

# Red Letter Reductionism

By Dwight Gingrich

First version: November 23, 2013. Last revised: September 12, 2017.

**I**s your Bible a red letter edition? I'm sure you've seen them—the Bibles in which all the text is printed in black except for the words of Jesus. His words are printed in red, shining brightly on the page, seeming to glow with extra warmth and authority. I own several red letter Bibles. I like them. I also like my black letter Bibles. Did you know that the original Greek New Testament didn't contain even quotation marks, let alone any red letters? Did you know that the first red letter New Testament was printed as recently as 1899?<sup>1</sup> Did you know that the publisher who first thought of red letter Bibles was encouraged by his mentor, who told him “It could do no harm and it most certainly could do much good”?<sup>2</sup> Did you know that some people today strongly disagree?

But let me stop. This essay is not about red letter Bibles. This essay is about red letter theology and red letter Christians. It is about the authority of the New Testament and the nature of the gospel. First, we need an introduction to red letter Christianity. Then we will ask whether it is harmless. To answer our question, we will consider the promise of the Spirit, the limits of pre-Pentecostal revelation, and the nature of apostolic authority. We will take a close look at Paul, examining his gospel and his apostolic claims. We will examine John 3:16 as a test case for red letter theology and then ask whether this theology paints a shrunken, two-dimensional Jesus. We will consider the relationship between the Sermon on the Mount and the gospel and ask whether Anabaptists are truly excited about the gospel. Finally, we will consult Matthew's opinion on red and black letters, then conclude with two clarifications and five suggestions for readers of this essay. Let's begin!

## What Is Red Letter Christianity?

Red letter Christians. Perhaps you've heard of them. In the most general sense—and as I'm using the term in this essay—red letter Christians are any Christians who in some way prioritize the words of Jesus over the rest of Bible, including over the rest of the New Testament.

There are many kinds of red letter Christians. In contemporary usage, the term often refers to a specific movement that wants evangelicals to focus on social justice issues such as peace and poverty instead of fighting about moral causes such as abortion and homosexuality (as if you can truly separate the two). Proponents of this movement argue that Christians should prioritize the issues that Jesus himself spoke about. Tony Campolo provides this explanation:

The goal of Red Letter Christians is simple: To take Jesus seriously by endeavoring to live out His radical, counter-cultural teachings as set forth in Scripture, and especially embracing the lifestyle prescribed in the Sermon on the Mount... By calling ourselves Red Letter Christians, we refer to the fact that in many Bibles the words of Jesus are printed in red. What we are asserting, therefore, is that we have committed ourselves first and foremost to doing what Jesus said.<sup>3</sup>

Jim Wallis further explains:

---

<sup>1</sup> “The Origins of the Red-Letter Bible,” Crossway, 2006-03-23, accessed 2013-11-22, <http://www.crossway.org/blog/2006/03/red-letter-origin/>

<sup>2</sup> The publisher was Louis Klopsch and his mentor was Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage. See Steve Eng, “The Story Behind: Red Letter Bible Editions,” International Society of Bible Collectors, accessed 2013-11-22, [http://www.biblecollectors.org/articles/red\\_letter\\_bible.htm](http://www.biblecollectors.org/articles/red_letter_bible.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Tony Campolo. “Start Here,” Red Letter Christians, accessed 2013-11-22, <http://www.redletterchristians.org/start/>

We affirm the authority of the whole Bible, not just the explicit sayings of Jesus... But we believe that the “red letters” of Jesus need to be focused on again.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, American Christianity needs to pay closer attention to Jesus’ words. But despite their claim to affirm the authority of the whole Bible, Campolo and Wallis have tended to downplay biblical teachings not explicitly addressed by Jesus. This has been proven over time by how they have adopted theologically liberal positions on matters such as homosexuality. Thus they share some similarities with classic liberal theologians, who have often found Paul rather distasteful thanks to his “narrow” views about such matters as gender roles and his insistence on doctrinal precision. Some have even insisted that Paul and his supporters misinterpreted Jesus, turning his Jewish renewal movement into a new religion called Christianity, complete with hierarchical leadership structures.

But there is also a conservative kind of red letter Christianity—indeed, an Anabaptist kind—and that is the focus of this essay. These conservative red letter Christians are not a cohesive movement. They are not all alike. But if you listen long enough, here are some things you will sometimes hear. Most obviously, like Campolo and Wallis, they will emphasize the Sermon on the Mount. Like them, they wish to distance themselves from traditional evangelical doctrinal camps and lifestyles. In contrast, they will probably aim to carefully teach all the ethical commands found throughout the entire New Testament. And unlike classic Protestant liberals, they may insist that Jesus and Paul agree. In fact, they may insist that Jesus and Paul not only *agree*, but—what is more—that they teach the *same* thing. In actual practice, however, these Christians typically define this “same thing” using the words of Jesus, not Paul. They are much happier to use Jesus’ language of discipleship than Paul’s language of justification by faith. Some insist that emphasis on the latter—or at least on the traditional Protestant doctrine of “faith *alone*”—has resulted in nominal Christians who think they can pray the “sinner’s prayer,” be “born again,” and sin their way securely to heaven. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16: 31 KJV) seems just a little too easy. For similar reasons, John 3:16 is not usually a favorite verse of these Christians. These Christians are most at home when reading the first three Gospels, particularly Matthew.

