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Westboro Baptist Church: The Church of Hate

In a vast majority of Christian beliefs, it is believed that God is the God of love, that He hates the sin but loves the sinner, and that He commands us to love our neighbors as He loves us. However, there is one religious group that does not practice this common belief. The Westboro Baptist Church is notoriously known for its homophobic, and anti-military protests and picketing outside funeral with messages of hate and disgust. Groups targeted by these protests, such as the military, homosexuals, victims of natural disaster, etc. have labeled Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) as a hate group because of the picketing and their blatantly and purposefully hateful message.

According to Ryan and Leeson, "Hate groups are organizations of individuals whose 'beliefs or practices attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics' such as race or sexual orientation, but sometimes for their mutable ones, such as religious beliefs" (256). Though Westboro Baptist Church has never used physical violence on another individual while picketing, they do verbally berate and antagonize their intended target "THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS. SOLDIERS DIE, GOD LAUGHS. FAG TROOPS. DON'T WORSHIP THE DEAD.

YOUR SONS ARE IN HELL." (Baker, Bader, and Hirsch 42) are just a few of the spiteful and offensive words plastered on posters and shouted at protests by the members of the church. Many groups have been affected by this type of harassment and discrimination from the church for years, with evidence of the church's message of hate dating back to the church's birth in 1955.

The Westboro Baptist Church was founded in Topeka, Kansas in 1955 by minister and Civil Rights lawyer Fred W. Phelps, Sr. "He preached a strict version of double and absolute predestination Calvinist Theology that viewed God as omnipotent, in every sense; hence the group's claim that God "causes" disasters and tragedies." (Baker, Bader and Hirsch 43). Most of the church members are consisted of his family members and remain in small numbers of about seventy to eighty members. Most of the members when asked to describe characteristics of God, all described Him to be "wrathful" and "angry" (44). Most Christians would not immediately describe God with such characteristics because we hear in preachings about His love first and foremost before His wrath and anger. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*The MacArthur Study Bible*, John 3.16) is arguably one of the most well known verses in the Bible when it comes to God and his declaration of His love for us. What the verse is trying to say is that God sent His only son to forgive us of our sins and that if we believe that Jesus is the Son of God then we will be accepted into Heaven. When it comes to loving your enemies, Matthew 6:43-45 says "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who

persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (*The MacArthur Study Bible*). Jesus is declaring here that when it was said to hate your enemy, you must now love him to show that you are sons of the Father. By not showing love to your enemy, you are not showing yourself to be a son of the Father, a Christian. God says as well "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6. 14-15). In order for God to forgive us, we must also forgive others as well; by not doing so we are not forgiven for our sins. These are just a couple of the numerous examples saying how God is a God of love but the WBC focuses on God's anger and wrath for main characteristics to satisfy their beliefs to protest against others.

The homosexuals have been targeted by Westboro Baptist Church and blamed for disasters dating back to 1989. Their first protest was in a local park at Topeka, Kansas protesting in response to a "tearoom" (44). Since then they have continued to relentlessly picket against homosexuals and those who are activists for LGBT. These protests spread to funerals in 1991, usually of those who were victims of AIDS and they began to gain media attention in the mid-1990s for staging counter-protests at LGBT pride events and protesting at the funerals for their famous advocates (44). It is clear when you read their literature on their pamphlets or on their websites (such as <http://www.godhatesfags.com>) and picket signs that they blame the homosexuals for disasters that strike our nation such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina (51). The WBC believe that God brings these disasters to us because of our tolerance and growing acceptance of homosexuality and those continuing to commit the sin and these disasters are to bring the sin to attention; this

belief brings the church to create signs such as "Thank God for 9/11" and "Thank God for Hurricane Katrina" (50).

When it comes to the military starting in 2005, the Westboro Baptist Church received wide-ranging media attention, along with legal responses, when it came to protesting at the funerals of soldiers killed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As mentioned earlier, they would create signs stating how we should thank God for dead soldiers and how God laughs when they die. The WBC came to nationwide attention when in 2010 *Snyder v. Phelps* was brought all the way up to the Supreme Court. In March of 2006, six of Fred Phelps family members and himself went to protest the funeral of U.S. Marine, Lance Corporal Matthew A. Snyder in Baltimore. They displayed signs saying "GOD HATES THE USA" and "SEMPER FI FAGS" while keeping to adherences by local ordinances for time and distance restrictions. Snyder's father heard of the protest and messages on the sign by word of mouth, the television news coverage, and viewing "an 'epic' posted on WBC's website that accused the deceased Snyder's parents of raising their son 'for the devil' and of supporting the Catholic Church, which they called a 'pedophile machine'" (57-58). Mr. Snyder then proceeded to file five civil torts against Phelps and two of his daughters, which the church claimed protection against under their First Amendment's free speech protections. Snyder was awarded originally over \$10 million but when it was appealed up to the Supreme Court, they favored Phelps and saying it was protected free speech because Snyder was seen as a public figure and they adhered to the local ordinances when it came to the funeral protest (58). Though this is the most prolific case that has come to light when it comes to WBC and military protest,

there are still many more protests that have committed and they continue to commit to this day, spreading their deviant words and beliefs at the funeral of those who sacrifice their lives for our country to protect their right for freedom of speech, which they seem to not recognize or care for.

The Westboro Baptist Church began turning their protests against the Jewish religions and synagogues in Topeka, Kansas around 2009 with the hate-filled message "God Hates Jews". They claim that they began protesting Jews because their religious leaders "are 'one of the loudest voices' in favor of homosexuality and abortion" (Sanchez). Their protests are filled with anti-semitic messages claiming that the Jews will go to Hell, they killed Jesus, and that they stole the land (Israel).

The Westboro Baptist Church's language and actions are widely considered to be deviant, which is why people see them more as a hate group and in turn people hate their actions. "WBC members relish the hatred they receive as evidence of divine election" (53). They believe that because they are receiving attention, albeit negative, God is actually rewarding them because it means their protests are being heard and they see that because they have not been eliminated yet that God must want them to continue their protests the way they are doing them. They see their "position as social pariah as proof of righteousness" (53). The hate filled messages that they print on their posters for protests and put on their literature and website they attribute to their success of spreading their message; because of this believed success, they continue to use hate and discrimination to get their messages across.

As stated at the beginning, a hate group is someone whose beliefs and practices attack another group. Though their protests meet lawful regulations and they are protected for freedom of speech by the First Amendment, their offensive and deviant protests and picketing have affected many of individuals and their hate has been witnessed nationally due to media attention and have been detested because of their actions. It's hard to believe that a group who claims to be Christian, specifically Primitive Baptist but are not accepted by other Primitive Baptist churches, can preach such hate when the rest of the Christian religious community preach about God being a God of love and how we should be like God and love our neighbors and our enemies equally. It is hard to call Westboro Baptist Church anything else besides a hate group.

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