first defeat to Save Our Children.

Momentum from the defeat of the Briggs Initiative did not, however, necessarily inspire the creation of gay rights laws in either California or other areas of the country, though. Dade County, for example, did not pass a gay rights ordinance for thirty years after the original one was repealed through referendum. However, the backlash against Save Our Children destroyed Anita Bryant’s career and marriage and inspired gay rights activism across the country. Dudley Fejes says the years of the Bryant-led campaign against gay rights were marked by “the emergence of a national politically self-conscious lesbian and gay community.”⁸⁴² Fenton Johnson, in a documentary about Bryant’s campaign, reflects that Bryant “gave a face to fear and ignorance and so enabled an oppressed people to fight an enemy that until then had been veiled in shadows and whisper.”⁸⁴³ By calling out latent anti-gay sentiment, Bryant also invigorated gay people who might otherwise have remained apolitical. Similarly, the successful repeal or discouragement of gay rights laws, as well as the articulation of anti-gay rights arguments in the public sphere, inspired anti-gay rights activists to engage in other “pro-family” moral lobbying. Sharon Georgianna notes that, prior to the 1977-1978 battles against gay rights, conservative Christians had been politically silent since the embarrassment of the Scopes Trial,⁸⁴⁴ when they had been characterized by H.L. Mencken as the “booboisie,” a class of uncultured, small-minded

⁸⁴¹ Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 387.

⁸⁴² Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, 214.

⁸⁴³ *I Just Wanted to be Somebody*.

⁸⁴⁴ Sharon Georgianna, *The Moral Majority and Fundamentalism: Plausibility and Dissonance* (Lewistown, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

anti-intellectuals.⁸⁴⁵ This time, even though Bryant had been mocked and had even been a target of a pie-throwing gay rights activist while speaking on television,⁸⁴⁶ she and other anti-gay rights activists had won legally and had tapped successfully into anti-gay sentiment held by many Americans.

The activism of Save Our Children gave the Religious Right a taste of success that subsequently energized activists. In 1978, Christian Voice, an advocacy group espousing conservative religious and political principles, was formed. It warns that “[t]he forces of moral decay—sexual promiscuity and perversion, pornography, homosexuality, the disparaging of marriage, family and the role of motherhood and fatherhood—all are rampant in our schools, our culture, government and even in many churches” and that “[t]he message of moral accountability must reach every American” or else “America's Christian foundation [will] become diluted or engulfed by the forces of darkness, our nation and the world will suffer immeasurably.”⁸⁴⁷ In this way, it espouses a religious remedy for threats to heteronormativity that are connected to the decay of American prestige and exceptionalism that is shared by other Religious Right groups. This group pioneered organized evaluation of political candidates based on their adherence to religious codes, such as the Congressional Report Card and Candidates Scorecard, as well as church-based voter networks useful for dispensing information about candidates, pending legislation, and other concerns for activists. These innovations have worked so effectively that other Religious Rights groups have adopted similar tactics in their efforts to lobby for their causes.

⁸⁴⁵ For a fuller analysis of how Mencken’s reporting affected public perception of religious fundamentalists, see S. L. Harrison, “The Scopes 'Monkey Trial' Revisited: Mencken and the Editorial Art of Edmund Duffy,” *Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 55-63.

⁸⁴⁶ “Notes on People,” *The New York Times* (October 15, 1977) p. 1.

⁸⁴⁷ “About Us,” *Christian Voice* <http://www.christianvoiceonline.com/about/> July 9, 2009

A survey of all identified Religious Right groups in the United States from the late 1970s on, including Focus on the Family (1977-present), the Moral Majority (1978-1989), Concerned Women for America (1979-present), Family Research Council (1981-present), and Christian Coalition (1987-present), and The Moral Majority Coalition (2004-2007), American Values, American Family Association (1977-present), Campaign for Working Families, Traditional Values Coalition (1980-present), and the meta-organization Freedom Federation, a coalition of other Religious Right groups, including the ones listed above, which debuted in the summer of 2009,⁸⁴⁸ reveals that all of them are (or, if no longer in operation, were) opposed to homosexuality as a personal act and lobby against gay rights. They utilize direct mailing tactics, church-based information networks, and, now, internet mailings and social networking sites, to disseminate information and encourage activist participation in events from rallies to letter writing to voting. The activism started with Anita Bryant has continued in its aim to limit the rights of gay Americans and has made effective use of new technologies and more politically-savvy lobbyists to insure success. Indeed, thirty years after Bryant and Briggs failed to pass Proposition 6, Proposition 8, a California law defining marriage as between one man and one woman, passed overwhelmingly in a state where a voter-referendum recognizing gay marriage may have had the greatest chance of passage.

What has changed, though, are the explanations that anti-gay activists use to justify their participation and the rhetoric that they use to persuade an increasingly tolerant public that it should vote against the extension of gay rights. While today's Religious Right relies upon

⁸⁴⁸ “The stereotypical media-exacerbated image of the angry white evangelical will be replaced by an evangelical movement that will reconcile uncompromised values of compassion, truth with mercy, and righteousness with justice,” according to Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, an organization affiliated with the federation. (Adele Banks, “Conservative Launch New ‘Freedom Federation,’” *Religion News Service* July 1, 2009). Notably, though the group does not yet have many clearly defined goals, the overturning of same sex marriage is one of them.

appeals to social science, medicine, and individual rights, prior to the 1990s, the theological defenses of heterosexism that are preached in churches and taught in Sunday Schools were commonly deployed in public debates about sexuality. The next section of this dissertation examines that theology.

Theological Justification of Anti-Gay Activism

Religious activists root their activism in religious tenets, texts, and traditions in order to justify their activity.⁸⁴⁹ While scholars may debate whether such activism is motivated primarily by theology and secondarily by politics or primarily by politics and secondarily by theology, religious activists defend their activism as part of a holy mission.⁸⁵⁰ Conservative Protestants believe that they derive this mission specifically from their reading of Biblical texts; scholars, like believers, must recognize “the importance of the Bible in shaping the movement’s identity.”⁸⁵¹ Protestant groups rely on a few key scriptural passages to argue against homosexuality and for activism that opposes gay rights. They include:⁸⁵²

- Leviticus 20:13, in which God instructs Moses to tell the Hebrew people, “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.” Verse 23 later states, “And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation, which I cast out before

⁸⁴⁹ The “About Us” pages of various Religious Right organizations demonstrate how they deploy religious justifications to explain their activism. For example, they often reference scriptural passages in their mission statements.

⁸⁵⁰ Robert L. Wood, “Religious Culture and Political Activism,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (November 1999): 307-332.

⁸⁵¹ Timothy P. Weber, “The Two-Edged Sword: The Fundamentalist Use of the Bible,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 102.

⁸⁵² While this list, of course, does not address every use of Biblical scripture that has been to undermine the validity of homosexuality, it is comprehensive. For more information, review Timothy J. Dailey’s *The Bible, the Church, and Homosexuality: Exposing “Gay” Theology*, published by Family Research Council in 2004 and available for free download at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF05K11.pdf>.

you: for they committed all these things, and therefore I abhorred them.” A common interpretation of these verses says that, unlike other Levitical passages regulating daily life, the prohibition against same-sex intercourse was not merely a custom (such as rules of religious ceremony may be interpreted), a rule designed to differentiate between Jew and non-Jew (as the mandate for circumcision may be interpreted), or a law meant to maintain cleanliness and reduce infection and disease (as laws against intercourse during menstruation may be interpreted). For these reasons, it was not discarded with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (which is viewed by most conservative Protestants as superseding Jewish law), the expansion of salvation to non-Jews, or modern hygiene practices. Instead, the prohibition against sexual relations between men, which contemporary Protestant readers extend to lesbian encounters, is understood as a rule against “confusing” the “natural” order that God created.⁸⁵³

- Genesis 1: 27 says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Contemporary Protestants understand this to mean that humans were designed with distinct sex differences, which are equated with gender differences, that are God-ordained, not culturally created. Moreover, they were created for heterosexual partnership. “[H]eterosexuality,” in this arguments, says Cynthia Burack, “is already the sexual orientation of all people and the way they were created by God,” and only by deviating from that identity does one “become” gay.⁸⁵⁴ Verse 28 of the same chapter includes God’s command that these first people “[b]e fruitful and multiply,” a command that only makes sense if the pair is heterosexual.

⁸⁵³ Robert Gagnon, “What does the Bible say about Homosexuality?” *Pure Passion*, <http://www.vimeo.com/2126309>.

⁸⁵⁴ Cynthia A. Burack, “Contesting Compassion: Love Wins Out in the Ex-Gay Movement” (Paper, Western Political Science Association, Albuquerque, NM, March 16-18, 2006 (accessed at http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/9/7/6/0/pages97608/p97608-1.php).

Genesis 2:24, which says, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh,” is understood to be the first definition of marriage: emotional and sexual intimacy exclusively with only one opposite-sex partner. Examples of Old Testament polygamy are interpreted as deviations from the pattern established in the Garden of Eden and thus disregarded as appropriate models for human relationships. Marriage is thus defined as monogamous, heterosexual, and procreative.⁸⁵⁵

- Genesis 19 relates the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a punishment that conservative Protestant readers understand to be a response to the cities’ tolerance of homosexuality. The entire town was destroyed. Some conservative Protestants understand this story to be an example of how the sins of a few and the toleration of those sins by the majority will result in God’s wrath. Interpretations of this passage are used to argue that the private sexual encounters of individual gay men and women will result in common destruction; therefore, to prevent national tragedy, same-sex encounters must be punished or at least condemned by the nation.⁸⁵⁶ In the Christian Scriptures, Jude explains that, because of their sexual sin, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are an example of “suffering the punishment of eternal fire,” indicating that God would repeat the destruction of a city for its sexual sins even after the coming of Christ.⁸⁵⁷

⁸⁵⁵ Answers in Genesis, “Marriage and Genesis,” http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/overheads/pages/oh20010413_15.asp (accessed May 12, 2009).

⁸⁵⁶ See for example Michael Marcavage’s argument that Hurricane Katrina was God’s response to “Southern Decadence,” a gay festival (“Hurricane Katrina Destroys New Orleans Days before ‘Southern Decadence,’” *Repent America*, August 31, 2005 http://www.repentamerica.com/pr_hurricanekatrina.html).

⁸⁵⁷ The King James translation of Jude 1:7 says, “Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

- Deuteronomy 23:17 announces that there is no place for “a sodomite of the sons of Israel,” a passage used to justify the exclusion from church and civic life of people experiencing same sex attraction.
- Romans 1:26-27 says, “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.” This passage is often used as evidence that the “abhorrence” of homosexuality in Leviticus was not merely a reflection of a violent Old Testament deity but that the same condemnation of homosexuality appears in the New Testament. Additionally, the words “nature” and “natural” are interpreted to affirm the designation of gender and heterosexuality seen in the creation story in Genesis 1.⁸⁵⁸
- 1 Corinthians 6:9 declares those who engage in homosexual acts “shall not inherit the kingdom of God,” which is seen as another call to reject gay people.
- 1 Timothy 1:10 puts practicing homosexuals, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and the sexually immoral into the same category. Rather than being viewed as evidence that homosexuality is as relatively common as lying and “sexual immorality,” this text is used as evidence that homosexuals are as much as a threat to public safety—and especially to children, as the name Save Our Children suggests—as kidnappers.

Though scholars of Biblical texts have published many alternative interpretations of these passages that do not result in pronouncements against homosexual activity or orientation, such scholarship is often dismissed by conservative or fundamentalist believers as simply “politically

⁸⁵⁸ Robert Gagnon, “Barack Obama’s Disturbing Misreading of the Sermon on the Mount as Support for Homosexual Sex,” *Republicans for Family Values* (October 23, 2008) <http://republicansforfamilyvalues.com/category/bible-and-homosexuality/>.

correct.” Moreover, alternative understandings of these texts are viewed as attacks not just on heterosexuality but also as efforts to undermine a particular method of understanding scripture, and, in response, conservative Protestants must mount “an organized and often militant movement to protect the Bible from all its enemies.”⁸⁵⁹ They prefer a Bible hermeneutics that assumes that the current English translations of the text is a whole, unchanging, accurate, and applicable letter from God to present-day humanity; such an understanding demonstrates a “devout but nondoctrinaire respect for the Bible.”⁸⁶⁰ For interpreters of the Bible, who use proof-texting as a method for understanding scripture⁸⁶¹ and who are influenced by Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which posits that truth is unchanging across time and culture and that all people possess the ability to rationally understand it, the condemnation of homosexual acts is clear and unequivocal. These adherents promote a reading of Biblical texts that condemns homosexual activity (if not orientation) and calls upon the nation to protect itself by likewise condemning gay people.⁸⁶²

According to some Religious Right leaders, same-sex attraction is incompatible with Christianity, so that “resolv[ing] these tendencies [of same-sex attraction] through homosexual

⁸⁵⁹ Weber, “The Two-Edged Sword,” 102.

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁶¹ Proof-texting is the practice of selecting Biblical quotations to support a proposition apart from their larger context within the Bible. According to theologian L. William Countryman, proof-texting remains a comfortable way of understanding difficult Biblical texts because it does not challenge dominant ideology. He writes: “[A]s long as the Bible is assumed to support the status quo, no further questions need to be asked. In other words, the culture religion is not actually *reading* the Bible, but only mining it for confirmation of the status quo.” (L. William Countryman, “The Bible, Heterosexism, and the American Public Discussion of Sexual Orientation,” in *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life*, edited by Kathleen M. Sands (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175).

⁸⁶² In the most extreme cases, this perspective is used to justify violence against gay men and women. For example, in an explanation of his role in the 1999 murders of Gary Matson and Winfield Mowder, Benjamin Matthew Williams said, “I’m not guilty of murder... I’m guilty of obeying the laws of the creator.” “You obey a government of man until there is a conflict,” Williams said in a post-arrest interview. “Then you obey a higher law.” According to Williams, who also confessed to the arson of three synagogues and an abortion clinic before committing suicide in his jail cell, “It’s part of the faith... So many people claim to be Christians and complain about all these things their religion says are a sin, but they’re not willing to do anything about it. They don’t have the guts” (Gary Delsohn and Sam Stanon, “I’m Guilty of Obeying the Laws of the Creator,” *Salon*, November 8, 1999, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/11/08/hate/index.html>).

behavior, taking on a homosexual identity, and involvement in the homosexual lifestyle is considered destructive, as it distorts God's intent for the individual and is thus sinful,"⁸⁶³ while others accept same-sex attraction as a tendency that must be corrected or controlled.⁸⁶⁴ Thus, many in the Religious Right argue for two choices for people experiencing same-sex attraction: celibacy or reparative therapy to re-orient someone to be predominantly heterosexual, with the eventual goal of either heterosexual marriage or celibacy.⁸⁶⁵ Both choices reflect that homosexuality is understood as a sin, one that is either a choice that the person makes or an element of his or her psychological makeup that can be resisted or revised.

While participation in homosexual acts is understood to be clearly sinful, the nature of that sin is less clear. Though some groups advocate exorcism, suggesting that homosexuality is caused by demonic forces,⁸⁶⁶ homosexuality is grouped with other sexual practices, not demonic influences, listed as deviant in Leviticus (sex with a close relative or sex with an animal, for example⁸⁶⁷) and with fornication, idolatry, theft, drunkenness, and extortion, as listed in 1

⁸⁶³ Exodus International, "Statement on Homosexuality," *Policy Statements* <http://exodusinternational.org/content/view/34/118/>.

⁸⁶⁴ Says Focus on the Family, "While we do not believe an individual typically 'chooses' his or her same sex-attractions, we do believe that those who struggle with unwanted same-sex sexual temptation can choose to steward their impulses in a way that aligns with their faith convictions" ("Counseling for Unwanted Same-Sex Attractions: The Right to Seek Change and Live in Alignment with Chosen Values," *Issues Analysis*, December 31, 2009, <http://www.citizenlink.org/FOSI/homosexuality/overcoming/A000008047.cfm>).

⁸⁶⁵ According to Exodus International, successful resolution of same-sex attraction is "measured by a growing capacity to turn away from temptations, a reconciling of one's identity with Jesus Christ, being transformed into His image. This enables growth towards Godly heterosexuality. Exodus recognizes that a lifelong and healthy marriage as well as a Godly single life are good indicators of this transformation" ("Healing," *Policy Statements*, <http://exodusinternational.org/content/view/34/118/>).

⁸⁶⁶ Jeff Christoffersen reports on an alleged "casting out of demons" at a church in Bridgeport, Connecticut ("Church Holds Homosexual Exorcism," *The Register Citizen* (Torrington, CT), June 24, 2009; <http://www.registercitizen.com/articles/2009/06/24/news/doc4a42a4b35665b803687354.txt>; accessed June 24, 2009). A video of the event is available on youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhedHERfcXk>.

⁸⁶⁷ Perhaps the most notorious comparison between homosexuality and bestiality came from former Republican Senator Rick Santorum. Though she did not quote him directly in her article, AP reporter Lara Jakes Jordan recorded the following interaction between herself and Santorum:

SANTORUM: In every society, the definition of marriage has not ever to my knowledge included homosexuality. That's not to pick on homosexuality. It's not, you know, man on child, man on dog, or whatever the case may be. It is one thing. And when you destroy that you have a dramatic impact on the quality —

Corinthians by others. Regardless of the context of its biblical condemnation, though, homosexuality alone remains the subject of emphatic condemnation. The Religious Right has undertaken little political lobbying on the other sins listed in Biblical texts. Homosexuality is a unique sin,⁸⁶⁸ not because it is less common than drunkenness or fornication (though it undoubtedly is), but because it is closely tied to the identity of the one performing it,⁸⁶⁹ which makes condemning it without condemning the person doing it very difficult.

Religious Right groups attempt to do this by simultaneously denying uncontrollable forces (such as genes⁸⁷⁰) and instead focusing the responsibility for homosexuality on factors that the one engaged in same-sex activity can control, even if he or she did not instigate them, such as family dysfunction, commonly in the form of a controlling mother or a distant father.⁸⁷¹

AP: I'm sorry, I didn't think I was going to talk about "man on dog" with a United States senator, it's sort of freaking me out.

SANTORUM: And that's sort of where we are in today's world, unfortunately. ("Excerpt from Santorum Interview," *USA Today* (April 23, 2003); http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-04-23-santorum-excerpt_x.htm).

⁸⁶⁸ I have found no record, however, of speakers claiming that homosexuality *is* the sin mentioned in Matthew 12 and Mark 3, but I have found numerous examples of writers assuring readers that homosexuality, though a sin, *is not* an unforgivable sin. This suggests that those reminding readers that homosexuality is forgivable are writing in response to unwritten but clear anti-gay sentiments that might taint the image of loving forgiveness that Religious Right leaders want to project.

⁸⁶⁹ Many in the Religious Right anti-gay rights movement "disarticulate same-sex desire from gay identity" so that, in turn, their attack on same-sex desire is not articulated as an attack on the person who feels it (Burack, "Contesting Compassion").

⁸⁷⁰ Such arguments often invoke research by The National Association for the Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) (A. Dean Byrd, "'Homosexuality is Not Hardwired,' Concludes Dr. Francis S. Collins, Head Of The Human Genome Project," "*Born That Way*" Theory, February 8, 2008, <http://www.narth.com/docs/nothardwired.html>).

⁸⁷¹ For example, in response to the question "Do you believe homosexuality is a choice?," Love Won Out's website says:

We do not believe anyone chooses his or her same-sex attractions. We concur with the American Psychological Association's position that homosexuality is likely developmental in nature and caused by a "complex interaction of environmental, cognitive and biological factors" (www.apa.org). We would also agree with the American Psychiatric Association when it states "some people believe that sexual orientation is innate and fixed; however, sexual orientation develops across a person's lifetime." If you ever hear us use the word "choice," it is in relation to men and women who struggle with unwanted same-sex attractions choosing to steward their impulses in a way that aligns with their faith convictions. ("Questions," *Love Won Out*, <http://www.lovewonout.com/questions/>).

In her analysis of a Love Won Out conference, Cynthia Burack notes that the group advocates a developmental narrative of sexual development, with homosexuality developing in response to poor parenting—usually defined as failure of parents to model traditional gender and sexual roles ("Contesting Compassion").

Additionally, the language of “sin” allows the Religious Right to place blame on the individual but credit religion with redemption. According to Exodus International, the most well known Christian ministry claiming to help people who want to rid themselves of unwanted same-sex attraction, “Christ offers a healing alternative to those with homosexual tendencies. [Exodus International] upholds redemption for the homosexual person as the process whereby sin's power is broken, and the individual is freed to know and experience true identity as discovered in Christ and His Church.”⁸⁷² According to the organization, heterosexuality is “God's creative intent for humanity” and “homosexual expression” is “outside of God’s will,”⁸⁷³ but individuals can be “healed” from their unwanted attraction if they have “motivation... and self-determination to change based upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”⁸⁷⁴ Thus, the individual sins, but Jesus, along with an “up by your own bootstraps” mentality, saves.

According to John C. Green, this view is often espoused by “general purpose” groups, the main focus of which is not to fight against gay rights but to use antigay rhetoric to rally members to the greater cause—usually the cause of “family values.” These groups may advocate reparative therapy, which seeks to reorient people who claim same-sex attraction away from those of the same sex and, ideally, toward heterosexual marriage and monogamy.⁸⁷⁵ The testimonials of those who have reoriented themselves primarily toward heterosexuality serve to reinforce the point that sexuality is a choice.⁸⁷⁶

Some Religious Right believers concede that sexual orientation is not a choice but is instead formed by genetics or some other unchanging aspect of a person. Those who hold this

⁸⁷² Exodus International, “Statement on Homosexuality,” *Policy Statements* <http://exodus.to/content/view/34/118/>.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷⁴ Exodus International, “Healing,” *Policy Statements* <http://exodus.to/content/view/34/118/>.

⁸⁷⁵ “NARTH Position Statements,” *NARTH*, February 27, 2008, <http://www.narth.com/menus/positionstatements.html>.

⁸⁷⁶ Burack, “Getting What ‘We’ Deserve.”

view may not recommend therapy aimed at re-orienting a person but rather urge celibacy, arguing that, while same-sex orientation may not be a choice, same-sex activity is. Holders of this view may even serve as defenders of gay people as inheritors of “‘benign immutable difference’ (‘can’t change it, can’t help it’).”⁸⁷⁷ In the classic “hate the sin/love the sinner” argument,⁸⁷⁸ such believers separate the gay person from gay behavior and accept the gay person into communion provided that he or she remain celibate and refrain from other behavior that would suggest acceptance of sexual difference.⁸⁷⁹ This scenario—closeted homosexual feelings and celibacy—is the most charitable option the Religious Right can offer those who cannot change their attractions. Surina Khan calls it an “attack on homosexuality in kinder, gentler terms.”⁸⁸⁰

The theology used to justify anti-gay activism varies from simple Biblical hermeneutics that look to the creation myth, ancient ritual law, and Biblical history for other examples of the exclusion or punishment of homosexuality to more complex understandings of homosexual activity, if not identity, as a choice that individual believers, aided by the supernatural, can accept or reject. Whether gay desire can be reformed into appropriate heterosexual desire, whether gay people choose their sin or are afflicted by a genetic abnormality or have a peculiar

⁸⁷⁷ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 3.

⁸⁷⁸ For example, Anita Bryant defended herself against accusations of bigotry by saying, “I don’t hate anyone. I love them enough to tell them the truth and also to provide the help for them to have a way out” (*I Just Wanted to be Somebody*). The structure of this argument separates the individual person committing the same-sex sex act from the act itself, effectively depriving people of an identity rooted in sexuality.

⁸⁷⁹ For example, in 2005, the Catholic Church adopted the position that admission to seminary or to religious orders was prohibited to those “who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or who support the so-called ‘gay culture’” (Congregation for Catholic Education, “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders,” originally published in the December 7, 2005 *L’Osservatore Romano*, English Edition and archived by the Eternal Word Television Network, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/ccehomosex.HTM>).

⁸⁸⁰ Surina Kahn, “Calculated Compassion: How The Ex-Gay Movement Serves The Right's Attack on Democracy,” *Public Eye: The Website of Political Research Associates*, 1998, <http://www.publiceye.org/equality/x-gay/X-Gay.html>, 2.

spiritual weakness may make a difference in how members of the conservative Christian community respond to them, conservative religious believers hold attitudes toward homosexuality that are overwhelmingly negative.⁸⁸¹ The reason for rejections makes little difference to those who desire to belong to a conservative theological community while also acting on their same-sex desires. For them, no place exists.⁸⁸²

Academic researchers often fail to adequately consider the role of theological belief as an explanation for individual or collective action; it is often only considered in ethnographies and biographies, when the researcher has spent extended time with a group of believers or an individual believer and may have a sense, through interaction, of the value of theology to that group or person. Otherwise, researchers look to other explanations—status discontent, political resource mobilization theory, and other sociological theories—to explain behavior.

Yet theology does matter. In “God in America: Why Theology is Not Simply the Concern of Philosophers,” Paul Froese and Christopher D. Bader argue that theology must be considered in assessing American religion because “earthly images of God indicate how believers perceive the ultimate objects of their religious devotion.... For this reason, differences of opinions about God matter deeply to believers and can inspire life changes, social movements, and societal conflicts.”⁸⁸³ For example, among men seeking to reorient their same sex attraction to predominantly opposite sex attraction in a study by Dr. Robert Spitzer, a gay rights advocate

⁸⁸¹ Brian Laythe, Deborah G. Finkel, Robert G. Bringle, and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, “Religious Fundamentalism as a Predictor of Prejudice: A Two-Component Model,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2002): 631.

⁸⁸² This presents a particular difficulty for gay believers in a conservative theology. They may find acceptance and appreciation for their sexuality within a liberal church—but only if they are willing to accept the other liberal doctrines of the denomination. Eventually, they may choose to forfeit their place in a religious home at all, illustrating James Darsey’s point that the “hegemonic quality” of conservative faith’s refusal to recognize gay Christians, a refusal historically supported by law and science, “is not what is surprising.” Rather, “[w]hat is remarkable is the degree to which it illustrates how the oppressed become co-conspirators in their own oppression” because they “repudiat[e] access to moral argument either by self-condemnation or excommunication” (*The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 176).

⁸⁸³ Paul Froese and Christopher D. Bader, “God in America: Why Theology is Not Simply the Concern of Philosophers,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 4 (2007): 465.

who was pivotal in removing homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* in 1973,⁸⁸⁴ all were religious and most believed that their religious and sexual identities were in conflict; religion proved to be a major motivator for personal change.⁸⁸⁵ For those working as activists against gay rights, their understanding of homosexuality as a personal sin and a potential source for national destruction has likewise motivated them.

Theology alone does not explain behavior, even if religious believers prefer to think of their actions as inspired by God rather than by common prejudices or other motivations. More specifically, despite the Religious Right's claim that anti-gay activism is Biblically-mandated and not a result of personal prejudice or "homophobia,"

Protestantism as cultural religion does not read the Bible primarily for its own sake or in the hope of new spiritual or religious illumination; and it certainly does not read it for its revolutionary potential. It reads it rather for legal purposes and to confirm existing presuppositions. Indeed, one might say that the very purpose of a culture religion is to serve as a kind of chaplaincy to the status quo... [the purpose of which is to] sanctify the idealized familiar.⁸⁸⁶

Particular readings of Biblical texts, then, serve to support already-held positions by claiming they are God-ordained, to "reassure the public that the idealized status quo is the divinely intended order of the world," a reassurance that those eager to hear it will be unlikely to question.⁸⁸⁷ Anti-gay theology, then, comes after anti-gay sentiment—long after, according to John Boswell. In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, he argues that "[i]t is

⁸⁸⁴ Religious Right anti-gay activists are adamant that the choice to re-categorize homosexuality was a result of "politicized cultural decline" (Cynthia Burack, "Contesting Compassion").

⁸⁸⁵ Robert L. Spitzer, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 32, no. 5 (October 2003): 403-417.

⁸⁸⁶ Countryman, "The Bible, Heterosexism, and the American Public Discussion of Sexual Orientation," 169-170.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

misleading to characterize Christianity as somehow particularly liable to antigay feelings or doctrine.”⁸⁸⁸ He traces the development of anti-gay sentiments in modern Christianity, noting that prejudices that were common in the broader pagan culture, not early Christianity’s commitment to Jewish sexual law or new teachings from the emerging Christian sect, are the source of anti-gay bigotry that has come to be seen by conservative believers as intrinsic to Christianity. Other explanations, then, should be considered.

Alternative Theories of Anti-Gay Activism

Six main arguments have been offered to explain for current activity, including anti-gay activism, in the Religious Right: (1) It is a defense of the declining prestige of conservative religion; (2) It is an expression of stores of political resources that had been pooling since the Scopes Trial; (3) It is motivated by genuine concern about particular social causes; (4) It is the result of corporate populism, so that the Religious Right serves “as a front for the acquisition of political power by special economic interests”⁸⁸⁹; (5) It is the result of sociological or psychological dysfunction on the part of adherents; (6) It is a defense “of a culturally coherent life-style and world view.”⁸⁹⁰ The next portion of this paper explores each theory more fully.

A Status Politics Explanation

In his 1946 work *Essays in Sociology*, Max Weber suggested that, along with economic class and political affiliation, people could be categorized into status groups, that is, groups that

⁸⁸⁸ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 127-128.

⁸⁸⁹ James Wechsler. “Introduction,” in *Thunder on the Right*, edited by Alan Crawford (New York: Pantheon, 1981), xiv.

⁸⁹⁰ Charles L. Harper and Kevin Leicht, “Status Politics and Beyond,” in *New Christian Politics*, edited by David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe (Macon, GA.: Mercer, 1984), 104.

hold common claims to social prestige.⁸⁹¹ Applying this concept to 1950s America, Seymour M. Lipset and Richard Hofstadter recognized how such groups sought political power through the use of “status politics”: by harnessing the resentment of those who wish to maintain or improve their status, political figures are able to rally support for their causes.⁸⁹² According to Lipset and Earl Raab, this “politics of resentment” is especially profitable for American political leaders, for “the problem of status displacement has been an enduring characteristic of American life” due to the “fluidity” of American society.⁸⁹³

For conservative Christians today, the unfamiliar religions appearing in the United States with the advent of immigrants from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the emergence of secular modernism and post-modernism, and public expressions of and toleration for sexual difference represent a threat to the place of conservative Christianity. Symbolic acts, such as a proposed holiday honoring gay rights activist and assassinated politician Harvey Milk, are interpreted by conservative Christians as an effort on the part of both the government and the broader culture to delegitimize conservative Christianity and replace it with multiculturalism, secularism, and acceptance of sexual difference.⁸⁹⁴ In this way, fundamentalist Christians express concern that they are treated like outsiders, a terrible insult to those who understand themselves to be authentic gatekeepers of America’s soul. Notes William R. Hutchison in his analysis of pluralism in the 1960s and after, “The unitive or counterpluralist impulse ... remained alive and vigorous in the final decades of

⁸⁹¹ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

⁸⁹² Gerard A. Brandmeyer and R. Serge Denisoff, “Status Politics: An Appraisal of the Application of a Concept,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 5-11.