These conservative red letter Christians are often suspicious of theology. They diligently mine the entire New Testament for ethical commands, but tend to spend little time on the theological chapters, such as Ephesians 1-3. Romans 12 (“be not conformed,” KJV) is a welcome friend, but Romans 1-11 are seldom explained with care and deep understanding. They often warn against “quarrels about words” (1 Timothy 6:4<sup>5</sup>) but are less likely hold up Paul’s example of “reasoning and persuading... about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8) or his admonition that elders must “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Sometimes you get the sense that these Christians think that what you *believe*—theology—is less important than what you *do*—ethics. Don’t be a theologian; rather, be a disciple.

Thus, red letter Christians believe that the most important parts of the Bible are those that directly record the example and teachings of Jesus. The ancient creeds and many evangelicals today emphasize the beginning and end of Jesus’ life—the incarnation and the atonement; Jesus is primarily our Savior. In contrast, many liberal theologians doubt the incarnation and the atonement, focusing only on the middle of Jesus’ life; Jesus is reduced to a great Teacher and Social Liberator. Conservative red letter Christians mention Jesus’ role as Savior, but *emphasize* his role as Teacher and Example. The primary command is not “believe” but “follow.”

---

<sup>4</sup> Jim Wallis, “Forward,” *Red Letter Christians: A Citizen’s Guide to Faith and Politics*, Tony Campolo. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008), 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Conservative red letter Christians read the entire Bible through the lens of the life and teachings of Jesus as found in the Gospels. How can one correctly interpret the Bible? By beginning and ending with Jesus. Use his actions to interpret his words, and use his words to interpret his actions. Use both to interpret every other biblical text. In particular, be sure every interpretation harmonizes with the Sermon on the Mount. This is the “Constitution of the Kingdom of God.” Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount, they may say, reveals the very heart and essence of Christianity, just as Jesus himself reveals the very nature of God.

## **Is Red Letter Christianity Harmless?**

What should we make of this conservative red letter Christianity? Clearly, there is much good to affirm—especially the emphasis on living as fully devoted disciples of Christ. Red letter disciples will help you spot the idols in your own heart. They will alert you to heavenly rewards. They make you eager to live in such a way that God's kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven. But can we confidently say that this red letter Christianity “could do no harm”?

### ***The promise of the Spirit and the glory of Jesus: “I still have many things to say to you”***

Perhaps the best place to begin our answer is with some red letters from the Gospel of John. Here's the scene: It is the final evening before Jesus' crucifixion. He is spending it alone with his closest disciples. No one else is present. Even Judas has left. In this intimate setting, Jesus tells the eleven, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). Reread that last clause: “*All that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.*” Can you imagine a stronger endorsement for red letter Christianity? After all, do we need to know more than Jesus knows?

If we rewind the audio from this final evening a little, we hear this: “These things I have spoken to you while I am with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:25-26). Notice first the promise of the Holy Spirit; something—no, Somebody—is coming. He is coming in Jesus' name—delegated as Christ's authoritative representative. What will he do? He will “bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” What does this mean? Among other things, surely it means that the four Gospels we hold today were written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; they are accurate records of what Jesus said. So again, it seems we can rest easy as red letter Christians.

But we skipped a clause: “He will teach you all things.” What does this mean?

If we fast-forward the audio toward the end of the evening, we hear this:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-14)

“Many things”! Do you feel the force of these words? Jesus still had *many things* to say to his disciples, but he was unable to say them, because they were unable to bear them. What a tragedy! What a loss! If only the disciples had been mature enough to receive all Jesus' words! Doesn't this make you want to crawl back through time and shake the disciples—knock some spiritual sense into their dull heads? Because of their weakness, we will never know everything Jesus wished to tell us. Right?

But wait. Again we have a promise of the Spirit. “He will guide you into all the truth.” What does this mean? When were the apostles guided by the Spirit into all the truth? What truths were they given under the Spirit’s inspiration? What did the Spirit take that belonged to Jesus (“he will take what is mine”) and deliver with the full authority of Jesus (“he will not speak on his own authority”) to the apostles? Where can we find those Spirit-borne, apostle-received teachings of Jesus today? Surely we find them in the writings of the New Testament—in the sermons of Acts, in the epistles, and in Revelation. And surely we find them even in the “editorial comments” and explanations included in the black words of the four Gospels. Here, at least in part, are the “many things” Jesus wanted his disciples to know.

Note carefully: *the truth that the Spirit would speak to the apostles would be grounded on the same authority as the words spoken by Jesus while he was on earth.* “He will not speak on his own authority.” Just as Jesus told his disciples “all that [he had] heard from [his] Father,” so the Spirit would speak “whatever he hears” from Jesus. Why would we say that some of Jesus’ words (in the Spirit-inspired apostolic writings) are not as authoritative as others (those he spoke in the flesh)?

Note also: “He will glorify me”; the result of the Spirit’s teaching would be the glorification of Christ. Why, then, would we want to demote the black letter portions of Scripture? Why risk detracting from the full glory of Christ?

