

STATEMENT OF RANDALL BALMER

August 6, 2007

Background and Qualifications

I was reared in an evangelical household, which means (in part) that I was in church several times a week, including twice on Sundays. My father for forty years was a pastor in the Evangelical Free Church of America, so I grew up in parsonages in Nebraska, rural southern Minnesota, Michigan, and Iowa, before heading off to Trinity College and (later) Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, where I studied theology and majored in history and church history.

My academic field of study is American religious history, and my specialty is evangelicalism, which includes the various strains of evangelical life in America: fundamentalism, pentecostalism, the holiness movement, neo-evangelicalism, the sanctified tradition, and the charismatic movement, among others. I have published a dozen books in my field, at least five of which specifically address the subject of evangelicalism, which I argue is the most important social and religious movement in American history. One of the books, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, now in its fourth edition, is a kind of travelogue into the various communities of evangelical religious life in America. This book was made into an award-winning, three-part television series for PBS.

I have taught at Columbia University since earning the Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1985. In addition, I have been a visiting professor at various places, including Rutgers, Princeton, Drew, Yale, and Northwestern universities and at Union Theological Seminary, where I am an adjunct professor of church history. For the past three years, I have been a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School, in addition to my responsibilities at Columbia.

In short, I believe that I am well-qualified – both by academic training and by personal experience – to comment on matters relating to evangelicalism, both historical and contemporary.

Finally, I want to make it clear that I consider myself an evangelical Christian (though I'm reasonably confident that Fred Phelps, one of the defendants in this case, would deny

me that appellation). I take the Bible very seriously as God's revelation to humanity, I believe in the transformative power of Jesus (in part because I have experienced that transformative power), and I believe that, as a follower of Jesus, I am compelled to preach the gospel, the "good news" of the New Testament. I was ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church last December, and I serve as a (non-stipendiary) assistant at a parish in northwest Connecticut.

Personal Disposition Toward the Defendants

I want to be equally clear that, because of my religious convictions, I disagree utterly with the teachings propagated by the defendants and by Westboro Baptist Church, especially on the matter of homosexuality. I find their views repugnant and their tactics insensitive, misdirected, and reprehensible. Jesus himself said nothing whatsoever about the topic, and if the people at Westboro take as their warrant the Levitical proscriptions, then it seems to me that, in order to be consistent, they should also be picketing cattle breeders (Lev. 19:19), condemning anyone who wears garments of mixed cloth, say wool and silk (Lev. 19:19), and advocating the death penalty for adultery (Lev. 20:10).

Most important, I detect little of the gospel, or "good news," that Jesus asked his followers to preach. Jesus, in fact, said "Do not judge, lest you be judged" (Matt. 7:1). I hear a good bit of judgment in the rhetoric coming from Westboro Baptist Church and very little of the ethic of love that Jesus taught his followers.

A final, brief digression before I continue to the substance of my statement. The invitation to be an expert witness in this case triggered in me a sustained crisis of conscience, one that I haven't fully resolved. Because I find the defendants' rhetoric so vile and their teachings so contrary to my understanding of the gospel, I wanted nothing to do with this case, and, more particularly, I wanted nothing to do with people whose views I do not and cannot admire.

However, as one of the expert witnesses in the Alabama Ten Commandments case (where I argued for the removal of the monument because it clearly violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment), I felt it was my duty to defend the other part of the First Amendment, the right to freedom of speech and assembly. Therefore, with those caveats in place, I proceed to the substance of my statement.

Historical Context of Fred Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church

Westboro Baptist Church clearly fits into the category of *fundamentalism*. Fred Phelps in his deposition indicated that he had attended Bob Jones University, which is now located in Greenville, South Carolina. Bob Jones is arguably the citadel of fundamentalism, which in turn is characterized by three things: sectarianism, separatism, and militancy. The fundamentalists derive their name from a series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915 called *The Fundamentals*, which addressed the major theological issues of

the day and did so from a distinctly conservative perspective. Those who adhered to these conservative formulations – on the virgin birth of Jesus, for instance, or the authenticity of miracles – came to be known as *fundamentalists*. (The term has since been applied to other religious traditions – Islamic fundamentalism or Hindu fundamentalism or Jewish fundamentalism – but it properly belongs in the American context as a subset of evangelicalism.)