⁸⁹³ Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 24.

⁸⁹⁴ See, for example, SaveCalifornia’s campaign against the proposed state legislation to honor Harvey Milk with a day of recognition (“Urge the Governor to Veto ‘Harvey Milk Gay Day’ for Schoolchildren,” *SaveCalifornia*, <http://savecalifornia.com/oppose-harvey-milk-gay-day-sb-572.html>).

the twentieth century not because of extremists ... but because of a larger ‘religious right’ that was predominantly white and Protestant.”⁸⁹⁵ In order to manage their anxiety about this decline in their prestige, fundamentalist Christians have sought political power, hoping to legislate a permanent place for themselves in the American hierarchy of prestige.

The application of status politics theory has not been whole-heartedly accepted as an explanation for the Religious Right by scholars in the field. Wald, Owen, and Hill caution that researchers cannot infer status discontent without “direct questioning on that topic,” which many scholars avoid. While “status discontent should be treated as an attitudinal property exhibited in varying degrees by persons at all levels of the social structure,” scholars should measure it via “direct questioning on that topic,” rather than inferring it.⁸⁹⁶ In their research, Wald Owen, and Hill did just this, discovering that feelings that traditional social groups are not appropriately appreciated “does apparently motivate support for contemporary moral reform movements,” even more so than economic concerns and sometimes even when these feelings conflict with economic concerns.⁸⁹⁷ Their quantitative research supports my own rhetorical analysis of much Religious Right writing. Wald, Owen, and Hill note that status discontent is “corporate and referential”⁸⁹⁸—that is, people resent not just their lost prestige but also that of whole groups. Anger at perceived displacement fueled a letter to Representative John D. Dingell, in which the voter complained:

God is a jealous God and I know he is not going to bless a country that has a
Congress that prays to a Hindu God. What are we thinking?... I don’t understand

⁸⁹⁵ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2003), 219.

⁸⁹⁶ Kenneth D. Wald, Dennis E. Owen, and Samuel S. Hill, Jr., “Evangelical Politics and Status Issues,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (1989): 4-5.

⁸⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

this. I can tell you this something needs to be done. We need someone to have a back bone and stand up for us Christians [sic].⁸⁹⁹

In this letter, the author explicitly links God’s blessing of a nation and its monotheism, and the letter ends with the resentment-filled complaint that “someone” needs to do “something” for the oppressed Christians. In their research, Wald, Owen, and Hill discovered that “[p]eople who felt that society accorded too little respect to groups representing traditional values—churchgoers, ministers, people who worked hard and obeyed the law, people like themselves—were indeed more positively disposed to support the agenda, organizations and activities of the *New Christian Right*.”⁹⁰⁰ This comes as no surprise, for if this were not the case, the Religious Right would not so deliberately foster this kind of resentment. It was rewarded for its work in 2007 when the Department of Justice, under Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez, launched the First Freedom Project, an initiative to increase prosecution of religious discrimination cases.⁹⁰¹

A final example suffices to illustrate how imbedded in the rhetoric such thinking is. In May 2007, Tony Perkins of Family Research Council sent an email alert titled “Family Values or the Liberal Status Quo?” in which he railed against the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a “hate crimes” bill that extended coverage of current federal hate crimes legislation to include discrimination based on sexuality but not, in the final version, on gender identity. In his email encouraging readers to work against the bill, Perkins appealed to their fear that their traditional values and, in fact, they themselves, were not receiving due respect under the law.

Wrote Perkins:

⁸⁹⁹“Subject: Hindu Prayer,” *Letters to Leaders*, July 15, 2007, http://www.congress.org/congressorg/bio/userletter/?id=329&letter_id=1301225761.

⁹⁰⁰ Wald, Owen, and Hill, “Evangelical Politics,” 12. Italics in the original.

⁹⁰¹United States Department of Justice, “DOJ Launches Initiative to Protect Religious Freedom: *The First Freedom Project*,” *First Freedom*, <http://www.firstfreedom.gov/>.

This bill creates a caste system within American society where those who fit a certain category—ranging from race, disability, gender to sexual orientation and transgendered—would be seen as deserving special legal protection. The bill is most notable for the millions of Americans it leaves out, meaning if you or I are a victim of a violent crime—we matter less.

Perkins is creating a “us/them” dichotomy and asking his readers to identify as a person being devalued and even deprived of protection under the law. His purpose is specifically to derail efforts to extend protection to queer people, as his other emails on the topic reveal, and, in this mailing, his commitment to the rhetorical strategy of making readers feel belittled and undervalued is so strong that he fails to see that the division he creates is not straight versus homosexual. Instead, his email actually places white, nondisabled, straight men into one category and everyone else into the “other” category. While Perkins’ intention is probably not to suggest that women, people with disabilities, and racial minorities do not deserve to be protected against discrimination, this is what his email says.⁹⁰² Notably, he did not retract this statement. I include it as one example of how readily appeals to status discontent are made. When the object of resentment is constructed as a wealthy, childless, selfish gay man whose life goal is to optimize sexual pleasure, despite the public costs of doing so, or lesbians who selfishly reject their proper roles as wives and mothers in pursuit of pleasure, the resentment is even easier to muster.⁹⁰³

A Political Resources Explanation

Resource mobilization theory holds that a group moves when it has the resources to do so. Stephen D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamney suggest that the Religious Right gained power in

⁹⁰² To credit Tony Perkins with a commitment to the protection of racial minorities, women, and people with disabilities is generous. Perkins’ disparaging comments about the Equal Rights Amendment do not suggest that he seeks a legislative solution to discrimination against women.

⁹⁰³ Jean Hardisty, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

the public sphere in 1980s because it had acquired the knowledge, abilities, and resources that it lacked previously.⁹⁰⁴ Additionally, this was a time of demographic growth in the politically and religiously conservative U.S. South and decline in traditionally liberal areas of the population.⁹⁰⁵ The rise of the electronic church—that is, televangelists and radio stations and television networks devoted to Christian programming—was an expression of the expertise and financial resources of religious people. Though H.L. Mencken had described fundamentalist believers as poor and uneducated, by the 1980s, the socioeconomic status of many religious conservatives had increased, and this rise contributed to the creation of Christian markets that in turn fueled greater wealth for at least some of the faithful: Christian book retailers, tourist agencies, retreat centers, and clothing lines are just a few examples. In the 1980s, direct mailing campaigns were innovations that allowed for the mass mobilization of conservative believers, and today the internet functions in a similar fashion to disperse information, rally voters, and connect believers. At the same time, old-fashioned human-to-human contact has been revitalized by church structures, particularly useful to megachurches but also used by smaller congregations, that divide attendees into small groups or house churches for studies of parachurch materials and Bible passages as well as service projects. From the perspective of faith, the church—that is, the body of believers—is a source of power.

As Robert Putnam noted in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of Community in America*, “faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America.”⁹⁰⁶ Repeatedly, researchers have demonstrated that, in a nation where many people go to church and other voluntary associations are weak,

⁹⁰⁴ Stephen D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamney, “Mobilizing Support for the Moral Majority,” *Psychological Reports* 56 (June 1985): 987-94.

⁹⁰⁵ Charles R. Wilson, editor. *Religion in the South* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1985).

⁹⁰⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of Community in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 22.

“congregational life serves as the key producer of social capital in America.”⁹⁰⁷ When the public square is empty, it may find itself filled with believers who do not have to compete with other groups for power.

During the last quarter of the twentieth-century and the first years of the twenty-first century, the public square may have become more hospitable to religion, particularly at the state level, as Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke write in the introduction of *Representing God at the State House: Religion and Politics in the American States*, a series of case studies of religious activism in state legislatures. Several factors create a more inviting environment: greater state budgets; a shift of power away from the federal government and toward state governments, especially over welfare policy; the availability of lobbyists; a willingness of the larger political sphere to tolerate religious activism, in part due to the success of religious activists in the Civil Rights Movement; and the fact that controversial policy decisions such as those about abortion and same-sex marriage are made at the state level.⁹⁰⁸ In this atmosphere, the increasing political resources of the Religious Right could be exercised with less opposition than conservative religious and political believers may have previously faced. Additionally, at the state level, the party control of a state government, the level of professionalization of its legislature (which correlates to the level of access that lobbyists have to legislators), and the overall political culture of a state government—whether it sees the state government as a moralizing force, a force that interferes with individual autonomy, or something else—all

⁹⁰⁷ Corwin Smidt, “Introduction” in *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2003), 14.

⁹⁰⁸ Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke, “Introduction,” in *Representing God at the Statehouse: Religion and Politics in the American States*, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), vii-viii.

contribute to the reception that politically-active believers will receive.⁹⁰⁹ Finally, in the battle against gay rights, as the early overwhelming successes of Save Our Children illustrate, the opponents lacked the political resources to mobilize that the Religious Right were deploying.⁹¹⁰

Despite the Religious Right's increased activity in politics, many religious activist groups "operate without some of the tools of their secular counterparts."⁹¹¹ This is because, unlike lobbyist groups that aim to protect or advance purely economic interests, they are often not as well-financed and because religious consciousness prohibits "influence peddling."⁹¹² While the choice to employ lobbying tactics that differ from, say, the gambling industry's tactics, may handicap religious activists, it also helps maintain "a distinctive political witness" that can energize a grassroots organization.⁹¹³ Additionally, in battles against gay rights activists, the Religious Right engages David versus Goliath imagery, depicting themselves as populist outsiders fighting against well-financed, politically-connected Washington insiders.⁹¹⁴ The distinctiveness of this message is critical to Religious Right success, even as believers attempt to form coalitions with politically like-minded groups. Warn Kevin R. den Dulk and Allen D. Hertzke, "[A]s Christian Right activists assimilate into the political process...they risk the loss of what often happens when movements are institutionalized, namely the loss of a distinctive and

⁹⁰⁹ Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke, "Conclusion," in *Representing God at the Statehouse: Religion and Politics in the American States*, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 229-231.

⁹¹⁰ For example, Lambda Legal, a nonprofit legal defense organization serving gays and lesbians, fought to come into existence for nearly twenty years before, in 1973, it was granted legal status as a nonprofit. Even then, though, according to Lambda Legal, achieving courtroom and legislative success "was an uphill battle" (Lambda Legal, "About Us: History," <http://www.lambdalegal.org/about-us/history.html>).

⁹¹¹ Kevin R. den Dulk and Allen D. Hertzke, "Conclusion," in *Representing God at the Statehouse: Religion and Politics in the American States*, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Allen D. Hertzke (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 227.

⁹¹² *Ibid.*

⁹¹³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁹¹⁴ James C. Dobson, "The Christian Response to the Homosexual Agenda," *Dr. Dobson's Monthly Letter*, June 1998, <http://www2.focusonthefamily.com/docstudy/newsletters/A000000804.cfm>.

independent critical voice in American politics.” Political success brings with it “the question of whether they can speak as prophets and politicians at the same time.”⁹¹⁵

Rhys H. Williams identifies religious language as “a cultural resource for those social groups that have few conventional political resources, such as money, votes, or insider connection.”⁹¹⁶ Mid-century, this description may have described conservative believers, yet, under those circumstances, the Religious Right did not emerge as a political force. As illustrated by Save Our Children, anti-gay rights groups had, from the 1970s through the 1990s, significantly better resources than the poorly-organized, poorly-funded gay rights advocates against whom they campaigned. Though their religious critics may complain that such groups, in winning political power lost their prophetic voices, Religious Right groups continue to stress their religious

An Issue-Based Explanation of Religious Right Activity

By calling themselves “Values Voters,” members of the Religious Right frame their commitment to particular “values,” which are really better understood as political positions, and the Religious Right has proven effective at using “values language” and terms such as “family” and “life” to garner support for particular political causes such as anti-gay rights legislation or anti-abortion laws. Single issues seem to be very important for members of the Religious Right, and the issues of highest concern for them are moral issues rather than economic or foreign policy ones, though the Religious Right often makes efforts to turn economic or foreign policy issues into moral ones by emphasizing their effects on the family.⁹¹⁷ Concerns about moral

⁹¹⁵ de Dulk and Hertzke, “Conclusion,” 237.

⁹¹⁶ Williams, “Language of God,” 184.

⁹¹⁷ Many Religious Right groups oppose taxing earnings and instead support an increased across-the-board sales tax at the point-of-purchase, the position that Arkansas minister-turned-governor-turned-presidential-hopeful Mike Huckabee advocated during his 2008 primary bid. (For details of the plan Huckabee supported, see “What is the Fair Tax,” *Americans for Fair Tax*, Fairtax.org <http://www.fairtax.org/site/PageServer>.) Agitation against welfare policies is sometimes adopted as a “family values” issue because, presumably, welfare undermines the motivation

issues drive support for the Religious Right. In an analysis of local support for the Moral Majority, Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey conclude that “[t]he single strongest predictor of support...was a set of conservative positions on social issues.”⁹¹⁸

Sexuality is such an issue. Research by James Stoutenborough, Donald P. Haider-Markel, and Mahally D. Allen on the influence of Supreme Court gay rights cases on public opinion suggests that “the policy implications of a decision are likely to play an important role in determining whether or not the decision influences public opinion”⁹¹⁹—that is, when Americans anticipate that a new law or court ruling will affect their lives, they are more likely to pay attention to its development and, if they dislike the anticipated result, that it will protest it or work against its implementation. Additionally, according to Stoutenborough, Haider-Markel, and Allen, to have the most effect, the cases need to have “significant national implications” and be “widely covered” in the national media.⁹²⁰ The more members of the Religious Right hear about potentially dangerous consequences of a gay rights law, the more they are likely to have negative feelings about the law.

Such concern about specific issues drives voting habits of the Religious Right. Among moralist Republicans, those whose concern about moral issues determines their support for a candidate, is a strong tendency to evaluate a leader based upon his or her adherence to positions

for marriage, especially among women of color. Additionally, the Religious Right protests the “death tax” and “marriage penalty” as “anti-family.” “Anti-family” foreign policies such as AIDS-reduction programs that do not focus on abstinence are likewise criticized. On foreign policy generally, the Religious Right is overwhelmingly supportive of strong U.S. military interventions and armament.

⁹¹⁸ Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey, “Reasonableness,” 271.

⁹¹⁹ James Stoutenborough, Donald P. Haider-Markel, and Mahalley D. Allen, “Reassessing the Impact of Supreme Court Decisions on Public Opinion: Gay Civil Rights Cases,” *Political Research Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2006): 430.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*

on specific issues rather than his or her overall leadership qualities.⁹²¹ The rise of the Religious Right, in fact, corresponds to the emergence in the 1970s of feminism and the gay rights movement, and the Religious Right itself defines its mission as a response to these “threats” and works specifically against the issues that these other movements work for. An issues-based explanation of the Religious Right notes that the relationship between the rise of the Religious Right and the prevalence of the “sins” (or, in more recent Religious Right literature, “social ills”) against which it fights—abortion, gay rights, no-fault divorce—is not merely correlated but causal. This viewpoint recognizes that the Religious Right may be, in fact, a reasonable response to the cultural changes of the 1970s through the present.⁹²²

A Cultural Populism Explanation of Religious Right Activity

Much has been made of the relationship between the Republican Party and religious conservatives, and while religious conservatives are likely to be Republicans, they are not without criticism of the party. Some of the difficulty between the Republican Party and the Religious Right may, in fact, be over the issue of conservatism—that is, for many religious believers, the Republican Party is not conservative or religious enough. For example, according to data presented by the firm Fabrizio, McLaughlin, and Associates, the percent of Republicans self-identifying as Protestant has decreased,⁹²³ while the percent identifying themselves as “moralists” (that is, those with a “[l]aser-like focus on moral issues”) has increased.⁹²⁴ Thirteen percent of Republicans, a significant minority, consider their primary reason for identifying as Republican to be “Moral/Religious Issues/Family Values.” Nineteen percent believe that the

⁹²¹ Fabrizio, McLaughlin, and Associates. “The Elephant Looks in the Mirror 10 years Later: A Critical Look at Today’s GOP,” June 2007, <http://www.fabmac.com/6-07%20National%20GOP%20Media%20Presentation%20Handout.pdf>, 35.

⁹²² Clyde Wilcox, Ted G. Jelen, and Sharon Linzey, “Rethinking the Reasonableness of the Religious Right,” *Review of Religious Research* 36, no. 3 (March 1995).

⁹²³ Fabrizio, McLaughlin, and Associates, “The Elephant,” 14.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

issues of abortion and stem cell research, moral issues, religion, integrity, and traditional marriage and family values best define the party.⁹²⁵ Moralist Republicans are also more likely than non-moralists to agree that an employer should be able to terminate an employee based solely on his or her sexual orientation, though, notably, most moralists do not hold this view.⁹²⁶ Moralist Republicans are more likely to hold that gays and lesbians should not serve openly in the military and to agree with the statement “Public policy should not contradict God’s Law.”⁹²⁷ In fact, seventy-six percent of moralists agreed with this claim while only about forty-five percent of other Republicans held this view. This gap between the religiously and politically conservative members of the Republican Party and members who do not identify as moralists contributes to internal strife, as evidenced by the fact that a majority of Republicans *except* moralists agreed with the statement “The Republican Party has spent too much time focusing on moral issues such as ... gay marriage and should instead be spending time focusing on economic issues such as taxes and government spending.” Seventy-two percent of moralists disagreed with this statement—but sixty-five percent of non-moralists agreed with it.⁹²⁸ This suggests a strong division within the party.

Many moralists adamantly maintain religiously-inspired political views even in the face of opposition from other Republicans, refusing to abandon or modify ideological positions that may alienate moderate voters. Notes Rhys H. Williams,

[A]ctors who have framed their claims as moral imperatives cannot easily “ratchet down” their demands to accept less on the grounds that it is a necessary compromise. To do so amounts to the selling out of a moral principle and “deal

⁹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

making” in the worst sense of the word. So, while religious language may get actors without conventional political resources to the public table, it may also lock them into struggles that cannot succeed completely.⁹²⁹

While “[m]oral conservatism ... serves the interests of secular conservatives through the Republican party”⁹³⁰ by echoing the traditional views of conservative politics and economics, any corporate populism argument must consider how and why the Religious Right is not simply the Republican Right.

If the Religious Right is not merely an arm of the Republican Party, this does not mean that the emergence of the Religious Right and a national swing toward political conservatism are not related. The religious tone of Republican rhetoric has found resonance in the Religious Right—and vice versa. Such resonance happens “when particular claims align with the previous experiences, narratives, or cultural worldviews of the people who hear the claim.”⁹³¹ In other words, the Religious Right may have simply found the Republican Party to be a fellow traveler—and if the broader world is receptive to the claims of the Religious Right and the Republican Party, so much the better, for “it is not simply the proportion of Christian conservative voters that explains political potency; it is a legislator’s perception that Christian conservatism is broadly palatable to the voting public as a whole.”⁹³²

Though some Republicans do not adopt an anti-gay rights stance,—the obvious exception being Log Cabin Republicans, a national organization for gay and lesbian Republicans—the party, as represented on the national level, has supported anti-gay rights measures.⁹³³ Many

⁹²⁹ Williams, “Language of God,” 186.

⁹³⁰ Wald, Owen, and Hill, “Evangelical Politics,” 3.

⁹³¹ Williams, “Language of God,” 183.

⁹³² den Dulk and Hertzke, “Conclusion,” 236.

⁹³³ Sarah A. Soule, “Going to the Chapel? Same-Sex Marriage Bans in the U.S., 1973-2000,” *Social Problems*, 51, no 4 (November 2004): 453-477.

commentators have suggested that the Religious Right responded to fear about the potential legalization of gay marriage in order to enact state constitutional amendments defining marriage as between one man and one woman, despite both the legal redundancy (as many states already had laws defining marriage this way) and the legal impotence of such amendments should the Supreme Court recognize same-sex marriage.⁹³⁴ Thus, suggest some analysts, leaders in the Religious Right fostered anxiety about a perceived loss—the legalization of gay marriage—in order to secure a legal and electoral victory.⁹³⁵ Furthermore, by making the issue of gay marriage into a spectacle, conservative Republican lawmakers kept attention away from other issues of national concern.⁹³⁶ Opposition to gay rights, a position pushed by Religious Right members, is thus linked to conservative Republican concerns.

Religious Right Activity as Pathological

Clyde Wilcox, Ted G. Jelen, and Sharon Linzey have documented that scholars of the Religious Right have, from the 1950s on, employed psychological models to explain participation in the Religious Right. In “Rethinking the Reasonableness of the Religious Right,” they note that such theories rest upon the assumption that something is “wrong,” socially or psychologically, with people who join or lead Religious Right groups and that “[s]trong religious beliefs are thought to be associated with, and perhaps causally related to, personality disorders

⁹³⁴ Barry D. Adam, “The Defense of Marriage Act and American Exceptionalism: The ‘Gay Marriage’ Panic in the United States,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (April 2003): 259-276.

⁹³⁵ PBS, “Republicans and Religion,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, October 27, 2006 <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1009/cover.html>. Daniel A. Smith, Matthew K. DeSantis, and Jason Kessel tested this thesis in Ohio and Michigan and found that conservative Christians overwhelmingly voted for both same-sex marriage bans and President Bush, though they did not conclude that same-sex marriage bans inspired voting among Christian conservatives who would not have otherwise voted (“Same-Sex Marriage Ballot Measures and the 2004 Presidential Election,” *State and Local Government Review* 38, no. 2 (2006): 78-91).

⁹³⁶ The belief of the Religious Right is that “we can assure ourselves that so long as Americans live by an appropriate sexual code, we need not worry about American moral health in other areas”—specifically those that might lead to liberal social and international policies (Jakobsen and Pellagrini, *Love the Sin*, 10).

incompatible with democratic civility.”⁹³⁷ Scholars who adopt this position begin by asserting that strong religious belief is linked to psychological maladies and that such maladjusted people threaten the broader culture. Pathological theories vary in their focus, but all have, at root, the assumption that something is “wrong” with the people who join such groups.

Some scholars have applied a collectivist behavior theory to the Religious Right, arguing that adherents are acting irrationally because their religion is irrational. As Richard Hofstadter wrote in his entry in *The Radical Right*, edited by Daniel Bell, “To understand the Manichean style of thought, the apocalyptic tendencies, the love of mystification, the intolerance of compromise that are observable in the right-wing mind, we need to understand the history of fundamentalism.”⁹³⁸ Hofstadter sees a singular kind of mental state operating among conservative Christians, and he identifies it as inherently illogical. Other scholars argue that Religious Right participants may display an unusual willingness to defer to authority, especially religious authority, including leaders and a rigid interpretation of Scriptures.⁹³⁹ These sources of authority may, in turn, lead believers to accept irrational understandings of the world, including conspiracy theories.⁹⁴⁰ Thus, irrationality may allow participants to accept the guidance of sources that affirm further irrational views of the world.

Michael Lienesch suggests that these authoritative leaders are the real source of trouble, for they have duped unsuspecting believers into joining their own pursuits for power. In “Right-Wing Religion: Christian Conservatism and a Political Movement,” he calls the Religious Right “in large part an elite phenomenon, a relatively small group of preachers and politicians

⁹³⁷ Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey, “Reasonableness,” 263.

⁹³⁸ Richard Hofstadter, “Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited: A Postscript—1962,” *The New American Right*, edited by Daniel Bell (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1963), 35.

⁹³⁹ Kenneth D. Wald, Samuel Hill, and Dennis E. Owen, “Habits of the Mind? The Problem of Authority in the New Christian Right,” in *Religion and Political Behavior in the United States*, edited by Ted Jelen, (New York: Praeger, 1989).

⁹⁴⁰ Steve Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

aligned with the right-wing of the Republican party,”⁹⁴¹ claiming the movement as a whole is “best understood as an alliance of preachers”⁹⁴² who are “in turn influenced by conservative politicians.”⁹⁴³ He offers some empathy for the deceived base of the Religious Right but does not give them much credit for critically considering their allegiance. “Most of them,” he says, “would surely fail to realize that their honest moral worries have been used to carry out a planned ideological strategy.”⁹⁴⁴

Whether participants in the Religious Right join the movement because they are psychologically flawed or whether the influence of accepted authorities prompts them to maladjustment, theories of pathology view members as abnormal. However, scholars have questioned the view that the members of the Religious Right are necessarily pathological. Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey wonder if “pejorative characterizations of constitutionally-protected beliefs and values have become less intellectually respectable” since the 1950s.⁹⁴⁵ In any case, according to their review of research, pathological explanations do not account for Religious Right participation. Clyde Wilcox’s earlier work suggested that a pathological explanations could not be sustained in empirical research.⁹⁴⁶ Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey differentiate between “authoritarianism,” which might indicate a pathology, and “authority-mindedness,” which is not a pathology, and see that authority-mindedness is a better predictor of support for the Religious Right than is authoritarianism.⁹⁴⁷

A Worldview Defense Explanation

⁹⁴¹ Michael Lienesch, “Right-Wing Religion: Christian Conservatism and a Political Movement,” *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 407.

⁹⁴² *Ibid.*, 408.

⁹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁹⁴⁵ Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey, “Reasonableness,” 265.

⁹⁴⁶ Clyde Wilcox, “Popular Support for the New Christian Right: A Test of Alternative Hypotheses,” *Social Science Journal* 26, no. 1 (1989): 55-63.

⁹⁴⁷ Wilcox, Jelen, and Linzey, “Reasonableness,” 266.

“The Christian worldview” is a term often-used in Religious Right discourse, particularly as a way of proving the authenticity of consumer goods, especially educational materials, sold in the Christian marketplace. For example, the American Family Association and Bott Radio Network sponsor Worldview Weekend, a traveling conference with associated books, Bible studies, and online courses. A participant can begin by taking a test to see if he or she currently has a “Biblical worldview”—that is, if his or her worldview is a “strong Biblical,” “moderate Biblical,” “secular humanist,” “socialist worldview,” or “communist/Marxist/ socialist/humanist worldview.”⁹⁴⁸ Such mixing of political, religious, and economic labels suggests that those writing the test see Christianity—that is, conservative Christianity, the kind used to define “Christian worldview”—as exclusive from forms of government other than democratic and economic systems other than capitalism.

Such exclusivity in defining what qualifies as a Christian worldview, a phenomenon that is mirrored in Fabrizio, McLaughlin, and Associates’ determination that moralists within the Republican Party select candidates based on how closely those candidates’ views on specific issues match their own, contributes to the feeling of being chronically threatened by the broader culture. The more inflexible the standards and the less diversity in opinion permissible, the greater the tension between the rigid, righteous religious and the rest of society, including many liberal believers. Thus, as the Christian (or Biblical) worldview—a term that links particular stances on particular issues, such as homosexuality, with selected scriptural passages—is consolidated, it is set in contrast to the mainstream culture. It is one that, ultimately, accepts only its own authority. Those who hold this worldview, Nancy T. Ammerman says, “are no more willing to recognize multiple moral authorities in the various institutions in which they live

⁹⁴⁸ Worldview Weekend, “Test Results for Everyone,” *Worldview Weekend*, 2003
<http://www.worldviewweekend.com/test/globalresults.php?testid=WORLDVIEW&altplate=globalresults.overall>.

than they are to recognize multiple moral authorities in the various cultures that occupy our diverse world. There is a rhetoric of purity and totality as well as a rhetoric of certainty,⁹⁴⁹—one that both denies distinctions between the secular and spiritual world by claiming God’s authority over it all and depicts itself in conflict with the secular world. Indeed, James Davison Hunter posits that conservative believers are part of a community that “derives its identity principally from a posture of resistance to the modern world order,”⁹⁵⁰ even if its resistance is highly selective, with contemporary churches making effective use of, for example, modern technology and mass media. The cultural framework in which such a mindset developed, observe Charles L. Harper and Kevin Leicht, is “cultural Fundamentalism in a uniquely American sense.”⁹⁵¹ They add, “It is a world view deriving from historic American Protestantism emphasizing individualism, hard work, thrift, and impulse control. It stands in stark contrast to what is perceived as the pervasive hedonism, moral relativism, and self-fulfillment ethic in American society”⁹⁵²—the characteristics used to stereotype gay men and women. A tension between these two mythic worldviews serves to motivate Religious Right activity. As Ammerman notes, this description of the world “is a powerful mythic image of a pristine state from which we have fallen and to which we must return, a movement of history that demands the heroic participation of the faithful.”⁹⁵³ The declared need to protect mythic America from perceived evils is a call to arms.

⁹⁴⁹ Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms,” 150. In a “Christian worldview,” scripture alone is credited as the final arbiter of truth. For example, Creation Ministries, a creationist organization, includes this statement as one of its tenets: “By definition, no apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the Scriptural record” (“About Us,” *Creation Ministries*, http://creation.com/about-us#what_we_believe).

⁹⁵⁰ James Davison Hunter, “Fundamentalism in Its Global Contours,” in *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon: A View from Within; A Response from Without*, edited by Norman J. Cohen. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990, 56.

⁹⁵¹ Charles L. Harper and Kevin Leicht, *Explaining the New Religious Right: Status Politics and Beyond* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 105.

⁹⁵² Harper and Leicht, “Explaining the New Christian Right: Status Politics and Beyond,” 105.

⁹⁵³ Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms,” 153.

To call the worldviews “mythic” is, of course, not to dismiss the reality of difference between those with a secular orientation and those with a sacred orientation. While American culture has always muddled the distinction between these two categories, Americans in the 1970s to the present have real reason to wonder if secular culture has much of value to offer. Harper and Leicht suggest that the rise of the Religious Right may have been mobilized by the fact that “the liberal welfare state policies which have dominated American politics since the depression are widely perceived to have failed, not only by cultural fundamentalists.”⁹⁵⁴ Mainstream churches did not seem to offer an alternative to secular culture, for such churches are “comfortable in society, having made their peace with the secular world”—that is, they do not have the tense relationship with secularism that marks conservative faith.⁹⁵⁵ While conservative churches adopted some of the same technologies as secular culture—by, for example, creating Christian rock bands and producing Christian romance novels, the messages of which do not, generally, address deep theological quandaries—the adoption of current pop culture in the church avoids out-right degradation of women, encourages responsibility, and celebrates citizenship. Such believers, though they “paint the world in black and white” also “do not manufacture the evil they see; they merely name it, highlight it, caricature it. Theirs is a keen reading of the actual threatening forces present in their society”⁹⁵⁶—or, rather, those forces they perceive as threatening. In the fallout of postmodernism, conservative churches found that they had a message that had appeal, one worth defending.