Here we must pause to examine what we mean by “the authority of Scripture.” First, following N.T. Wright, I believe that “the phrase ‘the authority of scripture’ can make Christian sense only if it is shorthand for ‘the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture.’”<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, this definition prevents us from directing worship to a book rather than to its Author; on the other hand, it reminds us that reverence for Scripture *as the word of God* is not idolatry but essential fear of God. Second, the term *authority* is used variously to refer to both (a) the divine origin of Scripture and (b) the weight or influence that any portion of Scripture carries to shape our interpretations and behaviors. In this essay I am primarily addressing the question of the divine origin of Scripture, arguing that red and black letters alike are words from God and, in that sense, equally authoritative. But one question leads to another; those who question whether all black letters truly come from God will also not allow them to shape their interpretations and behaviors as strongly. So near the end of this essay I will briefly address the question of which passages of Scripture should rightly shape our interpretation of Scripture most directly and strongly.

Back to Jesus’ words in John: True, all our Scriptural interpretations must harmonize with Jesus’ life and teachings. And true, some words of Scripture carry more interpretive weight (more on this later). Yet, if we believe with Paul and Peter that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God (2 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:21; 2 Pet. 3:15-16), then this passage from John suggests that *all* the words of Scripture—including those written by the apostles—are equally authoritative in the sense of being equally the word of God. To deny this hardly squares with Jesus’ claim that the Spirit’s words bear the same authority as his own earthly words—that the Spirit’s words come from the Father and from Christ himself.

True, Jesus’ earthly life and teachings are central to Scriptural revelation. True, we are no longer under the old covenant. But, central though they are, Jesus’ life and teachings are hardly the *climax* of Scriptural revelation. Jesus’ death and resurrection more properly bear that title, for they are the ultimate turning point in the history of creation, the moment of crisis upon which all eternity hangs.

---

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 21.

And even Jesus' death and resurrection are not the *denouement* where all the loose ends of creation are finally resolved; that awaits Christ's promised return in glory.

***The limits of pre-Pentecostal revelation: "Are you also without understanding?"***

If Jesus still had "many thing" he wanted to say to his disciples, why didn't he say them before he died?

As a partial answer, consider the blindness of the disciples during Jesus' earthly ministry. For example, let's survey just four chapters: Mark 6 through 9. After Jesus fed the five thousand, the disciples were "utterly astounded" to see him walk on the water and calm the sea; "for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:51-52). When the disciples asked Jesus to explain a parable, he said, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see...?" (7:18). When they misunderstood Jesus' word picture about the leaven of the Pharisees, he seemed positively frustrated with them: "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?... And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?... Do you not yet understand?" (8:17-21). After Jesus taught the disciples about his coming death and resurrection ("and he said this plainly"), Peter rebuked Jesus, earning another rebuke: "Get behind me, Satan!" Despite Peter's earlier proclamation that Jesus is the Christ, he was still extremely confused about who the Christ would be (8:32). A few days later, on the mount of transfiguration, Peter suggested they honor Moses and Elijah as equals with Jesus, "for he did not know what to say" (9:6). Many similar examples could be added from other passages.

Given how blind the disciples were, we should not be surprised that there were "many things" that Jesus was unable to say. The disciples seemed unable to accept even the bare physical facts about Jesus' coming death and resurrection. It is no wonder that Jesus never tried to give them a full theological explanation of the atonement! Thus, to argue against penal substitutionary atonement on the basis that you can't find it in Jesus' own teachings<sup>7</sup> is to misunderstand the flow of redemptive history. It is making the same sort of interpretive error as those who claim that Jesus wasn't divine just because they don't think Jesus ever explicitly said so himself.

It took time for the disciples to understand the theological implications of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. For example, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, "his disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him" (John 12:16). Notice five things: First, notice that the disciples did not understand Jesus' actions until after Jesus' death and resurrection (when he "was glorified"). Second, notice that they did not understand the Old Testament or its relationship to Jesus until after that time, either. This means, third, that Jesus' death and resurrection were an essential turning point that made understanding possible. Fourth, notice that the Old Testament served as the lens that explained the significance of Jesus' actions—the Old Testament! Not the words of Jesus alone or even merely the rest of the New Testament (which the apostles themselves were to write later). Fifth, notice that John does not clearly explain in this immediate context what it was that the disciples eventually understood about Jesus' actions. John does briefly explain some of this understanding at other points in his Gospel (see John 1:1-14 and 20:30-31), but he leaves many theological truths cryptically encoded.

---

<sup>7</sup> A strong argument can be made that it *is* there in seed form. See, for example, Matt. 20:28; 27:46, or John 3:14-15 in context of vv. 16-18, 36.

If we compare John with the other three Gospels, we find that the others contain even less explicit theological explanation. Indeed, if we possessed only the first three Gospels, it is doubtful if many of us would understand much at all about Christ's saving work. None of the resurrection accounts, for instance, say anything like "Jesus rose from the grave and therefore we can be sure that we, too, will be given resurrection bodies." Yet this truth is emphasized many times later in the New Testament as a focal point of Christian hope. It is only as we look back at the four Gospels with the insights provided by the rest of the New Testament (and the Old Testament!) that we can understand something of the full significance of Jesus' words and actions.

Try making a list sometime of all the New Testament truths that are *not* found in red letters. You might be surprised at the length of the list. There are "many things" that Jesus' disciples were simply unprepared to receive prior to the cross, resurrection, and Pentecost. So Jesus saved words for later.

***Apostolic authority: "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you"***

There is much additional New Testament evidence that Christ had authoritative teaching to transmit to his church even after he ascended. Let's examine some non-Pauline passages first.

