

The Heretic

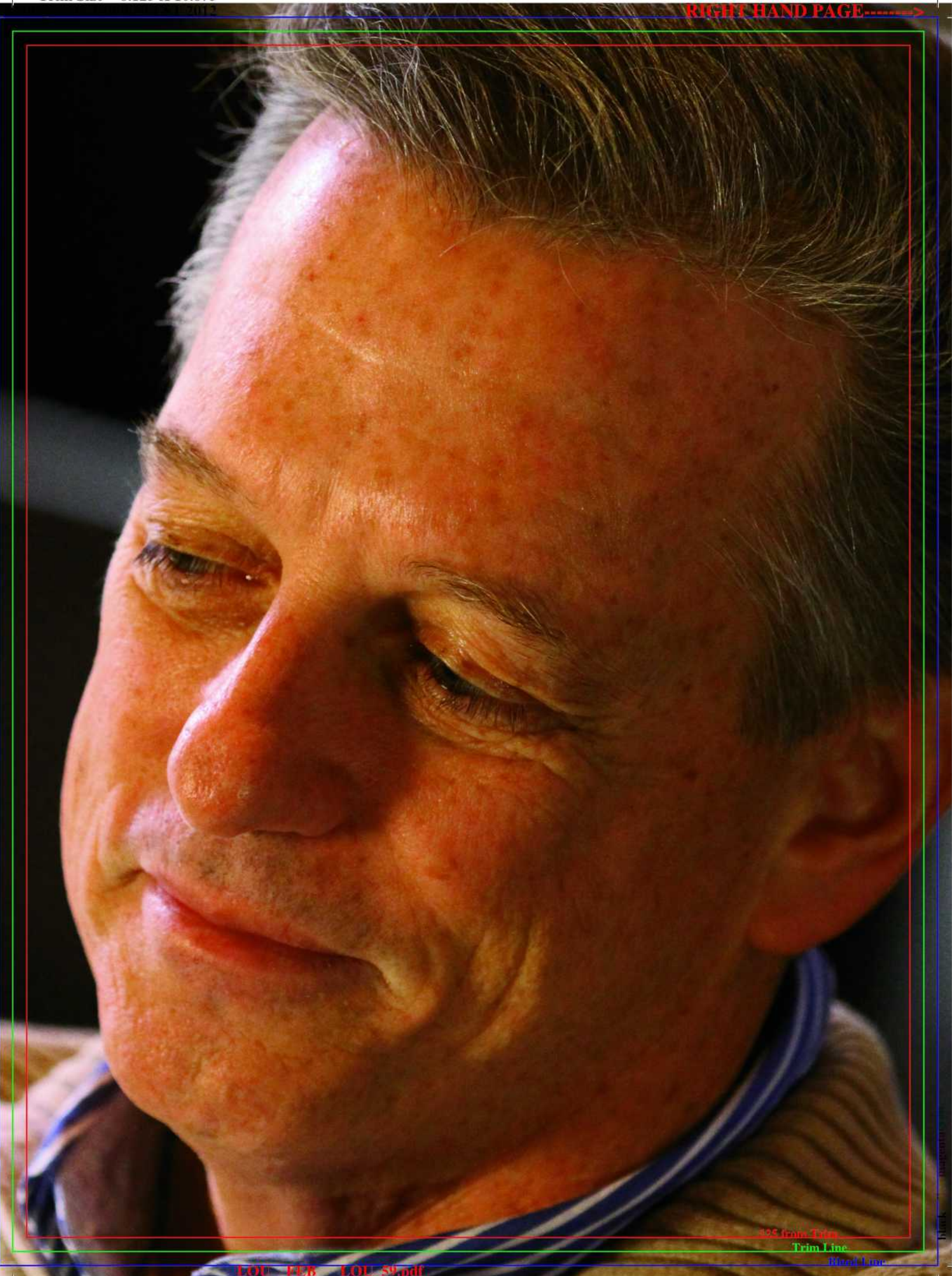
By Kane Webb
Photos by Nicholas Karem

Joe Phelps, the liberal pastor of Highland Baptist Church, isn't afraid to speak his mind and dissent from dogma — in newspaper columns, on his blog and at the pulpit. Is he a grandstander, or a voice of reason in an irrational world filled with overheated rhetoric?

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"As we walked into the 1979 Southern Baptist Convention (the first year of the conservative takeover), these two were standing outside. For a joke I said to my friend, 'Here, take my picture,' and walked up, stood between them and said, 'Smile.' Turns out they were . . . conservative Presbyterians."

