

May 2006[New Topic](#) | [Go to Top](#) | [Go to Topic](#) | [Search](#) | [Log In](#)[Newer Topic](#) | [Older Topic](#)The Religious Right and the Ruse of Selective LiteralismAuthor: [Randall Balmer](#) (---.uchicago.edu)

Date: 05-08-06 16:52

Before addressing the particulars of Margaret Mitchell's excellent and thought-provoking essay, I should like to register a protest. As a Christian, as someone who numbers himself among the followers of Jesus, I find the term Christian Right deeply offensive when applied to the coalition of politically conservative evangelicals that emerged in the late 1970s. To put it bluntly, I find very little that I would consider "Christian" in the actions and policies of the Religious Right.

Professor Mitchell poses an even more basic question: To what extent does the Religious Right (I'll use my term) remain faithful to the teachings of the Bible? This is no idle question because evangelicals, who make up the rank and file of the Religious Right, often boast about their fidelity to scripture. Martin Luther's assault on the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church deprived Protestants of one of the two bases for authority in Catholicism; Luther insisted on scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), not scripture as interpreted by the church. As Professor Mitchell characterizes the epistemology of fundamentalists (another slippery term), it's "the Bible, the Bible, and more of the Bible."

But is it? Professor Mitchell opens with an examination of the rhetoric of Tom DeLay, the former majority leader of the House of Representatives and "patronage saint" of the Republican Party. She applies her considerable skills as a literary historian in an effort to determine whether or not the Religious Right is using scripture responsibly. Not surprisingly, she finds – in the DeLay case, at least – that the Bible functions more as a tool to bludgeon one's political enemies than as a source of moral instruction. Professor Mitchell concludes that the "actual words of the Bible are not nearly as important as affirming the authority of the Bible in the most general of terms, in the face of presumed opposition."

To take another example, Professor Mitchell examines the website of Focus on the Family, probably the most influential Religious Right organization. There she finds that only two of the "Focus on Social Issues" tabs refer to the scriptures (abstinence and gambling). Indeed, Professor Mitchell's tour of other websites turns up a remarkable paucity of biblical references; those that do appear very often have been wrenched painfully out of context.

Is the Religious Right biblical? In terms of using the scriptures in support of an agenda, yes, she concludes. But in the sense of reading the whole Bible or reading it literally, no.

I recently finished writing a book on the Religious Right. In the course of my research, I sat in on a strategy session for an organization called the Association for Church Renewal, a coalition of the so-called renewal groups within mainline Protestant denominations. The meetings, spread over a day and a half, consisted almost entirely of reports from leaders of the various renewal groups, each of them complaining about the ordination of gays and lesbians and the move toward blessing same-sex unions in their respective denominations.

Toward the conclusion of the session, I asked if I could pose a question. How many in the room, I asked, opposed the ordination of women? Only one person out of twenty (an Episcopal woman) raised her hand. Why do you ask, they wondered. I allowed that I was fairly certain that if this group had been meeting twenty or thirty years earlier that they would be quoting scripture to justify their opposition to women's ordination. Silence. What are you getting at, they asked. I went on to wonder that if this or a similar group had convened 160 years ago, or 60 years ago, when the issues of the day were, respectively, slavery and segregation – would they be quoting scripture to justify their support for slavery and segregation? The opposition to homosexuality (and abortion, for that matter) was especially curious because Jesus himself said nothing about either topic. I argued, finally, for the historical contingency of some of these issues.

Well, this is different, someone replied. Okay, I said, eager to be enlightened. How is it different? A long pause. "It's just different."

I call the Religious Right's handling of the Bible the "ruse of selective literalism."

Randall Balmer is professor of American religious history at Barnard College, Columbia University, and a visiting professor at Yale Divinity School. His new book, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical's Lament* (Basic Books), will be released July 3, 2006.