A good place to continue is with three observations from the author Luke. First, we should consider what Luke's Gospel tells us about Jesus' own words. Luke's introduction to his Gospel reminds us of how the four Gospels were composed (see Luke 1:1-4). For example, it reminds us that the Gospels are compilations of narratives; thus, the Gospel writers were selective in what they included. The Gospels are based on what "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" delivered; thus, they are based on oral accounts (and probably written portions) that existed before the Gospel writers crafted the Gospels we know today. Thus the Gospels were composed in what appeared outwardly to be a rather ordinary human manner. Those of us who agree that they are part of God-breathed Scripture must conclude that the Holy Spirit oversaw both the *memories* of the eyewitnesses and *compilation choices* of the Gospel writers.

In addition, most historians of first-century Israel agree that Jesus did not teach primarily in Greek, the language in which our Gospels were written, but in Aramaic. Thus *it is not stretching the facts to say that we possess almost none of the actual words that Jesus' spoke*. (I say "almost none" because of the few Aramaic phrases included within the Greek New Testament.) Rather, we possess inspired *translations* that accurately convey the true message of Jesus' own words.<sup>8</sup>

These facts about memory, compilation, and translation reduce the distinction we can make between Jesus' own words and the words of the rest of the New Testament. *Both* come to us through the Spirit-guided apostolic witness.

Second, the ending of Luke's Gospel leaves us longing for more teaching from Jesus. In Luke 24 we read that the risen Jesus "opened [the disciples'] minds to understand the Scriptures" in an entirely new way and that he "interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27, 45). The first readers of Luke (and keen ones today), however, are apparently left hanging. Where are the interpretations that Jesus provided? Are we left unable to understand the Old Testament, unable to

---

<sup>8</sup> In addition, every translation involves interpretation. This is evident in the Gospels, for there are many times where the various Gospel writers use different Greek words while translating the very same conversation of Jesus! Every sentence that we speak carries a cluster of explicit meanings and implicit connotations. Each of the Gospel writers was inspired to faithfully emphasize unique aspects of the meanings and connotations of Jesus' words as they translated them. A similar (though more fallible) process today explains much of the variation between our English Bible translations.

understand Christ and his work well enough to proclaim him to the nations? The first readers of Luke, however, were not truly left hanging, and nor are we. Luke wrote a sequel to his Gospel—the book of Acts. In this book we find many apostolic sermons, and most of these are filled with quotations from the Old Testament. I suggest that in these sermons we can discover some of what Jesus explained to the disciples in Luke 24. *Again, we do not have Jesus' actual words, but we do have his message, transmitted through the apostolic witness.*

Luke opens his sequel with a telling clause: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). Notice the word “began.” While the translation and interpretation of this clause is debated,<sup>9</sup> the word “began” may suggest that Jesus was not done “doing” and “teaching” when he ascended. This interpretation is supported by several passages later in Acts. In his Pentecostal sermon, Peter says that it was the exalted Jesus who initiated the miraculous events of that day: “He [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33). Later in the book, at another crucial juncture (the expansion of “the word” into Europe), we find that Jesus is still active. When Paul and his companions attempted to go into Bithynia, “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:7; see Phil. 1:19). These textual clues remind us that we cannot limit our focus to the Gospels if we want to discover all that Jesus has done and taught. Even after Pentecost, it took years for the Spirit of Jesus to teach the apostles many truths, such as the inclusion of the Gentiles in his kingdom.

Third, as the ending of Luke and the beginning of Acts link those two books together (more links could be explored), so the book of Acts as a whole links the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament. Who are the main human characters in Acts—those Spirit-filled men who carried the gospel of Jesus from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth? Who are the authors of the rest of the New Testament—those Spirit-filled men who wrote letters to guide Jesus' church? The answers to our two questions are nearly identical. Peter and Paul are the main human characters of Acts, supported by, among others, John and James. And it was these four men, supported by one or two others, who wrote the rest of the New Testament. Thus the book of Acts points us forward, affirming the apostolic authority of the epistles.

Apostolic authority is a concept crucial to our understanding of the authority of the New Testament documents. Paul writes that the church of Christ is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets”—those who were specially chosen to have the mystery of Christ revealed to them by the Spirit (Eph. 2:20; cf. 3:4-5). The first traces of this authority are found in the Gospels themselves, as Jesus appoints twelve “whom he also named apostles” (Mark 3:14).<sup>10</sup> Before his ascension he commissions them as his authoritative witnesses. Consider again his words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20). “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47-48). “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21).

Christians through the ages have rightly perceived that these “Great Commission” passages carry implications for Christians throughout all ages, until the work of witnessing to the nations has been

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, commentators F. F. Bruce, Charles K. Barrett, I. Howard Marshall, and David Peterson agree with the interpretation I am presenting, while Ben Witherington III and some others do not.

<sup>10</sup> I also understand Jesus' statement to Peter (“on this rock I will build my church” Matt. 16:18) to refer to the unique role that Peter was given during the founding of the church, as recorded in the first half of Acts, but I will not try to defend that view here.

completed. However, we should also recognize that the first apostles were given a unique and foundational role in this task. To this day (and “to the end of the age”), it is the written witness of the apostles that we carry to the nations, not merely our own words or our own experiences of Christ.