Social historians may point out that the anomie associated with postmodernism was present in American culture long before the emergence of the Religious Right. The

⁹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵⁵ Anson D. Shupe, Jr. *Six Perspectives on New Religions: A Case Study Approach*, Studies in Religion and Society, vol. 1, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 6.

⁹⁵⁶ Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms,” 155.

mythologizing of the current moment as the most important battle in the War on Christianity erases other, far more tumultuous moments in our national history,⁹⁵⁷ but because those battles ended in clear victories for the righteous, they are retold as stories of heroes and hope. Today's world, though, lacks heroes and has little hope. Writes conservative Christian blogger Vic Bilson,

It is important to recognize that those who are working for the dissolution of our society have a spiritual agenda. They are not merely attempting to dismantle the historic cultural values of this nation and move us toward a homogenized world. They also want to destroy Christianity and Bible-based religion. It is a clear part of their agenda, and they have already moved a long way in that direction.⁹⁵⁸

Indeed, Blisson's writings are devoted to reveal evidence of America's falling into a spiritual degradation. He calls his site "Jeremiah Project" because, seeing the moral collapse of America, he feels compelled to respond as the prophet did in his own time. While adopting the language of a Hebrew prophet may seem dramatic, given the discomfort between the espoused Christian worldview and the reality of a fallen world, such a choice may be the only alternative to capitulation to what seems to be an increasingly invasive secular mainstream, one that tolerates the expression of same-sex desire that would, in other times, have been unthinkable.

"Even when fundamentalism is struggling and virtually invisible," as in the middle years of the twentieth century, "it still nurtures its critique of culture, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. A variety of circumstances may conspire, however, to take this vision outside the

⁹⁵⁷ For example, Robert P. Dugan, Jr. of the National Association of Evangelicals titled his book on the topic *Winning the New Civil War: Recapturing America's Values* (Portland, OR.: Multnomah, 1991). This comparison between the horrific, divisive Civil War, a war about the enslavement of human people, and today's cultural battles is historically insensitive, but it is commonly invoked by so-called "culture warriors."

⁹⁵⁸ Vic Bilson, "War on Christianity," *Jeremiah Prophet*, <http://www.jeremiahproject.com/prophecy/warxian.html>.

confines of the families and congregations where it lies dormant,” reminds Nancy T. Ammerman.⁹⁵⁹ Possibly, each of the above theories provides some insight into why, after decades of apparent silence on the national political scene, conservative believers became involved in the Religious Right in the late 1980s and why the movement has continued. After all, the Religious Right is a broad category, encompassing a wide variety of people who join for different reasons, in different places, and at different points in their lives. Increasingly, conservative Christians, once stereotyped as backwoods, poor, rural, and white, are differentiating in wealth, status, and even ethnicity, with many Hispanics, Catholics as well as Protestants, joining the conservative Christian movement.⁹⁶⁰ Though status politics has often been used as an explanatory model, “status politics was not the only factor predisposing individuals to promote the [New Christian Right],” Wald, Owen, and Hill found in their research.⁹⁶¹ They also found evidence of “a high probability of mobilization among persons accessible to issue-entrepreneurs through church-based networks” and support for the claim that cultural factors such as whether people were raised in families and communities where traditionalism was valued, contributed to their support of the Religious Right.⁹⁶²

On the other hand, Robert Wuthnow suggests that increased activity among conservative believers was “simply...a sensible thing to do” in light of the “recreation of symbolic worlds” that occurred in the 1970s, positing that the election of Jimmy Carter after the Watergate scandal renegotiated the borders between public and private morality and between religion and politics in a way that permitted conservative Christians to partake of politics.⁹⁶³ While Wuthnow’s thesis

⁹⁵⁹ Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms,” 163.

⁹⁶⁰ Nathan J. Kelly and Jana Morgan Kelly, “Religion and Hispanic Partisanship in the United States,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2005): 93.

⁹⁶¹ Wald, Owen, and Hill, “Evangelical Politics,” 11.

⁹⁶² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁹⁶³ Robert Wuthnow, “The Political Rebirth of American Evangelicals,” in *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation*, edited by Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (New York: Aldine, 1983), 184.

still seems applicable, especially given that many issues of concern for the Religious Right are moral or are reframed as moral issues, it does not require the rejection of other theses. The declining prestige given to those who embrace traditional values, people who, in turn, felt their worldview to be under attack, may have converged with an abundance of resources that could be used to respond aggressively to the secular culture. Nancy T. Ammerman argues that conservative religious activism “arises in both response to the movement’s own resources and connections and to the demands and structures of the world outside. Its forms and strategies are shaped both by the group’s ideology and by the particular political traditions and structures within which it works.”⁹⁶⁴ Those strategies may have been fueled and even funded, at times, by secular conservative forces, but it has not always easily fulfilled the desires of those forces. Notably, while sociologists have recognized each of these theories as possible explanations, and a few, like Harper, recognize multiple factors in motion at once, such as when Wuthnow and Matthew P. Larson note that “any phenomenon as important as fundamentalism does indeed derive from multiple sources,”⁹⁶⁵ most analyses ignore the explanations that the Religious Right itself recognizes as diminishing the historical tension between faith and politics. As Gaines M. Foster observes in his analysis of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction America, conservative Christians define “morality primarily in terms of righteousness or virtue, not justice.”⁹⁶⁶ Morality, defined as virtue, especially sexual virtue, then, is the motivation that members of the Religious Right identify for their activism.

⁹⁶⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman, “The Dynamics of Christian Fundamentalism: An Introduction,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15.

⁹⁶⁵ Robert Wuthnow and Matthew P. Lawson, “Sources of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 22.

⁹⁶⁶ Foster, *Moral Reconstruction*, 2.

Shifts in Religious Right Anti-Gay Rhetoric

Arguments that rest upon the immorality of same-sex intercourse resonate less and less with an American public that shows more comfort than ever with gay people, with seventeen percent fewer people saying in 2002 that same-sex relations are “always” or “almost always” wrong than said so in 1987.⁹⁶⁷ In part, this growing acceptance of same-sex sexuality may be due to the strategic choice of gay rights activists to repress “the sex in homosexuality in an effort to keep a kind of public/private distinction intact and thereby appeal to a broader liberal public,” for, “if sex stayed in the bedroom and was not part of the public identity of homosexuals, then liberals were more likely to support [a]... reversal in attitude” about homosexuality.⁹⁶⁸ In some ways, this strategy evolves from the homophobic demand that “it’s okay if people are gay as long as they act straight in public.” In other words, as gay people’s sexuality is muted, it is less offensive to a heterosexist public, which will, in turn, have fewer reasons to object to gay people. This strategy has been effective at derailing Religious Right efforts to depict gay men and women as pathological or individually dangerous.

Additionally, the American public beyond the Religious Right is not always enthusiastic about enforcing rules that seem to apply to merely the moral dimension of life. “The direct appeal to religion,” note Jakobsen and Pellagrini, “is...remarkable because the government does not fall back on religion as its primary rationale except when it comes to sex.”⁹⁶⁹ In an effort to

⁹⁶⁷ Stephen C. Craig, Michael D. Martinez, James G. Kane, and Jason Gainous, “Core Values, Value Conflict, Citizens’ Ambivalence about Gay Rights,” *Political Research Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2005): 5-17. In contrast, Religious Right leaders still use negative language about gay people and gay rights, often using secular culture’s increasing tolerance of homosexuality as evidence of the need to reform it. See, for example Burack, “Getting What ‘We’ Deserve.” Amy M. Burdette, Christopher G. Ellison, and Terrance D. Hill have noted that “even when negative feelings toward homosexuality are taken into account, conservative Protestant groups are indeed less willing [than other groups] to grant basic civil liberties,” a trend consistent not just among leaders but among lay people (*Sociological Inquiry* 75, no. 2 (May 2005): 192).

⁹⁶⁸ Daniel Wickberg, “Homophobia: On the Cultural History of an Idea,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 2007): 48.

⁹⁶⁹ Jakobsen and Pellagrini, *Love the Sin*, 4.

broaden their argument against homosexuality, its opponents do not cite Bible verses but instead cite social science (or pseudo-social science). Family Research Council, for example, highlights a paper titled “The Negative Health Effects of Homosexuality” by Timothy J. Dailey. Dailey has also written *Dark Obsession: The Tragedy and Threat of the Homosexual Lifestyle*, indicating his understanding of same-sex attraction as both a personal flaw and a community threat, and books in which he identifies contemporary fulfillments of Biblical prophecy.⁹⁷⁰ In promoting “The Negative Health Effects of Homosexuality,” though, Family Research Council treats the paper as if it were objective scientific research, not the work of someone committed to framing same-sex desire as a “tragedy and “threat.” The effort to make sexuality a crime against science and public health rather than against God is key to moving the discussion from merely a religious debate to one that can appeal to a heteronormative, secular public. In this effort, Family Research Institute has been a publishing leader. Formed in 1982, FRI has, in its own words, “one overriding mission: to generate empirical research on issues that threaten the traditional family, particularly homosexuality, AIDS, sexual social policy, and drug abuse.”⁹⁷¹ Recognizing the validating power of science and the academic world, FRI claims to be “the *first* traditionally-minded organization to conduct scientific research in these areas and to publish it in peer-reviewed professional journals” that can be found “in almost all university and medical libraries around the globe.”⁹⁷² Efforts to give scientific credibility to anti-gay legislation are a recognition that many Americans are wary of purely religious reasoning for law.⁹⁷³ Conservative Protestants who seek a scientific argument against homosexuality seem to have recognized this.

⁹⁷⁰ Timothy J. Dailey, *Dark Obsession: The Tragedy and Threat of the Homosexual Lifestyle* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003).

⁹⁷¹ “Our Mission,” *Family Research Institute*, <http://www.familyresearchinst.org/>.

⁹⁷² *Ibid.*

⁹⁷³ Such unease may be a reason why few jurists are drawn from fundamentalist and evangelical law schools. Instead, conservative Protestants have found champions for their legal causes in conservative Catholics on the Supreme Court and have supported the appointments of Justices Alito, Scalia, and Thomas and Chief Justice John

In an effort to appear more positive to those audiences that may not espouse religious opposition to homosexuality, the Religious Right has carefully shifted its language to suggest a less explicitly *religious* anti-gay argument. As Kevin R. den Dulk and Allen D. Hertzke note, [T]he term “Christian” defines the movement in distinctly religious terms. While it is certainly the case that this political movement is fueled largely by highly committed Christians and especially traditionalist evangelicals, there are many within the movement... who would prefer “pro-family” or some other term to focus attention on their policy goals rather than their religious motivations.⁹⁷⁴

The rhetorical move from explicitly religious language expands the potential base of support for religious anti-gay activism by allowing those who hold anti-gay sentiments to express them without having to accept religious language that they may find unfamiliar, alienating, or inappropriate for public discussion. In some forms, this language may be rooted in “family values,” for “by giving ‘values’ the appellation ‘family,’ it is possible to invoke ‘religion’ without having to name it as such,”⁹⁷⁵ or it may reference sociology and social harm, or it may rely on a rhetoric of choice, of rights, or of compassion.

When homosexuality is framed as a choice (either the choice to *feel* gay or the choice to *act* gay—that is, to experience same-sex attraction or to have same-sex intercourse), unlike something that is viewed as an immutable difference such as, say, race, the chooser is forced to take responsibility for his or her choice. This rhetorical strategy “effectively neutralizes both queer claims of discrimination”—for one can always *choose* to be outside of the group

Roberts—all Catholics whose judicial decisions have aligned with the agenda of the Religious Right. Notably, Justice Kennedy, also Catholic, supported the pro-choice position in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in 1992, and Justice Sotomayor, a Catholic, was criticized by conservative Christians for her suspected pro-choice position during her nomination process in 2009.

⁹⁷⁴ den Dulk and Hertzke, “Conclusion,” 234.

⁹⁷⁵ Janet R. Jakobsen, “Why Sexual Regulation: Family Values and Social Movements,” in *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life* edited by Kathleen M. Sands (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 105.

experiencing discrimination—“and public support for legal remedies” that would be appropriate if discrimination was experienced.⁹⁷⁶ By stressing “choice,” the Religious Right actually adopts a social constructionist position; no longer is the anti-gay argument about what is “natural” or “unnatural” but what is the best “choice” an individual can make.⁹⁷⁷

Indeed, not only do gay people have a *choice* to make about their sexuality, Religious Right rhetoric may demand that they have a right to do so—in other words, a *gay right* to choose not to be gay. The National Association for the Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), for example, is often lauded by the Religious Right for its insistence, for people struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction, that “[t]he right to seek therapy to change one's sexual adaptation should be considered self-evident and inalienable.”⁹⁷⁸ American Evangelical Protestantism, with its focus on “making a decision for Christ” seems particularly receptive to this argument because it asks the believer to take responsibility for his or her salvation—and his or her sins, and the language of NARTH (“self-evident and inalienable”) hearkens to the language of the Declaration of Independence, a uniquely American document.

The Religious Right relies on the language of rights in another way: to articulate gay rights as in tension with religious rights, rights that advocates of gay rights violate or threaten and rights that should take primacy over gay rights.⁹⁷⁹ Believers must counter, then, with calls for voter referenda and constitutional amendments “protecting” their own heteronormative

⁹⁷⁶ Burack, “Contesting Compassion.”

⁹⁷⁷ Indeed, the autobiography of John Paulk, former chair of the North American Exodus International and head of Focus on the Family's Homosexuality and Gender Division, is titled *Not Afraid to Change: The Remarkable Story of How One Man Overcame Homosexuality* (Tony Marco, co-author (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 1998)).

⁹⁷⁸ “NARTH Position Statements,” *NARTH*, February 27, 2008, <http://www.narth.com/menus/positionstatements.html>. Notably, NARTH also recognizes that a person may choose to adopt a gay identity. Religious Right groups never cite this tenet of the NARTH mission statement.

⁹⁷⁹ Alan Sears and Joel Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religion Today* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003).

families and their right to believe that homosexuality is wrong.⁹⁸⁰ Such arguments may appear alarmist or like a false dilemma to outsiders—as they do to Kathleen M. Sands, who asks, “Why are religious freedom and sexual freedom constructed as if they belong to different camps, as if the ground gained by one were always lost by the other?”⁹⁸¹ Nevertheless, they tap into Religious Right fears that believers are victimized or marginalized and are fearful of declining status.

Finally, the Religious Right utilizes a language of compassion to justify its discouragement of homosexuality and homosexual rights. For example, Focus on the Families conferences promoting “ex-gay” therapy are called “Love Won Out,” as is the autobiography of Exodus International’s former North American chair John Paulk and his wife Anne Paulk. Reflects Cynthia Burack, “[M]any conservative Christians may understand both their feelings of sexual disgust and their willingness to extend compassion to those who inspire it as divine mandates on the issue of same-sex sexuality as well as personal virtues.”⁹⁸² As Anita Bryant said, “My stand was not taken out of homophobia, but of love for them [gay people].”⁹⁸³ Indeed, Bryant can congratulate herself not only for doing God’s work but for doing it so compassionately.

In the process of shifting from explicitly religious rhetoric to emphasizing social science, choice, rights, and compassion, members of the Religious Right not only appear more tolerant to those outside their group who nevertheless share anti-gay political goals; they also assure themselves that they are caring for the nation, participating in democracy, and encouraging compassion for what they perceive as suffering and struggling gays and lesbians.

⁹⁸⁰ Timothy J. Daily, *The Other Side of Tolerance: How Homosexual Activism Threatens Liberty* (Washington, D.C.: Family Research Council: 2006).

⁹⁸¹ Sands, “Introduction,” 5.

⁹⁸² Cynthia Burack, “Contesting Compassion.”

⁹⁸³ Ken Kelly “Playboy Interview: Anita Bryant,” *Playboy*, May 1978.

Conclusion

This chapter has defined the contemporary Religious Right in the United States and surveyed several theories that explain its activism, particularly its anti-gay activism, from the 1970s onward. Of key importance in self-understanding of Religious Right activism is the use of theology and scriptural texts that are understood to condemn those who engage in same-sex intercourse as well as those nations that tolerate or condone it. Because the secular public audience, even though it is generally not supportive of extending gay rights, is uncomfortable with grounding anti-gay sentiment in overtly religious language, the Religious Right has utilized rhetorics of social health, choice, rights, and compassion to build a coalition of anti-gay rights supporters.

Westboro Baptist Church began its anti-gay activism at the start of this “softening” of other anti-gay Christian rhetoric, and it has actively denounced other churches for failing to “speak plainly” about the sin of homosexuality. Westboro Baptist Church’s anti-gay rhetoric, which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6, most notably fails to distinguish between “sinner” and “sin,” between the one performing same-sex acts and the same-sex act itself, as does the rhetoric of other groups in their claims of compassion for gay people. It makes no appeals to social science or medicine to explain its anti-gay stance, nor does it engage in any sustained way the argument that gay rights infringe upon the rights of heterosexuals. While Fred Phelps frequently characterizes gay men and women as privileged people with greater access to political and media power than the average citizen in his argument against hate crimes legislation, appeals to status discontent do not form the bulk of his argument. For Westboro Baptist Church, theology alone suffices, as the name of the church’s central website suggests: God Hates Fags, and, in this group’s assessment of itself, that alone explains their activism.

Chapter 6: Cobelligerents in Anti-Gay Activism: Westboro Baptist Church and the Religious Right

Though the rhetoric of Westboro Baptist Church is offensive, anti-gay rhetoric circulated by the Religious Right and its sympathizers similarly focuses on the threat of homosexuality to gay people and the nation, the wrath of God as a response to gay sex, and the “unnaturalness” of same sex attraction. For example, readers might find it difficult to distinguish the famous speakers of the following quotations.

1. “If God does not then punish America [if same-sex marriage is legalized], He will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah.”⁹⁸⁴
2. “Like Adolf Hitler, who overran his European neighbors, those who favor homosexual marriage are determined to make it legal, regardless of the democratic processes that stands in their way.”⁹⁸⁵
3. “Homosexuals are now more than non-productive ‘sexual bums.’ They are recruiting others, forming communities, beginning to mock and undermine the old pieties of loyalty to family, country, and God. They have redefined ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and view with contempt the idea that honest work and sex within marriage are communal acts necessary for human survival.”⁹⁸⁶
4. Homosexuals are “brute beasts...part of a vile and satanic system [that] will be utterly annihilated, and there will be a celebration in heaven.”⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸⁴ John Hagee, *What Every Man Wants in a Woman* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2005), 68.

⁹⁸⁵ James Dobson, *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win this Battle* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 41.

⁹⁸⁶ Paul Cameron, “The Psychology of Homosexuality,” *Family Research Institute*, <http://www.familyresearchinst.org/2009/02/the-psychology-of-homosexuality/>.

⁹⁸⁷ Jerry Falwell, Quoted in Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle, *The Bible Tells Me So* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 69-70.

5. “I don't think I'd be waving those [gay pride] flags in God's face if I were you. This is not a message of hate -- this is a message of redemption. But a condition like [gay-friendly events] will bring about the destruction of your nation. It'll bring about terrorist bombs; it'll bring earthquakes, tornadoes, and possibly a meteor.”⁹⁸⁸
6. “I've never seen a man in my life I wanted to marry. And I'm gonna be blunt and plain, if one ever looks at me like that I'm gonna kill him and tell God he died. In case anybody doesn't know, God calls it an abomination. It's an abomination! It's an abomination!”⁹⁸⁹

Surprisingly, none of these quotations come from a member of Westboro Baptist Church.

Instead, all are from leaders of the anti-gay movement in the Religious Right. The first speaker, John Hagee, a pastor and author of several books about End Times, was an outspoken supporter of John McCain during the 2008 presidential election. The second speaker is Dr. James Dobson, Christian psychologist and head of Focus on the Family, whose media empire produces radio shows, religious curricula, and volumes of “pro-family” literature. The third is Paul Cameron, anti-gay psychologist and founder of the Family Research Institute. The fourth speaker is Jerry Falwell, and the fifth is Pat Robertson. The final statement was spoken by Jimmy Swaggart during a 2004 telecast of a sermon; he offered a half-hearted apology “if anyone was offended” a week later.⁹⁹⁰ While none of them include the word “fags,” these comments, all made in public, reveal anti-gay sentiment that dehumanizes gay people; posits same-sex sexuality as sinful,

⁹⁸⁸ –Pat Robertson, warning the city of Orlando against hosting “gay days” at Disney World, *The 700 Club*, June 6, 1998.

⁹⁸⁹ Jimmy Swaggart, telecast of sermon, September 12, 2004, <http://www.Swaggart.wmv>.

⁹⁹⁰ Swaggart told the AP, “If it's an insult, I certainly didn't think it was, but if they are offended, then I certainly offer an apology.” AP, “Swaggart Apologies after Remarking about ‘Killing’ Gay Men,” *USA Today*, September 22, 2004, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2004-09-22-swaggart-remark_x.htm.

unnatural, and deviant; caricaturizes gay citizens as enemies of the state; and predicts the justified destruction of gay people and societies that accept them.

Though Westboro Baptist Church is commonly dismissed as a fringe group that is not representative of American Christianity, the overlap in religious rhetoric and political goals between Westboro Baptist Church and members of the Religious Right is notable and places the Religious Right in the uncomfortable position of defending anti-gay theology and politics while jettisoning its affinities with Westboro Baptist Church.

The Religious Right has deployed multiple strategies to distance itself from Westboro Baptist Church. Its goal is to use Westboro Baptist Church as a foil to construct itself as compassionate to gay people but critical of gay sex. In other words, by characterizing Westboro Baptist Church as “haters,” the Religious Right can recalibrate the scale of homophobia so that its own homophobia is seen as moderate. Westboro Baptist Church’s fringe behavior, then, serves Religious Right goals, even as the Religious Right denounces the church. Additionally, Westboro Baptist Church anti-gay activism serves to keep alive anti-gay sentiment, gives potentially “loose cannons” in the Religious Right a place to voice their anti-gay sentiment in abrasive ways, and, at times, inspires pro-gay counterprotest, such as Michael Moore’s “Sodomobile” or the “Million Fag March,” that illustrate to religious conservatives homosexual “depravity.”

This chapter will examine how Westboro Baptist Church and the Religious Right work in tandem, even as the Religious Right denies similarities between its anti-gay activism and the anti-gay activism of Westboro Baptist Church and despite theological differences between Westboro Baptist Church and the Religious Right. It compares the theology of each group, the political goals of each group, and the activism of each group to discover what they have in

common and why they struggle against each other despite these commonalities, then concludes by placing Westboro Baptist Church's anti-gay activism within the context of Religious Right anti-gay activism.

Anti-Gay Theology of Westboro Baptist Church v. Anti-Gay Theology of the Religious Right

The theological differences between Westboro Baptist Church and the Religious Right should not be understated, especially given the importance of theology to Westboro Baptist Church self-understanding. Westboro Baptists are proud of the hyper-Calvinism that distinguishes them from other Christian groups and view their theology as a reason why any alliance between their church and other churches will fail. In particular, those who preach "lying Arminian bilge," which is "buckets of warm spit"⁹⁹¹ to hyper-Calvinist Westboro Baptists, cannot cooperate with Westboro Baptist Church because Westboro's double and absolute predestination offends their notion of self-determination. "Arminian will-worshippers will go to Hell rather than suffer reproach for the cause of God and Truth in the world," Fred Phelps lamented in his March 28, 2010 sermon.⁹⁹² However, they cannot be blamed for their failure to understand the beautiful justice and mercy of Calvinism, for, "as to the non-Elect, they have no light because a sovereign God has never commanded the light to shine upon them, but has chosen to leave them in gross darkness."⁹⁹³

Because Arminians believe that people can change through their own volition and that sexually active gay people are agents in their own salvation, they are less likely to preach about hell and are thus less loving toward gay people, ultimately, argue Westboro Baptists. According to Westboro Baptist Church, cooperation among Arminians and hyper-Calvinists is thus unlikely

⁹⁹¹ Fred Phelps, sermon, April 11, 2010.

⁹⁹² Fred Phelps, sermon, March 28, 2010.

⁹⁹³ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 21, 2010.

because, while they both despise homosexuality, because of their differing beliefs about people's ability to change, they seek different responses from their audiences. Compounding this theological difference is Westboro Baptist Church's fierce independence. As Fred Phelps has noted, "[I]t's supremely, supremely irrelevant to us what anybody thinks or says."⁹⁹⁴ Given that perspective, Westboro Baptist Church will not allow any outside group to determine its goals or strategies, so cooperation is impossible. On the rare occasion when Westboro Baptist Church has partnered with an outside group—as when Westboro Baptists and members of the Gainesville, Florida Dove World Christian Outreach picketed alongside each other when Westboro Baptist Church visited the University of Florida to picket area churches and a Hillel in April 2010⁹⁹⁵—Westboro Baptist Church sets the agenda.

The Religious Right addresses Westboro Baptist Church theology delicately—for the Religious Right includes Calvinists and hyper-Calvinists. Thus, The Religious Right cannot renounce the doctrine of predestination and other theological tenets embraced by some of its members. Further, it cannot renege on its conclusion that unrepentant gay people go to hell, for to do so would mean to believe that same sex intercourse is not a sin or that God allows unrepentant sinners into heaven, and these beliefs are justifications for anti-gay politics and prejudices and evangelism. In sum, members of the Religious Right are in the delicate position of defending its anti-gay politics and belief in the damnation of gay people without being confused for Westboro Baptists.

The Religious Right does this, first, by renouncing the claim that “God Hates Fags” and claiming instead that God does not hate anyone. In this view, God hates sin but loves sinners. This position, which is frequently repeated by Christian counterprotestors, contradicts the hyper-

⁹⁹⁴ As quoted in Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “The Gospel According to Fred,” *Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994.

⁹⁹⁵ C.J. Pruner and Minch Minchin, “Protestors Hold Rally, Counter-Rally,” *The Independent Florida Alligator*, April 19, 2010, http://www.alligator.org/news/local/article_b35e2dce-4b5c-11df-957c-001cc4c03286.html.

Calvinist claim that God both actively damns and elects people, and the corollary that God in fact loves everyone is a criticism of the more mainstream Calvinist claim that Jesus' sacrificial death was only intended for the elect. When "God doesn't hate people" and "God loves everyone" are stated by opponents of Westboro Baptist Church, they are both an expression of a theological position and a distancing of the religious believer from Westboro Baptist Church's homophobia. "There is a reason why Christian conservative leaders now proscribe the phrase, *God hates* in public discourse regardless of its object," notes Cynthia Burack. "[S]uch beliefs are common bases of religious discourse, but they are not—or not yet—successful bases for political arguments in liberal democracies."⁹⁹⁶ Moreover, they offend Christians who prefer to think of themselves as believers in and representatives of a loving and kind God, even if this God does, ultimately, send people to hell. For example, counterprotestors in this research never expressed the idea that "God doesn't hate people. And even if he did, he wouldn't hate gay people because being gay is just fine with God." Instead, Christian opponents of Westboro Baptist Church consistently claim that God loves all people, *even sinners like gay people*.⁹⁹⁷ Says Fred Phelps in his rejection of those who counter his message of God's hatred by insisting that God loves everyone, "Don't stand there on the street corner with me when you know you've never cracked a Bible in your life."⁹⁹⁸ Conservative religious counterprotestors respond by insisting that God distinguishes between people, whom he loves, and their sin, which he hates. By positioning itself, like God, as not anti-gay people but only anti-gay sex (which is a form of sin in this view), the Religious Right thus uses Westboro Baptist Church as a foil to deflect criticisms of its own anti-gay sentiments and politics. In contrast to Westboro Baptist Church's message that

⁹⁹⁶ Cynthia Burack, "From Doom Town to Sin City: Chick Tracts and Antigay Politics" (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 1-4, 2005).

⁹⁹⁷ In my research, I never encountered a single pro-gay Christian counter-protestor. This phenomenon will be addressed in Chapter 7.

⁹⁹⁸ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 14, 2010.

homosexuality is a punishment from God, the Religious Right emphasizes choice in sexuality (as in salvation) so that it can ultimately blame the unrepentant gay person for being gay.

Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson have noted that the Religious Right provides two different “origin stories” about homosexuality. By emphasizing that sexual identity and sexual behavior are separate and that, even if a queer person cannot choose his orientation, he can choose how he behaves, the narrative of choice “neutralizes both queer claims of discrimination and public support for legal remedies,”⁹⁹⁹ for, as Jean Hardesty concludes, when “gay sexuality is a choice ... it is not a candidate for civil rights protections.”¹⁰⁰⁰ Didi Herman detects a contradiction in the claim that gender is intrinsic, natural, and essential (though the production of so many Christian gender manuals/how-to books suggests that conservative believers think it can and should be taught—and perhaps needs to be taught!) but that sexuality is not.¹⁰⁰¹

The narrative of choice may generate little sympathy for gay folks because it blames them for the suffering that the Religious Right imagines they must endure due to their lack of sexual fulfillment and the peace of mind that comes from living in accordance to the will of God. This lack of compassion may serve to maintain an image of gay people as deliberately ignoring, mocking, or destroying straight culture. “Always unstable in its political effects, compassion can undermine the message that homosexuals are unregenerately evil corruptors of society and manipulators of a democratic political system,” Burack and Josephson observe.¹⁰⁰² For this reason, the narrative of choice is deployed when gay men and women are being depicted as a threat.

⁹⁹⁹ Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, “Origin Stories: Same-Sex Sexuality and Christian Right Politics” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2-5, 2004).

¹⁰⁰⁰ Jean Hardesty, *Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 118.

¹⁰⁰¹ Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 73.

¹⁰⁰² Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, “Origin Stories: Same-Sex Sexuality and Christian Right Politics” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2-5, 2004).

In contrast, the narrative of development views gay people less as deliberate corruptors of straight culture and more as victims in it. In this view, emphasis is on “the continuity and force of same-sex desire over time in certain individuals.”¹⁰⁰³ Like the narrative of choice, it aims to repudiate immutability and thus undermine civil rights claims but also to assure parents that hope for emerging homosexual kids is warranted and to justify anti-gay education efforts.