Fundamentalists tend to be sectarian in that they differentiate themselves from most other churches and denominations. Westboro Baptist Church, for example, is not (as far as I can tell) part of any Baptist denomination, such as the Southern Baptist Convention or the Landmark Baptists. That in itself is not so unusual; there are thousands of independent Baptist congregations in America, unaffiliated with any denomination. But this status also tends to be a characteristic of fundamentalist churches.

Second, fundamentalists are separatists, seeking to set themselves apart from anyone they regard as insufficiently pious or theologically suspect. Most fundamentalists, for example, view Billy Graham as a flaming liberal because he cooperated with mainline Protestants in 1957 during his famous Madison Square Garden “crusade” in New York City. As nearly as I can determine, the membership of Westboro Baptist Church consists entirely of Fred Phelps’s extended family, by blood or marriage, which takes separatism to an entirely new level! I found it telling – not to mention heartbreakingly poignant – that Mr. Phelps professed (or at least pretended) not to know the names of his own children who were not members of Westboro Baptist Church. The members of Westboro Baptist Church clearly view themselves as a kind of righteous remnant, and they believe that they must separate themselves from anyone, even family members, who do not approach their level of righteousness.

Finally, fundamentalists are characterized by militancy. The shorthand, somewhat facetious, definition about the difference between a fundamentalist and an evangelical is that a fundamentalist is an evangelical who’s mad about something. It’s a description that comes pretty close to the mark. The examples of fundamentalist militancy are too numerous to detail here, but they would include John R. Rice railing against women’s rights in *Long Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers* (1941), Carl McIntire’s tireless attacks on the World Council of Churches, and Jerry Falwell’s excoriations of political liberals or blaming the September 11 attacks on “the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle.”

Fred Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church clearly stand within this tradition, although, given the notorious separatism among fundamentalists, he may be reluctant to acknowledge that he has anything in common with any of the individuals I’ve mentioned here. That very refusal to be lumped together with others – to regard oneself as the final arbiter of righteousness – is in itself a hallmark of fundamentalism.

Theological Context

Fred Phelps and Westboro Baptist Church fall squarely within the purview of Calvinism, a theological tradition that, in America, reaches back to the Puritans of New England and the Dutch Reformed Church in the Middle Colonies. Once again, the reference to Bob Jones University provides a tip-off, but this theological sensibility is also reflected in the various statements from the defendants. Fred Phelps himself, for example, testified that he "spend[s] a lot of time and a lot of money collecting real old, old books, mostly by Calvinist theologians of the past, and I read those books, and I incorporate a whole lot of what I read into my sermonizing."

Calvinist theology has several characteristics, two of which are germane to this statement. First, a conviction that all of humanity inherits the sin of Adam, a doctrine known as total depravity. As such, we are unworthy before God. Timothy Phelps rehearses this notion, albeit with unnecessary drama: "it is our sincerely held religious belief is that God hates the vast majority of mankind. And only if he gives you grace and therefore you repent from your sins, can you have any hope of the love of God." Later, he adds, "And it's all something that is determined in the council halls of eternity. We don't own salvation, and we don't pretend to own salvation." This notion is consistent with classic Calvinist theology.

The second tenet of Calvinism that is relevant to this case is the doctrine of providence, that God is in charge of all things and that nothing happens that is outside of God's will. Timothy Phelps's deposition also demonstrates this: "And in this generation, at this particular time in history, in America, the weapon of choice for God almighty, providentially, is demonstrated to be these IEDs, hitting these soldiers and otherwise killing these soldiers." Although no Calvinist I know would concur with Mr. Phelps's application of the doctrine of providence to IEDs, the principle does derive (ostensibly) from the Calvinistic doctrine of providence.

The "Prophetic" Fire-and-Brimstone Tradition in America

I'm confident that Fred Phelps and his followers view themselves as prophets in the tradition of Jeremiah or Micah or Joel, the ancient Hebrew prophets who called the nation (in their case, Israel) to repentance. This task takes on special urgency if you believe, as Calvinists do, that all of humanity is inherently sinful and in need of redemption.

The Puritan divines were always calling the Puritans to repentance, and, especially in the waning decades of the seventeenth century, they were willing to catalog the people's sins: growing litigiousness, hypocrisy of professing saints, excessive pride in dress and in spiritual manners, neglect of the church and its ordinances, irreverence and profanity, violation of the Sabbath, decline in family devotions and discipline, "sinful heats and hatreds" and "uncharitable and unrighteous censures, back-bitings, hearing and telling tales," intemperance and drunkenness, dishonesty, "inordinate affection to the world," hardhearted continuing in sin, lack of community spirit, unbelief and impenitence. And, like the defendants' linking of personal sins to social ills (the carnage in Iraq), the

Puritans saw signs everywhere that God was unhappy with Massachusetts: the drought of 1662, fires in Boston in 1676 and 1679, and King Philip's War, the bloodiest war per capita in American history.

