

No More Cold, Hateful Religion

If there were an award for Worst Example of Christianity in 2012, it would have to go to the infamous Westboro Baptist Church.

The tiny sect, based in Topeka, Kan., made headlines several times last year—most notably in December 2012 when its members planned an unsuccessful demonstration at the funeral of a victim of the Connecticut school shooting.

Fred Phelps, the 83-year-old leader of Westboro, believes innocent children died in the Connecticut tragedy because God is mad at America for tolerating gay marriage. This is why Phelps named his church's website and why he sends his followers to hold hateful placards at military funerals. He claims that every time a U.S. soldier dies in Afghanistan, it is God's reminder that He's angry at America's moral decay.

Personally I don't think this group should use the term "Baptist" (Phelps describes himself as a Calvinist, but he is accountable to no one) or "church" (his members spend most of their time at protests wearing "God Hates Fags" T-shirts). They bear no resemblance to New Testament faith.

Most of us just roll our eyes when we hear of Westboro's disgusting attempts to get publicity. Phelps has the constitutional right to say what he wants (and the Supreme Court agreed in 2011), but his angry tone makes all believers look bad. I'm sure some people have rejected the gospel because they assume all Christians share Phelps' self-righteousness.

I have no plans to fight Phelps. I think the best counter-offensive is to show America what genuine Christian faith really is. We can begin by searching our hearts and making

sure we don't have any self-righteousness in us.

I have to be honest: As much as Phelps upsets me, I suspect I have at least a hint of his hypocrisy. And you probably do too. (If you don't believe that, read Romans 2.)

The cry of my heart as we enter 2013 is for a genuine New Testament faith. I want the real deal. I crave humility, brokenness and compassion. I want the vibrant love of God, not cold, poisonous, hateful Phariseeism. If you agree, consider taking this questionnaire to make sure you are not harboring the spirit of religion.

How do you view God? A religious spirit sees God as a harsh, distant taskmaster rather than an approachable, loving Father. If you have not allowed God's unconditional love to soak into the core of your being, you will misrepresent Him to others.

Do you know you are truly forgiven? The people who rail the loudest against other people's sins often have never come to know the depths of forgiveness the Father offers. Religious people base their relationship with God on their ability to perform spiritual duties. Thus they deny the power of grace.

Are you working to earn God's acceptance, or is your salvation based totally on Christ's death on the cross? Religious people think God accepts them because they pray, read the Bible, attend church or abstain from certain behaviors. And they believe God gets mad if they aren't perfect. Yet the apostle Paul told us plainly that if we are working for our salvation, we are "fallen from grace" (see Gal. 5:4).

Do you have true joy in Jesus? Those who know the true love of God enjoy a continual feast of inner religious people are cynical and hypercritical, and no one wants to be around their sourness. Children who grow up in joyless religious homes usually abandon faith in adulthood.

Do you embrace other churches besides your own? Religious

people think their righteousness is special and that they cannot associate with believers who have different standards. (Phelps, for example, believes Billy Graham is the greatest false prophet since Balaam!) So men like Phelps form tiny elitist clubs that focus on specific doctrines and they become vulnerable to deception.

How do you view sinners? A person who has been transformed by God's love cares deeply for people, regardless of their race, social background, political affiliation or sexual history. Jesus showed acceptance and love to prostitutes, thieves and notorious sinners even as He called them to repentance. Yet we evangelicals have created a confusing hybrid Jesus who is compassionate on one hand, yet on the other hand is angry at homosexuals, Hollywood stars, environmentalists, Democrats, atheists, illegal immigrants and pot smokers.

The American church needs deliverance from this toxic religiosity. If we don't correct the problem, we are really no different from Phelps. If the poison of judgmentalism has contaminated your walk with God, ask Him to pour a fresh understanding of grace into your barren spirit—and then expect His new life to flow through you in 2013.

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