According to Burack and Josephson, The narrative of development rests on three claims: 1) Homosexuality is an emotional response to damaged parent-child relations, including the failure of a parent to model appropriate gender behavior, the failure of the child to mirror this behavior, and the failure of the parent to notice a child’s nonconformity, all of which may implicate even parents who follow relatively traditional gender roles; 2) Absent same-sex parent, with special focus on the role of men in preventing homosexuality; 3) Sexual and other trauma. In the narrative of development, “although the onset of same-sex desire does not sentence individuals to a life of homosexuality, predispositions and homosexual desires are not easily reversed once they are formed.”¹⁰⁰⁴ Thankfully for parents, says this model, “prehomosexuals” can opt to avoid same-sex activity and thus “further entrench their dysfunctional sexual identities.”¹⁰⁰⁵ Like the narrative of choice, the narrative of development has political implications, but, also like the narrative of choice, it may also be sincerely held, and notably, it may “disrupt other forms of Christian Right political work”¹⁰⁰⁶ because it does not find fault in would-be gays but instead seeks compassion for them, calling not for their stoning or casting out of their demons but for viewing their sexuality as a problem to be overcome, similar to other personal problems of a developmental nature.

¹⁰⁰³ Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, “Origin Stories: Same-Sex Sexuality and Christian Right Politics” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2-5, 2004).

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Westboro Baptist Church's view of homosexuality, as explained in Chapter 3, falls into neither category. As double predestinationists, Westboro Baptists do not believe that homosexuality is a choice, for nothing is a choice. Instead, homosexuality is a punishment, a sign of God's "giving up" of a person to his or her own sinful nature. At the same time, homosexuals are a threat to a society and its national future, not merely or primarily because of the "scientific" consequences of homosexuality (such as disease and family breakdown) but because God will destroy a nation that protects gay people. In the Westboro Baptist perspective, gay people are not to be treated with so-called compassionate condescension but with strong—and offensive—words of rebuke. The result is that Westboro Baptist Church is seen (and strategically constructed as) a hateful church or even a hate group¹⁰⁰⁷ while the Religious Right touts itself as loving. "Compassion can work to shore up support for 'mainstream' antigay initiatives by assuaging the suspicion that these programs are driven by group-related bias or defended by arguments that are pretexts for bias," note Josephson and Burack.¹⁰⁰⁸ Westboro Baptist Church's hyper-Calvinism, especially the double predestination of all people and the absolute predestination of all things, seems cruel in comparison to the "compassion" of the Religious Right's depiction of gay people as victims, even if, for both, unrepentant gay people go to hell in the end. The Religious Right thus uses "compassion" to 'center' cultural and political actors"¹⁰⁰⁹ and escape the criticism that faces Westboro Baptist Church.

¹⁰⁰⁷ The Southern Poverty Law Center lists Westboro Baptist Church as one of six hate groups in Kansas under the heading "General Hate." The others fall under the headers "Neo-Nazi," "KKK," and "Racist Skinhead" ("Hate Map," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map#s=KS>).

¹⁰⁰⁸ Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, "Origin Stories," in *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right* by Cynthia Burack (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 90.

¹⁰⁰⁹ (A.M. Smith, 1994/Burack, 2003)." (Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, "Origin Stories: Same-Sex Sexuality and Christian Right Politics," Paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Sept. 2-5, 2004), pg. 21).

Anti-Gay Political Goals of Westboro Baptist Church v. Anti-Gay Political Goals of the
Religious Right

According to Marty E. Martin and R. Scott Appleby, religious fundamentalists show special concern for how “the intimate zones of life are ordered.”¹⁰¹⁰ As discussed in Chapter 5, the Religious Right was organized across the boundaries of traditional faith categories to include Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, and Jews, around concerns about the perceived threats of modern notions about sexuality, gender, and reproduction, among other issues organized under the topic of “family.” Within the context of American culture, these concerns are expressed in “a secular religion which teaches that the particularities of one’s nation are not the result of history, but are rooted somehow in the eternal nature of things.”¹⁰¹¹ For both the Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church, increasing tolerance of homosexuality in American culture is linked to national decline, both sociologically and spiritually. Contemporary political issues are addressed in relation to a perceived national slide into sin. For example, writes Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council,

America is in deep trouble. Consider the following:

Environmental disaster of epic proportion[s] in the Gulf of Mexico

Economic struggles with unemployment at nearly 10%

Protracted bloody wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

Political leadership bent on promoting what God forbids

Ignoring the role that the Family Research Council played in electing public officials who fight against environmental and banking regulation and oversight and who pushed for and continually

¹⁰¹⁰ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Introduction” in *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3. [1-9]

¹⁰¹¹ Glenn T. Miller, *Religious Liberty in America: History and Prospects* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 121.

supported military engagement in foreign nations, Perkins blames national problems—including the Obama administration’s alleged support for gay rights—on the failure of Americans to be properly moral. He does this, though, without explicitly saying that the tragedies he has listed are a direct punishment from God. In language that neither claims nor denies that God uses environmental disaster, economic trouble, war, or political leadership to correct or punish a nation, Perkins says:

We are a broken nation full of broken people who have broken God’s laws and God’s heart. Consequently, in these difficult days, the Lord has continued to impress upon me the greatest need for us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to take responsibility for the broken state of our nation and go to God for help because He is the only one who can help us.¹⁰¹²

But, for Perkins, merely asking God for help is insufficient. The nation needs to demonstrate, via *political* change, that it is no longer breaking God’s laws and heart, for how else “can we possibly expect God to continue blessing this nation?”¹⁰¹³

Westboro Baptist Church looks at the same evidence—oil spills (See Figure 49 and 50.), economic downturns (See Figure 51.), wars, and the Obama administration—and makes the claim to which Perkins alludes but never makes explicit: that such troubles are the direct hand of God, either rebuking a stubborn nation or punishing it. (See Figure 52.) Westboro Baptists, too, call for the nation to seek God but questions the nation’s sincerity in doing so. For example, Louisiana Senate Resolution 145 urged residents of Louisiana to pray on June 10, 2010, for a solution to the problem of oil leaking into the Gulf of Mexico due to the explosion of a BP oil rig. In announcing that resolution, state Senator Robert Adley noted, “Thus far, the efforts made

¹⁰¹² Tony Perkins, “Help Change America this July 4th,” letter to Family Research Council supporters, June 24, 2010

¹⁰¹³ “If My People, Who are Called by My Name...” *Family Research Council Bulletin*, June 23, 2010.

“Your Oil Will Soon Be Burnin’”

Rejected His laws in your cities
 Burning in your lust every night and day
 You never met a sin that you didn’t love
 Now we’re gonna’ tell you how it’s gonna’ play

For proud sin you keep yearnin’
 Your oil spill will soon be burnin’
 Burnin’—burnin’
 Burnin’—burnin’
 Burnin’ in your rivers

Got a lot of freaks in Memphis
 Pumped a lot of lies in New Orleans
 You have never seen—the sight that is-a comin’
 When God spreads the oil with a hurricane

Your hard words you keep churnin’
 This nation will soon be burnin’
 Burnin’—burnin’
 Burnin’—burnin’
 Burnin’ ragin’ rebels

You must come out from among them
 Put away your sin and all your pride
 Your destruction’s comin’
 God will have no mercy
 Maybe you can sue God—and survive!
 He sent that oil a-burnin’

Obama will soon be runnin’
 Runnin’
 Runnin’
 Hoppin’ on his airplane

Burnin’
 Burnin’
 Burnin’ in your rivers

Churnin’
 Churnin’
 Your sin has got you burnin’

Burnin’
 Burnin’
 Burnin’ in your rivers

Figure 49. Lyrics to a Westboro Baptist Church song to the tune of “Proud Mary.” The lyrics reveal Westboro Baptist Church belief that the oil spill—and future hurricanes that might spread the contamination—are a punishment from God for the Gulf Coast’s refusal to obey God. Viewers can hear the song performed at “Parodies,” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.godhatesfags.com/audio/index.html#parodiesPlaylist>.

by mortals to try to solve the crisis have been to no avail. It’s clearly time for a miracle for us.”¹⁰¹⁴ For Westboro Baptists, the belated call for prayer—unaccompanied by a call to repentance and a pursuant changing of American culture—*after* human efforts have failed is symptomatic of American arrogance toward God.¹⁰¹⁵ In Adley’s call for prayer, as with Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal’s call, the people do not seek God first, do not repent, and do not change. Instead, God is invoked when all else fails and is sought without any sense of

¹⁰¹⁴ Senator Robert Adley, “Sen. Adley Urges Citizens to Join Together for Statewide Day of Prayer Sunday,” *Senator’s News Release*, June 16, 2010, <http://senate.legis.state.la.us/adley/releases/2010/06-16-2010.pdf>.

¹⁰¹⁵ Brent Roper, comments at a Bible study, July 18, 2010.



Figure 50. Sara Phelps' sign identifies the 2010 BP oil spill as a punishment from God. Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin, July 18, 2010. All rights reserved.

Thank God for Stock Market Crash!

Within a year of this nation attempting to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ by spoiling goods she didn't even have, america's economy is in the toilet! *"For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head."* Obadiah 1:15. The Westboro Baptist Church has been warning you that the siege is coming!

Well, ladies and gentlemen, the siege is here! The siege that God has laid upon you will only get worse until you eat your children! *"And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them."* Jeremiah 19:9.

This is just a small sampling; expect worse and more to come America!

"Why criest thou for thine affliction? thy sorrow is incurable for the multitude of thine iniquity: because thy sins were increased, I have done these things unto thee." Jeremiah 30:15.

It's the fags, stupid! When a society determines to set the abominable sin of sodomy (Lev. 18:22) up on a pedestal, such that they seek to criminalize preaching against it from the Bible, they have gone the way of Sodom. Sodom's sin wasn't that the entire population of that thriving 5 city metropolis were practicing fags, their sin was that they all condoned it, to the point of trying to force everyone else, even angels, to love it (Gen. 19). When you've done that, you can only expect the same punishment Sodom received – destruction by fire.

Figure 51. On the website *God Hates America*, Westboro Baptists link the 2007-2009 recession to the failure of the nation to heed Westboro Baptist Church teachings on sexuality and, more specifically, on the original ruling in *Lawrence v. Snyder*. The church predicts a "coming siege," like the one described in 2 Kings 6: 26-30, in which economic troubles press Americans into eating their own children.

Open Letter from Westboro Baptist Church to President Barack Obama

ANNOUNCE AND ENFORCE A POLICY OF SINCERE REPENTANCE AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD
... START WITH A NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER ... HEED THE ROD OF GOD **TODAY**

THIS IS THE ONLY SOLUTION TO THE DESTRUCTION BEARING DOWN ON YOU

September 2, 2010

Dear President Obama, and every member of the so-called "Christian Nation:"

God is dealing with you to your face. You have angered Him and now He is fighting against you. You have adopted policies of disobedience and perversion: abortion; same-sex marriage/domestic partnerships; divorce and remarriage. You have called Him a liar and taught your children that He does not mean what He says.

You did not heed so many tender warnings – 9/11, Katrina (and all her friends), economic dearth – delivered directly and powerfully in kindness to provoke your repentance. Instead, you have arrogantly beat your breast and declared that you have the power to rebuild even stronger, and have added more idols to your overflowing bag. And when we direct your attention to each true and righteous judgment of God, imploring you to repent and obey, you increase your rebellion by passing laws to shut us up, arresting us, suing us ... and now, your more direct approach, mob violence.

Now look what you've done:

Jeremiah 30: 23 Behold, the whirlwind of the LORD goeth forth with fury, a continuing whirlwind: it shall fall with pain upon the head of the wicked.

A "powerful and enormous" Hurricane Earl is bearing down on the East Coast, and right in its path are a plethora of cities that have distinguished themselves by their violent, brutish behavior to the servants of God at WBC. The people of this region have grievously fretted God with their cruel treatment of His people, and now God has turned His rod on you. After Earl, you have Fiona, Gaston and more and worse to look forward to; it will be a continuing whirlwind that will fall with pain on your heads if you do not hear these precious words of rebuke, heed them, and repent.

Here's your blueprint (to the words, rebels!):

2 Chronicles 34:27 Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou heardest his words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before me, and didst rend thy clothes, and weep before me; I have even heard thee also, saith the LORD.

You will not heed. You will not repent. You will not obey. You will not humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God. He will not forbear. Hang on to your hats: your destruction is imminent!

WBC'S GODSMACK TOUR: COMING TO A CITY NEAR YOU!

www.bit.ly/WBCtourSchedule



Westboro Baptist Church

Topeka, Kansas

785.273.0325

Figure 52. Open letter to President Barack Obama from Westboro Baptist Church, dated September 2, 2010, calling for a national day of prayer in the face of developing hurricanes in a coastal area already suffering from an oil spill. In contrast to the calls that the governor and legislators of Louisiana made, this letter calls for "sincere repentance and obedience to God."

remorse or desire or intent to change. God does not even *hear* a prayer like that, emphasizes Shirley Phelps-Roper.¹⁰¹⁶

While Westboro Baptists and members of the Religious Right both call for a return to godly living and the imposition of law allegedly derived from Biblical standards, Westboro Baptists have little hope that such a change will occur. This was not always the case. In the 1990s, when Fred Phelps ran in the Democratic primary for governor of Kansas, he called for a coalition of like-minded Republicans and Democrats to advance what is basically a Religious Right agenda. In his 1990 campaign, he sought a “Coalition of Righteousness” of voters who supported 1) “zero tolerance for abortions,” 2) the right to keep and bear arms, 3) the “death penalty for all premeditated murders,” 4) “zero tolerance for crime” with caning as a potential punishment for offenders 5) lawful prayer and Bible reading in public schools and a fair voucher system to support students in private religious schools 6) “Zero tolerance for tax hikes, budget hikes, and waste” 7) “No same sex marriages and zero tolerance for AIDS.” Of special note is his early opposition to gay marriage and his linking of the tolerance of homosexuality and the decline of state power. For example, in a press release explaining his views, he says:

The sanctity of holy matrimony shall not lie dead on the plains of Kansas. AIDS will inevitably bankrupt this state and nation unless humane quarantining of the guilty AIDS spreaders is begun¹⁰¹⁷

and

So long as criminal sodomy... or any crime is winked at there is no moral authority to control violent crime or any other crime.¹⁰¹⁸

¹⁰¹⁶ Shirley Phelps-Roper, comments at a Bible study, July 18, 2010.

¹⁰¹⁷ “Vote Randall Lt. Governor,” 1990, undated press release.

¹⁰¹⁸ “Vote Randall Lt. Governor,” 1990, undated press release.

Here, as in the Religious Right, gay people (“guilty AIDS spreaders”) are constructed as a national threat and, as in Tony Perkin’s argument, the state’s tolerance of gay people undermines its ability to protect its (nongay) citizens.

The political goals of Westboro Baptist Church and the Religious Right are thus not that different—and, as the above planks in the “Coalition of Righteousness” indicate, not merely in the regulation of sexuality. Both want marriage to be defined as one man and one woman, though the Religious Right is far more tolerant of divorce among its members and leaders than is Westboro Baptist Church. The Religious Right saw *Lawrence v. Texas*, which decriminalized sodomy, as the government’s abdication as hegemonizing force for heterosexuality, as did Westboro Baptist Church. Both groups oppose openly-gay politicians. Though Westboro Baptist Church openly calls for capital punishment for sodomy and the Religious Right does not, members of the Religious Right have been implicated in the promotion of such policies in nations where the citizenry will possibly tolerate it.¹⁰¹⁹ Further, the Religious Right does not univocally oppose the death penalty for same-sex contact.¹⁰²⁰

In sum, the Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church both legally oppose advancing gay rights, gay marriage, the inclusion of openly-gay soldiers, and the legalization of same-sex contact. Culturally, they both warn against the normalization of gay people or the acceptance of gay subcultures. Theologically, they both believe that unrepentant gay people go to hell, though one believes that a loving God who grants free will sends them there and another believes that a

¹⁰¹⁹ For an analysis of how America’s ex-gay movement has framed debate about homosexuality in Uganda, see Susan E. Spivey and Christine M. Robinson, “Genocidal Intentions: Social Death and the Ex-Gay Movement,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 5, no. 1 (April 2010): 68-88.

¹⁰²⁰ Writes Paul Cameron of the Family Research Institute regarding Uganda’s bill that makes repeat violators of the law against sodomy subject to execution: “Honorable people can differ on how severe should be the penalties for the various offenses catalogued in the Ugandan bill. But we find no warrant for considering this bill at odds with the historic values of either Christianity or democracy.... Many of its provisions would be welcome restorations to our own penal code” (“View from the Chair, Dec. 2009: The Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill,” *Family Research Council*, <http://www.familyresearchinst.org/2010/02/dec-2009-the-ugandan-anti-homosexuality-bill/>).

just God has damned them there since before the start of time. These two groups, though, cannot work together for their shared political goals, despite the fact that the Religious Right includes a number of theologically diverse believers and could likely tolerate the hyper-Calvinism of Westboro Baptist Church because of two blocks: 1) Westboro Baptist Church's explicit linking of national sin to national tragedy, a link that the Religious Right makes only tentatively and when aimed at particular kinds of sins (homosexuality, but not, for example, obesity or corporate dishonesty) and particular kinds of tragedy (hurricanes that destroy majority African-American cities and nations, not war deaths of American soldiers) and 2) differences in strategy. Chapter 7 will discuss the first obstacle to cooperation in detail. The next section of this chapter examines differences between Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church strategies.

Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church Strategies

As discussed in Chapter 4, Westboro Baptist Church began its anti-gay activism in the early 1990s, a time when the Religious Right was shifting its anti-gay rhetoric from Biblical to social scientific arguments that claim that same-sex sexuality is bad for the common good. Rather than attacking homosexuals individually for their sexuality, the Religious Right now focuses on particular sites of potential gay rights advancement—like the end of Don't Ask, Don't Tell or gay marriage—and explains why acceptance of gay rights in those areas is bad for the entire society, including gay citizens.

In contrast, Westboro Baptist Church deliberately deploys explicit images and rhetoric that will be heard by its audiences—especially individuals grieving the loss of a loved one or communities reeling from a disaster—as hateful. Though Westboro Baptist Church's theology is more complicated than “God Hates Fags,” the church has not been effective at preaching its message that Westboro Baptists believe that they, in fact, love gay people. Members of the

Religious Right and members of Westboro Baptist Church both claim to love gay people, but only the Religious Right has effectively used compassion politics to project the idea that they, like God, love gay people but hate homosexuality. Westboro Baptist Church, on the other hand, in promulgating an image of God as hateful, does not make clear that they do share the emotion that they assign to God. Of course, for individual gay people who do not desire to renounce their sexuality, such a difference may not matter much at all. However, for the broader public, the Religious Right has more effectively constructed its anti-gay activism, from support of “gay conversion” groups such as Exodus International to anti-gay rights legislation, as a compassionate response to a sin that God hates.

In affirming religious conservatives as compassionate, the Religious Right retains respectability that Westboro Baptist Church lacks. The Religious Right is thus able to seek influence over politicians, frequently by mobilizing its grassroots to contact political representatives and leaders. Members create policy documents and legal briefs as well as primary research aimed at filling in the facts the Religious Right uses in those documents and briefs. It publishes newsletters, magazines, and Sunday school curricula, and it broadcasts television and radio programs all aimed at persuading readers and listeners to adopt and enact a particular political stance, expressed in voting choices but also in the public sphere. In contrast, Westboro Baptist Church no longer expects to be politically persuasive. Its goal is to “help” people articulate their own “acceptance” of homosexuality and thus, “By their words they will be condemned.”¹⁰²¹ For this reason, members do not engage politicians or the political process with any real hope of changing the political landscape (even when they have run in elections) but instead engages people at scenes where their message is likely to gain a wide audience and where

¹⁰²¹ Westboro Baptist Church, “FAQ: What are you Trying to Accomplish?” *God Hates Fags*, <http://www.westborobaptistchurch.com/mobile/faq.html>.

their shocking words and images are likely to produce a response. The meaningful difference between the Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church, then, is not in their theologies (though this prevents Westboro Baptist Church from cooperating with other groups) or political goals but in the way in which they share their message with the greater public.

The Religious Right's Response to Westboro Baptist Church's Anti-Gay Activism

The Religious Right claims no relation with Westboro Baptist Church. Rejections of the church can be outright dismissals that Westboro Baptist Church is Christian or a church at all. For example, when asked if Fred Phelps "give[s] the Christian right a bad name,"¹⁰²² Jerry Falwell denied that Fred Phelps had the power to do so, saying:

Fred Phelps does not give the religious right a bad name, because nobody claims kin to that guy. He's a certified nut. He's got papers to prove it--he doesn't, he should. Anybody who goes to a funeral of a little boy who's dead, and his parents are looking at a big placard Fred Phelps puts up saying 'Matt is in hell,' is either mean as the devil or a nutcase. Either way, he doesn't represent anybody credible.¹⁰²³

At the same time that he recognizes Fred Phelps' power to hurt Judy and Dennis Shepard and other parents of dead children, Falwell does not recognize or acknowledge his role in creating an atmosphere where gay people are devalued. Indeed, Falwell does not seem to notice how his own prediction that gay people will be "utterly annihilated, and there will be a celebration in

¹⁰²² Jerry Falwell, "Frontline, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/interviews/falwell.html>, 2000.

¹⁰²³ Jerry Falwell, "Frontline, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/interviews/falwell.html>, 2000.

heaven”¹⁰²⁴ is the same as Fred Phelps’ claim that “Fags die, God laughs.”¹⁰²⁵ Thus, Falwell is correct in saying that “nobody claims kin to that guy”—but just because Falwell does not claim kin” does not mean that he is not kin.

Here, Falwell is performing a common tactic of the Religious Right in regards to Westboro Baptist Church: preaching a theology that results in the damnation of gay people (for Falwell never says that Fred Phelps’ claim is false, only that declaring it on a placard at a funeral is mean or crazy) and working against gay rights while denying any similarity to Westboro Baptist Church. This strategy is especially important to Baptists, like Falwell, since they share with Westboro Baptist Church the name *Baptist*. “New School” Baptist churches (that is, non-Primitive Baptist Churches) have overwhelmingly distanced themselves from Westboro Baptist Church without espousing support for gay rights or gay people.¹⁰²⁶ For example, Dwayne Hastings, the Southern Baptist Convention’s director of communications for the religious-liberty commission, says, “The slogans that Fred Phelps and his group are promoting are unscriptural and very inappropriate.... Southern Baptists stand on the word of God in believing that homosexuality is wrong and that, as the Bible says, it’s an abomination to God.”¹⁰²⁷ He distances his own group from Westboro, simply saying that Westboro Baptist Church is “unscriptural” while Southern Baptists “stand on the word of God”—that is, one is more authentically Christian than the other. At times, other mainstream Baptist churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention or American Baptists simply drop the word “Baptist” from reporting about Westboro

¹⁰²⁴ Jerry Falwell, quoted in Jim Hill and Rand Cheadle, *The Bible Tells Me So* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 69-70.

¹⁰²⁵ Westboro Baptist Church, “Fags Die, God Laughs,” *Sign Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.net/videos/signmovies/index.html>.

¹⁰²⁶ Michael Foust, “Night & Day: The Difference between Southern Baptists and Fred Phelps,” March 31, 2003, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=15606>.

¹⁰²⁷ Robert Stacy McCain, “Condemn Sin—and Sinner,” *Insight on the News*, August 16, 1999.

Baptist Church, as if to deny Westboro Baptist Church its historical or theological ties to their denomination.

Likewise, other Primitive Baptists have denounced Westboro Baptist Church, though because they are autonomous, Primitive Baptists have a harder time delivering a unified public statement. In 2008, though, Elder David Montgomery, writing at Primitive Baptist.Org, sternly denounces Westboro and denies the authority of Fred Phelps:

PB-Online and the Primitive Baptist Church do not recognize the ministry of “pastor” Fred Phelps, nor do we have fellowship with the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, which styles itself as an Old School (or Primitive) Baptist Church. We find the actions of these people to be deplorable and against the very Scriptures they claim to believe. Let it be firmly noted that the Primitive

Baptists do not and will not endorse, condone or support the base actions of this group.¹⁰²⁸

The use of quotation marks around the word *pastor* (similar to other writers’ use of the words “the so-called Reverend Fred Phelps” or “the so-called church”) aims to undermine Phelps’ credentials.¹⁰²⁹ Similarly, Montgomery’s use of the verb “styled” to explain Westboro Baptist Church’s Primitive Baptist identity is deployed to undermine Westboro Baptist Church’s claim to be an authentic Primitive Baptist church in an arena where authenticity is very important. Implicit in Montgomery’s assessment is the comparison between Westboro Baptist Church, which is only “styled” as a Primitive Baptist church, and Primitive Baptist churches whose beliefs are sincerely held, not superficial.

¹⁰²⁸ Elder David Montgomery, *Primitive Baptist Online*

¹⁰²⁹ Because he was not baptized by an “orderly” Primitive Baptist pastor, Fred Phelps cannot be considered an authentic Primitive Baptist by other Primitive Baptists.

As other anti-gay churches struggle to distinguish themselves from Westboro Baptist Church by denying its claims to authenticity, Christians outside of the Religious Right—including mainstream and progressive Christians—face less of a struggle to be distinct since they do not adopt outright anti-gay theology or seek anti-gay policies. The earliest counter-protestors were other Christians, recall Westboro Baptists. As early as 1993, when the church had already articulated its narrow focus on homosexuality but had not yet picketed at many cultural events or at the funerals of straight people, a group of Topeka clergy signed a declaration “in response to the Environment of Hatred and Violence.” (See Figure 53.) None of the dozens of signatories were representatives of theologically conservative churches in the city.¹⁰³⁰

¹⁰³⁰ “A Clergy Declaration in response to the Environment of Hatred and Violence in Topeka, Kansas,” press release dated October 11, 1993.

A Clergy Declaration
In Response to
The Environment of Hatred and Violence
In Topeka, Kansas
October 11, 1993

We the undersigned clergy and religious leaders of Topeka make the following declaration:

We believe God is Love and that we are called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We believe that all people are God's creation and are blessed by God.

We detest the environment of hatred and violence that is promoted by a vocal few in Topeka.

We believe there are ways people can express their religious, cultural and political differences without resorting to hostile confrontation, displays of anger or abusive language.

We are opposed to taking scriptural texts and religious writings out of context and claiming they are definitive for all people.

We want our community to know the scriptural interpretations displayed on our street corners by the purveyors of hate, prejudice and bigotry are neither universal nor the norm.

We believe God, not individuals, judges people and nations and that we are called to proclaim God's love and minister faithfully to each other in God's name.

Figure 53. Mainstream and progressive religious leaders in Topeka publicly decried the anti-gay activism of Westboro Baptist Church as early as 1993. No conservative clergy signed the document.

The Religious Right's hesitation to denounce Westboro Baptist Church early in its anti-gay ministry reflects the agreement between Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church theology and politics. Soulforce, an organization working to increase acceptance of sexual minorities among Christians, has illustrated these similarities in "Southern Baptists May Not Say 'God Hates Fags' as Fred Phelps Does but the Effect is the Same," a presentation that places official statements from the Southern Baptist Convention and prominent Southern Baptists next

to statements by Fred Phelps.¹⁰³¹ (See Figure 54.) Like the quotations that opened this chapter, they are difficult to distinguish, but Southern Baptists—like others in the Religious Right—seem unable or unwilling to hear how their own anti-gay theology, which, along with social scientific evidence about the danger of being gay, they claim drives their anti-gay politics, echoes that of Westboro Baptist Church, even if their posture is more pleasant, their graphics less graphic, and their words more tactful. This respectability, though it gives the Religious Right greater access to the public than Westboro Baptist Church, is criticized by Westboro Baptist Church, which argues that other religious leaders have traded in their prophetic voice for access to power.

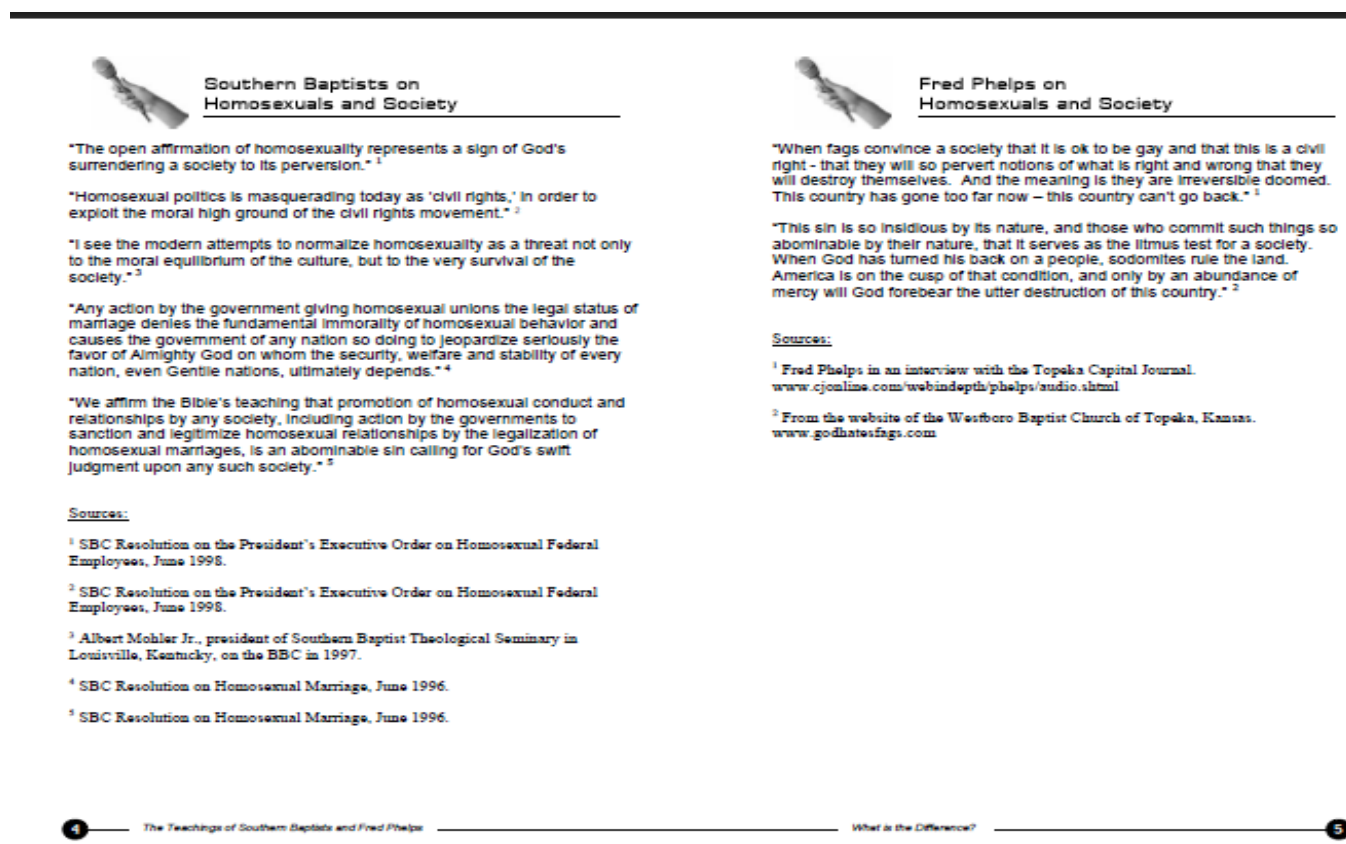


Figure 53. Pages from a Souforce publication juxtaposing quotations from the Southern Baptist Conference and Westboro Baptist Church to highlight similarities in position, even as Southern Baptists avoid the tone of that Westboro Baptist Church publications take.