Jonathan Edwards is generally known as the last Puritan in America (though it's possible that Fred Phelps would want to claim that mantle). His most famous sermon by far was "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741. Although it was atypical of Edwards's preaching – his sermons overwhelmingly emphasized the grace and the benevolence of God – it stands out as an early example of fire-and-brimstone preaching, calling his auditors to repentance.

Other preachers throughout American history have carried on this tradition of condemnatory, fire-and-brimstone preaching. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Peter Cartwright and numerous other preachers condemned various sins, notably sexual debauchery and excessive alcohol consumption, on the frontier. Many, many preachers interpreted the Civil War as a sign of God's judgment against the nation, not unlike Fred Phelps's framing of the war in Iraq. In the decades surrounding the turn of twentieth century, Billy Sunday railed against saloons and general sinfulness. I already referred to John R. Rice, Carl McIntire, and Jerry Falwell, but the list could be expanded almost indefinitely. Fred Phelps and his followers fall into this tradition; there is little that is novel about his approach. Even the rhetoric directed specifically at gays has ample precedent – in kind, if not in degree – in the Religious Right. "I'm sick and tired of hearing about all of the radicals and the perverts and the liberals and the leftists and the Communists coming out of the closet," James Robison, a televangelist, told a Religious Right rally in 1980. "It's time for God's people to come out of the closet."

The practice of picketing by religious groups is a bit less common, though it is present throughout history as well. The most obvious precedent would be the picketing by anti-Mason protesters and by temperance groups, including the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Some of the protesters were quite determined in carrying out their protests. Carry A. Nation would lead the singing of hymns, quote scripture, smash liquor bottles, and then destroy saloon furnishings with her hatchet. (One of the targets of her destruction, coincidentally enough, was the Senate Saloon in Topeka, Kansas, Fred Phelps's hometown.)

A more recent precedent for religious picketing would be the activities of Operation Rescue (since renamed Operation Save America), the anti-abortion organization started by Randall Terry in 1984. This group, similar to the actions of Mr. Phelps and his family, staged demonstrations outside of abortion clinics, most notably a forty-six-day siege in Wichita, Kansas, that the organization dubbed "Summer of Mercy." Like Mr. Phelps and his family, Operation Rescue's tactics were meant to be confrontational. So too the rhetoric was intentionally inflammatory, much like that of Mr. Phelps. "I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you," Randall Terry told a congregation in Indiana in 1991. "I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good."

Fred Phelps may very well have taken a page from the Operation Rescue playbook.

Another parallel here is the quest for publicity. It's clear from the defendants' depositions that they stage their antics for maximum effect and media exposure. Once again, this follows in a long tradition within American evangelicalism. Evangelicals, in fact, contrary to popular perceptions, have been inordinately adept at communications and propagating their message to the masses. George Whitefield, the most famous preacher of the Great Awakening, had been trained in the London theater and used his skills to great effect; contemporaries said he could bring tears to your eyes simply by saying "Mesopotamia." In the early decades of the nineteenth century, circuit riders brought the gospel to the frontier, and later in the nineteenth century colporteurs rode the train lines to distribute Bibles and tracts and to organize Sunday schools. Dwight L. Moody, Billy Graham, and Billy Sunday were pioneers in urban mass communications, and Aimee Semple McPherson, Charles E. Fuller, and others used the radio waves to communicate with the masses. Fred Phelps, with his masterful manipulation of the media, follows in that tradition.

Conclusion

The actions of Fred Phelps and members of the Westboro Baptist Church, albeit extreme and inflammatory, fit into a much longer tradition of "prophetic" and condemnatory preaching in American society. Acting out of their own understanding of theological principles, they seek to call individuals and the nation to repentance. To do so, they have adopted the tactics of confrontation, which are very much consistent with the actions of other fundamentalists.

Once again, I offer no brief whatsoever for the *content* of the defendants' rhetoric, which I find deeply offensive and contrary to the teachings of Jesus. But I acknowledge that the defendants are acting according to their own understandings of scripture, and they can be located within a much larger tradition of religious rhetoric and dissent in American history.

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(Randal Balmer) 8/6/2007

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Date