You can see your breath, human-engine puffs of smoke, as you cross Cherokee Road and make for the double wooden doors of Highland Baptist Church. You join the other smoke-puffs as they trudge along — hands in pockets, heads down against the cold — to Highland's Friday service. It's a little after 7 on a 26-degree night in mid-January. Friday the 13th, to be precise.

They come in jeans and work boots. Puffy NFL team jackets and tennis shoes. Sweat pants and oversized coats. Many of the men look as if they've just gotten off work — not the office but the construction crew or the kitchen — and have chosen church instead of a cold one, a sermon instead of a nap. It's a diverse crowd that fills about a third of Highland's 60 rows of pews. There are men and women, black and white, Hispanic, mostly young, mostly working class. Many are recovering addicts.

Near the altar up front, a man with a guitar sings what could pass as a Delta Blues tune. Many in the pews join in. They seem to know the words.

*I'm trading my sorrow
I'm trading my shame
I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord.*

Off to the side, swaying and singing beneath the stained glass, blue eyes dancing across the room, stands Joe Phelps. If you didn't know better, you wouldn't guess that Phelps, 57, is the pastor of Highland Baptist Church. He wears a beige sweater that zips at the neck, an open-collar shirt and khaki pants. In one hand, he holds a cup of coffee and a copy of tonight's program, the top of

which reads, "Find Peace at Friday Church. No Hellfire, No Brimstone."

The line is vintage Phelps.

As stereotypical Baptist preachers go, Phelps is an outlier, if not an outcast. He admits to being a liberal. ("I can't run from that description," he says with a smile.) And he regularly spars with fundamentalist Baptists on issues that range from the characterization of homosexuality in the Bible to the placement of the Ten Commandments in the public square. He's now led two churches — Highland Baptist and the Church of the Savior in Austin, Texas — that have broken from the conservative Southern Baptist Convention. A few years ago, Phelps even took on Walmart, criticizing the retail behemoth about its wages and health benefits. Would Jesus shop at Walmart? The question landed him on Fox News and got him branded a "wacko" in the *Limbaugh Letter* by Rush Limbaugh himself.

More recently, Phelps publicly defended the Occupy movement, whose protests against corporate greed and fiscal inequality are, writes the pastor, what churches should be protesting, too. Phelps even visited the Occupiers one afternoon at Founder's Square downtown. Also, in a December op-ed in the *Courier-Journal*, Phelps, a prolific writer of commentaries for print publication, compared fast-food workers to modern-day slaves, held in bondage by poor pay from companies out to maximize profits.

Tonight at Highland, unlike at his sermon the previous Sunday, Phelps doesn't mention the Occupy protests, but he speaks of an inclusive and forgiving God who "won't stop

loving you no matter what you've done." He ends the service in the crowd, hugging, handholding, asking about a family member, a Bill Clinton working the rope line. Phelps spies a journalist being bear-hugged by a stranger in the back row. "Hey, man, I'm glad you could make it! What'd you think?" Phelps asks.

The journalist, a cradle Catholic, verbalizes his only thought: "I'm not sure, but I'm glad I came."

After the service, parishioner Bill Dinwiddie, 70, slides into an empty pew, rests an arm across the pew back, laces the fingers of both hands together in front of his thick red scarf and tells his story. "I grew up Methodist," he says, "then joined an Episcopal choir, then took 25 years off. In 2007, I was in the hospital for four months, where I should have died, then moved into a place across the street."

He'd heard about Highland Baptist and Phelps, and Dinwiddie wanted to reconnect with something, something besides hospital stays and fighting cancer. So he attended a Friday service. He listened to the addicts line up to tell their stories or read Scripture — *Hello, I'm Bill, and I'm an alcoholic. (Hello, Bill!) Today's Scripture is from the Gospel of Mark...* — and he saw the group hugs during the offering of peace, and he heard Phelps promise to stay after and talk to anybody for as long as he or she needed. "I said, 'This is why I'm alive,'" Dinwiddie recalls. "I'm a retired social worker, 40 years in the field, and this was the first church I'd attended that speaks to the people who've been disenfranchised, who've been — pardon the language — shit on."

As Dinwiddie talks, a recovering alcoholic who gave his testimony during the service stops to say goodbye.

"Do you recognize his name?" Dinwiddie asks the journalist.

No.