¹⁰³¹ "Southern Baptists May Not Say 'God Hates Fags' as Fred Phelps Does but the Effect is the Same," *Souforce*, <http://www.souforce.org/pdf/sbcandphelps.pdf>.

Conclusion

The theological nuances of Westboro Baptist Church's theology of sexuality would matter little to the Religious Right, which adopts a "big tent" philosophy that accepts theological difference for the sake of political expediency, if Westboro Baptist Church was willing to adopt Religious Right tactics—in other words, to come into the tent. However, Westboro Baptist Church refuses to wear the "mask of compassion" that characterizes the "repackage[ed]" Religious Rights anti-gay movement.¹⁰³² It refuses to exchange Bible-based arguments against homosexuality for the respectability of social science or to temper its language. Members of Westboro Baptist Church keep their focus on theology, but, note Carin Robinson and Clyde Wilcox, "doctrinal talk is bad politics,"¹⁰³³ so they make little headway toward the goals they share with the broader Religious Right. Westboro Baptist Church is ostracized by the Religious Right not because of its theology, which the Religious Right could tolerate, or its anti-gay politics, which the two share, but because of Westboro Baptist Church's refusal to adhere to the Religious Rights tactics. Like anti-Catholic tract writer Jack Chick, Fred Phelps is "an old-school Christian in a focus group world."¹⁰³⁴ However, Westboro Baptist Church's message of a hyper-Calvinist God who uses national tragedy to rebuke a nation for individual and collective sin, though, has deep roots in American religious history, and Westboro Baptists pride themselves on their place in this tradition.

¹⁰³² Surina Khan, "Calculated Compassion: How The Ex-Gay Movement Serves The Right's Attack on Democracy," *Political Research Associates*, 1998, <http://www.publiceye.org/equality/x-gay/X-Gay.html>.

¹⁰³³ Carin Robinson and Clyde Wilcox, "The Faith of George W. Bush: The Personal, Practical, and Political" in *Religion and the American Presidency*, eds. Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney from *The Evolving American Presidency* series (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 219. (chapter is 215-238).

¹⁰³⁴ Cynthia Burack, "From Doom Town to Sin City: Chick Tracts and Antigay Politics" (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., September 1-4, 2005).

Many used to preach “as I am preaching,” reminiscences Fred Phelps, but “they’re gone!”¹⁰³⁵ And this is true. Just as Calvinist Puritans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Westboro Baptists of today share a double, absolute predestination that links individual and community tragedy to sin, the Religious Right of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s shared with Westboro Baptist Church a tendency to dehumanize gay people and describe same-sex contact as “loathsome” and “detestable” and gay people as a threat to themselves and the nation. Individual actors within the Religious Right continue to use this language, as the quotations at the start of this chapter reveal, even as the Religious Right as a movement has adopted social scientific arguments against homosexuality in order to avoid appearing prejudiced. Over the last two decades, then, Westboro Baptist Church did not change; the Religious Right did—or, rather, the official rhetoric changed to *sound more* compassionate, even if the old prejudices against same-sex sexuality remain. The failure of new preachers to rise up to preach the old message of personal and national destruction as a consequence of sin only reinforces Westboro Baptist Church’s self-perception as the only remaining authentic voice of Christianity. This criticism of other churches is sharpened by the perception that many Religious Right leaders falsely claim compassion; Westboro Baptist Church, like many suspicious of the Religious Right’s intentions, senses the hypocrisy.

Despite the Religious Right’s disavowal of Westboro Baptist Church and Westboro Baptist Church’s disdain for the “kissy pooh” theology¹⁰³⁶ of the “softer, gentler gay bashing” of the Religious Right,¹⁰³⁷ the two groups contribute to an atmosphere that is hostile to gay people

¹⁰³⁵ Fred Phelps, sermon, April 11, 2010.

¹⁰³⁶ Michael Foust, “Night & Day: The Difference between Southern Baptists and Fred Phelps,” March 31, 2003, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=15606>.

¹⁰³⁷ Tate Hausman, “The GOP’s ‘Kinder, Gentler’ Gay Bashing,” *The Albion Monitor*, August 3, 1998, <http://www.albionmonitor.com/9808a/copyright/gopgayattack.html>.

and gay rights, even as both deny that they foment violence.¹⁰³⁸ Westboro Baptist Church keeps alive so-called “Bible-based” arguments against homosexuality, giving the Religious Right room to agitate politically without fear of association with Westboro Baptist Church. Indeed, anti-gay activists can affirm their own “compassion” by opposing Westboro Baptist Church without backtracking on their support for anti-gay rights policies. Or, as Soulforce concludes in its comparison of the Religious Right and Westboro Baptist Church, “the effect is the same.”¹⁰³⁹

¹⁰³⁸ For example, the Family Research Council does not condone state-sanctioned violence against gay *people* “nor any other penalty which would have the effect of inhibiting compassionate pastoral, psychological and medical care and treatment for those who experience same-sex attractions or who engage in homosexual conduct” (J. P. Duffy, as quoted in David Weigel, “Family Research Council Explains: It Lobbied for Changes to Uganda Legislation, *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-now/2010/06/family_research_council_explai.html). Notably, Family Research Council does not differentiate between those who would seek such “medical care and treatment” under their own volition and those who are content pursuing their same-sex attraction. Jerry Falwell also spoke out against violence against gay people after a joint conference involving members of his Thomas Road Baptist Church and Soulforce (Jerry Falwell, “*Frontline*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/interviews/falwell.html>, 2000). Westboro Baptist Church stresses their own non-violence toward gay people as well as toward counter-protestors.

¹⁰³⁹ “Southern Baptists May Not Say ‘God Hates Fags’ as Fred Phelps Does but the Effect is the Same,” *Soulforce*, <http://www.soulforce.org/pdf/sbcandphelps.pdf>.

Chapter 7: Public Response to Westboro Baptist Church at Military Funerals: Civility and Civil Liberties, Heteronormativity, Religious Nationalism, and the Radical Flank Model

As argued in Chapter 6, the Religious Right shares anti-gay sentiments with Westboro Baptist Church but expresses these sentiments in terms that are more palatable to an American public that is anti-gay but that does not want to appear intolerant of social diversity and finds the graphic and confrontational tactics of Westboro Baptist Church offensive. Thus, the Religious Right distances itself from Westboro Baptist Church in public statements, even as it advocates anti-gay policies and as both groups share the claim that God will stop blessing (or is destroying) America for its sexual sins. James A. Aho writes,

The story line is familiar. America has a covenant with the Lord. If she remains faithful to its edicts, as expressed in the Constitution and the biblical lawbooks, she shall be favored. Her crops shall be plentiful, her people well-fed, prolific, and happy, her children obedient to the voice of their parents. But now she has faltered in her obligations and her cities lie corrupt, her waters and air are befouled, and wantonness, crime, and dissolution follow her people everywhere.¹⁰⁴⁰

In religious fundamentalist belief, “outside of the biblically revealed way, everyone is doomed to eternal damnation, and societies are doomed to chaos.”¹⁰⁴¹

American churches have long encouraged the connection between individual and collective sin and national doom, a theological coalescence of the state of the church and the state of the state. In early America, churches

¹⁰⁴⁰ James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 3-4.

¹⁰⁴¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms: Social Dynamics and Rhetorical Strategies” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 4, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 149-150.

contributed to the construction of a religious nationalism that provided the new nation with a sacred canopy under which it could develop its own characteristic national style.... In turn, the nation itself provided the churches with a symbol of unity and wholeness that they could not generate out of their own resources.¹⁰⁴²

America became perhaps the most religious secular state in the modern world. A hegemonic Christianity—Protestant in orientation but generic in its theological details—saw America as uniquely blessed by God. Because “God’s world is pure, not pluralistic,”¹⁰⁴³ those who threaten this vision of a sacred America worthy of God’s blessings represent threats to national prosperity and security.

To many, this pessimistic narrative turns upon the sexual sins of the people. Because appropriate sexual expression is narrowly defined as monogamous, life-long, and heterosexual and idealized as procreative—that is, heteronormative—, those who express sexuality outside of those parameters invite God’s wrath upon a nation. Impurity, in the form of deviation from heteronormativity, threatens to undo the blessings God has already provided, stop God from further blessing the nation, or, even, prompt God’s destruction of the nation.

A Christianity that declares that God blesses America and that this blessing is contingent upon heteronormative behavior will thus be anti-gay in defense of its nationalism. Its anti-gay theology will be an effort to protect the nation from the withdrawal of God’s blessing or the provocation of God’s wrath. This religious justification of heteronormativity in defense of nationalism inspires members of the Religious Right to fight, sometimes quite cruelly, any public policy that recognizes the dignity of same-sex desire, not merely or even primarily because of the

¹⁰⁴² Glenn T. Miller, *Religious Liberty in America: History and Prospects* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 79.

¹⁰⁴³ Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, and R. Scott Appleby, “Explaining Fundamentalisms” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 5, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 428.

social consequences of such policies but because of the supernatural consequences.¹⁰⁴⁴

Sociologist Ruth Murray Brown neatly summarized the optimism that informs Religious Right activism by titling one of the chapters of her impressive study on the Religious Right “Saved People Can Save the Country.”¹⁰⁴⁵ Here, “save the country” means not only to insure the country’s continued functioning but its continued blessing by God. It is both materially and spiritually saved. As Fred Phelps explains, Americans could “get the blessing of God back on it rather than his curse” if they just stopped sinning.¹⁰⁴⁶ (See Figure 54.)



Figure 54. Rachel Hockenbarger connects America’s sexual sins with the attacks of September 11, 2001, in this undated photograph provided by Westboro Baptist Church.

¹⁰⁴⁴ For example, Candi Cushman, who serves as an education analyst for Focus on the Family’s political action group, Focus on the Family Action, has spoken extensively in opposition to school policies that would target bullying based on a victim’s real or perceived sexuality (Candi Cushman, “Parents Beware: ‘Anti-Bullying’ Initiatives are Gay Activists Latest Tools of Choice for Sneaking Homosexuality Lessons into Classrooms,” *Citizen Link*, June/July 2010, http://www.truetolerance.org/p9_June_Jul_Citizen_10_antibullying.pdf).

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ruth Murray Brown, *For a “Christian America”: A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), 81.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Fred Phelps, interview in *Fall from Grace*, DVD, directed by K. Ryan Jones (2008; New York: DOCURAMA, 2008.)

The Religious Right therefore views homosexuality as one of the foremost threats to the state. Indeed, religious conservatives have a duty to fight against “homosexual activism” because such activism is itself a threat to liberty. Advances in gay rights threaten the ability of believers “to practice their religious beliefs—including their religiously-based moral convictions about God’s will concerning the nature of marriage and human sexuality.”¹⁰⁴⁷ Believers must band together to fight the tyranny of gay rights. For example, in the face of the potential legalization of same-sex marriages, signees of the Manhattan Declaration pledged not to “bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family.”¹⁰⁴⁸ Promising civil disobedience if the law requires them to recognize same-sex unions, the signees envision themselves as heroes defending religious liberty. Because religious liberty is one of the nation’s founding principles, by depicting gay rights as antithetical to and undermining religious liberty, members of the Religious Right can describe homosexuality as anti-American. “People who favor gay rights face no penalty for speaking their views, but can inflict a risk of litigation, investigation, and formal and informal career penalties on others whose views they dislike,” complains “traditional marriage” defender Maggie Gallagher.¹⁰⁴⁹ Timothy J. Dailey encourages “Christians who feel that their right of religious freedom and expression under the Constitution has been denied should” to “seek

¹⁰⁴⁷ Timothy J. Dailey, “The Other Side of Tolerance: How Homosexual Activism Threatens Liberty” (Family Research Council, Washington, D.C., 2006), 17.

¹⁰⁴⁸ “Manhattan Declaration: A Call to Christian Conscience,” available at “National Religious Leaders Release Historic Declaration on Christian Conscience,” *DeMoss News*, November 20, 2009, DeMossNews.com/ManhattanDeclaration, para. 27, para. 38. The *L.A. Times* calls these “Strong words, but also irresponsible and dangerous ones” for “[t]his is a nation of laws, not of men—even holy men.” The logic displayed in the Manhattan Declaration’s call to civil disobedience calls into question Religious Right leaders’ roles in making law. They “insist on their right to shape the nation’s laws [while] reserving the right to violate them in situations far removed from [Martin Luther] King’s witness” (“Christian Leaders’ Stance on Civil Disobedience is Dangerous” *L.A. Times*, November 28, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/nov/28/opinion/la-ed-disobedience28-2009nov28>).

¹⁰⁴⁹ Maggie Gallagher, “Banned in Boston: The Coming Conflict Between Same-sex Marriage and Religious Liberty,” *Weekly Standard*, May 15, 2006, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/content/public/articles/000/000/012/191kgwgh.asp?page=4>.

redress.” Doing so is an act of patriotism because it defends others whose rights are under attack. Says Dailey, “By doing so, you may also help to protect others who are facing or will face similar situations by establishing legal precedent for the protection of such rights.”¹⁰⁵⁰ Gay rights advocates are thus constructed as an enemy not only of heterosexuality but of freedom.

Further, homosexuality is a threat to the state because it invites outside threats from both other nations and God. For example, the presence of openly gay soldiers in the U.S. armed forces would lead to national insecurity, darkly predicts Tony Perkins of Family Research Council. He warns:

If open homosexuals are allowed to serve, it will break our all-volunteer force, dangerously weaken the military’s war-fighting ability, and put national security and our country’s future at risk.¹⁰⁵¹

In the Religious Right’s imagined future, gay servicemen and women are threats to their peers, who will be the unwanted objects of their lusts. Discipline within the ranks will disintegrate, as gays and lesbians use their sexuality to curry favor with higher ranked officers. Lovers will prioritize each other over the straight members of their fighting units, endangering straight troops. Ten percent of current military members will not re-enlist, forcing conscription. Drafted troops, pressured by gay superiors into unwanted sex and betrayed by gay peers who care only for each other, will be unable to win wars.¹⁰⁵² Gay soldiers will infect their straight comrades with HIV during battle. “If open homosexuals are allowed into the United States military, the Taliban won’t need to plant dirty needles to infect our soldiers with HIV. Our own soldiers will

¹⁰⁵⁰ Dailey, “The Other Side of Tolerance.”

¹⁰⁵¹ Tony Perkins, fundraising letter for Family Research Council, May 2010.

¹⁰⁵² Such is the picture painted by Family Research Council’s Peter Sprigg in his report “Homosexual Assault within the Military” (*Insight*, May 1010, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF10E118.pdf>). Here, Sprigg uses questionable statistical analysis to argue that gay male soldiers are more likely than their straight counterparts to assault their peers.

take care of that for them,” warns Bryan Fischer of the American Family Association, referencing claims in British newspapers that the Taliban is attempting to build bombs that contain dirty needles. Indeed, the interests of gay citizens are depicted not merely as irrelevant to American security; they depicted as in opposition to American security and tradition, which is why Fischer titles his article “Gay Sex = Domestic Terrorism.”¹⁰⁵³ If gay people serve openly in the military, the nation will be insecure and thus open to attack. Asks Perkins,

It comes down to this: Whose flag will fly over the U.S. military? The flag of our Founding Fathers? Or the rainbow flag of the homosexual rights movement? Now is the time to fight for the red, white, and blue—for God, for country, for those who serve, for our families, and for our future.¹⁰⁵⁴

On one side stand Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and the other (assuredly heterosexual) men who founded the nation, defending God, country, the military, families, and “our future.” On the other side are gay rights activists, in defiance of God, unpatriotic, subversive, and anti-family.

The consequences of tolerating homosexuality are great, warns David Barton, revisionist Christian historian and head of Wallbuilders, an organization that promotes “the Godly foundation of our country.”¹⁰⁵⁵ If any ground is given, then eventually all is lost. In a 2001 article about homosexuality in the military, Barton argues that the nation will fall if homosexuality is not actively discouraged. Drawing upon the legal writings of eighteenth century German theologian Johann David Michaelis, Barton argues that Michaelis believed that

¹⁰⁵³ Bryan Fischer, “Gay Sex = Domestic Terrorism,” *Rightly Concerned* [blog associated with the American Family Association], June 10, 2010, <http://action.afa.net/Blogs/BlogPost.aspx?id=2147495382>.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Tony Perkins, fundraising letter for Family Research Council, May 2010.

¹⁰⁵⁵ WallBuilders, “About Us,” *WallBuilders*, <http://www.wallbuilders.com/ABTOverview.asp>.

“homosexuality must be more strenuously addressed and much less tolerated than virtually any other moral vice in society” for social reasons.¹⁰⁵⁶ Barton quotes Michaelis as writing,

If we reflect on the dreadful consequences of sodomy to a state, and on the extent to which this abominable vice may be secretly carried on and spread, we cannot, on the principles of sound policy, consider the punishment as too severe. For if it once begins to prevail, not only will boys be easily corrupted by adults, but also by other boys; nor will it ever cease; more especially as it must thus soon lose all its shamefulness and infamy and become fashionable and the national taste; and then . . . national weakness, for which all remedies are ineffectual, most inevitably follow; not perhaps in the very first generation, but certainly in the course of the third or fourth. . . . To these evils may be added yet another, viz. that the constitutions of those men who submit to this degradation are, if not always, yet very often, totally destroyed, though in a different way from what is the result of whoredom.

Whoever, therefore, wishes to ruin a nation, has only to get this vice introduced; for it is extremely difficult to extirpate it where it has once taken root because it can be propagated with much more secrecy . . . and when we perceive that it has once got a footing in any country, however powerful and flourishing, we may venture as politicians to predict that the foundation of its future decline is laid and

¹⁰⁵⁶ David Barton, “Homosexuality and the Military,” *WallBuilders*, 2001, <http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=101>.

that after some hundred years it will no longer be the same . . . powerful country it is at present.¹⁰⁵⁷

In the present moment, implies Barton, gay rights advocates, by trying to insure that this “vice” gains “footing,” must wish “to ruin [the] nation.” Self-centered gay people, complains Cliff Kincaid of America’s Survival, a Religious Right group, do not care about the troops or national security:

They want their “rights” and they want them now. They simply don’t care if a premature policy change causes thousands of our soldiers to leave the Armed Forces in disgust and dismay and thousands more never to sign up because they don’t want to room or shower with individuals sexually attracted to them. . . . Our troops have become cannon fodder in the gay rights campaign to force their views and acceptance on the rest of us. The rights of gays are now supposed to take precedence over our soldiers’ lives.¹⁰⁵⁸

Homosexual sex is a national security threat, both because God has previously destroyed entire communities—a lá Sodom and Gomorrah—for the sin of homosexuality and because the social consequences of homosexuality are disease, disorder, the destruction of heterosexual marriage, a decline in military prowess, and, as Michaelis argues, the degradation of the male “constitution” (words that hint at the misogyny behind anti-gay sentiments). Gay Americans, then, are not merely un-American but anti-American, for homosexuality, “a sin that baffles those who would be true followers of Liberty and Righteousness,” seeks “to destroy the freedom and liberty of all

¹⁰⁵⁷ Barton attributes the quotation to Sir John David Michaelis, translated by Alexander Smith, *Commentaries on the Laws of Moses, Volume IV*. (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1814), 115-117. Barton misrepresents Michaelis, first as an American, second as a nineteenth century thinker, and third as a jurist. He was a German theologian (His *Commentaries on the Laws of Moses* was a theological work, not a legal argument, despite the word “law” in the title), and he died in 1791. I have retained Barton’s use of ellipses.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Cliff Kincaid, “Saving Soldiers from Gay Death,” *America’s Survival*, May 27, 2010, <http://www.usasurvival.org/ck05.27.10.html>.

nations.”¹⁰⁵⁹ Oklahoma State Representative Sally Kern spoke for many conservative Americans in 2008 when she warned that “no society that has totally embraced homosexuality has lasted... more than a few decades. So it's the death knell in this country.... [I]t's the biggest threat that our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam, which I think is a big threat.” Kern stressed, “It will destroy this nation.”¹⁰⁶⁰

For this reason, gay sexuality is not merely a private issue but a collective social concern for all patriotic Americans. Indeed, Official Street Preachers, a Christian street preaching ministry that adopts some of the same theology and tactics of Westboro Baptist Church, explicitly links national security and homosexuality in the signs that members hold. (See Figures 55 and 56.)



Figure 55. A member of Official Street Preacher linking homosexuality and national security. When asked about the logic behind the sign, Ruben Israel, a member of the group, responded: “Contact the mayor of Sodom and Gommorah.” Israel cited both supernatural consequences—such as God’s destruction of those ancient cities—and epidemiological evidence—such as the higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases among gay people—of homosexuality. “The sin of homosexuality is a decline of a [sic] individual, a family, a city and nation,” he explained (email to the author, October 26, 2010). Photograph taken July 29, 2006; courtesy of Navid Baraty. All rights reserved.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Earl Taylor, Jr. “The Destructive Sin of Homosexuality,” *National Center for Constitutional Studies*, August 1999, <http://www.nccs.net/newsletter/aug99nl.html>.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Associated Press, “Oklahoma Rep. Sally Kern on YouTube Clip: Homosexuality Bigger Threat Than Terrorism,” *FoxNews*, March 16, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,338271,00.html>.



Figure 56. Fred Phelps, Jr., “connects the dots” between homosexual sin, the nation, and America’s future doom. Undated photograph courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.

Saving the country from this threat means “transforming American culture in ways that are consistent with the [Religious Right’s] conception of sexuality and sexual immorality and, in eschatological terms, turning God’s wrath away from an America that is perceived to court divine judgment with every cultural and political shift.”¹⁰⁶¹ Thus, Westboro Baptist Church’s linking of homosexuality and military death is consistent with the tradition within the Religious Right that generally links homosexuality and national doom. Unlike most groups in the Religious Right, however, Primitive Baptists “are not religious nationalists” because they believe that, since individuals are equally depraved, God cannot favor one nation of sinners over

¹⁰⁶¹ Cynthia Burack, “Compassion Campaigns and Antigay Politics: What Would Arendt Do?” (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, August 30-Sept. 2, 2007), 24.

another.¹⁰⁶² Nevertheless, Westboro Baptists believe that America, as represented by its legal system but also by its culture, has given approval to homosexuality and is thus being corporately punished by God. This is precisely the threat that the Religious Right invokes in its effort to contest gay rights. Unlike the Religious Right but like other Primitive Baptists, Westboro Baptists do not subscribe to the notion that God cares in particular about America, but they do believe that God uses tragedy, including military deaths, to capture the attention, rebuke, and punish an entire nation, including those who are elect. This logic thus actually has a long history in American religious rhetoric, even if it has not been asserted so blatantly as Westboro Baptist Church states it.

“Fundamentalist movements are organized efforts to shape the future of a people in the light of a past that is seen through the lens of ... authorities traditionally available in the culture,” notes Nancy T. Ammerman.¹⁰⁶³ Westboro Baptist Church taps into a latent fear of homosexuality and thus gay people as threats to the national future, a fear is “available in the culture,” in large part thanks to the work of Religious Right anti-gay activists who keep such fear circulating.

Under close analysis, then, the Religious Right agrees with the message that Westboro Baptist Church preaches at military funerals or other scenes of national tragedy or during moments of national mourning: that, because America does not collectively condemn homosexuality, soldiers die. Westboro Baptists preach at funerals, says Fred Phelps, “to remind you that we warned you”¹⁰⁶⁴ in advance of the military members’ death that military death results from a nation’s failure to obey God. Westboro Baptists, like all believers, they argue,

¹⁰⁶² James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 93.

¹⁰⁶³ Ammerman, “Accounting for Christian Fundamentalisms,” 151; italics in original.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 7, 2010.

have a “non-delegable duty... to warn your neighbors that their proud sins are bringing their destruction upon themselves (harbingers of that national and then eternal destruction are your individual dead soldiers).”¹⁰⁶⁵ Westboro Baptist Church’s double predestination, though, means that the church declares that God is actively destroying America, while many in the Religious Right think of God as merely removing the “the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812.”¹⁰⁶⁶ In its outline, Fred Phelps’ message is markedly similar to the message of Religious Right pastors and politicians. America, the New Jerusalem, the New Israel, like the historic Israel, has turned away from God. Says Fred Phelps:

[Americans] rapidly descended into irreversible apostasy; and, with no holy pattern to keep their spirits and doctrines in paths of righteousness, cunningly devised fables and darkest heresy completely took over. They must be nationally punished—so must America—for an example unto them that after should live ungodly.¹⁰⁶⁷

For Westboro Baptists, the death of servicemen and women is not a surprise but a fitting and logical response from an angry God who demands holiness from individuals and the nation. Every serviceman or woman killed in battle was reared in a culture that despised God, says Tim Phelps, and, still, Americans have not humbled themselves before God and repented:

¹⁰⁶⁵ Fred Phelps, interview in *Fall From Grace*.

¹⁰⁶⁶ “Falwell Apologizes to Gays, Feminists, Lesbians,” *CNN.com/US*, September 14, 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/>.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Fred Phelps, sermon April 18, 2010. Here, Phelps references 2 Peter 2:4-10, which says in the King James’ translation: “For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;) The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished: But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.”

You taught him that God was joking about all those sins, when he said you were going to pay for them. Well, now you know better. He cut that child down before the child's life began. And here you are, railing against God for his hand of judgment, when what you should be doing is getting down on your knees and thanking him that he hasn't killed you yet. There's no hope for that kid. He's in hell.¹⁰⁶⁸

"You did this," Tim Phelps states baldly, blaming America for the death of its servicemen and women. "We warned you. You punished us for warning you... and now you're paying the price."¹⁰⁶⁹

Westboro Baptists complicate the relationship between sexual sin and national doom in one unique way: viewing themselves as prophets for contemporary America, they see public response to them as the same as public response to God, as Tim Phelps suggests when he says that America is "paying the price" for punishing Westboro Baptist Church. God sent Westboro Baptists to preach against America's sexual sin, and when America responds by ignoring or opposing the church, America will pay—through civilian deaths in crimes and accidents and through military deaths. Sara Phelps explicitly cites attacks on Westboro Baptist Church in the 1990s, when an area man was found guilty of setting off a "4- to 6 inch 'explosive device' made of a one inch PVC pipe that was detonated with a fuse,"¹⁰⁷⁰ as the source of God's choice to use IEDs to kill American soldiers and Marines:

Ten years ago, the fags set off an IED at our church, and it says in the Bible, [the] Lord says, "Vengeance is mine; *I shall repay*. Ten years later, do you think it's a

¹⁰⁶⁸ Tim Phelps, interview in *Fall from Grace*.

¹⁰⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷⁰ Steve Fry, "Topekan Gets 16 Days in Pipe Bomb Incident," *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, April 6, 1996. On October 29, 2007, a similar bomb threat was made against the church, though no bomb was found (Phil Anderson, "Church Target of Bomb Threat," *The Topeka Capital-Journal*, October 30, 2007).

coincidence that American soldiers are getting blown up by IEDs? ... When you start messing with the servants of the Most High God, God is going to kick your ass, period.¹⁰⁷¹

As Sara Phelps stresses, when bad things happen—when vengeance occurs—it is God repaying America for its sins. Indeed, says Fred Phelps, “It’s no surprise to me that God’s picking off these miserable brats.”¹⁰⁷² The logic is clear: because America attacked Westboro Baptist Church, God is using the same weapon—IEDs—to attack America. Indeed, killing American soldiers is God’s chosen way of punishing America precisely because it strikes at Americans’ hopefulness about their future, their children, and their security. Says Fred Phelps,

You can’t hardly imagine a more fitting way to severely punish a people than to begin to blow the cream of their young manhood and womanhood to smithereens in Iraq, and the forum, the venue to preach that, is the funeral of some soldier, some young American soldier whose been blown to smithereens by an IED. It’s as though the Lord God said, “You raised him for the devil and hell [and] I’m giving him back to you in a bodybag. You partook as part of that evil nation that set off a bomb, an IED, at my servant’s church. That is not a minor matter.”

It is Westboro Baptist Church’s vision of itself as the lone remnant of the true apostolic church on earth that enables it to see itself as central in God’s interaction with the world. At the same time, the belief that God has a special purpose and thus insures the success of that mission is held by many religious leaders. The difference between them and Westboro Baptist Church’s confidence that God protects them from their enemies is that Westboro Baptists define their enemies not as liberal politicians, atheists, or others are viewed as inimical to conservative

¹⁰⁷¹ Sara Phelps, in *Fall from Grace*.

¹⁰⁷² Fred Phelps, in *Fall from Grace*.

Christianity but as America itself, embodied in its soldiers. Targeting the military dead as enemies is perceived as simply too uncivil—in both the sense of *rude* and a threat to *American civilization*—for the Religious Right, as for many Americans, to tolerate.