It is instructive to study the use of the word *witness* in the book of Acts. At the end of the first chapter we find the eleven apostles concerned that someone must be chosen to replace Judas. But not just anyone will do. It must be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us”—only such a person can serve as “a witness to [Jesus'] resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22). In other words, a “witness” must be an *eye-witness*—someone who, through prolonged exposure, had seen Jesus with his physical eyes. In addition, note the sense of a specific role or office to fill: “one of these men *must become with us* a witness” (Acts 1:22, emphasis added; cf. Luke 24:48). These words suggest that a witness was not simply one who had *seen*, but also someone *appointed to give witness*, someone appointed to join a *defined group* of witnesses. This is different from our use of the word *witness* today when we speak of being a “witness” for Jesus.

The rest of Acts underscores this specialized use of the word *witness*. Peter tells Cornelius that God “made [the risen Jesus] to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been *chosen by God as witnesses*, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded *us* to preach to the people and to testify...” (Acts 10:40-42, emphasis added; cf. 13:31). This is why it is crucial that Paul, too, should see the risen Christ. Only after seeing can he serve as an apostle, as “a witness for [Jesus] to everyone of what [he had] seen and heard” (22:15). Jesus himself tells Paul on the Damascus road, “I have *appeared* to you for this purpose, *to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you*, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:16-18, emphasis added). Yes, Paul could bear witness to the continuing actions of the ascended Christ (“those [things] in which I will appear to you”), but his special apostolic authority depended upon his having actually seen the risen Christ and been called to represent him.

We today cannot serve as a witness in the same way that the apostles could. As Peter said, “We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32; cf. John 15:26-27). The apostles bore witness, and the Holy Spirit within every believer bears witness, but we do not bear apostolic *eye-witness*.

This understanding of apostolic authority drawn from Acts fits well with the perspective found in the rest of the New Testament. For example, consider Hebrews. On the one hand, Jesus “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,” superior to all other beings (1:3). On the other hand, the salvation message to which we “must pay much closer attention” was “declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2:1, 3-4). Jesus, the apostles, and God's ongoing miraculous intervention; these all played a role in declaring a message that is fully “reliable” (2:2) and authoritative.

Red letter Christians are rightly concerned that Christians should worship only Christ, not the apostles or the New Testament documents. But sometimes this concern leads them to downplay the authority of the apostolic writings. Perhaps it would be helpful to draw a distinction between the *identity* and the *words* of a person, considering both categories for Jesus, for us today, and for the apostles.

Consider *identity* first. Jesus is divine. He bears intrinsic authority and is worthy of worship. We today, however much we may be filled with the Spirit, remain only human. The apostles, likewise, “are [merely] men, of like nature with you” (Acts 14:15). We do not worship the apostles, nor do we pray to them.

Now consider *words*. Jesus clearly spoke for God—indeed, as God. All of his words bear divine authority and, rightly understood, provide guidance for the church today. Our words today bear authority only to the extent that we speak the message of Scripture or words provided by the Spirit. All of our non-Scriptural prophetic words must be tested and thus do not, practically speaking, bear authority in the same sense that Scripture does (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21). And, whatever we may believe about the existence of a secondary-level gift of apostleship today, none of us is an apostle in the same sense as the apostles who formed the foundation of the church. Thus none of our words can be “foundational” for the church as a whole. None of our words qualify to be added to Scripture.

What about the words of the apostles? Here it seems that we must draw more distinctions that are even more nuanced. On the one hand, it is clear that some of the apostles' words (and actions) were fallible and even misguided. Consider the lead role Peter played in influencing the Jewish believers at Antioch to stop eating with Gentile believers, a role which probably involved words (Gal. 2:11-14). Consider also how Paul spoke words that stirred up a division between his Pharisee and Sadducee opponents—a use of words that Paul later described as “wrongdoing” (Acts 24:20-21). On the other hand, as the apostles carried out their unique apostolic trust, Christ himself was working through them: “He who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:8). The apostles and prophets are the foundation of the church, as we noted earlier (Eph. 2:20). To change the metaphor somewhat, Christ is the foundation of the church, and the apostles were given the task of laying this foundation (1 Cor. 3:10-11). Thus Peter called Paul's letters “Scripture,” apparently giving them the same status as the Old Testament Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:15-16). In the same chapter he reminded his readers of “the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles,” thus identifying both the Old Testament prophetic word and the apostolic word as authoritative, and affirming that Jesus's commandment came “through” the apostles (2 Pet. 3:2).

How do we reconcile this tension regarding the words of the apostles? I think the process of Scriptural canonization has already resolved this tension for us. The apostolic words that we possess today are a select portion of the total sum of the apostles' words. They are a tested, authoritative subset of all that they spoke. No, we do not believe that the apostles' words were all infallible. But yes, we do believe that their letters and sermons which are found in the New Testament bear the stamp of the authority of Christ, the breath of the Spirit. The early church recognized this, and for most New Testament books there is—contrary to popular mythology—no record of any dispute whatsoever.<sup>11</sup> New Testament canon scholar Michael J. Kruger summarizes apostolic authority like this:

The apostles were the mouthpieces of Christ and were given the task of delivering and preserving his redemptive message—which was originally delivered orally but eventually was embodied in a more permanent, written form. The New Testament books were considered authoritative not because the church declared them to be so, or even because they were written directly by an apostle, but because they were

