

# Tossing Out Bible Bombs (versus The Hard Work of Hermeneutics)

By Keely Emerine Mix

Rarely has any field of study offered itself more to pendulating – the swing from one extreme to another – than hermeneutics, the art and science of Biblical interpretation. This is either fascinating, maddening, or else utterly irrelevant to those who, for whatever reason, are not convinced that the 66 books of the Christian Bible are God’s word and who therefore watch from the bleachers, so to speak, as the church ricochets from context-absent wooden literalism to an often flamboyant weaving from bits of Scriptural cloth whatever seems appropriate to the moment. It’s ruefully entertaining, even for those of us who revere the Bible as God’s revealed word, to watch the rhetorical and logical gymnastics that occur when the unskilled or inexperienced student attempts to weave a theology that veers from God as a disembodied hand measuring the skies and the seas (Isaiah 40:12, from which a televangelist once attempted to calculate the height of the Almighty) to God as ever-shifting standard of convenient righteousness (Romans 8:1,2 – “there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus...” – which has been employed by many as license to do those things that a sober examination of Scripture would prohibit). This knowing amusement is possible for the Christian because we’ve all been there, we grow up, and not a lot of harm is done in the meantime because we speak in earnest circles of our equally immature peers and not from the pulpit. At least that’s the idea. And while I find the subject fascinating, I realize that the study of hermeneutics is not a hot topic among my readers, until, that is, an example of hermeneutics-gone-bad rears its head in our community. This week, it did.

In early June, Christ Church Pastor Doug Wilson received a six-page, anonymously written letter imploring him to repent of what the author viewed as consistently and markedly unloving behavior. The letter was full of loving concern for Wilson, his congregants, and the community, laced with Scripture references as a self-titled “labor of love” designed to provoke Wilson to more Christlike behavior. It did provoke him, although not in the way the letter writer had hoped. “Dismissive” would generously describe his response to the letter and its admonitions. We can speculate on where Wilson might have disagreed – indeed, we have to, because he has decided it deserves to be ignored, shredded by machine only after he verbally fillets the author’s reputation while refusing to respond to the meat of the letter’s content.

Veering to the other side of the spectrum, the side that makes rigid and unbending what the Bible allows to be fluid and yielding, he serves us another example. Wilson’s “Blog and Mablog” is a curious name for a Christian pastor’s online ruminations on the cultural and theological goings-on of the day because of the obvious connection to “Gog and Magog,” the Old Testament archetypical king and kingdom opposed to God’s sovereign rule. In one of his recent posts, he affirms that a young man’s dyeing his hair purple was a sin. Case closed, declares Wilson, and not because of any reference to purple hair anywhere in Scripture. No, he says, the bible student must decide what purple hair “means,” and in order to spare us the search, Wilson confidently declares that it means “rebellion.” Which, of course, is always the same thing: an evil in God’s sight.

In both cases we have an example of a pendulated hermeneutic that represents an unfortunate lapse in the application of Scripture. In the name of “a high view of Scripture,” he has taken the low road, lobbing random “Bible bombs” that explode either to help evade the conviction of the Spirit, or to help explain how one’s personal taste can be used as a standard in judging another’s to be sinful. In the first case, he “majors in the minors” and focuses with microscopic precision on a verse or two to avoid the larger body of consistent, obvious teaching of Scripture; in the second, he constructs an enormously inflated “major” by issuing an edict from the most minor of evidences justifying one. Wilson said he refused to respond to the points raised in the letter because it was written anonymously and, therefore, did not satisfy the Old and New Testament standard of charges being brought against an elder by two or three witnesses. In the second case, quoting from his recent book on Biblical boyhood, he insists that while the Bible nowhere

states that purple hair-dyeing is a sin, we may not conclude that it is subject to the conscience of the individual. Rather, it is assigned a value and then condemned.

One needn't be a Bible student to see the problem with the course Wilson has chosen. Clearly it makes sense to have bad behavior witnessed by more than one person before an accusation is leveled. Of course, being "unloving," by its imprecise nature, is behavior that, if accurate, has undoubtedly been witnessed by many more than three. But by clinging to a wooden hermeneutic that offered him an "out" by which to avoid the painful issues raised in the letter, however anonymously, Wilson demonstrates that proof-texting – the careful selection of a few verses that, while true out of context, illustrate a point that, in context, is perhaps inconsistent with the full testimony of Scripture – can insulate the believer from having to seriously examine, even repent of, a behavior that is condemned throughout the Bible. In fact, employing this argument is impossible to do without a measure of smugness, arrogance, pride, and disregard for those around him. Worse, he then is able to claim he is the victim of a false accusation, made false not because of the merit, or lack thereof, of the charges, but because of the form of their delivery. It's brilliant, in a sense, but it's bad theology.

He then veers to the other extreme in his confident denunciation of purple hair. He judges purple hair, and rightly so, as a departure from the norms of hair color. He clearly doesn't like purple hair, but presumably has no problem with a woman dyeing her hair a shade lighter. The color and style, perhaps the gender and age of the wearer, act as Wilson's clues to a larger and more troubling issue: rebellion, which he says is sin. As surely as a fatal stabbing is homicide, Wilson would have us conclude, non-typical hair color is a sign of rebellion against Almighty God. As the parent of two teenage boys, I understand rebellion. Sometimes it's bad – when, for example, the dishwasher doesn't get emptied because someone decided to disobey his mother. Other times, though, rebellion is good. When my son is offered a joint, for example, I would hope that he would rebel – that he would refuse, thus acting in a way contrary to the culture he finds himself in, however fleeting. Either way, though, rebellion is defined by context and a deliberateness of motive and not by hair color. Purple hair, in and of itself, is morally neutral – it is neither an impediment to Godly living or a gateway to debauchery. Dark gray business suits are neutral, too – and the good folks at Enron proved that they don't guarantee ethical behavior. And it isn't the hoods and sheets of the Ku Klux Klan that make it evil, but surely a rebellion against the conformity of ritualized racism would be a good thing. I regret that examples of other people's simple bad taste isn't enough to allow me to judge them; damned if I don't have to actually get to know them before developing an idea of their character.

The pendulated examples Doug Wilson has shown us this summer do have the benefit of making life more tidy, providing as they do reason to avoid sincere self-examination as well as the irritating processes of patience and tolerance. They are lamentable, however, coming from Moscow's most well-known pastor. The consequences of sweeping pronouncements on sartorial and tonsorial morality are not earth-shattering, although they've hurt one of my sons, who is often presumed to be "less Christian" than his brother because of his long hair, earring, and penchant for leather cuff bracelets. The consequences, though, of rushing to a harbor of simplistic, deceptive Biblical literalism are enormous – as much, I think, for the congregants as for the preacher, who confirms in his deliberate hermeneutical evasion and steamrolling rush to judgment that, anonymous or not, this particular letter writer got it exactly right.