He notes that the man is from a prominent local family, another example of the all-comers credo of Highland Baptist. "Some of these addicts will come up to (Phelps) and say, 'I don't believe in God,'" Dinwiddie says. "And he replies with the most astute answer I've ever heard to that statement. He'll say, 'Tell me about the God you don't believe in, because I may not believe in him, either.'"

The comment seems like a natural segue to the next question: What does the hierarchy at the powerful Southern Baptist Convention, of which Highland is no longer a member, think of all this?

"They pray for us every day, I'm sure," Dinwiddie says with no small hint of sarcasm. "They *disdain* us."

There are times during a conversation with Phelps when he puts away his easy smile and looks down so that you can't see his eyes, which appear far too gentle for someone with a public life. That's when he finally looks his age. You notice the gray streaking through his weatherman's hair. But it's the lines under his eyes that reveal, however briefly, the stress of a life he did not expect when he was, as he puts it, a "wannabe juvie delinquent" as a teenager in Dayton, Ohio. (He was arrested once for stealing a car and blowing out a store window with an M80. When his father picked him up from jail, he told his son, "I guess you know you just ruined your life." The young Phelps returned to chasing girls and drinking beer.)

It's not even a life he would have expected when he'd cleaned up his act, found God, and attended Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary just down the road from Highland Baptist. That was back in the 1970s, when Joseph Owen Phelps' path looked obvious and well trod. He would be a Baptist minister like all the rest, a true believer and not a contrarian. Even his spiritual awakening from his juvie-delinquent-wannabe self had been old-fashioned: The summer of his 16th year, he was invited to play the drums at a Church youth group and, well, something happened. "To use that old language, I was born again," Phelps says.

When Phelps looks down and his world weighs on his shoulders, you wonder if he's thinking about whether he should have hit the Send button that day in Austin, Texas, when he'd finally by-gawd had enough.

Late in 1993, while he was serving as the pastor of Church of the Savior, Phelps knocked out a letter to the *Austin American-Statesman* that was headlined "Anti-gay reading of bible is flawed." Usually he would ask his wife Terri, a lawyer, to proofread letters for him, maybe smooth out some rough edges, cool some hot rhetoric. This time Phelps just hit Send. "They printed the letter and my life was forever changed," Phelps says. "You could say it was a . . . minority point of view." At issue was a local tax break for Apple Computer Inc., which offered health benefits to same-sex partners. "For days there was an outcry that the city rescind the tax break," Phelps says. "I kept waiting for a pastor to step forward and say something, but nobody did."

"I grew up in a conservative Baptist home, and I had a conservative Baptist calling. From that context, I was a young conservative who tried to toe the party line. But there were interpretations of parts of the Gospel that didn't ring true for me." One was the supposed clarity of the Bible in condemning homosexuals. His piece in the *American-Statesman* attracted plenty of letters to the paper in response, including one from a minister who wrote that a Christian lifestyle and a homosexual lifestyle "are mutually exclusive." Phelps himself says he received hundreds of emails and letters, "even a veiled death threat."

He seems embarrassed to have mentioned the threat, leaning back in a chair in his office and re-crossing his legs. His office is a library of books and photographs, including one from his Texas days when he attended the Southern Baptist Convention. In the photo, he stands between two Presbyterian men holding similar signs, one of which reads, "Liberals Should Be Expelled From Southern Baptist Convention."

A then-mustachioed Phelps is the only one of the three men smiling.

"When he tells me about things he has said or done or written, it scares me a little bit," Terri Phelps says later on the phone. "People can be so mean, and to some extent our livelihood depends on (people's perceptions). But when I read that piece in the Austin paper, I could see that he just so believed in it."

Her husband says he was encouraged that his responses ran about "2-to-1 in appreciation" of what he wrote, which was that biblical scholars "find little support . . . for blanket condemnation of homosexuals."

"From that moment on," Phelps says,

"our church was identified with welcoming gay and lesbian people, that God loves you as you are. You are not an abomination."

"Austin is liberal for Texas," says his wife, who met Phelps at church in Austin when she was a law student at the University of Texas. "But we were in the suburban part of town, which is actually quite conservative. It wasn't easy."

Three months after Phelps' letter ran in the paper, Church of the Savior split from the Southern Baptist Convention. At the time, only two other churches had quit the SBC, then some 16 million members strong.

"It is pretty clear that the conservative fundamentalist group has taken over (the SBC), and, as a church on the opposite extreme, we felt shoved out the door," Phelps told the *American-Statesman*. "Probably the single issue that made some people in the church decide it was time to leave was the strong anti-homosexual stand the convention took at its annual meeting."