---

<sup>11</sup> For example, there is no historical record of any dispute in the early church about the canonicity of any of the four Gospels, of Acts, or of any of Paul's letters. Only seven New Testament books, representing together less than 14% of its total length, were ever mentioned by anyone in the early church as being disputed. See Michael D. Marlowe, “Disputed Books of the New Testament,” Bible Research, accessed 2017-08-29, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/canon5.html>

understood to bear this essential apostolic deposit.<sup>12</sup>

The early church was careful to limit the canon of the New Testament to writings that rested upon the authority of apostles chosen by Christ himself.<sup>13</sup> Thus the closure of the New Testament canon is a natural result of the supernatural and unrepeatable role of the apostles as Jesus-chosen, Spirit-guided eyewitnesses.

At least some New Testament authors seem to have been aware of the authority entrusted to them as they wrote. Peter addresses his readers as “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:1), declaring that what he had “written” was “the true grace of God” in which his readers must “stand firm” (1 Pet. 5:12). This self-identification as “apostle” is found at the beginning of many New Testament letters, and should not be missed. When an Old Testament prophet said “Thus says the LORD,” he was using a standard messenger formula—the same formula that was used by the herald of a king, who would preface his message by saying “Thus says king so-and-so.” This formula indicated that the prophet was on assignment, speaking God’s words.<sup>14</sup> A similar thing seems to be happening in the New Testament whenever an author claims to be an apostle. He is using this title to assert that he is God’s messenger—“the special envoy of Christ Jesus commissioned by the will of God.”<sup>15</sup>

James calls himself only a “servant,” but to be a servant “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” carried authority, as evidenced by how the word “servant” often parallels “apostle” in other letter greetings in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Tit. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1:1; cf. also Gal. 1:10).

John is bolder. He prefaces his prophetic visions with a blessing best reserved for the word of God (cf. Jesus’ statement in Luke 11:28): “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it” (Rev. 1:3a). At the end of Revelation, Jesus repeats this blessing on those who “keep” what John has written (Rev. 22:7; cf. 22:9), just as faithful saints elsewhere in the book are said to “keep” the commandments of God (12:17; 14:12) and the word of Jesus (3:8, 10).

John’s prophecy ends with a most solemn warning (that may come from the lips of Jesus himself):

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev. 22:18-19)

This warning adapts similar warnings found in the Law of Moses (Deut. 4:1-2; 12:32; 29:19-20), leading Oxford theologian Christopher Rowland to this observation:

In utilizing this prohibition from Deuteronomy John appears to regard his own revelations as being of equal importance with earlier communications from God given to Moses. There is no question here of this book being regarded by its author either as a series of inspired guesses or intelligent surmise. John believes that what he has seen and heard actually conveys the divine truth to his readers... John sees himself as the one

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 193-94.

<sup>13</sup> For example, they understood that Mark recorded Peter’s testimony, and we know that Luke was Paul’s travel companion.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Stuart, lecture, “Prophetic Books,” *Old Testament Survey*, BiblicalTraining.org, accessed 2013-12-13, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/prophetic-books/old-testament-survey-0>

<sup>15</sup> Murray Harris’s paraphrase of part of Colossians 1:1, from Murray Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (Exegetical Guide to the New Testament), (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 193.

who has been commissioned to write down the divine counsels for the benefits of the churches (Rev. 1:19).<sup>16</sup>

In his first epistle John expresses similar apostolic confidence: “We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6).

What do statements such as these suggest? “Recent study of the [New Testament] letters, and of the intention of the gospel writers,” says N.T. Wright, “emphasizes the self-conscious way in which the New Testament authors believed themselves called to exercise their calling as 'authorized' teachers, by the guidance and power of the Spirit, writing books and letters to sustain, energize, shape, judge, and renew the church.” He continues:

It used to be said that the New Testament writers “didn't think they were writing 'scripture.’” That is hard to sustain historically today... That is not to say, of course, that the writers of the New Testament specifically envisaged a time when their books would be collected together and form something like we now know as the canon. I doubt very much if such an idea ever crossed their minds. But that they were conscious of a unique vocation to write Jesus-shaped, Spirit-led, church-shaping books, as part of their strange first-generation calling, we should not doubt.<sup>17</sup>

***Paul's gospel and apostolic authority: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name”***

But what about Paul, that “one untimely born... the least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:8-9)? Red letter Christians sometimes give Paul a hard time. In fact, he seems to be their least-favorite New Testament author. I once heard a preacher describe how he loved the Pauline letters in his youth, even having memorized most of Romans. But then, he claimed, he discovered a problem: “My focus on Romans and Ephesians was obscuring my vision of Jesus, so I start with Jesus now.”

I wonder what Paul would have said if he had heard this preacher. Paul's life mission was to know Christ and to make him known (Phil. 3:7-11; Rom. 15: 18-21). If focusing on Paul's letters obscures Jesus, where does the problem lie? Did Paul fail in his life mission? Or are we misreading Paul? Now, if by “focus” the preacher meant “focus on Paul and not pay much attention to the four Gospels,” then perhaps I can agree. However, I have observed that such statements tend to come from people who are over-reacting to the imbalances of some (not all!) Protestants and evangelicals. Their unease about Paul often springs from their understanding of the gospel and from their belief that Paul provides the basis for Protestant distortions of that gospel.