Civil Liberty v. Civility

Pickets at military funerals and at the scenes of national tragedy have sparked the greatest outrage from opponents of Westboro Baptist Church. As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg asked during Margie Phelps' oral arguments in *Snyder v. Phelps*, "Why should the First Amendment tolerate exploiting this bereaved family when you have so many other forums for getting -getting across your message...?"¹⁰⁷³ To the general public, criticism of the dead at the moment of their death or during their mourning is reprehensible and, at minimum, tasteless. However, Westboro Baptist Church argues that their message is precisely most potentially valuable to its audience at that moment, for when people are emotionally vulnerable, they are more open to hear the truth of God.¹⁰⁷⁴

Snyder v. Phelps illustrates the tension around military funeral pickets. In early March 2006, Matthew Snyder, a Marine from York, Pennsylvania, was killed when he was ejected from a Humvee in a non-combat accident during a resupply mission, Operation Mighty Oak, in Iraq. According to the Marines' account of the incident, the driver of Snyder's Humvee was out of formation at the time of the accident, ignored orders to fall back into formation, and was driving

¹⁰⁷³ Transcript of oral arguments in *Snyder v. Phelps*, October 6, 2010, *Supreme Court*, http://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/09-751.pdf.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Coincidentally, Military Missions Network, a fundamentalist outreach to servicemen and women, encouraged strategic evangelization at moments of vulnerability since "some environments and situations (i.e. basic training, stressful TDYs ["temporary duty yonder," brief assignments distant from the place of original assignment], threats of violence) create a very receptive audience," according to the evangelism manual of the group (Jason Leopold, "Pentagon Facilitating Christian Evangelism," *Truthout*, October 8, 2007, <http://www.truth-out.org/article/report-pentagon-facilitating-christian-evangelism>). In contrast to the many people who believe that evangelizing at a funeral is inappropriate, relatively few people raised a protest against this exploitation of military-related stress to produce religious conversion.

excessively fast. None of the riders was wearing seat belts, even though seat belt use is stressed as a safety protocol. When the Humvee hit some potholes, the driver lost control of the vehicle, and Snyder, who was riding as gunner, was declared dead at the scene.¹⁰⁷⁵ His body was returned for burial, and a funeral was held on March 10, 2006, at St. John’s Catholic Church in Westminster, Maryland. Westboro Baptist Church picketed at a distance of 1000 feet away from the funeral site, holding signs that said “Thank God for Dead Soldiers” and “Semper Fi Fags.” (See Figures 57, 58, and 59.) Picketers were present prior to the funeral but left the site before the funeral actually began. At the time, Maryland had no laws limiting funeral pickets, and when one was passed in 2006, it only requires picketers to be 100 feet from the funeral.¹⁰⁷⁶ Thus, Westboro Baptists were three times as far from the funeral as the law now requires, and, at the time, they could legally have been as close as they liked.



Figures 57, 58, and 59. Westboro Baptists picket near Matthew Snyder’s funeral in Westminster, Maryland, on March 10, 2006. From left, Pastor Fred Phelps, Rebekah Phelps-Davis, and Shirley Phelps-Roper. The only three adults at the picket, these three became defendants in *Snyder v. Phelps*. Pastor Phelps. These three photographs, provided by the church, were submitted as evidence at the trial.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Marine Captain Bret Miner wrote the report of the accident that killed Matthew Snyder and injured three others. In it, he recommended holding superior officers responsible for seat belt use among occupants, providing further training on driving in the desert, reviewing protocol regarding convoy formation, and retiring the Humvee involved in the accident. His superiors rejected all suggestions (Michele Canty, “Military Report Details Crash,” *York (Pennsylvania) Daily Times*, May 27, 2008, http://www.ydr.com/ci_7555437?IADID=Search-www.ydr.com-www.ydr.com).

¹⁰⁷⁶ Maryland Code, Criminal Law § 10-205.

The funeral picket did not disturb the funeral, though the funeral procession detoured to avoid potentially seeing picketers. As usual, Westboro Baptists did not use sound equipment to amplify their words. Though the tops of their signs were visible at the funeral site, the words were not, and Albert Snyder, the father of Matthew Snyder and the man who brought the case against Westboro Baptist Church, was not aware of the counterprotest at the time of the funeral. By the time the funeral started, the picketers were gone.

While watching the news that evening, Albert Snyder saw video coverage of Westboro Baptist Church's picket of his son's funeral and grew distressed. According to his lawyer, his stress contributed to worsening of his diabetes. A few months after the funeral, he completed an online search about the picket and found his way to *God Hates Fags*, where he read what the church terms an "epic" about his son—a kind of open letter connecting God's wrath with America's tolerance of homosexuality and other sins to Matthew Snyder's death. (See Appendix A.) All of the information contained in the epic was publically available information, some of it taken from Matthew Snyder's obituary, and thus church members did not violate Albert or Matthew Snyder's privacy by accessing it or republishing it.¹⁰⁷⁷

On June 5, 2006, Albert Snyder filed a civil claim against Westboro Baptist Church. Originally, he accused the church of committing the following torts:

- Defamation, which is the false written or spoken statement of fact that damages a person's reputation.¹⁰⁷⁸

¹⁰⁷⁷ Both sides agreed to the facts of the case as presented here (Oral arguments of *Snyder v. Phelps* are available at the Supreme Court's website at http://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_audio_detail.aspx?argument=09-751.)

¹⁰⁷⁸ Citizen Media Project, "Defamation," *Glossary*, <http://www.citmedialaw.org/glossary/8/letterp#term290>.

- Intrusion on seclusion, which is defined as intentionally intruding, physically or otherwise, upon the solitude or seclusion of another or his private affairs or concerns, in a way highly offensive to a reasonable person.¹⁰⁷⁹
- Publicity given to private life, which Snyder claimed occurred through the publication of private facts, an “invasion of privacy [committed] by publishing private facts about an individual, the publication of which would be offensive to a reasonable person. Such a claim can only be successful, however, if the facts in question are not legitimately newsworthy.”¹⁰⁸⁰
- Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress (IIED), which required Snyder to prove that defendants Fred Phelps, Shirley Phelps-Roper, and Rebekah Phelps-Davis
 - acted intentionally or recklessly
 - engaged in conduct that was extreme and outrageous
 - acted in ways that caused distress
 - conducted themselves in ways that directly resulted in his severe emotional distress
- Conspiracy to commit the above acts

On October 15, 2007, the defendants’ motion to dismiss the claims was granted in part. The court granted summary judgment for the Westboro Baptists on the invasion of privacy claim based on publication of private facts and the defamation claim. According to Shirley Phelps-Roper, the presiding judge noted that church members’ assertion that Matthew Snyder’s mother engaged in adultery was not defamation because, in contemporary America, it is simply not an

¹⁰⁷⁹ The American Law Institute, “Intrusion Upon Seclusion,” *Restatement of the Law, Second, Torts*, 1977, Harvard University, http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/privacy/Privacy_R2d_Torts_Sections.htmv.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Citizen Media Project, “Publication of Private Facts,” *Glossary*, <http://www.citmedialaw.org/glossary/8/letterp#term290>.

insult to say that a woman slept with a man while she was married to another. This logic, stressed Shirley Phelps-Roper, was indicative of the moral decline of American law.¹⁰⁸¹ In its summary judgment, the court declared, “These comments — as extreme as they may be — they are taken in terms of religious expression. This is not the type of language that one is going to assume is meant as a statement of fact.”¹⁰⁸² These words would become important later, when a group of state attorneys general supporting Snyder protested in an *amicus* brief that this logic would encourage the *most* outrageous statements, for the more extreme the words are—that is, the less likely they are to be understood as fact—the more protected they are.¹⁰⁸³

The summary judgment left the jury to consider only two charges, intrusion upon seclusion and the intentional infliction of emotional distress, as conspiracy “piggybacks” on the other claims, so if the court found church members to be liable for the first two torts, then the church members would also be found to have acted in a conspiracy to commit them. Further, only the first two torts were ones that could be remedied through monetary damages. The jury trial lasted from October 22 to October 31, 2007, and, in the end, the jury awarded Snyder 2.9 million dollars in compensatory damages, six million dollars in punitive damages for invasion of privacy, and two million dollars in the intentional infliction of emotional distress that he suffered.¹⁰⁸⁴ On February 4, 2008, the judge reduced the punitive damages to 2.1 million dollars,

¹⁰⁸¹ Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, July 30, 2008.

¹⁰⁸² The decision is available at the 4th Court of Appeals website, <http://pacer.ca4.uscourts.gov/opinion.pdf/081026.P.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸³ “[T]he Phelpses are not asserting exaggerated opinions or hyperbolic overstatements for rhetorical purposes. The Phelpses cannot and do not claim that their messages are parody or satire; *they mean every word they say*.... Yet the Fourth Circuit immunized the Phelpses from liability in part because their statements were so outrageous and vile. That result turns traditional tort law on its head: the messages were much more likely to inflict serious emotional harm on their target precisely because they were so unconscionable. In fact, the Fourth Circuit created a perverse incentive for emotional terrorists to be outrageous and extreme, because First Amendment immunity will apply if reasonable people would not actually believe the statements” (“Brief for the State of Kansas and 47 Other States, and the District of Columbia as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Petitioner,” *American Bar Association*, June 2010, http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/09-10/09-751_PetitionerAmCu48StatesandDC.pdf).

¹⁰⁸⁴ The compensatory damages are payment for the actual harm suffered by Snyder, while the punitive damages are a kind of punishment for Westboro Baptist Church.

thus reducing the total award from 10.9 million dollars to five million, suggesting a legal awareness that an appellate court, which would surely hear the case, would hesitate to use civil torts to limit free speech. Indeed, the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the ruling entirely on September 24, 2008, and, to the outrage of many, required that Snyder pay Westboro Baptist Church's legal fees. In reversing the decision, the majority opinion wrote

Notwithstanding the distasteful and repugnant nature of the words being challenged in these proceedings, we are constrained to conclude that the Defendants' signs and Epic are constitutionally protected. To paraphrase our distinguished colleague Judge Hall, judges defending the Constitution "must sometimes share [their] foxhole with scoundrels of every sort, but to abandon the post because of the poor company is to sell freedom cheaply. It is a fair summary of history to say that the safeguards of liberty have often been forged in controversies involving not very nice people."¹⁰⁸⁵

Westboro Baptists agreed, noting in a post-Supreme Court blog, "That First Amendment is there for THAT speech—the speech that nobody wants to hear."¹⁰⁸⁶

While the 4th Circuit Court of Appeal's decision would neither stop future funeral pickets nor satisfy the public's desire to punish Westboro Baptist Church, legal experts were in increasingly frustrated agreement that, under the facts of this case, Westboro Baptist Church was

¹⁰⁸⁵ Justices King and Duncan wrote the majority opinion. Justice Shedd wrote a concurring opinion that argued that the original decision should be reversed because of Snyder's failure to prove his tort rather than on First Amendment grounds (*Snyder v. Phelps*, 2009, <http://www.citmedialaw.org/sites/citmedialaw.org/files/2009-09-24-Snyder%20v.%20Phelps%20Appellate%20Decision.pdf>).

¹⁰⁸⁶ Westboro Baptist Church, "You May Not Agree With The Westboro Baptist Church, But There Are Fundamental Rights That Were Established In This Country In Her Infancy! You Don't Get To Outlaw Words You Hate/Disagree With – You Get To Say MORE WORDS! Most People Don't Get It, But Sometimes There Are Little Friendlies Sprinkled Around That Understand That Simple Concept :)," *The Workmen* [blog], November 8, 2010, <http://blogs.sporen.com/index.php/workmen/?title=you-may-not-agree-with-the-westboro-baptist-church-but-there-are-fundamental-rights-that-were-established-in-this-country-in-her-infancy-you-donarsquo-t-get-to-outlaw-words-you-hate-disagree-with-anda&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1>.

probably in the legal, though certainly not moral, right. Indeed, many began to worry that, should the decision be heard by the Supreme Court, the rights of free speech, peaceable assembly, and freedom of religion would be under review. The Supreme Court agreed to hear the case in March 2010, and, on October 6, 2010, both sides appeared before the Court.

Many filing *amicus* briefs in the case expressed ambivalence. Fourteen *amicus* briefs were filed, with five supporting Snyder's side, six supporting Westboro Baptist Church's position, and three supporting neither side. Every brief, regardless of the legal position it supported, expressed empathy for Albert Snyder and appreciation for sacrifice of his son and condemned Westboro Baptist Church's actions. Though focusing on different aspects of the case, all of the briefs that supported Westboro Baptist Church's position—filed by the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Speech, the Marion B. Brechner First Amendment Project, the National Coalition Against Censorship, and the Pennsylvania Center for the First Amendment in Support of Respondent; Scholars of First Amendment Law; Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which was joined by twenty-one news media groups; Liberty Counsel; the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Maryland; and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which was joined by law professors Ash Bhagwat, David Post, Martin Redish, Nadine Strossen, and Eugene Volokh—drew attention to the potentially chilling effects that a decision against the church would have on free speech.¹⁰⁸⁷ Those supporting Snyder stressed the “sacrosanct” nature of funerals¹⁰⁸⁸ and the outrageousness of church members' conduct, calling it “an affront of the most egregious kind.”¹⁰⁸⁹ An *amicus* brief filed

¹⁰⁸⁷ All *amicus* brief are available online under “Snyder v. Phelps” at the American Bar Association's website at <http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/oct2010.shtml#snyder>.

¹⁰⁸⁸ The American Legion's brief is available at http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/09-10/09-751_PetitionerAmCuAmericanLegion.pdf. See page 2.

¹⁰⁸⁹ The Veteran of Foreign War's brief is available at http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/09-10/09-751_PetitionerAmCuVFW.pdf. See page 4.

by the state of Kansas, supported by forty-seven other states and the District of Columbia, argued, “Traditions as old as humanity, much older than our Constitution, demand such privacy; the First Amendment does not abrogate all history and cultural norms to protect the Phelps’ unprecedented tactics.”¹⁰⁹⁰ The attorneys general’s brief contends that the sacred nature of funerals predates the Constitution and that the unthinkable act of funeral pickets cannot upset that, despite the First Amendment.¹⁰⁹¹ This *amicus* brief ignores that it is Snyder who is seeking to silence religious speech because of its content; to silence Westboro Baptist Church based on the content of their argument *would* be a violation of First Amendment rights.

As previously noted, since the 1950s, scholars of the Religious Right have used psychological methods to explain participation in the Religious Right. Such theories rest upon the assumption that “[s]trong religious beliefs are thought to be associated with, and perhaps causally related to, personality disorders incompatible with democratic civility.”¹⁰⁹² Certainly, theories about the mental health of Westboro Baptists abound, but what is clear in the controversy surrounding military funeral pickets, as illustrated in the briefs filed by Westboro Baptist Church and Albert Snyder and by friends of the court, is that Westboro Baptist Church, though uncivil in its methods and message, relies heavily on the First Amendment even as those who react to the church seeks to preserve civility at the expense of civil liberties. “[T]he price of

¹⁰⁹⁰ This brief is available at http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/09-10/09-751_PetitionerAmCu48StatesandDC.pdf. See page 10; internal footnotes omitted

¹⁰⁹¹ Additionally, Westboro Baptist Church tactics at military funerals are not “unprecedented.” To begin, the church itself has been picketing at funerals for nearly twenty years. Further, as illustrated in the *amicus* brief filed by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, which was joined by twenty-one other news organizations, other groups have used funerals as opportunities to picket for their own reasons. For example, Teamsters have picketed at non-unionized funeral home, and pro-life protestors have picketed at the funerals of judges who defended the legality of abortion as well as the funerals of slain abortion providers. (The brief is available through the American Bar Association at http://www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/09-10/09-751_RespondentAmCuReportersCommitteeforFreedomofthePressetal.pdf; see especially pages 24-25.)

¹⁰⁹² Clyde Wilcox, Ted G. Jelen, and Sharon Linzey, “Rethinking the Reasonableness of the Religious Right,” *Review of Religious Research* 36, no. 3 (March 1995): 263.

this inestimable jewel, civil and religious liberty, was the price of blood,”¹⁰⁹³ said Primitive Baptist founder Joshua Lawrence, and to counterpicketers at military funerals who declare “My soldier didn’t die for you to have the right to protest his funeral,” Westboro Baptists reply, “Of course he did.”¹⁰⁹⁴ Of course, they believe, fundamentally, that soldiers die because God wants them dead, but their point in this exchange is that war-mongering rhetoric has always relied upon the claim that servicemen and women are going to fight to protect the rights of Americans. Thus, for a war widow or widower or parent of a fallen serviceman or woman to complain that Westboro Baptist Church is using this right in a way that he or she finds abhorrent is illogical—and, indeed, unpatriotic, counter church members, for it means that the family members of the fallen do not truly value founding American principles—namely, free speech.

Westboro Baptists themselves have been injured and their property damaged in the exercise of their right to preach this message. For example, when church members picketed in response to the death of twenty-nine miners from an explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia, Shirley Phelps-Roper’s hair was set on fire by a cigarette and she was spat upon, an action that resulted in an arrest for assault.¹⁰⁹⁵ In another instance, a Nebraska man attacked church members with bear repellent at a church picket in Omaha, harming no church members but injuring sixteen others, including a police officer, and sending some to the hospital

¹⁰⁹³ Joshua Lawrence, *A Patriotic Discourse*, July 4, 1830; as cited in James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 92.

¹⁰⁹⁴ In response to the Supreme Court’s announcement that it would hear the case, talk radio commentator and columnist Michael Smerconish stated baldly in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that servicemen and –women like “Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder fought and died for [America’s freedom and security]. In this case, the Supreme Court should deny its fruits to Fred Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church” (Michael Smerconish, “Picketed Family has Rights too,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 14, 2010).

¹⁰⁹⁵ Fred Phelps, sermon April 11, 2010.

for treatment.¹⁰⁹⁶ On November 15, 2010, two tires on the van that church members drove to a picket of a military funeral in McAlistier, Oklahoma, were slashed during the picket, and no automotive shop in town would perform repairs.¹⁰⁹⁷ On November 25, 2010, church members were attacked at a soldier's funeral in Harrisonville, Missouri, though police quickly regained control of the situation, which included hundreds of counterprotestors, many of whom surrounded the van carrying Westboro Baptists.¹⁰⁹⁸ Despite claims that they have no right to picket and despite vigilante efforts to make them stop, Westboro Baptists continue their activism, viewing themselves primarily as religious activists but also as First Amendment defenders.¹⁰⁹⁹

Westboro Baptists care deeply about the First Amendment. In part, this may reflect the legal training of many church members and the subsequent commitment of Phelps-Chartered to, generally, progressive legal causes, including criminal defense and work on behalf of racial minorities and indigenous people, women, and children. In addition, the absolute predestination theology of the church dismisses "free will" and "free choice," so church members are encouraged to think of the freedom of religion not as a choice but as a duty. Thankfully, they say, God has given them the First Amendment to insure that they can perform this duty:

¹⁰⁹⁶ According to the church members, God protected them in the attack. (Matthew Hansen, "Marine Veteran Haunted by Memories," *Omaha World-Herald*, August 31, 2010, <http://www.omaha.com/article/20100831/NEWS97/708319913/1031>).

¹⁰⁹⁷ Manny Gamallo, "Tires on Westboro Baptist Church Van Slashed in Oklahoma," AP, November 15, 2010, <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2010/nov/15/tires-westboro-baptist-church-van-slashed-oklahoma/>.

¹⁰⁹⁸ "Crowd, Controversial Church Fight at Funeral," *KCCI 8*, November 23, 2010, <http://www.kcci.com/r/25891818/detail.html>.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Indeed, Westboro Baptist Church often partners with progressive civil liberties defense groups in fighting its legal battles. For example, Shirley Phelps-Roper was represented by the ACLU when she was charged with the crime of flag desecration in Nebraska. Said Amy Miller, the legal director of ACLU Nebraska, "Clearly, the ACLU disagrees with the Westboro Baptist Church's message that gay people are an abomination.... The ACLU spends a significant amount of time working for equality on the basis of sexual orientation and I myself am gay. But disagreeing with the message doesn't mean that we can allow the government to try to silence protected free speech. Punishing this use of the flag is contrary to the very spirit of freedom the flag stands for" ("ACLU Nebraska Challenges Flag Desecration Law," *ACLU*, June 8, 2007, <http://www.aclu.org/free-speech/aclu-nebraska-challenges-flag-desecration-law>).

The Lord God of Eternity set up this constitutional republic in its infancy knowing that when this nation would no longer endure sound scriptural doctrine, His servants on the ground were going to need certain tools in place to allow them to fulfill their duty to Him and to their fellow man.¹¹⁰⁰

In this view, God not only approves of the message of the church but provides the means for its delivery.

Westboro Baptist Church critics frequently suggest limiting freedoms of religion and speech in exchange for greater civility—or, more specifically, to silence this particular group of religious believers. For example, at a September 11, 2010 protest of the church’s U.S. flag and Quran burning, one protestor who came to the event to show her displeasure with the destruction of a U.S. flag declared that “if they have the right to burn the flag,” which, they do, provided they are doing so as part of an otherwise legal and peaceable protest, “then maybe we have too many Constitutional rights.”¹¹⁰¹ Another protestor, the father of an Army member currently serving in Afghanistan, agreed, saying that destroying the U.S. flag is “treason,” and church members should be punished accordingly.¹¹⁰² Such sentiment is widespread. For example, Julie Banderas, host of Fox News Channel’s *The Big Story*, lost her temper during an on-air exchange with Shirley Phelps-Roper on June 10, 2006, saying after a heated exchange,

These people should be arrested, and I understand the right to protest, but when you disgrace not only our fallen soldiers, but when you disgrace innocent young

¹¹⁰⁰ Westboro Baptist Church, “You May Not Agree With The Westboro Baptist Church.”

¹¹⁰¹ Anonymous, interview with the author, September 11, 2010.

¹¹⁰² Anonymous, interview with the author, September 11, 2010.

children, I swear. Lock 'em up. Throw away the key. Give 'em the death penalty.
I think it's disgusting.¹¹⁰³

Here, Banderas intersperses her anger at Westboro Baptists' incivility ("I think it's disgusting.") with legal judgments ("Lock 'em up. Throw away the key. Give 'em the death penalty.") that are appropriate for criminal actions, *even though Westboro Baptists did not break the law*. Indeed, in the case of Matthew Snyder's funeral, church members were so respectful of the spirit of the law that they exceeded the letter of the law, staying 1000 feet away from the site of a *future* funeral (since they were not present during the actual funeral) when there was no law against any kind of funeral picketing in Maryland at the time.

Banderas, like many of the counterpicketers and other Westboro Baptist Church opponents interviewed for this dissertation, expresses, at least in the heat of an argument, a willingness to see civil liberties curtailed in order to silence disagreeable opinion as it is unpleasantly expressed. Nevertheless, she is unlikely to see herself—especially because she is a journalist—as advocating censorship. Kathleen C. Boone sees this contradiction repeatedly among religious fundamentalists:

Well-worn maxims of American culture—to each his own, everyone is entitled to his own opinion, don't tread on me—[,] our fierce defense of individualism[,] and personal freedoms seems to fall almost completely by the wayside in the fundamentalist world. Even more curiously, fundamentalists espouse Americanist sentiments without awareness of the contradiction.¹¹⁰⁴

¹¹⁰³ Footage of Banderas' interview with Shirley Phelps-Rope is available online at *Youtube* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3PyoUPcobA>.

¹¹⁰⁴ Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 6.

Banderas' tirade occurred in the midst of an argument with Shirley Phelps-Roper about military funeral pickets. Banderas sees herself as defending fallen servicemen and women, but she does not see her willingness to use imprisonment or capital punishment to silence criticism about military death as antithetical to democracy or free speech. Though neither Banderas nor all counterprotestors who would withdraw Westboro Baptist Church's First Amendment rights are fundamentalist religious believers and claim to be patriots, the policy they espouse would threaten the Constitution to which they also claim to be committed. As Jonathan Phelps accused a counterprotestor at an event at the University of Kansas' Lied Center, "You hate the Constitution,"—a comment that further angered the man, a veteran.¹¹⁰⁵

Fred Phelps characterizes critics who would silence the church purely because of the content of its message as inconsistent hypocrites. "What about the First Amendment?" he asked an imaginary critic during a sermon. "'To hell with the First Amendment!'" his imagined critic yells back.¹¹⁰⁶ This, clearly, is a reason for Westboro Baptists to mistrust the general public and state and federal lawmakers who would revoke their right to speak because of the content of their words.

Courts have been more careful than members of the public in protecting free speech, freedom of religion, and the freedom to peaceably assemble. In July 2010, U.S. District Judge Richard G. Kopf reminded Westboro Baptist Church opponents that the church's destruction or disrespectful use of an American flag, even at a military funeral, is protected speech and cannot be cause for arrest. Asked Judge Kopf of the Nebraska Attorney General, the Superintendent of the Nebraska State Patrol, the Sarpy County Attorney, the Chief of the Papillion Police Department, the Douglas County Attorney, Chief of Omaha Police Department, and Chief of the

¹¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Phelps, interview in *Fall from Grace*.

¹¹⁰⁶ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 7, 2010.

Bellevue Police, all of whom were involved with Shirley Phelps-Roper's arrest for flag desecration:

Recognizing your duty of candor to the tribunal, and following *Johnson* and *Eichman*, am I not bound to restrain future enforcement of the Nebraska flag statute at least as applied to the plaintiff and members of her church so long as they otherwise act peacefully while desecrating the American or Nebraska flag during their religiously motivated protests?¹¹⁰⁷

The frustration that Judge Kopf expressed in this memo was likely a result of both the ugliness of the church's behavior and of the failure of Nebraska's legal system to adhere to laws that guarantee free speech regardless of content.¹¹⁰⁸ As the officers and lawyers who arrested and prosecuted Shirley Phelps-Roper ought to have known, the arrest was unwarranted and would possibly result in a countersuit—as it did, costing Nebraska taxpayers money. Given the legal training of so many of its members, Westboro Baptists are unlikely to break the law, even as their opponents would like to create more restrictive laws to limit their ability to preach their message.

In the meantime, many opponents respond to Westboro Baptist Church with their own uncivil words and acts. Frequently, opponents are baited into uncivil or even embarrassing actions by the taunts of Westboro Baptists, who have, over nearly twenty years of pickets,

¹¹⁰⁷ Order of Judge Richard G. Kopf to Margy [Megan] M. Phelps-Roper and Jon Bruning, Nebraska Attorney General, Col. Bryan Tuma, Superintendent of Nebraska State Patrol, . Kenneth Polikov, Sarpy County Attorney, Leonard Houloose, Chief of the Papillion Police Department, Donald Kleine, Douglas County Attorney, Alex Hays, Chief of Omaha Police Department, and John Stacey, Chief of the Bellevue Police Department; dated July 15, 2010.

¹¹⁰⁸ Indeed, prior to her arrest for flag desecration and contributing to the delinquency of a minor (because she encouraged her minor child to stand on the flag), Shirley Phelps-Roper politely reminded the officer who arrested her that she was within her legal right to tread on the flag because the Supreme Court said in *Johnson v. Texas* that flag desecration was legal in an otherwise lawful protest. The officer replied, "You're not in Texas." Phelps-Roper attempted to correct the officer by stressing that the Supreme Court has jurisdiction nationwide. Nonetheless, he arrested her, sparking a three year legal battle (Westboro Baptist Church, "Why Nebraska is Now Funding WBC Picket Trips," *Sign Movies*, <http://www.signmovies.com/videos/news/index.html>).

developed tough skins, self-calming techniques in order to avoid being goaded into fighting back illegally, and a large vocabulary of insults aimed at infuriating opponents. For example, a group of three young men, in their late teens or early twenties, protested the church's burning of the Quran on September 11, 2010. As Shirley Phelps-Roper, carrying a sign that declared "God Hates Muslims," crossed the street outside of the church in order to speak to some Muslims who were also picketing the event, one young man intervened, stepping directly in front of Shirley and standing nose-to-nose with her. Heaving his own sign into the air, he obstructed her path. Taking a step back, Shirley turned to her brother and said, "John, get a load of this lady over here."

Looking around, the young man, who had shoulder-length hair, was bewildered. There was no woman at the scene.

Shirley Phelps-Roper repeated her call to her brother, who came to the scene with a camera. At the second instance of being called a woman, the young man replied hotly, "I'm not a woman."

Shirley Phelps-Roper continued to egg him on by speaking about but not to him. "John, get a picture of the little lady with the pink shoes."

Looking down at his shoes—they were, indeed, bright pink sneakers—the young man grew furious as he recognized that church members were casting doubts about his gender. "I'm a man! Look at this! I've got a cock!" Promptly, he unzipped his pants and wagged his penis in front of the audience of church members, church protestors, and media. A police officer who had been patrolling the area was not present at that moment, but church members could legally have reported this young man for public indecency. Instead, they merely scoffed at him, making jokes about the size of his penis in order to further humiliate and anger him. Here, church

members used a bullying tactic learned on the grade school playground—humiliating a man by calling him a woman—and the protestor, who likely sees himself as an ally of both women and gay people, responded exactly as they anticipated: with his own incivility. “They’re the experts” at hurtful, in-your-face confrontation, Nate Phelps noted in an interview for the documentary *Fall from Grace*, as this young man learned.

Such responses are not uncommon. In research for this dissertation, more than seventy-five percent of the words that counterpicketers or passersby said to Westboro Baptists contained profanity; this included responses delivered at two military funerals and at the entrance of Arlington National Cemetery, where visitors are reminded to maintain the dignity of the space with silence or quiet voices. Many of the oral criticisms directed at church members involved calling them “faggots,” “fags,” “dykes,” “lesbians,” “lesbos,” “buttfuckers,” or “cocksuckers”—all homophobic insults. These words were yelled out of car windows and shouted and spoken by passersby, and they were used among counterpicketers even when Westboro Baptists were not within earshot. It is likely that some users of homophobic insults chose these words because they assume that insults about sexuality would be most hurtful to anti-gay religionists. Others may have chosen them because they sincerely believe that at least some Westboro Baptists are repressed homosexuals. However, most epithets seemed to be spoken in moments of sheer anger, without a conscious awareness of the rhetorical purpose of those particular words, and follow-up interviews with people who used them were met with unhelpful explanations (“I said it because he’s a faggot.” “She’s got to be a lesbian. Look at how ugly she is.”). That homophobic words were so often and mindlessly chosen—for example, those words never appeared on a sign held by a counterpicketer, suggesting that those who planned what words they would say did not

choose homophobic ones—suggests that such insults are latent in the culture, familiar as mean and useful in degrading others.

Similarly homophobic insults were spray-painted on Westboro Baptist Church repeatedly in the past. In May 2010, vandals spray-painted, among other words and images, “cunt,” references to anal sex, and three foot tall penis on the garage and exterior wall of the church building. In contrast to previous instances of vandalism, the church this time resisted a city ordinance that requires the removal of public nuisances that are visible from the public right-of-way or easement. The city, recognizing the church’s First Amendment right to free speech, granted the request to leave the graffiti, which the city would otherwise remove. (See Figures 60 and 61.) The purpose of leaving the graffiti was to show to the community, “in as much as we've been telling this nation that they are a rebellious, good-for-nothing group,” according to Shirley Phelps-Roper, that Topekans and their youth are uncivil, violent, thugs.¹¹⁰⁹ In this way, Westboro Baptist Church activism reveals a willingness among some of those who oppose them to use misogynistic, violent, and homophobic language. (See Figure 62.) In addition to eliciting their own uncivil words and deeds, Westboro Baptists reveal an incivility and, in particular, homophobia already present in contemporary America.

