

Fred Phelps Didn't Speak for Me

Fred Phelps, the fire-and-brimstone-breathing pastor of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kan., will be remembered for shamelessly encouraging members of his tiny congregation to carry "God Hates Fags" protest signs. Phelps died last week at age 84, but thousands of gay people will continue to assume all Christians share his hateful views.

Actually, no. Phelps did not speak for me. Nor did he speak for any other Baptist or for any true Christian from any other denomination. He was a spiritual Lone Ranger, an isolated extremist and a pitiful example of a minister of Jesus.

His tiny, independent "church" was a cult of hate. He was a deeply disturbed man who was full of bitterness. He had been estranged from his parents for decades (he reportedly never answered their letters), he didn't speak to some of his own children (they accused him of abuse), and he was so judgmental that he once said Billy Graham was the greatest false prophet since Balaam.

A hyper-Calvinist, Phelps taught that all of the natural disasters affecting the United States in recent years and all deaths of military servicemen were acts of God's judgment because of the rise of homosexuality in our country. His church members showed up at military funerals and rock concerts with their cringe-inducing placards. And when other churches begged Phelps to stop acting so obnoxious, he announced that Christians were headed straight to hell if they refused to condemn gay people like he did.

Phelps' death is the appropriate time to issue a reminder that God has called us to use kindness when we interact with the gay community. If Phelps were still alive, he'd condemn me to

hell for saying this. But I hope all of us can agree on these points:

1. There's no excuse for anti-gay name-calling. If you ever use the words *queer*, *faggot*, *fairy*, *dyke*, *butch*, *lesbo* or other demeaning terms for a gay person, you have just short-circuited any chance for Christ's love to flow through you. Would Jesus use those words? Of course not, because He offers every sinner a chance to discover forgiveness.

2. We shouldn't label homosexuality a "worse" sin. Many gay people see hypocrisy in the church because we blast homosexuality on one hand and then look the other way when heterosexual people commit adultery or when singles sleep around. The Bible lumps all sexual sin into the category of immorality, and we misrepresent God when we pretend that "straight" sin is more acceptable than "gay" sin. Sin is sin. We should lovingly warn people to avoid every form of immoral behavior.

3. We should never tolerate bullying of gay people. Many teens who struggle with their sexual identity have been traumatized by peers who call them names, threaten them, beat them up or ostracize them. It's no wonder so many people in the LGBT community feel marginalized. The church should offer counseling and healing for people who have been bullied, and we should also confront bullying in our culture.

4. We should offer Christ's compassion to any gay person. Many Christians are afraid that if we show love and kindness to a gay person—or to two people in a gay relationship—we are compromising our faith. That's silly. If I show love to a Muslim, that doesn't mean I have embraced his religion. Jesus showed acceptance to tax collectors, prostitutes, thieves, adulterers, two-faced religious hypocrites and clueless pagans—yet He never celebrated or excused their sin. He told a woman caught in adultery, "Go. From now on sin no more" (John 8:11, NASB), but He said this after He protected her from

being stoned by a religious mob. God's kindness leads people to repentance! (See Romans 2:4.)

5. We must agree to disagree with hostile gay people. Some gay people will refuse to embrace the idea that they must renounce their lifestyle in order to follow Jesus. Some will become angry when we maintain that true discipleship requires sinners in every category to deny themselves and embrace a life of holiness. (The gay community, in fact, has some spokespeople who are as hateful as Fred Phelps—I know because they have told me in graphic terms where I should put my religious views!) But it is not my job or yours to argue. Their argument is with God and with His Word. We must simply shine the light of His love and be ready to lead any sincere seeker to the truth.

I'm aware there are people in this country who think I'm guilty of hate speech or gay-bashing just because I believe homosexuality is a sin. They can go ahead and say that. They can call me names. They can be as hateful as Fred Phelps if they want to. They can even crucify me for believing in the gospel. I will choose to love them anyway, because that's what Jesus would do.

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