For example, consider this excerpt from a book written to show that “the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century... were mistaken”<sup>18</sup> regarding the doctrine of salvation:

Unfortunately, a modern understanding of the Gospel almost presupposes the need for a careful exegesis of Paul's letter to the Romans. However, this relegates the actual teachings and example of Christ to a secondary position. Yet Jesus himself said no student is greater than His master (John 13:16 and 15:20). Interestingly, Jesus' first two commands (proclaimed throughout the Gospels) clearly articulate the early church view of the Gospel; that is, repent and follow me! The Gospel according to Jesus is turn from your sins and follow Him.

---

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, 51-52.

<sup>18</sup> Marc Carrier, *The Other Side of Salvation: An Early-church [sic] Perspective* (Values-Driven Publishing, 2010), 4. My copy of this brief book is in the form of a stapled sheaf of loose papers, given to me by the same Anabaptist preacher whom I quoted in the previous paragraph.

Turn from the world, the kingdom of darkness, sin, selfishness, hatred, and submit to the lordship of Christ, the Kingdom of God, righteousness, holiness, obedience, and love. This is the true Gospel. Christ's atonement (that is, His incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection) were accomplished to facilitate this specific end.<sup>19</sup>

From what I have observed, this author seems to be serving Christ faithfully, including in some ways that far eclipse my own walk so far. And in context, the author is warning against a real and dangerous error: the teaching that how Christians live is unimportant as long as they “believe.” And elsewhere in his book, the author *does* discuss in detail the work of Christ in ransoming us.<sup>20</sup> *But I can't find a place where he explicitly calls this ransoming work of Christ the gospel.* The paragraph just quoted provides his fullest definition of the gospel. And notice: this paragraph defines the gospel *entirely* as something that humans do: “Repent and follow me.”<sup>21</sup>

It seems to me that such a definition dishonors both the work and the words of Jesus. The *work* of Christ, according to this paragraph, is not actually part of the gospel itself, just something essential to “facilitate” the gospel. In addition, this paragraph dishonors the *words* of Christ, by reducing Jesus' teachings to his first two introductory commands. What about Jesus' other teachings, such as his statements, however compressed, about how he came to “give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28) and to inaugurate a new covenant by providing forgiveness through his shed blood (Matt. 26:28)? What about his other commands, such as the implied command to eat his body and blood (John 6), which was made explicit at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26-29)?

This reduction of Jesus' teaching is a little like summarizing Peter's entire Pentecostal sermon with his words “Repent and be baptized,” without including his long exposition about God's completed work of making Jesus both Lord and Christ and his promised work of giving the Holy Spirit. It is a little like summarizing an entire college course by quoting the professor's opening words about course requirements.

If this is our definition of the gospel, then some people will hear it simply as a call to earn salvation through good behavior. They will not be drawn to glory in the riches of Christ's work or to rely deeply on his grace. But good works alone cannot save, even in a post-atonement world where Christ's “facilitating” work has been accomplished. Cornelius was already “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:2). In fact, it appears that he was doing all the good deeds described in the previous gospel “definition,” with the sole exception that he had not heard of the lordship of Christ. Yet that was not enough. God sent an angel to him, instructing him to send for Peter, because “he will declare to you *a message by which you will be saved*, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14, emphasis added). Notice two things. First, despite his good deeds, Cornelius had not yet been “saved.” Second, it would be the message, not his own deeds, that would save him. What saving message did Peter deliver to Cornelius? Did he say “Repent and follow Jesus?” Did he provide a summary of the Sermon on the Mount? Certainly Peter believed both those potential messages whole-heartedly, but they were not the saving message. When we examine Peter's message, we see that it is a summary of the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ,” covering the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' own baptism with the Spirit, Jesus' good and miraculous deeds, his death and resurrection, his post-resurrection appearances, the “Great Commission,” Jesus' return as Judge, and the prophetic promise of forgiveness “for everyone who

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see this summary statement: “We are indeed saved by grace through faith, because it was Christ who willfully subjected Himself to the Father, was given into the hands of evil men, bled and died so that He could conquer death and set us free from the Law of Sin and Death. It was His blood that washed us clean.” Ibid., 12.

<sup>21</sup> Carrier repeats this summary definition of the gospel four times later in his book.

believes in him” (Acts 10:36-43). Not a word is mentioned of Jesus' ethical instructions, or of anything besides the implied call to believe. Yet Peter calls this “preaching the good news,” that is, the *gospel*.<sup>22</sup>

One self-described red letter Christian who read the book excerpt above told me, “I like that better than the Romans Road version.” I can understand this perspective, given the simplistic and life-*unchanging* manner in which the Romans Road has sometimes been used. However, such a statement, it seems to me, is hardly fair to Paul. The Romans Road summary of the gospel, *improperly* applied, is a condensation of Paul's teaching that reduces the gospel to God's work without any necessary response from man besides “faith.” That condensation is as bad as the book excerpt version of the gospel. But the Romans Road, *properly* applied, is a summary of Paul's teaching that includes both God's work and a human response of “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

The climactic verse in the traditional Romans Road presentation of the gospel is Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This promise has been reduced by some evangelicals to a call for a mere mental-assent “faith”—a faith that is indistinguishable from the “faith” of James' demons: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19). Unfortunately, while red letter Christians strongly disagree with this summary of saving faith, some seem to implicitly affirm the accuracy of this reductionist interpretation of Romans 10:9 by their avoidance of Paul, and are thus misreading Paul just as much as any Protestant. The only difference is that, instead of embracing mental-assent salvation, they pit Paul against Jesus and reject Paul as dangerous to discipleship. How ironic and unfair, given Paul's own life of radical discipleship to his Lord!