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Re: The Religious Right and the Ruse of Selective Literalism

Author: [paul white](#) (---.gibs13.xdsl.nauticom.net)

Date: 05-09-06 17:07

Dear Dr. Balmer:

I read your response to Ms. Mitchell's Religious Right chastisement with interest. Somehow I slipped through the crack--graduate of Brown U, who gasp, somehow started to read the bible and believe ALL of it. That may make me a member of the Religious Right, although I never thought of myself as such (except that, in the broadest sense, anyone who reads the Word and tries to follow it, is probably in the Right). Anyway, I am a businessman (after getting an MBA) and lead an adult Sunday School Bible class in a fairly- large Presbyterian Church USA, Pittsburgh-area church. Compared to you, we're probably fairly conservative down here.

I responded to Ms. Mitchell's piece and I welcome your response to my contention. Obviously you and I have different agendas, but, as an academician, you certainly must have a thought about my contention of what Matthew 5:18 means. In all honesty, I cannot see you being able to refute my contention. If you do, I suspect your refutation will not be scriptural. I try to keep all of my arguments based upon scripture, not political opinion.

And I don't consider myself superior to you, notwithstanding Brown's penchant for beating Columbia and Yale most years on the gridiron. I truly welcome your thoughts.

In Christ's Love,

Paul White

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Re: The Religious Right and the Ruse of Selective Literalism

Author: [Randall Balmer](#) (---.dhcp.nwtm.ct.charter.com)

Date: 05-31-06 11:03

Dear Mr. White:

Thank you for your thoughtful comments, and, yes, I concede that Brown is generally superior to Columbia on the gridiron.

I don't claim -- nor have I ever claimed -- to be a theologian, but my reading of the New Testament suggests that Jesus is introducing a new ethic, the ethic of love, that transcends the law. That's why he becomes so impatient with the moralists of his day -- because they are forever confusing morality with moralism and using the law to bludgeon their enemies. You contend that Jesus affirmed the law. Yes, he did. No argument there. But what do you do with the fact that, following such an affirmation, Jesus proceeds to heal people on the Sabbath? That was clearly a violation of the law -- as the Pharisees were quick to point out! Yet what Jesus seems to be saying is that love transcends the law, which is why, when asked, he restates the law in the simplest (yet, oh so difficult) of terms: Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourselves. Living according to the ethic of love, Jesus suggests, is infinitely more difficult than hiding behind the law because when we hide behind the law we don't have to deal with others on their own terms -- as people, as God's creatures.

My further challenge to the Religious Right and to its putative claims to fidelity to the scriptures centers on the biblical teachings regarding divorce. Unlike the Religious Right favorite issues of abortion and homosexuality, Jesus did indeed have something to say about divorce -- and none of it good. Yet evangelicals have somehow maneuvered around the unequivocal teachings of Jesus on that matter and diverted their attention to abortion and homosexuality. Why is that? (I address that issue at some length in the forthcoming book, "Thy Kingdom Come.")

Best,

Randall Balmer

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Jesus Changed Nothing

Author: [paul white](#) (---.155.105.62.Dial1.Baltimore1.Level3.net)

Date: 05-31-06 20:26

Dear Randall,

Thank you for responding. Society is clearly in a cultural war these days and civil discourse is crucial. I am disturbed by many who want to change God's Word. It is a very serious problem in the church.

I don't claim to be a theologian either, but I, like you, do read scripture. When I teach, I have NO political agenda. I sincerely ask the Holy Spirit to guide me in what I do and say, and most important, to have my words be congruent with God's Will. I sincerely ask Him now that the remainder of this e-mail also be true to His Word and Will.

In my reading, Jesus is introducing nothing new!!! He is merely delivering OT scripture in a refreshing new way. OT scripture in Jesus time was misquoted and misapplied. There was nothing wrong with it. Love (Jesus-style) was always there in the OT--intended by the OT. Love does NOT transcend the Law!!! Nothing transcends the LAW!!! LOVE IS PART OF THE LAW!!! It was all there--it's just that the Jewish leaders in Jesus' time couldn't see it, or more correctly, didn't want to see it. Beyond their not seeing it, they were not living by it on the inside (and they knew that they weren't, which is why Jesus called them hypocrites). Jesus merely had to represent the same OT (Law) concepts in another format. He came to fulfill the Law, not to change it or add to it or subtract from it. Every "iota" of it was true forever (good for teaching also, II Timothy 3:16).

