

Literalism Blocks Bible's Big Picture

By Leonard Pitts, Jr.

First Baptist Church of Watertown, N.Y., fired Mary Lambert for being a woman. They say the Bible told them to do it.

Nothing against women, says the Rev. Timothy LaBouf. The church is just trying to obey 1 Timothy 2:11-14, which says, in part, "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

So, after 54 years as a Sunday school teacher at First Baptist, Lambert was given the heave-ho a couple weeks ago. She and others have said the firing probably had as much to do with church politics as with scriptural injunctions, but let's stick with the stated reason as given in her letter of dismissal: The Bible forbids women taking positions of authority. There is, for the record, a similar injunction in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, which warns that it is "disgraceful" for a woman to speak in the church.

So the church is scripturally right. It's just not right right.

Intriguing

The Lambert case intrigues me because it illustrates a point I've made on many occasions when people bring out Bibles to explain why gay folk deserve no civil rights. Maybe now, without the reflexive emotionalism that gay brings to cloud their view, a few more people will see the obvious: Bible literalism is impractical and impossible. Or maybe they won't see.

Allow me to share by way of example an e-mail I received last week from a gentleman named Al who took exception to a column I wrote condemning capital punishment. Said Al, "When one criticizes the death penalty one criticizes God's judgment in the matter, as scripture ordains death for numerous crimes. It is not wise to criticize God."

I shot back a note pointing out that among the crimes for which scripture ordains death are cursing your parents (Lev. 20:9) or committing adultery (Lev. 20:10). Did Al really believe those misdeeds should be treated as capital offenses?

"Only if one wishes to accomplish God's will in the matter," said Al.

I don't mind telling you, people like him scare me.

A Good Change

As it happens, one of America's greatest churchmen recently weighed in on the question of Bible literalism. In a twilight-of-life interview with Newsweek, Billy Graham spoke of the way age and perspective led him to reject the absolutism of the left and right and to make his peace with the notion of God as a loving mystery. People of faith, he said, can "absolutely" disagree about

the details of theology. “I’m not a literalist in the sense that every single jot and tittle [of the Bible] is from the Lord,” he said. “This is a little difference in my thinking through the years.”

It is a difference people like AI would do well to emulate.

Or has no one else noticed how literally some Christians interpret those Scriptures that give them license to condemn, yet how elastic and liberal their readings are when dealing with Scriptures that convict their personal behaviors? Meaning that it’s always a little more difficult to catch people being literal about turn the other cheek, do not store up treasures on earth, do not turn away the borrower, love your enemy.

Yet, you can’t go to the store without tripping over someone who wants you to know the Bible calls homosexuality an abomination.

Most Important Themes

People obsess on the fine print, yet miss the big picture, the overarching themes of sacrifice, redemption, love. In their selectivity, they are reminiscent of the Islamic fanatics who bomb and behead, citing some passage of the Koran as justification, yet conveniently ignoring a dozen other passages commanding mercy and love. People are much less apt to be selective in the direction of mercy and love.

I’ll close by observing that Exodus 35:2 requires death for those who work on the Sabbath. Were I a member of First Baptist, I might wonder where the church leaders stand on that one.

Of course, I’d be scared to ask.