

Snookered: A call to look to the Bible for the Word of God

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

It's been said that a fundamentalist is an evangelical who got mad. Fundamentalists in 1920, angry that their fellow conservative believers did not fight back, fought against moderates and liberals in their own denominations as well as in other churches and in the nation. Their politically minded descendants do the same these days, using their kind of biblical literalism as a weapon.

Those they target rarely fight back, instead mildly ruining the postures of the right. One effective exception is that of Barbara Rossing, a biblical scholar who quietly fought back in *The Rapture Exposed* (Fortress), countering what James Barr called the "mythopoeic fantasy" that poses as literalism in respect to the millennium, the rapture and being "left behind." Are even 0.666 per cent of the tens of millions of the rapture-obsessed aware of her literate critique of literalist critiques?

Now Margaret Mitchell has done a bit of fighting back against the widespread notion that the Christian right really does take the Bible literally. Since Fox News won't cover Mitchell, let me recommend that you check out her investigation "How Biblical Is the Christian Right?" (marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum/052006/index.shtml).

She quotes the illustrative words of Tom DeLay when he called on Congress last year to intervene to save brain-damaged Terri Schiavo. Everything DeLay said was designed to sound biblical, but Mitchell shows how DeLay selected three fragments from two Gospels and tore them from the contexts of the passion narratives. This borders on sacrilege, but who noticed or cared?

DeLay said: "A young woman in Florida is being dehydrated and starved to death. . . . If we do not act, she will die of thirst. . . . Terri Schiavo has survived her passion weekend, and she has not been forsaken. No more words, Mr. Speaker. She is waiting. The members are here. The hour has come . . ."

DeLay portrays Schiavo as needing help, because like Jesus on the cross she is “forsaken” and thirsty. But in Mark’s Gospel, it is God who has forsaken Jesus. So DeLay was asking Congress to do what God refused to do for Jesus. As for the allusion to Jesus’ thirst on the cross (portrayed in John’s Gospel), Mitchell observes that in John, Jesus’ thirst refers to his desire to complete the death he was meant to die. So the analogy DeLay is making to Schiavo doesn’t work. The same is true for the phrase “the hour has come.” In John that is a signal that the divine plan culminates in the death of Jesus.

Mitchell knows why DeLay did what he did. He was declaring “affiliation with a certain brand of American Christianity.” But he was doing so, in this case, by relying on “patently allegorical or typological readings” of the Bible.

Mitchell, an expert on early Christian authors, shows that three groups have been snookered into thinking that the self-proclaimed literalists really are literalists. They are 1) members of the Christian right who use the literalist claim as a weapon for rallying their own and to bash others; 2) other Catholic, Protestant and evangelical Christians who surrender to rightists’ claim that they are literalists; and 3) most members of the media, who accept the rightists’ claim to be true literalists.

My words are not a call to fight back in a world where Christians and everyone else are already too busy fighting. They are the declaration of a wish that we would be suspicious enough to not be snookered anymore, to study claims carefully, to call things what they are, and to look to the Bible for the Word of God and not for weaponry with which to clobber people with whom we disagree politically.