Jesus certainly did not come to reinterpret it (JJ Bodine's blasphemy aside).

There was NOTHING in the OT that would suggest that one could not heal on the Sabbath. That was not considered "work" by OT standards. It was considered work by the Jewish leaders' standards, but they were wrong. It was the Jewish leaders who were misintepreting the OT. Jesus added nothing to the Law, other than clarification.

Here is my contemporary analogy. Before the advent of the Good News Bible and other similar easy-read versions (the Word in understandable terms), Christians typically kept their King James version Bibles unopened on the coffee table. The laborious wording led to misunderstanding or no undersatanding without help from the Holy Spirit. Heavens knows, the Word is hard enough to understand truly even when written in 6th grade vocabulary. Even the simplest of scripture in that King James version was a challenge. The everyday language versions were a God-send!! The rewritings in common, everyday language did not change anything in the King James version. They merely allowed the people to have a user-friendly version. By the same token, the love Jesus brought (New Commandment) could have been gleaned from the OT if one had spent enough time with the OT and if the scribes/pharisees had purer hearts. Jesus' different, refreshing approach merely helped the everyday person understand better the original intent of the Law.

As for divorce, it is a sin. except in 2 situations (adultery and the ascertainment that one partner is not a Christian). That's in the Word. Period. You have said that the Christian Right avoids it to concentrate on abortion and homosexuality. It does? Who could be more Christian Right than the Roman Catholic Church?? How many catholics do you know who never divorced period?? They just stayed together in lousy marriages because the church incorrectly said they couldn't divorce. The Church typically never told them that there were 2 exceptions. And since they never opened their KJ Bibles, they never knew. I'd say the Christian Right

spends mucho time on it!!! There are all kind of divorce avoidance groups in my synod--I don't know of any dealing with homosexuality or muder (abortion). There should be!! I personally, did not get a divorce because of that scripture--I had no scriptural grounds. My wife did not commit adultery and who am I to say that she was not Christian, just because she stopped going to church or even talking about Jesus Christ. I was not going to b e judgmental. I guess I am part of the Christian Right and I sure spent time on the subject of divorce.

Again, scripture syas that divorce is NOT forbidden in all situations. Nonetheless, the Christian Right does spend time on divorce (your thoughts notwithstanding). The Christian Right spends time on abortion, because it is murder (Exodus 20:13) and is forbidden. It spends time on homosexual sex because it is forbidden. Worse, homosexual sex can easily become the only unforgiveable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Adultery is a sin and is forbidden. Normally, when one commits murder or adultery, one knows he has sinned against God's Wod, as recorded under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. and seeks forgivenessfrom God. When you ask for forgiveness, you are acknowledging the truth of scripture--of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, many homosexuals feel, notwithstanding all of the OT and NT (Pauline) commands not to commit homosexual sex (including Jesus' in Matthew 18--every single penstroke in the OT is true and will be forever), that they are justified in having homosexual sex because their's is a loving relationship and after all Jesus somehow stated the OT prohibitions against it weren't true and I guess somehow, Paul's writings against it (after Jesus' death) somehow don't count. They somehow feel, unlike the typical adulterer, that they have NOT disobeyed God's Word. Therefore, they do not have to ask for forgiveness--they are not sorry for what they did. They have disregarded scripture (that is the Holy Spirit), feeling it does not apply to them. Therefore, they are denyin the existence of the HS--that, according to Jesus is the only sin He will not forgive--blasphemy against the HS. He states very explicitly that those folks committing this sin will burn in hell forever.