The tension between civil liberties and civility has rarely been as taut as it is in *Snyder v. Phelps*, and efforts to suppress incivility through the courts via intimidation or vandalism are unlikely to silence Westboro Baptists. “Think you’ve got us scared?,” Fred Phelps asked of an imaginary public in a sermon, “Wrong!” His audience of church members responded with confident laughter at their enemies.¹¹¹⁰ Further, the curtailment of civil liberties for Westboro

¹¹⁰⁹ Tim Hrenchir and Kevin Elliott, “Westboro Graffiti may Stay,” *Capital-Journal*, May 8, 2010, http://cjonline.com/news/local/2010-05-07/city_westboro_graffiti_may_stay.

¹¹¹⁰ Fred Phelps, sermon, February 7, 2010.



Figure 60. Westboro Baptist Church property was vandalized in May 2010. Church members initially left the graffiti, which included sexually explicit images and misogynistic language, to illustrate, they said, the depravity of the Topeka community. By mid-summer, though, they had painted over the images, though they were still largely visible. July 18, 2010 photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin. All rights reserved.



Figure 61. Detail of graffiti painted at Westboro Baptist Church in May 2010. July 18, 2010 photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin. All rights reserved.

Shirley Phelps is a disgusting pig and deserves to suffer a long agonizing death. What is wrong with these people? ... There is no force, law or punishment that could prevent me from causing harm to this c**t if she had protested against a deceased soldier that I know.... Rotting in hell for eternity won't be enough for her or her despicable family!—“Marine Sister,” September 12, 2007, at “Shirley Phelps Roper [sic] Deserves the Worst Punishment Know to Man” at the website *Topix*, <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/virginia-beach-va/TI8KSCF22SQD8U3HB/p24>.

Id love to be the one to shoot this bitch and her whole demonic family. They are all spawns from hell. Weirdos!... I hope the next time I hear about her the news will be talking about how she burned in a fire or flew out of the windshield of a car.—“Meme,” October 31, 2007, at the website *Topix*, <http://www.topix.com/forum/city/virginia-beach-va/TI8KSCF22SQD8U3HB/p24>.

These people are an absolute disgrace to humanity and are quite undeserving of living among us. If they're so convinced that they're the only people in the world going to heaven then why dont they just fuck off and die. p.s. I in no way mean any actual harm to these.."people" but if they were to die i might let a "woo hoo" slip.— Nick Thompson, administrator of “Fred Phelps and his Soulless Spawn Must Die” page on Facebook page, available at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2412507650>.

the crazy woman thats always on fox news or one of the other stations that always comes on and tries to pass off her bullshit beliefs about God and whats happening to this country with her bullshit church comprised mostly of her cult/nazi family. this is the prime example of a women that should not be able to live or privileged to have a life here, let alone be an American. she must die, and so should her entire cult church. this would make the world a tinsy bit better, dont you think?— Rob Warren, administrator of “Kill Shirley Phelps Roper!!! ” page on Facebook, available at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=35134801496>.

i want to kill those peoples families and go to thier funeral with a sign that says: thank god for your dead family!!!!!!! whos with me?—“tianlarka1” on November 6, 2010, at “Crazy Woman on Fox News 1” at *Youtube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAMaWsuGTXU>.

I swear to God, If I see that bitch on the street i will beat the living fuck out of her, and her hole family too (they think they're a church). If wasn't ilegal, I would distribute flyers all over america offering money tto anyone who kicks their disturbed ass, thats how much this whore makes me mad—“McLovin123ify” on November 4, 2010, at “Crazy Woman on Fox News 1” at *Youtube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAMaWsuGTXU>.

God Hates Bigoted Narrow-minded Arseholes (especially ones who use his name to defend their self-righteous, people hating activities). Stupid Cunts—posted by Adam Bayliss, administrator, “Burn Down the Westboro Baptist Church” page on Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7931513813>

Figure 62. Excerpts from social networking sites discussing imagined violence against Westboro Baptist Church. Grammar and spelling uncorrected. Other websites include “Fred Phelps Must Die” (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Fred-Phelps-must-die/219176792721#!/pages/Fred-Phelps-must-die/219176792721?v=wall>) and “Kill Fred Phelps” (<http://www.killfredphelps.com/>). While anonymous online writers undoubtedly often hyperbolize, violence is frequently directed at church members. On October 5, 2010, for example, an envelope containing white powder was delivered to Phelps-Chartered. Though the powder was determined not to be anthrax, the intention of intimidation was clear. In another case, authorities suspected that Mark Uhl, a Liberty University student, may have intended to use home-made bombs against church members who were picketing at Jerry Falwell’s funeral in 2007 (“Liberty U Student Plotted to Set Off Explosives, Police Say,” *CNN*, May 22, 2007, http://articles.cnn.com/2007-05-22/us/va.bombarrest_1_homemade-devices-explosive-devices-bomb-squad?_s=PM:US).

Baptists means limiting the civil liberties of all Americans. As University of Maryland law professor Mark Graber, in response to *Snyder v. Phelps*, says, “[W]e risk silencing the best social outcasts as well as the worst when we give juries the power to determine whether speech meets constitutional standards and allow them to award unlimited damages.”¹¹¹¹ The result might be silence from Westboro Baptist Church, but it would also mean silencing those whose religiously-motivated words made Americans uncomfortable with slavery and Jim Crow laws. This is an unacceptable loss in a democratic society. An erosion of the wall of separation between church and state, a wall that now protects the right of Westboro Baptists to practice their unpopular religion, would give other religious fundamentalists the opportunity to define the status quo. Note Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby,

The success of fundamentalisms in reimagining the nation and remaking the state have occurred primarily if not exclusively in states in which the public-private distinction... has not been written into the constitution and protected by laws and judicial rulings.... [I]n politics in which some form of church-state separation has been adopted, fundamentalism seems less likely to dictate the course of national self-definition.¹¹¹²

In this framework, the Religious Right, which seeks to reclaim the world for God and, in doing so, bring secular law in line with religious belief, is more of a threat to democracy, in that it would seek to continue to define the nation as “pure, not pluralist,” than the world-renouncing Westboro Baptist Church, which has no hope of purifying the nation. And in that battle, the Religious Right has a powerful weapon: the Christian, heteronormative war hero.

¹¹¹¹ Joe Taschler and Steve Fry, “Phelps is No Stranger to Court System,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 3, 1994, http://cjonline.com/indepth/phelps/stories/080394_phelps22.shtml.

¹¹¹² Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Conclusion: Remaking the State: The Limits of the Fundamentalist Imagination,” in *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 640.

The Christian, Heteronormative War Hero

Westboro Baptist Church's decision to picket military funerals and attack the nation's sacred symbols—but, to a much lesser extent, members' pickets of funerals of gay people and gay cultural events—has elicited outrage and led to the widespread and extraordinary efforts to curtail their civil liberties in large part because of the *manner* in which Westboro Baptist Church has engaged the American heteronormative religious nationalist ideal—and, perhaps, because in its engagement, Westboro Baptist Church calls attention to the constructed nature of this ideal. As Benedict Anderson has argued, this ideal is epitomized in the American citizen-soldier, one who is willing “not so much to kill, as to die willingly”¹¹¹³ for the nation, which is itself defined, in part, by fraternity, “the deep, horizontal comradeship” that gives its members “the image of their communion.”¹¹¹⁴ He is a figure that affirms the masculinist, militaristic, imperialist, and heterosexist aspects of popular American Christianity¹¹¹⁵—aspects that have been perceived as under attack for centuries. Indeed, ever since women first outnumbered men in the American pews in the 1600s, popular Christianity has seen repeated attempts to reverse the “feminization of Christianity”¹¹¹⁶; recent attempts include the publication of masculinity manuals such as *Raising a Modern Day Knight*; Christian masculinity movements such as the Promise Keepers; and church services organized around the perceived needs, desires, and limitations of men, including their love of garage rock music and sports and their short attention spans.¹¹¹⁷

¹¹¹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York, Verso, 1991), 7

¹¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹¹⁵ For examples, see the essays in Stefan Dudnik, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh, editors, *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), especially Joan B. Landes, “Republican Citizenship and Heterosocial Desire: Concepts of Masculinity in Revolutionary France” (96-115).

¹¹¹⁶ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1988).

¹¹¹⁷ See, for example, Sally K. Gallagher and Sabrina L. Wood, “Godly Manhood Gone Wild?: Transformations in Conservative Protestant Masculinity,” *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 135-160. For an examination of how conservative Christian women incorporate this vision of masculinity into their own popular culture, see

Central to these efforts is the citizen soldier, both metaphoric and literal for conservative Christians. Christian men who are not in the military use militaristic rhetoric to describe their function in the church and in their families. They are “modern day knights,” and both men and women are “prayer warriors.” Promise Keepers organizes its adherents into “platoons,” with men given military titles (for example, “wingman”) to designate their role in the group.¹¹¹⁸

Metaphors of military service appear throughout conservative Christian discourse, from Sunday School curricula to Christian music (from the children’s song “I’m in the Lord’s army” to hymns such as “Onward Christian Soldiers” to Christian pop).

Additionally, conservative believers—men and women alike—attribute to actual military servicemen (and women) a kind of holiness that sets them apart from civilians, viewing them as doing God’s duty.¹¹¹⁹ Churches pray for members of the military, sponsor servicemen and women while they are abroad by sending care packages and praying for them, and work to reintegrate them into civilian life when they return. Groups such as Military Ministry, an outreach of the conservative Campus Crusade for Christ, seek not only to support current Christians serving in the military but strategically use the structure of the military to “[transform] the nations of the world through the militaries of the world.”¹¹²⁰ The U.S. military, then, becomes a force for Christianizing the globe. Among the strategies for fulfilling this vision are “[s]top[ping] the unraveling of the military family,” “[b]uild[ing] Christian military leaders and influenc[ing] our nation for Christ as a result,” “[w]ag[ing] Christian outreach, discipleship and

Rebecca Barrett-Fox, “Hope Faith and Toughness: An Analysis of the Christian Hero” in *Empowerment versus Oppression: 21st Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, edited by Sally Goade (New Castle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007), 93-102. For specific analysis of the Promise Keepers movement, see Dane S. Claussen, editor, *The Promise Keepers: Essays on Masculinity and Christianity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

¹¹¹⁸ For more on the use of military rhetoric in contemporary conservative Christianity, see David S. Gutterman, *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

¹¹¹⁹ See, for example, Allen J. Frantzen’s study of Christian masculinity among World War I servicemen in *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹¹²⁰ Military Ministry, “About Us,” *Military Ministry*, <http://www.militaryministry.org/about/>.

training on the Internet to military member across the world,” and “[c]hang[ing] continents for Christ” through the conversion and support of indigenous military leaders worldwide.¹¹²¹ The goals—the defense of “traditional family,” creating a Christian nation, and creating a Christian world—align with broader Religious Right views of a “pure, not pluralist” world. The “Christianization” of the military has been a strategic goal of Religious Right groups post-9/11, argues Jeff Sharlet in his coverage of the issue for *Harper’s Magazine*:

What men such as these have fomented is ... [n]ot a conspiracy but a cultural transformation, achieved gradually through promotions and prayer meetings, with personal faith replacing protocol according to the best intentions of commanders who conflate God with country. They see themselves not as subversives but as spiritual warriors—“ambassadors for Christ in uniform,” according to Officers’ Christian Fellowship; “government paid missionaries,” according to Campus Crusade’s Military Ministry.¹¹²²

As evidenced in blogs such as *A Christian Marine’s Journey*¹¹²³ and *Christian Military Wives*,¹¹²⁴ conservative believers within the military and their supporters view their military service as part of their larger duty to God. The overlap of Christianity and the military has come under increasing criticism, especially during a war being fought in places of historic tension between Christians and Muslims.¹¹²⁵

¹¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹²² Jeff Sharlet, “Jesus Killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 2009, <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2009/05/0082488>.

¹¹²³ Lance Corporal Josepha Cuesta, *A Christian Marine’s Journey*, <http://achristianmarine.blogspot.com>.

¹¹²⁴ *Christian Military Wives*, <http://christianmilitarywivescentral.blogspot.com/>.

¹¹²⁵ One recent example that sparked public criticism was Trijicon Inc.’s practice of inscribing Bible verses on rifle scopes. After the practice became publically known in early 2010, the military agreed to review its relationship with the military contractor (Dan Lamothe, “Bible Verses on Rifle Scopes Cause Concern,” *The Army Times*, January 21, 2010, http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/01/military_biblical_optics_011910w/). More recently, a September 2010 “Rock the Fort” evangelistic Christian music concert at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and paid for in part with government funds, drew attention to fundamentalist

This coalescence of military service and Christianity occurs not just among those in active duty but also among their home front communities. Writes Tony Perkins about his military service, “Every generation of my family has served in the military. Besides giving my heart to Jesus Christ and meeting and marrying my wife, joining the U.S. Marine Corps was the next most transformation experience of my life.”¹¹²⁶ Here, Perkins highlights the family tradition of military service and orders it only under his faith—which centers on his born-again conversion experience—and his marriage. Religion, family, and military service—or, more precisely, born-again Christianity, heterosexual marriage, and military service—are the top three meaningful aspects of his life.

The citizen-soldier uses his Christian belief to defend military action around the world, often by depicting national enemies as threats to Christianity.¹¹²⁷ The military, in turn, becomes

Christianity’s efforts to gain converts on military bases (Kevin Dolack, “Ft. Bragg Evangelical Event Draws Fire,” *ABC News*, September 25, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/ft-bragg-evangelical-event-draws-fire/story?id=11727193>). Similarly, the Air Force Academy, located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, home to many conservative Christians and Religious Right groups, including, most notably, Focus on the Family, has faced charges that evangelical Christian staff and cadets have created a climate hostile to non-believers and non-Christians. The Cadet and Permanent Party Climate Assessment Survey, which was released on October 29, 2010, revealed that fifty percent of non-Christians perceived low tolerance for non-religious people, an increase of twenty percent since 2007. Indeed, forty-one percent of non-Christians reported being exposed to unwanted proselytizing (Whitney Jones, “Air Force Academy Cites Progress in Tackling Religious Intolerance,” *The Christian Century*, November 2, 2010, <http://www2.christiancentury.org/article/2010-11/air-force-academy-cites-progress-tackling-religious-intolerance>). The Air Force Academy has struggled in the past with cadet and staff intolerance of and insensitivity to non-Christians. CNN reports that 55 complaints of religious intolerance were filed with the school from 2001 to 2005 (Mike Mount, “Air Force Probes Religious Bias Charges at Academy,” *CNN*, May 5, 2005, http://articles.cnn.com/2005-05-03/us/airforce.religion_1_religious-intolerance-senior-cadets-religious-sensitivity?_s=PM:US). A civil suit against the academy included accusations that staff members inappropriately attached Bible verses to their email signatures, that government email systems were used to promote participation in religious events, that non-religious events included prayer, and that the football coach hung a poster encouraging players to be part of “Team Jesus” (Christine Lagorio, “Air Force Sued Over Religion,” *CBS News*, October 6, 2005, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/06/national/main919947.shtml>). A more recent incident occurred in February 2010, when a large wooden cross was placed in an outdoor area designed for worship by Wiccans in the community (DeeDee Correll, “Cross Found at Air Force Academy’s Wicca Center,” *L.A. Times*, February 3, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/feb/03/nation/la-na-wicca3-2010feb03>).

¹¹²⁶ Tony Perkins, fundraising letter for Family Research Council, May 2010.

¹¹²⁷ See, for example, Bryan Fischer, “Freedom of Religion does not Mean Tolerance for Treason,” *Rightly Concerned* [blog associated with the American Family Association], August 25, 2010, <http://www.afa.net/Blogs/BlogPost.aspx?id=2147497772>. Writes Fischer, “[N]o city council should allow itself to be browbeat into granting building permits to an organization - the religion of Islam - whose god commands his followers to kill the members of that city council. “Slay the idolaters wherever you find them,” the god of the Holy Koran says. What

a defender of Christianity.¹¹²⁸ Additionally, this version of Christianity is adamantly heterosexist and pushes for continued exclusion of non-heterosexuals from military service.¹¹²⁹ The project of heterosexist religious nationalism is thus the continued defense of Christianity, heterosexism, and nationalism at home and the promotion of the Christianity, heterosexism, and American culture abroad.¹¹³⁰ Lost amid this, liberal religious believers criticize, are traditional Christian concerns for the alleviation of poverty, sickness, and suffering.¹¹³¹ A civil theology that melds nationalism and religion has two negative consequences, argues Glenn T. Miller in *Religious Liberty in America: History and Prospects*: “Not only does such a perspective contribute to a national self-righteousness—as it did in the early national period—but the divine mission all too easily becomes a mundane secular goal.”¹¹³² Yet that secular goal—in the case, the reversal of gay rights advances—was central in the culture wars in the 2000s and has real-life consequences

kind of insanity is it to insist that special protections be granted to those whose sacred Scripture commands them to kill us? It is mind-numbed craziness to cooperate with that.”

¹¹²⁸ In a well-publicized example, Al Jazeera circulated a film clip showing American soldiers apparently discussing how to convert Afghan civilians (James Bays, “US Troops Urged to Share Faith in Afghanistan,” *Al Jazeera English*, May 4, 2009, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2009/05/20095423950874168.html>). While the local language Bibles in the video were not distributed to Afghan civilians, the images provided further evidence that at least some servicemen and women view their time abroad to promote Christianity. In the video, Army Chaplain Lt. Col. Gary Hensley tells soldiers they have a Christian duty “to be witnesses for Him.” He explained: “The special forces guys, they hunt men basically. . . . We do the same things as Christians, we hunt people for Jesus. We do, we hunt them down. Get the hound of heaven after them, so we get them into the kingdom. That’s what we do, that’s our business.” Though a military spokesperson later said that the chaplain’s words were meant to encourage evangelism within the military—itsself a problematic issue—they reveal a missionary impulse that is seen as a threat by the Muslim world (David Waters, “Christian Soldiers or Crusaders?” *Under God* [religion blog], *Washington Post*, May 25, 2009, http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2009/05/christian_soldiers_or_crusaders.html).

¹¹²⁹ A Gallup poll released on May 10, 2010, revealed broad, steady support for the reversal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell but also showed that those with more regular church attendance are more likely to support the policy (Lymari Morales, “In U.S., Broad, Steady Support for Openly Gay Service Members,” *Gallup*, May 10, 2010, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/127904/broad-steady-support-openly-gay-service-members.aspx>).

¹¹³⁰ For example of the promotion of traditional *American* gender and sexual values in other culture, see President George W. Bush’s international AIDS policy, which stressed abstinence and monogamy over condom use.

¹¹³¹ Writing in *Sojourners* magazine, a venue for progressive Christians, Chris Rice asks, “[W]hy the outrage over homosexuality and not over the culture of divorce, premarital sex, and sexual abuse—all of which affect more people and, studies show, occur with the same devastating prevalence in the church as in society? Why is homosexuality treated as a worse sin than the pervasive idolatry of money that is warned about far more throughout scripture? If Christians opposed to homosexuality were equally outraged by racial and economic injustice, we’d have racism and poverty licked by now” (“What I Learned When I Opened my Mouth about Gay Rights,” *Sojourners*, May/June 2000, <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0005&article=000561>).

¹¹³² Miller, *Religious Liberty in America*, 80.

for gay Americans, who have watched as their right to marry their partner and their ability to serve openly in the military have been granted, then denied.¹¹³³

Through the lens of this civil theology, every soldier is seen as a Christian or potential Christian, which means he—for the ideal, imagined soldier is male, despite the reality of women in service—is also straight or, if not straight now, straight if he asks God to help him in his struggle against unwanted same-sex attraction. This assumption is encouraged by Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the federal policy that prohibits the military from asking about a service member's homosexuality or a service member from being openly gay. Thus, every service member who is killed in the line of duty is presumed to be straight. This assumption serves well the Religious Right entwinement of sexuality, religion, and military service.

The citizen-soldier, whether dead or alive, is thus always constructed as straight and as religious, and he is always a hero, regardless of how he died.¹¹³⁴ When President George W. Bush signed legislation limiting picketing in federal cemeteries in response to the military funeral pickets of Westboro Baptist Church, the legislation was titled “The Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act,” making clear in the title two things: first, that members of the military deserve special protection from funeral picketing, protection not available to the gay citizens whom Westboro Baptist Church had been picketing for years, and second, that a soldier

¹¹³³ The current legal state of Don't Ask, Don't Tell is in flux.

¹¹³⁴ The battle for the memorialization of Pat Tillman illustrates the cultural desire to define “fallen heroes” as brave Christians. Tillman, a safety for the Arizona Cardinals football team who became an Army Ranger in 2002, was killed while serving in Afghanistan in 2004. His family was initially informed that he was killed in an ambush, but five weeks after his death, the military admitted that Tillman and an Afghan soldier standing near him were killed by friendly fire. Tillman was awarded a posthumous Purple Heart and promoted, and he was awarded a Silver Star for extraordinary heroism, an award some suspect was an effort by the Army to boost Tillman as a hero. Christian groups clamored to depict Tillman as a citizen-soldier, though Kevin Tillman, Pat Tillman's brother and a fellow Army Ranger, allegedly objected to the saying of prayers and the presence of a chaplain during a repatriation ceremony for his sibling, and the Tillman family made clear that Pat Tillman was not a Christian (Mike Fish, “An Un-American Tragedy,” *ESPN*, no date, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/eticket/story?page=tillmanpart1>). “He wasn't treated as a person, really,” said Mary Tillman, Pat Tillman's mother, but as a stock character in a narrative about religion and military that served the purposes of those telling the story (AP, “With Movie Upcoming, Pat Tillman's Family Still Seeking Answers,” *USA Today*, August 13, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2010-08-13-pat-tillman-family_N.htm)

becomes a hero when he dies, no matter how he lived or how he died. For example, Pat Tillman was killed by friendly fire and Matthew Snyder was killed in collision that resulted when the driver of his Humvee failed to follow orders. Albert Snyder, Matthew Snyder's father, upon learning the news of his son's death, was publically critical of the military and the war, expressing doubt that his son's death was meaningful in securing America.¹¹³⁵ Regardless, through death, the dead are given status as heroes. In this scheme, death makes one a hero, and soldiering implies one's heterosexuality and proves one's value to the nation, for military service erases "class, regional, and ethnic differences and creates a 'national masculinity' embodied in the individual soldier."¹¹³⁶ Thus, the fallen serviceman is the ideal citizen: male, straight (and thus presumably procreative), Christian, and heroic.

This is, in part, why pickets of the funerals of the war dead are so offensive to Americans and, in particular, to conservative religious believers, who value straightness and Christianity so highly. When the city of Casper, Wyoming, responded to Westboro Baptist Church's promise to picket Matthew Shepard's funeral by attempting to hastily pass a law banning funeral protests, the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a conservative Christian legal defense organization, filed a brief expressing concern that such a ban would infringe upon Westboro Baptist Church's religious freedoms, saying there should be "no funeral exception to the First Amendment."¹¹³⁷ When, a few years later, the state of Missouri attempted to pass a similar law

¹¹³⁵ Snyder's father to the news of his son's non-combat death with criticism of the war and a despondent reflection, saying, "I just want it to be over.... And I want answers. They said he was the gunnery on top of the Humvee and the Humvee rolled. When is this senseless war going to end?" ("Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder," *Military Times*, undated, <http://militarytimes.com/valor/marine-lance-cpl-matthew-a-snyder/1582584/>).

¹¹³⁶ Robert A. Nye, "Western Masculinities in War and Peace," *American Historical Review* (April 2007): 421. 417-438.

¹¹³⁷ The Associated Press, "How Casper, Wyo., Reconciled Rights of Protestors, Funeral-Goers," October 23, 1998, *First Amendment Center*, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx?id=11278>. Throughout the legal debates regarding funeral pickets, conservative Christians have been rightly fearful that limits on funeral pickets could affect the rights of anti-abortion picketers picketing near abortion clinics. Said Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the ACLJ, regarding Casper's ordinance: "I don't think that a speech-free zone (at a funeral) is any more

in response to Westboro Baptist Church's *military* funeral picketing, the ACLJ took the precise opposite position, this time filing a friend-of-the-court brief arguing *against* the right of Westboro Baptist Church to protest.¹¹³⁸ What had changed? Only the presumed sexuality of the deceased and his identity as a soldier.¹¹³⁹

In death, citizen-soldiers belong to the nation. "No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers," noted Anderson. "[V]oid as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings."¹¹⁴⁰ The empty tomb is meaningful because it houses the ideal of the citizen-soldier, unencumbered with factual details about the cause of death or the kind of life lived, heterosexuality and heroism assumed. "The Tomb's scene of interpellation can have very powerful effects, for it permits the mourning subject to transform a particular loss—real or imagined—into the general loss suffered by the nation,"¹¹⁴¹ so all citizens grieve, and all citizens are harmed by funeral pickets.

Pickets at military funerals are thus condemned as attacks on the American ideal of the straight, Christian hero who died defending the nation—regardless of whether the dead was, in fact, straight or Christian or if he was actually defending the nation at the time of death. In contrast, pickets at the funerals of gay people are, if unkind or ineffective or embarrassing to those who share the name "Baptist" with Westboro Baptist Church, defended as exercises in free

constitutional than a buffer zone around an abortion clinic." In contrast to the ACLJ's "no exceptions" position, Fred Phelps called Casper's ordinance "altogether constitutional when the distance is so minuscule."

¹¹³⁸ The brief, filed September 27, 2006, is available at http://www.aclj.org/Media/PDF/06-cv-4156-FJG_Amicus_Brief.pdf.

¹¹³⁹ When the Supreme Court agreed to hear *Snyder v. Phelps*, the ACLJ offered a carefully worded brief in support of neither party, recommending retrial because of faulty jury instructions in the original trial. This is likely because, while the reversal of the original decision was intolerable to the ACLJ's pro-military and anti-gay sensibilities, the original decision opened new possibilities for further limits of abortion clinic pickets, limits that the ACLJ certainly does not want to support.

¹¹⁴⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 9.

¹¹⁴¹ Mark Redfield, "Imagi-nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning," *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 68-69.

speech. Scenes of military funeral pickets capture public attention in particular, Westboro Baptist Church has found, because military funeral pickets—and flag desecration—hit an emotional nerve. “We found their idol,” Shirley Phelps-Roper says of military funeral pickets and flag desecration.¹¹⁴² (See Figures 63 through 72.) Not only do these, of all the outrageous acts the church performs, inspire the most fury—they are also the ones that are most directly aimed at the heterosexist religious nationalism that informs the Religious Right definition of America. Indeed, the very term “flag desecration” indicates that holiness that has been assigned to the flag. In another example, Stephen McAllister, a law professor at the University of Kansas and the Solicitor General of Kansas who has written on the subject of funeral pickets and co-authored an *amicus* brief supporting Snyder’s position before the Supreme Court, titled his University of Kansas Dole Institute for Politics presentation in support of Snyder “Is Nothing Sacred?”¹¹⁴³ But, in the court of law, the answer is clear: no. The state has no authority to decide which objects are sacred.

Precisely because flags and military funerals are experienced as sacred objects and sacred events by many religious believers, Westboro Baptist Church has selected these objects and events for use in the preaching of their message. Indeed, their use of these objects are ideally suited to their theological purposes of shattering idols, calling sinners’ attention to their worship of “false gods,” and sharing God’s message of doom for the nation. Steve Drain explains why he drags the flag at pickets, saying, “I do it so that it can be a springboard into conversation about idolatry.... The fact is these people have more respect and reverence for a piece of cloth that’s

¹¹⁴² Shirley Phelps-Roper, interview with the author, September 11, 2010.

¹¹⁴³ Angelique McNaughton, “First Amendment, Controversial Protests Up for Debate,” *University Daily Kansan*, September 27, 2010, <http://www.kansan.com/news/2010/sep/27/first-amendment-debate/>.

colored in a certain way than they do for the word of God.”¹¹⁴⁴ (See Figures 74, 75, and 76.)

Whether true or not, it has been the church’s engagement with these objects and activism at military funerals that has prompted the greatest public outrage.

The emotional intensity of the public response to Westboro Baptist Church’s desecration of objects, symbols, and ritual events widely perceived to be sacred is made intelligible by James A. Aho’s explanation that “[p]olitical drama is far more trenchant than textbook recitation in instilling messages of national, cultural, and racial identity[, for] drama re- presents a people’s legends and myths not just to the ear, but to all the senses.”¹¹⁴⁵ Westboro Baptists, with their colorful signs, parodies of patriotic songs (See Figure 77 .), vulgar language, and flag trampling, catch the eye and ear of all who encounter them. They engage patriotic symbols—ones sacralized by a civil theology that views America as blessed from its creation but in spiritual decay—in ways that inflame their audiences. Their actions, though, are justified by the same texts that other conservative believers use to defend and extend their own converging of religion and patriotism. Asks Fred Phelps of his congregation:

Should we not take heart, Beloved[?] We have more than abundant evidence ... to believe that our Father placed us upon this hill; and ordered His holy light to shine; and no power on earth or in Hell can hide that light.¹¹⁴⁶

This is the same biblical metaphor that drove early Puritan settlers and drives contemporary Christian reformers. The hyper-Calvinism of Westboro Baptists further emboldens them, though, for a strong belief in predestination produces independent spirits. This theology

¹¹⁴⁴ Nathan Dinsdale, “Father Knows Best,” *Santa Fe Reporter*, April 20, 2005, http://www.altweeklies.com/aan/father_knows_best/Story?oid=145872.

¹¹⁴⁵ Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness*, 3.

¹¹⁴⁶ Fred Phelps, sermon, April 21, 2010.

“fears no man, though seated on a throne, because it fears God, the only real sovereign.”¹¹⁴⁷

With God for them, Westboro Baptists fear no Supreme Court decision, physical assaults from outsiders, or the defection of their own children. In a religious narrative that announces that God rules now and will save his people, the success of the church mission is guaranteed.

Westboro Baptist Church’s confidence is derived from the same source as Religious Right groups’ confidence: the belief that God has a unique role for America in world history; that God wants American law and culture to follow Biblical edicts, as interpreted in conservative Protestant theology; that Christians have a duty to conform the culture to this model; and that God will bless them and give them victory in the war for America’s soul. As argued in Chapter 5, the Religious Right sees the fight against legalized homosexuality and gay rights as central in that war. Westboro Baptist Church, then, while it does not identify as part of the Religious Right and is indeed rejected by other Religious Right groups, is not so much distinct from the Religious Right as a fringe element of it, positioned at the most politically conservative (capital punishment for those who engage in same-sex contact) and tactically offensive point on the anti-gay religious spectrum.