Phelps would remain at Church of the Savior for another three years. He continued to write, publishing in the *Statesman* and regularly in a weekly in Cedar Park, Texas, an Austin suburb. He took on the issues of the day — and came down squarely on the left. Meanwhile, his church grew

Membership at Highland Baptist Church has almost doubled since Phelps took over 15 years ago. Here, he visits with a parishioner after one of his two Sunday services, which typically fill the pews.



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from a couple of dozen members who met in an elementary school to more than 100 who attended an actual church.

"I think what Joe did was open it up so that someone like me could be pastor," says Mary Wilson, the current head of Church of the Savior. "I'm an openly gay woman who's been in an 18-year relationship. Because Joe was willing to open the doors, open the conversation, there was no issue as to my sexual identity when they hired me. It was whether I could do the job."

In 1997, Phelps received a call from Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, a city he had not visited since graduating from the seminary almost two decades earlier. Highland was looking for a new pastor. Was Phelps interested? Maybe, Phelps said, but there are some things about me you need to know. He then recounted his Austin days, including that fateful letter to the *American-Statesman* and the furor it caused. "I told Highland I wasn't going to push the issue, but that here was my position," Phelps says. "Over the years, Highland had been a Don't Ask-Don't Tell church."

That would change.

Phelps was at a conference in Nashville when the phone call came. His oldest son Bobby's apartment complex in Crescent Hill had burned down during the night. Of the five tenants, four survived. Bobby Phelps did not. He was 25 years old.

It will be five years in May since his death. His father still can't piece together the drive back from Nashville to his home in the upper Highlands, the days that followed, the how-they-got-through-it. They just did. "He's an emotionally present person," says Nina Mables, the associate pastor at Highland. "He'd

cry. At first, he didn't talk about it in the pulpit. He'll mention it now."

"My wife and I never questioned God," says Phelps, who has three other adult children. "It never occurred to ask, 'Why us?' But I don't think you can walk through that kind of valley and not be more compassionate toward people who have walked through it themselves." Phelps may have been better prepared for the death of his son by having grown up with a mentally disabled brother. As a child, having exhausted the questions of *Why, Lord?* and *Why him and not me?*, Phelps understood that to ask them as an adult would be counterproductive. Besides, he had a church to run.

Highland, no longer Don't Ask-Don't Tell, was growing. And the spotlight was shining on its controversial pastor. In the corner of the bathroom in Phelps' office is a handmade sign, black letters on white poster board. It reads, "The Pilgrims Would Be Pissed." There's a story behind that sign.

At the start of George W. Bush's second term, the conservative Family Research Council organized a nationwide televised event called "Justice Sunday: Stop the Filibuster Against People of Faith." The goal was to rally support to eliminate a rule in the U.S. Senate that allowed Democrats to block some of Bush's nominees to the federal bench. Highview Baptist Church, a megachurch in Louisville, would host a telecast.

Phelps organized a protest, calling a press conference with other ministers to say, "We see 'Justice Sunday' as part of a larger effort to link church and state in ways not seen in America since the Puritans were hanging Quakers on Boston Commons and exiling Baptists on Rhode Island."

Now you can see how the sign came about. "Justice Sunday" went on as scheduled, and picketers showed up at Highview. A member of Highland was among

them, saw the sign and secured it as a gift for Phelps. But the protest against the event was the least of it. For in his press conference, Phelps referred to Highview as a "sister church." Uh-oh. The pastor at Highview wasn't having that. The Rev. Kevin Ezell, who now presides over the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board in Maryland, responded pointedly, saying of Phelps: "Nobody who goes to his church would ever go to mine."

"I don't know Joe Phelps," Ezell said in an interview then with the *Courier-Journal*. "He's never called me. The biggest story here is that he wants to be on TV, he wants to be in the paper. He needs to spend more time reaching people than criticizing other churches."

For all his bluster, Ezell, who couldn't be reached for comment for this story, brings up a legitimate question: Is Phelps a grandstander? It seems odd to ask after spending time with the mild-mannered Phelps. His voice never rises. His demeanor never changes. He's the laid-back uncle with whom you can talk about anything. No question rattles him. Even during his appearance on Neil Cavuto's show on FOX in the midst of the Walmart foofaraw — a link to which appears on Phelps' blog — the pastor remained infuriatingly calm. Infuriating for Cavuto, no doubt, who must have been itching for a buzz-worthy fight.