That, Randall, IS WHY THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT HAS ESPECIALLY CONCENTRATED ON HOMOSEXUALITY--IT DOESN'T WANT THOSE NOT SORRY FOR IT (MOST OF THEM, CAUSE THEY DON'T THINK IT'S WRONG) BURNING IN HELL. As astounding as this may seem to you, I worry about Homosexuals for this reason. I want all of us to go to heaven. Jesus says we will (cause He's so forgiving) except for those who disregard scripture or change it. Gasp--isn't that what most Witherspooners rationalize in almost every e-mail--why scroipture doesn't really mean what it says or that is somehow is relative?? Could it be, that Spoonhers aren't really Christians??? I'm sure not judging, but Iam spending time on this site, because I LOVE Spooners (more than they might suspect).

Remember, I have asked God to bless what I am writing to you. Do you believe that He just worked through me to try to get to you, or do you think I'm a Fox-watching, Santorum-loving, Bush-loving crackpot? Do you think I am misguided? Do you think after my sincerely asking for His guidance and help on this very e-mail to you that He would llet me expose untruths? I KNOW that He would not. I pray, much as I suspect you don't want the above to be the truth, that you can see that I am sincere and that my asking of Hi m was sincere, and that from scripture, God just would not let me go on like this without blessing the effort.

In Christ's Actual Love (the scriptural kind, not the progressives ' perception of what His love should be kind),

Paul White

Adult Sunday School Teacher

Father

Seller of Long-term Care Insurance, and

Sinner Seeking Forgiveness,

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Re: The Religious Right and the Ruse of Selective Literalism

Author: [Deric Shaw](#) (---.ipt.aol.com)

Date: 07-20-06 18:58

I found Mitchell's essay to be very interesting and though provoking for those who do follow and believe the Religious Right as well as for those who do not. I, myself, have listened to leaders like Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and others for several years now. I have agreed with some of the things that they said and other things I have not. I have never really listen to the Religious Right leaders as religious leaders, but more like political pundints who feel a certain way on certain issues and are people with strong idiologies. Even though I may have agreed with a few stances on certain issues, I do not think that biblical texts influenced my opinion and my feelings on many political issues.

No, the Religious Right are not literalists in my opinion. They will use a literal reading of certian parts of the Bible and other parts they will not. Interpretation is just interpretation. Many people's interpretation of what the Bible means and actually says can differ quite a bit. You have to use your own ability to understand it as well, and guidance from the Holy Spirit. I am a little weary of those who use religious texts to influence political elections, especially when they chop texts up and only want to use or discuss part of it.

Mitchell rasied many great points that should be discussed more openly in society. They way she questioned about the use of the Bible by leaders of the Religious Right; are they interpreting the Bible literally and using it as a gouide to guide themselves in everyday life, or are they using only certian parts to try to make political gains and hammer political opponents over the head by saying they are ungodly becasue they feel a certain way on issues.

I have not really thought about that before. It is ashame if that is true, but I think it does happen.

The major social issues of today like abortion, contraception, gay marriage, etc, are very important to a lot of people because they see those issues as eroding the America they once knew. These issues can fuel election turnouts because of the passion and emotion that are involved in tthem. It seems as if religious and non-religious people are pitted against one another. I think a lot of Christians see this as an us versus them battle, and a battle that they do not want to, and cannot afford to lose. Therefore, everything is used to try to get support for one's side and even misinterpretations of the Holy Bible will be used to support one's side and political canidate.

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Margaret Mitchell and the Religious Right

Author: [paul white](#) (---.gibs13.xdsl.nauticom.net)