¹¹⁴⁷ Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell’s *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist* (Middleton, NY: Gilbert Beebe’s Sons, 1886),333.

Westboro Baptist Church

(WBC Chronicles – Since 1955)
 3701 S.W. 12th St. Topelca, Ks. 66604 785-273-0325 www.GodHatesFags.com
Religious Opinion & Bible Commentary on Current Events

Friday, November 12, 2010

NEWS RELEASE

(Supplemental info: background, photos, audio sermons & hymns, & video footage – available free at www.JewsKilledJesus.com,
www.SignalMovie.com, www.GodHatesTheWorld.com, www.PriestsRapeBoys.com, www.BeastObama.com & Blog.SpareNot.com)

WEEK 1012 OF THE GREAT GAGE PARK DECENCY DRIVE

WBC observes WEEK 1012 of protests against public sodomy at Gage Park, November 14. WBC's Gospel message, (*"Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination."* *Leviticus 18:22*) is America's only hope. We're determined the nation shall hear. God's Command: *"Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression."* *Isa. 58:1*. "Show" = get in their faces; make it crystal clear. America's sin is that of Sodom: societal acceptance/ respect for a soul-damning, nation-dooming "gay" lifestyle. America is *"deeply (irreversibly) corrupt."* *Hos. 9:9; 2 Chr. 36:16*. WBC's Commission: *"Son of man, cause (America) to know her abominations."* *Ezek. 16:2*.

Thank God for 17 more dead troops.

We are praying for 17,000 more.

**We will picket their funerals in their home towns
in respectful and lawful proximity thereto.**

Here is a Roster of the Damned:

Spc. James C. Young of Rochester, IL
 Sgt. 1st Class Todd M. Harris of Tucson, AZ
 Spc. Blake D. Whipple of Williamsville, NY
 Lance Cpl. Brandon W. Pearson of Arvada, CO
 Lance Cpl. Matthew J. Broehm of Flagstaff, AZ
 Sgt. Michael F. Paranzino of Middletown, RI
 Staff Sgt. Jordan B. Emrick of Hoyleton, IL
 Lance Cpl. Randy R. Braggs of Sierra Vista, AZ
 Pfc. Shane M. Reifert of Cottrellville, MI

Sgt. Jason J. McCluskey of McAlester, OK
 Sgt. Aaron B. Cruttenden of Mesa, AZ
 Spc. Dale J. Kridlo of Hughestown, PA
 Spc. Anthony Vargas of Reading, PA
 Spc. Andrew L. Hutchins of New Portland, ME
 2nd Lt. Robert M. Kelly of Tallahassee, FL
 Lance Cpl. Dakota R. Huse of Greenwood, LA
 Lance Cpl. James B. Stack of Arlington Heights, IL

"For there fell down many slain, because the war was of God." *1 Chron. 5:22*

**We've turned America over to the fags;
They're coming home in body bags.**

Figure 63. A press release dated November 12, 2010, announcing the "roster of the damned": soldiers who, by defending a nation that defies God's laws about sexuality, are enemies of God. Press release courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.



Figure 64. In this undated photograph, Lizz Phelps identifies gay Americans as the cause of God's wrath. Photograph courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.



Figure 65. Westboro Baptist Church credits God with violence against America. Undated photograph provided by Westboro Baptist Church.



Figures 66 and 67. Young adults Jabez Phelps and Sara Phelps hold signs expressing their view of American servicemen and women. The sign in Jabez's hand, at left, labels Matthew Snyder "murderer" and "rapist." Undated photographs courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.





Figures 68 and 69. Above, Grace Phelps-Roper holds a sign that addresses the way that Americans imagine fallen servicemen as belonging to all of us by arguing that God has killed “your sons.” Below, Bekah Phelps-Roper holds a sign that refutes that claim that God blesses America. Both undated photographs courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.





Figure 70. A Westboro Baptist addresses members of the Patriot Guard Riders, who provide a colorguard for military funerals and stand between Westboro Baptists and funeral-goers. Many Patriot Guard Riders are veterans. Undated photograph courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church.



Figure 71. Jael Phelps waves an upside down flag behind the backs of Patriot Guard Riders. In the sign at center, Westboro Baptists use the symbol of the yellow ribbon, which signals support of those currently serving and a “welcome home” to those returning, to insult military servicemen and women.

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NEWS RELEASE

(Supplemental info: background, photos, audio sermons & hymns, & video footage – available free at www.JewsKilledJesus.com,
www.SignalMovies.com, www.GodHatesTheWorld.com, www.PriestsRapeBoys.com, www.ReastObama.com & Blogg.SpareNet.com)

GOD HATES AMERICA & IS KILLING OUR TROOPS IN HIS WRATH.

**Military funerals have become pagan orgies of
 idolatrous blasphemy, where they pray to the
 dunghill gods of Sodom & play taps to a fallen fool.**

**This message to be preached in respectful, lawful proximity
 to the memorial of Sgt. 1st Class Charles M. Sadell**

Sat., Nov. 6, at 9:45 a.m.

Vaughn Funeral Home

18905 State Route 45 North, Weston, MO

**Sgt. 1st Class Sadell gave his life for the Constitutional right of WBC to
 warn America. To deny us our First Amendment rights is to declare to the
 world that Sgt. 1st Class Sadell died in vain, and that America is a nation
 of sodomite hypocrites.**

***“Except the Lord build the house, They labor in vain that build it;
 Except the Lord keep the city, The watchman waketh but in
 vain.” Psa. 127:1.***

**The Lord no longer builds the American house; nor does the Lord
 watch over and protect America. These soldiers are dying for
 the homosexual and other sins of America. God is now
 America’s enemy, and God Himself is fighting against America.**

THANK GOD FOR IEDs.

Figure 72. In a November 2, 2010 press release announcing their intention to picket the funeral of a fallen soldier, Westboro Baptists argue that the U.S. military defends homosexuality. At the same time, the press release seeks to preempt arguments that picketing is unpatriotic, saying that those who would silence them would make the soldier’s death “in vain.”



Figure 73. Members of Westboro Baptist Church picket the funeral of Sgt. 1st Class CJ Sadell in Weston, Missouri, as announced in the press release in Figure 69. November 6, 2010 photograph courtesy of Westboro Baptist Church. The church was met with counterprotestors who filled the parking spaces close to the funeral home to discourage Westboro Baptist Church from coming near the scene.¹¹⁴⁸



Figure 74. Megan Phelps-Roper identifies the U.S. flag as an idol in an undated photograph provided by Westboro Baptist Church.

¹¹⁴⁸ Edecio Martinez, “Westboro Baptist Church Protesters Blocked by Residents at Mo. Soldier's Funeral,” *CBS News*, November 9, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20022176-504083.html.



Figures 75 and 76. Above, a Westboro Baptist stomps on the American flag at an October 5, 2010 picket at Arlington National Cemetery. At the same event, Steve Drain, below, stomps on a POW/MA flag as counterpicketers, including Patriot Guard Riders and a disabled veteran, protest across the street. Photographs by Rebecca Barrett-Fox. All rights reserved.



“Semper Fi Semper Fags” (Parody of “Marine Hymn”)

#1

From the halls of Montezuma
 To the Shores of Tripoli
 Fighting this vile nations battles
 Has made God your enemy
 First you fought for feces eaters
 Then for sinner – proud and mean
 Shame on those who claim the title
 Of United States Marine

#2

For the filthy bloody
 US flag
 They are coming home in bags
 With the IED God’s blown them up
 No toes left for their toe tags
 If the army and the navy Ever gaze on hell’s grim scenes
 They will find the streets are loaded up
 With United States Marines

#3

There’s a rule in war that’s number 1
 You must know your enemy
 With God’s hatred pouring out on you - - Say goodbye to victory
 All your laws and worship of the dead
 Will not stop one IED
 It’s too late to ask for God to bless
 The United States Marines

Figure 77. A Westboro Baptist Church parody of “Marine’s Hymn.” The church has produced songs parodying the songs of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. Additionally, members sing parodies of songs such as “Proud to be an American” by Lee Greenwood, “This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie, and “America the Beautiful” by Irving Berlin. Parodies are available at *God Hates Fags* (<http://www.godhatesfags.com/audio/index.html#specialPlaylist>).

Westboro Baptist Church as the Religious Right's Radical Flank

In his analysis of the religious tracts of Jack Chick, Daniel K. Raeburn stresses that “hate literature reveals not only its own corruption but the sick society that hatched it.”¹¹⁴⁹ Even as the mainstream culture decries Westboro Baptist Church members’ pickets at scenes of military funerals and national tragedies, the silence of mainstream America when such pickets were aimed at gay people alone suggests a tacit de-valuing of the lives of those who deviate from the heteronormative standard. Although other religious conservatives may seek to distance themselves from the lurid language and confrontational tactics of Westboro Baptist Church members, they share with them the belief that acceptance of homosexuality and respect for gay people contravenes God’s law and will lead to national doom, ruin, desolation, and destruction. Therefore, it is not Westboro Baptist Church’s denunciation of homosexuality to which the Religious Right objects so much as it is the unique way in which they have packaged and presented it. Other representatives of the Religious Right have articulated their antipathy toward homosexuality in more palatable ways—i.e. less sensational and more “legitimate” religious and social scientific language—and, especially, avoided Westboro Baptist Church’s argument that God’s judgment is manifested in the deaths of American servicemen and women. In their efforts to dismiss Westboro Baptist Church as mean, inauthentic, or crazy, other conservative Christians reveal their discomfort in seeing themselves as similar to Westboro Baptists. Even though they share with Westboro Baptist Church a theology that links homosexuality and national doom, these believers prefer to see themselves as—and, importantly, be seen as—more compassionate and loving than Westboro Baptists. In the process, Westboro Baptist Church contextualizes and calls attention to the anti-gay theology and activism central to the contemporary Religious Right.

¹¹⁴⁹ Daniel K. Raeburn,, editor. *The Holy Book of Chick with the Apocrypha and Dictionary-Concordance*, King Imp Edition (Chicago: Daniel K. Raeburn, 1998), 1.

As a result, Westboro Baptist Church represents the radical flank of the Religious Right—that is, the extreme and radical tactics of Westboro Baptist Church provide cultural cover and legitimacy to the less strident and more “moderate” anti-gay ideology of Religious Right groups.

A radical flank model of social movements has been developed most fully by Herbert H. Haines in *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970*; here, Haines analyzes the roles of “radical” and “moderate” ideologies and tactics in the Civil Rights Movement, though Haines roots his model in the work of feminist thinker, activist, lawyer, and journalist Jo Freeman¹¹⁵⁰ and the model has been usefully applied to anti-abortion¹¹⁵¹ and animal rights groups.¹¹⁵² In this model, the presence of more radical groups facilitates the public acceptance of “moderate” group by enabling the latter to become perceived as “reasonable” relative to the former, who now occupy the position of “fringe” or “radical” or “extreme.”¹¹⁵³

Religious Right disdain for and denunciation of Westboro Baptist Church, therefore, results in what Haines calls *negative radical flank effects*—the discrediting of “centrist” or “moderate” activists in the public eye because of the public’s association of them with radicals, with a resulting loss of support for the moderate position.¹¹⁵⁴ “Those who oppose the

¹¹⁵⁰ See especially Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation* (New York: McKay, 1975).

¹¹⁵¹ See, for example, Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest* (New York: Twayne, 1994). See also, Alesha E. Doan, *Opposition and Intimidation: The Abortion Wars and Strategies of Political Harassment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹¹⁵² See, for example, James M. Jasper and Dorothy Nelkin, *The Animal Rights Crusade: The Growth of a Moral Protest*, (New York: Free Press, 1991).

¹¹⁵³ Theologian Joseph C. Hough, Jr., illustrates the process in *Black Power and White Protestants: A Christian Response to the New Negro Pluralism*, where he recalls a series of conversations he had with a Southern white friend. In 1953, during their first conversation, the two men “agreed that while the Negro deserved a better chance in America, we must be careful to oppose two kinds of extremists—the NAACP and the Ku Klux Klan.” In 1955, the two men again discussed the issue of race in America, now agreeing that “Negroes ought to be able to attend desegregated public schools, but that we should oppose two kinds of extremism—White Citizens Councils and Martin Luther King.” In 1966, the men met again, and Hough’s friend said to him, “If we could get the good whites and the good Negroes to support Martin Luther King, perhaps we could put the brakes on these SNCC and CORE people and also put a stop to this ridiculous revival of the Ku Klux Klan” ((New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 224-225; as cited in Norman R. Yetman, editor, *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 448). As Haines effectively illustrates in *Black Radicals*, today’s moderates may have been yesterday’s radicals.

¹¹⁵⁴ Haines, *Black Radicals*, 6.

normalization of homosexuality have been presented as backwoods, antiquated, and dangerous people,” complains R. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“Conservative Christians have been presented as proponents of hatred rather than as individuals driven by Biblical conviction”¹¹⁵⁵; here, Mohler does not name Westboro Baptist Church as the evidence that those who mischaracterize the Religious Right use in constructing all anti-gay Christians as “backwards, antiquated, and dangerous,” but Mohler is concerned with this group in particular because of the vehement public dislike of it. Mohler clearly understands Deana A. Rohlinger’s warning that “if radicals are too far outside the mainstream..., they may have a ‘tarring effect’ on the entire movement, outraging the broader public and generating negative sentiment toward and publicity for the movement as a whole”¹¹⁵⁶ In order to avoid such negative radical flank effects, non-Westboro anti-gay Christians label Westboro Baptist Church as inauthentic, non-Christian, or a cult.¹¹⁵⁷

However, as a radical flank of the Religious Right, Westboro Baptist Church may at the same time produce *positive radical flank effects*—gains for the moderate position because of its perceived contrast to the radical group, which becomes the more threatening choice to those who would formerly have objected to even the moderate group.¹¹⁵⁸ Says Haines, “Radicals may... provide a militant foil against which moderate strategies and demands can be redefined and

¹¹⁵⁵ R. Albert Mohler, “After the Ball—Why the Homosexual Movement Has Won,” *Gender-News.com*, June 3, 2004), <http://www.gender-news.com/other.php?id=19>.

¹¹⁵⁶ Deana A. Rohlinger, “Friends and Foes: Media, Politics, and Tactics in the Abortion War,” *Social Problems* 53, no. 4 (November 2006), 540.

¹¹⁵⁷ For example, Facebook includes an anti-Westboro Baptist Church group named “Westboro Baptist Church is NOT of God” (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=2211017461>). In dozens of interviews that I conducted with clergy on the topic, all stated that Westboro Baptist Church is not a “true” Christian church. Most notably, a leading Primitive Baptist who asked not be identified stated, “Well, we believe that God hates homosexuals, too, but Fred Phelps isn’t a Primitive Baptist. He might as well call himself a Catholic as far as we [“orderly” Primitive Baptists] are concerned.” Given that Primitive Baptists tend to view Catholics as apostate, this comment was not a call to include Westboro Baptist Church within Christianity.

¹¹⁵⁸ Haines, *Black Radicals*, 172-186.

normalized.”¹¹⁵⁹ Westboro Baptist Church may aid the Religious Right by reminding the broader public of the more atrocious forms of anti-gay theology and activism, thus contributing to public perception of the Religious Right’s activism as a more compassionate response to gay rights or even as benign when compared to Westboro Baptist Church. Members of the Religious Right can congratulate themselves on being unlike Westboro Baptist Church, for using kinder tactics or espousing a gentler anti-gay theology, and they can gain public support for those who oppose gay rights but do not want to be “tarred” as “hatemongers.” Thus, Westboro Baptist Church can produce positive radical flank effects for other anti-gay religious activists.

Positive radical flank effects are precarious, though, can be lost if the radical flank gains more media exposure than the moderate group, which can possibly producing a negative radical flank effect.¹¹⁶⁰ This happens because “the often outrageous and shocking character of militant actions can threaten to steal the show from moderates.”¹¹⁶¹ As illustrated in chapter 2, anti-gay Religious Right supporters in Topeka struggled with just this problem when Westboro Baptist Church spearheaded a campaign against a proposed city ordinance banning discrimination based on sexual identity in public hiring and firing. Three groups emerged in the debate: supporters of the ordinance, Westboro Baptists, and other conservative Christians who, like Westboro Baptist, did not support the ordinance but did not want to be viewed as sharing a political position with Westboro Baptist Church even though their underlying logic—that any gains in gay rights threaten the safety of a community and that, in the end, sexuality is a religious issue—is

¹¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁶⁰ See, for example, how abortion clinic bombings produced a negative radical flank effect for pro-life activists in the 1980s and 1990s in Rohlinger, “Friends and Foes.” These bombings garnered so much press coverage for the radical flank of anti-abortion activists that moderate anti-abortion activists were concerned about their own message would be lost in the debate.

¹¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

similar.¹¹⁶² In the end, the ordinance was enacted—possibly because, in part, of the negative radical flank effect of Westboro Baptist Church.

Mary L. Gray recounts a similar episode in her ethnography *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* in which students in rural Kentucky wanted to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at their high school. The students met resistance, and when the ACLU became involved, the backlash increased. However, when Westboro Baptist Church picketed in the community, the community responded by uniting against Westboro Baptist Church, even when doing so meant uniting *for* the Gay-Straight Alliance. “Ironically,” notes Gray, “the presence of Phelps and his kind is what ultimately united the community.”¹¹⁶³

In the hyper-Calvinism of Westboro Baptist Church, though, such an outcome is not upsetting but expected. Says Tim Phelps, “[O]ne thing is for doggone certain: no one can see our signs looks at our signs or hears our words without immediately having to take a position.”¹¹⁶⁴ Rather than being dismayed that other anti-gay religious conservatives switched their position to support the Gay-Straight Alliance in response to Westboro Baptists’ picketing, church members would celebrate the switch, even though it meant the creation of the student group, for the damnation of Gay-Straight supporters also glorifies God, and Westboro Baptists are happy to participate in that glorification. Preached Fred Phelps one Sunday:

¹¹⁶² Dan Walker led the efforts of Family Action Network, a “pro-family” conservative religious group that opposed the ordinance. Walker made clear threat he perceived that the ordinance delivered to Christians. “I believe this [issue] has galvanized the Christian community,” he said after the vote (Alicia Henrickson, “Vote Signals a Longer Fight,” *Capital-Journal* (September 12, 2002), http://cjonline.com/stories/091202/com_vote.shtml). However, he was quick to distance his group from Westboro Baptist Church, saying, “We aren’t part of their message of hate; we do this in love.... This is not an issue about Westboro Baptist Church. This is an issue about what the homosexual movement is trying to do in Topeka” (Jodi Wilgoren, “Vote in Topeka Today Hangs on Gay Rights and a Vitriolic Local Protestor,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/01/national/01topeka.html?pagewanted=1>).

¹¹⁶³ Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 79.

¹¹⁶⁴ Tim Phelps, interview in *Fall From Grace*.

We smell like death to the one [those who are damned], and life to the other [those who are saved]—but to God, both are a sweet savour [sic] of Christ(!).

Meaning that God is glorified by those who are eternally damned in Hell, as much as by those who are eternally blessed in Heaven.¹¹⁶⁵

The goal is not to build anti-gay alliances with other religious conservatives; it is to “to put the cup of fury to the lips of this nation and make them drink,”¹¹⁶⁶ to force engagement with their message.

Moreover, united opposition to Westboro Baptist Church did not precisely correspond to support for gay rights. While eleven Westboro Baptists picketed local churches they felt were not sufficiently anti-gay, a rally sponsored by the county’s Human Rights Commission, which was formed in the 1960s to investigate charges of racist discrimination, also occurred, but organizers of the rally made clear that they were rallying in support of diversity and equality in general, not gay rights specifically. Indeed, members of the Gay-Straight Alliance were not permitted to speak at the rally—even though, as a student leader of the group noted with disappointment, Westboro Baptists were given an opportunity to express themselves. Further, the former mayor of the city avoided any direct discussion of the Gay-Straight Alliance or homosexuality, instead talking about bigotry in general. “Unity does not mean we always agree, but we can be united against bigoted views,” he encouraged the crowd. His comment provided “moderate anti-gay” activists—those who opposed the Gay-Straight Alliance but did not support Westboro Baptists’ tactics—a way to view themselves as *against bigotry* while retaining their anti-gay stance. The ambivalence did not go unnoticed. Reflected a student leader of the Gay-

¹¹⁶⁵ Fred Phelps, sermon, referencing 2nd Corinthians 2: 15-18, February 14, 2010.

¹¹⁶⁶ Tim Phelps, interview in *Fall from Grace*.

Straight Alliance, “It seemed like they [rally organizers and participants] weren’t really sure who they were supporting.”¹¹⁶⁷

The presence of both negative and positive radical flank effects means that the Religious Right must carefully manage its relationship with Westboro Baptist Church. Given the unpopularity of the church, the Religious Right cannot embrace Westboro Baptists, even if they would welcome such collaboration (which Westboro Baptist Church emphatically rejects). At the same time, they work toward the same anti-gay political ends, and Westboro Baptist Church may center Religious Right homophobia, giving anti-gay voters an option to support anti-gay policy without affiliating with radicals. Because “[i]t is not radicalism *per se* that is the operative mechanism in radical flank effects but rather the intersection of particular forms of radicalism with particular interest groups”¹¹⁶⁸—because it was not the anti-gay radicalism of Westboro Baptist Church that has prompted widespread opposition but instead the presence of that radicalism at military funerals—Westboro Baptist Church may assist the Religious Right in its argument that anti-gay radicalism *looks like* brightly colored picket signs with stick figures engaged in anal intercourse so that the public ignores the dramatically more successful but less in-your-face anti-gay legislative efforts of the Religious Right.

Conclusion

Though some people hope that, with the death of founder Fred Phelps, Westboro Baptist Church will disappear, unless the broader culture rejects the theology that links homosexuality and national doom, younger generations of Westboro Baptists—the legal right to preach their message won by their predecessors, their own training in media and technology, and their

¹¹⁶⁷ Gray, *Out in the Country*, 61-85, especially 80.

¹¹⁶⁸ Haines, *Black Radicals*, 180.

growing-up years spent on the picket line—will continue to tap into latent anti-gay religious sentiment. Indeed, reflects Tim Phelps, son on Fred Phelps and himself father to ten children, he and his siblings and children are “battle worn, battle tried;” “We were weaned on this, so you’ve got some rabid... generation of children.”¹¹⁶⁹ The death of the patriarch, then, will not dissuade the church, for Westboro Baptist Church is from a tradition where church conflict is “a drama of doctrine as much as it is a clash of wills and passions.”¹¹⁷⁰

The goal of opponents, then, should not be to silence church members—for not only does that goal seem unlikely to be met, but it endangers the First Amendment—but to give no aid or comfort to the message, to reject its underlying theology. Nate Phelps, in encouraging residents of Topeka in their fight against his father, instructed them to insure that church members’ “seeds of hate will fall on barren soil.”¹¹⁷¹ To create that “barren soil,” the larger culture must reject not only Westboro Baptist Church’s message but the Religious Right’s similarly anti-gay theology and policy. Ironically, Westboro Baptist Church may be assisting in that effort, for, writes Haines, “It is possible... that the emergence of more militant actors may lead to the redefinition of existing spokespersons and organizations as *more* radical than previously thought.”¹¹⁷² The task of creating “barren soil” requires more than ignoring the church’s message of national doom because of homosexuality; it requires countering it wherever it appears—and most importantly when it takes sanctuary in churches more palatable than Westboro Baptist Church.

¹¹⁶⁹ Tim Phelps, interview in *Fall from Grace*.

¹¹⁷⁰ Peacock and Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox*, 87.

¹¹⁷¹ Nate Phelps, Public Presentation at the Topeka Performing Arts Center, April 24, 2010.

¹¹⁷² Haines, *Black Radicals*, 7.

Appendix A

The Burden of Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew A. Snyder. The Visit of Westboro Baptist Church to Help the Inhabitants of Maryland Connect the Dots! This Epic Adventure Took Place on Friday, March 10, 2006



This is a wicked and evil generation, a perverse people. There is no peace for you saith your God!¹

Isaiah 29: 1 ¶ Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear:

2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

3 For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness.

4 None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity.

5 They hatch cockatrice' eggs, and weave the spider's web: he that eateth of their eggs dieth, and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper.

6 Their webs shall not become garments, neither shall they cover themselves with their works: their works are works of iniquity, and the act of violence is in their hands.

7 Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.

¹ Isa 48:22 There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked.

Isa 57:21 There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.

8 The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace.

9 ¶ Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness.

10 We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men.

11 We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.

12 For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us: for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them;

13 In transgressing and lying against the LORD, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood.

14 And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter.

15 Yea, truth faileth; and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey: and the LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no judgment.

16 ¶ And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him.

17 For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloke.

18 According to their deeds, accordingly he will repay, fury to his adversaries, recompence to his enemies; to the islands he will repay recompence.

19 So shall they fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun. When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him.

20 And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD.

21 As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of

the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever.

Seven² angels from Westboro Baptist Church flew across America having the everlasting gospel to preach to the earthdwellers, saying with a loud voice FEAR GOD and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: AND, worship him that made heaven, earth, sea and the fountains of waters.³

Our journey, which was mapped out from eternity past, was on this wise: Twenty years ago, little Matthew Snyder came into the world. He had a calling; he had a vital roll in these last of the last days. God created him and loaned/entrusted him to Albert and Julie Snyder. He required a standard when He delivered the lad to them, to teach him among others things to fear God and to keep His commandments. God expected them to GIVE THAT CHILD BACK in thanksgiving to Him for the blessings of the opportunity and privilege they received from their God, to raise that child.



Psalms 127:1 Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

2 It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

3 Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

4 As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.

5 Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.

Psalms 128:1 Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways.

2 For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.

² Fred Sr., Shirl, Becky, Isaiah, Zacharias, Grace and Gabriel

³ Re 14:6 And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

- 3 Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table.
 4 Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the LORD.

God blessed you, Mr. and Mrs. Snyder, with a resource and his name was Matthew. He was an arrow in your quiver! In thanks to God for the comfort the child could bring you, you had a DUTY to prepare that child to serve the LORD his GOD – PERIOD! You did JUST THE OPPOSITE – you raised him for the devil.

You taught him that God was a liar. At Matthew 19:4-6 the Lord Jesus Christ said:

- And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female,
 5 And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?
 6 Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

Albert and Julie RIPPED that body apart and taught Matthew to defy his Creator, to divorce, and to commit adultery. They taught him how to support the largest pedophile machine in the history of the entire world, the Roman Catholic monstrosity. Every dime they gave the Roman Catholic monster they condemned their own souls. They also, in supporting satanic Catholicism, taught Matthew to be an idolater.

- Exodus 20:4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

Then after all that they sent him to fight for the United States of Sodom, a filthy country that is in lock step with his evil, wicked, and sinful manner of life, putting him in the cross hairs of a God that is so mad He has smoke coming from his nostrils and fire from his mouth! How dumb was that?



- 2 Samuel 22:8 Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of heaven moved and shook, because he was wroth.

- 9 There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it.
- 10 He bowed the heavens also, and came down; and darkness was under his feet.
- 11 And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: and he was seen upon the wings of the wind.
- 12 And he made darkness pavilions round about him, dark waters, and thick clouds of the skies.
- 13 Through the brightness before him were coals of fire kindled.
- 14 The LORD thundered from heaven, and the most High uttered his voice.
- 15 And he sent out arrows, and scattered them; lightning, and discomfited them.

The newspaper account told the story about Matthew and his parents:

- Matthew was 20 years old.
- He was killed (by a sovereign God) in Iraq.
- He was a marine.
- He was an only son with two sisters.
- His father lives with his younger sister in York, Pennsylvania.
- His mother lives in Westminster, Pennsylvania.
- He was a leader in his family among his 15 cousins.
- His mother is grief stricken.
- His father says he was the love of his life.
- He wanted to be a marine since he was 9. Indeed – he had to!
- On the refrigerator hangs a photo of Matthew with relatives by the (pagan) Christmas tree!
- When he completed boot camp his family presented him with a journal of handwritten messages.
- He volunteered for the duty that killed him. Indeed, he bowed down to the sword.

So, here is the short – for this cause God raised up Matthew Snyder so that God might show his power in him!

Romans 9:17-18 - For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

Romans 9:22 - What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.

God rose up Matthew for the very purpose of striking him down, so that God's name might be declared throughout all the earth. He killed Matthew so that His servants would have an opportunity to preach His words to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, the Maryland Legislature, and the whorehouse called St. John Catholic Church at Westminster where Matthew Snyder fulfilled his calling.

2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

The servants of God delivered the burden of God to Maryland on this date and Maryland rejected it. It will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for the people of Maryland.

Matthew 10:14-15 And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city.

Even still, at this late hour, God has compassion upon America, to send His servants to warn you. So we criss-cross this nation daily, reminding you that if you would turn from your wicked ways, God will bless you; and if not, He will continue to curse you with a cruel smiting blow.

De 11:26-28 Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known.

In response to God's kindness to you in this regard, the Maryland Legislature (THINK: TALIBAN) is setting about to pass a law attempting to shred the First Amendment. Their purpose is simple: it is to blot out the word of God from the landscape. In response, God will blot out their young men.

*Jeremiah 18:18 - Then said they, Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.

- 19 Give heed to me, O LORD, and hearken to the voice of them that contend with me.
- 20 Shall evil be recompensed for good? for they have digged a pit for my soul. Remember that I stood before thee to speak good for them, and to turn away thy wrath from them.
- 21 Therefore deliver up their children to the famine, and pour out their blood by the force of the sword; and let their wives be bereaved of their children, and be widows; and let their men be put to death; let their young men be slain by the sword in battle.
- 22 Let a cry be heard from their houses, when thou shalt bring a troop suddenly upon them: for they have digged a pit to take me, and hid snares for my feet.
- 23 Yet, LORD, thou knowest all their counsel against me to slay me: forgive not their iniquity, neither blot out their sin from thy sight, but let them be overthrowen before thee; deal thus with them in the time of thine anger.

Maybe the Maryland Legislature can pass a law abolishing hell and preventing God from killing any more of their young men.

If there was a media outlet in Maryland that was not present to carry the message to the people, I would be surprised. For an hour, they swarmed over us with their cameras and microphones. Every one of the good hearts from Westboro Baptist Church talked and talked for their God. Interestingly, the biker chicks were a non starter. They were reduced to flipping their bloody middle fingers and sniping from a distance.

So, at the completion of our appointed time, we packed up our precious seed and shook the dirt from off our feet in a testimony against Maryland. This epic was record by your eternally grateful seer, Shirl.

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