Phelps considers the question, admits that, sure, he has an ego and he likes to write. He likes to express himself. Finally, he settles on this:

"One of my heroes, Henlee Barnette, once referred to himself as a pagan with a thin veneer of Christianity," Phelps says. "And I feel that way. I do have to work on my anger and my acting and reacting. That's why I've had to be a real disciple of prayer. But for that, I can be a hothead."

"Joe may be outspoken, but how can you be authentic and not be?" says Dinwiddie, the retired social worker who's part of the Friday church ministry group. "He is as authentic and real as anybody I know. He tends to call it as he sees it. He's been open to learning from a lot of people. He's not knee-jerk, nor flip. There's depth."

"You're an idiot."

"Dear Satan Incarnate."

"Heretic."

That's just a sample of some of the compliments Phelps has received over the years

The pastor spends up to 13 hours a week working on his sermons, which often reference biblical scholars such as Walter Brueggemann.



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via notes and emails. Oh, and don't forget "wacko" from the *Limbaugh Letter*. Perhaps that's what happens when a Baptist minister asks if Jesus would shop at Walmart or compares today's corporate giants to Pharaoh of ancient Egypt, "the dominant corporation of his day," or takes on Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Or writes this about the Southern Baptist Convention: "Its beliefs about the Bible, how to read it, how to frame it, the way it points, what it means to please God, on and on, are amazingly narrow and exclusive." (Asked for comment on Phelps, Mohler did not return a phone call or email by press time.)

But Phelps knows what he's doing. He admits he's made mistakes. For one, he says, he should not have filmed his "Wake Up Walmart" ad in the church. It offended some members. Mostly, however, those who attend Highland know what they're doing, too, and understand what their pastor feels compelled to write. Says one parishioner, "For the most part we're supportive. I won't say we never disagree. But if Joe feels strongly, it's for a good reason."

"Here's the thing," says Maples, Highland's associate pastor. "The pastor is a person, but he represents a community. You can't take the title off when you want and go on your merry way. The Walmart ad, the church had some trouble with that. Because we're a church that talks, we shared what we felt and moved on."

To judge by his commentaries, there are times when Phelps must feel like the only active member of the Religious Left, if there

is such a thing, and his church the exception to every denominational rule. A Friday service that attracts mostly recovering addicts? A Baptist church that openly welcomes gay and lesbian members? A pastor who'll mix it up on FOX News — the same network that offers a weekly show hosted by a conservative Baptist preacher and former presidential candidate named Mike Huckabee?

"I don't think we would look at ourselves as rebels," Maples says. "We try to be faithful to what Jesus would do. Maybe that looks radical to some people. I don't know. But we don't sit around over here thinking, 'Oh God, we're out there!'"

In 2002, Highland, which began as an SBC church, ended its 100-plus-year relationship with the SBC when, as Phelps says, "the parameters for which churches were included were severely tightened."

"We've not been ostracized," Phelps says, "but we know we're not welcome in the Southern Baptist community. We don't want to fight. But there are some things we want to fight about."

For this story, calls were placed to Ezell, Mohler and Bryant Wright, current president of the SBC and an old classmate of Phelps' at the seminary. None could be reached for comment, although representatives for Wright and Mohler returned calls, both curious as to the gist of this profile.

The service is packed on this brisk Sunday morning in January. Standing room only. And what a first-time visitor is most struck by is the

formality of it all. The structure. The liturgy. Communion. It could pass, but for Phelps' more scholarly approach to the Gospel reading (Matthew 2:1-12), as a Catholic mass. Once again, Phelps and his church aren't quite what they're expected to be.

Afterward, as the rising sun almost blinds parishioners emptying onto Cherokee Road, Phelps stands at the door shaking hands and hugging his flock. It has almost doubled in size since he arrived 15 years ago. The congregation now counts some 1,200 members, and the two Sunday services typically attract a total crowd of 500. Many of the Phelps era members are like David Hartley, 57, and Jerry Burske, 54, who joined Highland eight years ago. They've been life partners for twice that long. They had heard about the openness of the church and, of course, this wave-making pastor. (Of late, says Maples, who tracks the demographics, the church has attracted more young families, although a significant portion of the congregation is gay.)

When Hartley and Burske first approached Phelps about joining his church, the pastor took them to lunch at the Bristol and visited with them for hours.

"That's how Joe is," Hartley says. "And that's how this congregation is. We discuss things. We don't let them simmer. We talk."

And Joe Phelps writes. Whether others like it or not.

After all, when he's preaching on Fridays and Sundays, he can look to the back of the church and see 10 words inscribed in the stone above the door: "Be Ye Doers of the Word and Not Hearers Only." ■