Date: 05-09-06 16:37

Margaret Mitchell, Professor at the University of Chicago provided a thoughtful piece on the Religious Rights' use of scripture. Unfortunately, in her haste to chastise the Religious Right, she seems to have forgotten Jesus' very words in Matthew 5: 17-19. Her contention is that the Right primarily uses specific books of the OT and certain Pauline letters to justify its positions at the expense of the very words of Jesus. Perhaps the Right does that because of Matthew 5:17-19. These verses suggest, contrary to Ms. Mitchell's assertion, that the Religious Right indeed IS paying attention to Jesus' very words. Jesus in essence is saying in these verses that every letter (Greek: iota), every penstroke of the Law (the first five books of Jewish Scriptures--our Old Testament) is the truth. In fact, he goes on to say that it (every penstroke in the OT) will remain the truth until all is accomplished--that is, til the end of time. Wow!! So Jesus does condemn homosexual sex, contrary to rationalization by the Left that Jesus never addresses it!!! Afraid Ms. Mitchell missed the power of Matthew 5:18 (actually, she missed the entire verse, never mind its power). Jesus even states in verse 17 that HE came to fulfill this Law, not to change it!! What more endorsement of the OT does the Right need? In one verse (Matthew 5:18), Jesus is totally endorsing what is in the OT. His problem was never with the Law--it was with the hypocrisy with which the Jewish leaders followed that Law--with what was in their hearts. Jesus goes on in verse 19 to predict trouble for anyone breaking the least of these OT laws. Paul's II Timothy 3:16 reasserts that all scripture is the truth--not just some of it. Not just the words of Jesus. In fact, when II Timothy 3:16 was written in 66-67 AD, the scripture that then existed was almost all the OT, since much of the NT books hadn't even been written.

Beyond this, we know that God has only one intention for His scripture--His will. Sometimes it is difficult for us to discern this will. His Word calls us to find other scripture to clarify any verse not understood--no scripture verse ever contradicts any other scripture verse (Assignment for Witherspoon Members--find the verse that says this). Here is an example. Some on the Left think Jesus might actually not disapprove of homosexual sex in certain committed situations. The Religious Right thinks otherwise because they read and believe ALL scripture. The Right knows that Jesus condemns homosexual sex because of Matthew 5:18 and what Leviticus has to say about it. Forgetting Matthew 5:18 for a moment, since scripture doesn't contradict itself and since it can be consulted to clarify ambiguous scripture, no one could read anything Jesus ever says in combination with Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:27, I Timothy 1: 10-11 or I Corinthians 6:9, and claim anything other than Jesus obviously had total disdain for homosexual sex. For Him to do otherwise would mean He did not believe His own Word. Since He came to fulfill it, He hardly took exception to it. Sorry, left wingers!

With this in mind, how can Ms. Mitchell argue against the Religious Right using primarily OT scripture? Jesus totally endorsed it. Paul totally endorsed it. And it's the truth. What more does Ms. Mitchell want? In reality, she may have an agenda contrary to the Religious Right's, and she therefore may want to forget scripture such as Matthew 5:17-19.

Paul White

First Presbyterian Church of Bakerstown, P

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Re: Margaret Mitchell and the Religious Right

Author: [J J Bodine](#) (---.cntcnh.tds.net)

Date: 05-25-06 19:45

Mr. White equally ignores Jesus' reinterpretation of the Law ("You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .") Professor Mitchell's points concerning the religious right's selective use of Scripture are well taken--as such selectivity inevitably overbalances to one side or another.

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Re: Margaret Mitchell and the Religious Right

Author: [Fritz Detwiler](#) (198.108.80.---)

Date: 05-30-06 11:59

I appreciate Professor Mitchell's examination of the use of the Bible in the contemporary Christian Right. As one who has studied and written about the movement for over a decade I am not surprised by her findings. My take on the movement centers it not in Fundamentalism but in Dutch Calvinist sources. The importance of this is that in the Calvinist sources to which I trace the movement, the Bible is important but in a broader sense than it is in Fundamentalism. Here the Bible establishes the categories of knowledge and thus provides the foundation for truth and the assessment of truth claims. While specific biblical passages are quoted, their importance is as a set of assumptions that ground the Christian Right worldview as I understand it.

The organizations cited by Prof. Mitchell are important ones and do provide the application of the "Christian worldview" but they are not good sources for the worldview itself. On the websites Prof. Mitchell sites, the biblical passages are meant to establish authority for the interpretation and applications that follow -- but they do not constitute the worldview itself. I have found that a good source for the worldview itself can be found at <http://www.reformation.net/>. It is here that the movement establishes its coherence.

Fritz Detwiler

Prof. of Philosophy and Religion

Adrian (Mi) College

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