Two words can point us toward a better interpretation of Romans 10:9: “Lord” and “confess.” Let's consider “Lord” first. Paul uses this term throughout his writings to express the identity of Christ. To believe that Jesus is “Lord” is to believe that he has come down from heaven (Rom. 10:6). It is to believe that he is Yahweh (Rom. 10:13; Phil. 10-11) who has come to reign as King (Rom. 10:15; Isa. 52:7). It is to believe that Jesus, not Caesar, is the true Lord and commander-in-chief of the world. In Paul's mind, if you truly believe that Jesus is Lord, then you will follow him. If we truly believe that Jesus is Lord, then we will not be “a disobedient and contrary people” (Rom. 10:21).

If red letter Christians tend to misunderstand Paul's use of “Lord,” they also tend to misunderstand his use of the word “confess.” To “confess... that Jesus is Lord” is not the same thing as what Jesus was describing when he warned, “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21). Paul's “confess” is a richer word than Jesus' “says.” If we want to find a statement of Jesus that is a closer parallel to Paul's statement, we should look at Matthew 10:32-33: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.” Jesus said this while warning the disciples about coming persecution and about the need to take up the cross and follow. The word “acknowledge” in this passage and the word “confess” in Paul's statement are actually translated from the same word in Greek. To confess with our mouths that Jesus as Lord is, therefore, a costly public acknowledgment; it is to assert that no one is Lord but Jesus, and that we are willing to suffer shame or even death to remain loyal to our Lord. The early Christians were martyred because they confessed that Jesus, not Caesar, was the true Lord of the universe.

This interpretation of Paul's theology of Lordship and confession also helps to explain his claim in 1 Corinthians 12:3: “I want you to understand that... no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Spirit.” If

---

<sup>22</sup> The KJV obscures the fact that Peter mentions the gospel, but the underlying Greek clearly supports the ESV translation.

you want to discover whether someone is a true servant of the Lord Jesus and full of the Spirit, watch to see whether he will publicly identify with Jesus before Jesus' own enemies. Thus to “confess” that Jesus is Lord is to do the exact opposite of what Peter did when he “denied” Jesus.

Another reason some people are uneasy about Paul’s influence is because they fear he is not sufficiently clear on nonresistance. After all, a majority of Protestants historically have been all too quick to take up the sword and repay evil with evil. Does this endorsement of violence flow naturally from the Pauline Reformed theology that many of them embrace? More explicitly still, Romans 13 certainly has been and still is used by many Protestants to defend the Christian use of the sword. Isn’t it safest—even essential—to subjugate Paul’s ambivalent teachings on the sword to Jesus’ clear command that we must not resist evil?

Four brief responses can be given. First, Reformed or even Protestant theology simply does not explain most of the Christian use of the sword throughout history. Roman Catholics, too, have historically affirmed the Christian use of the sword, despite not being shaped by the Pauline theology of Luther which set the trajectory for Protestant doctrines. During the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics alike waged war and persecuted Anabaptists. And Christian just war theory is much older than the Reformation. It stretches back at least to Augustine (A.D. 354-430), was developed most significantly by the great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225-1274), and remains the official doctrine of the Catholic church to this day.

Second, Paul is not to blame for Augustine’s formulation of just war theory. Augustine believed that Jesus’ command to love our neighbor meant that Christians must normally not kill in self-defense. Yet, drawing explicitly upon Greco-Roman pagan thinkers—especially Cicero<sup>23</sup>—he made an exception for “just wars.” Romans 13 was not his “starting point,” despite the chapter’s later close association with just war theory by thinkers such as Aquinas and Luther.<sup>24</sup> Augustine concluded, as one scholar summarizes, that “‘times change’... pacifism was appropriate... in the time of the apostles [but] not... in a day and age when kings and nations have succumbed to the gospel” in fulfillment of prophecy.<sup>25</sup> Augustine was well aware of what both Jesus and the apostles taught, but concluded that new circumstances called for new behaviors. Augustine’s theology was too pagan, not too Pauline.

This leads to a third point: the influence of politics on theology. Catholics and Protestants alike developed their theology within the context of a Christendom that extended back to Constantine, the first Roman emperor to bear the sword in the name of Jesus. Political allegiances shaped the magisterial theology of Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin, with each relying on the sword-bearing support of city councils or German princes. The Swiss Brethren Anabaptists, in contrast, counted the cost of losing political legitimacy at the time they chose believers’ baptism. Living as a persecuted minority, they were free of political entanglements that might have hindered them from following Jesus’ teachings on nonviolent enemy-love. Yet they developed their nonresistant theology, it must be noted, while also wrestling meaningfully with Paul’s teachings in Romans 13.<sup>26</sup> This influence of political power over our theology of the sword continues to this day, as Reformed theologian Preston Sprinkle has observed:

It’s fascinating (one might say disturbing) to see how each person’s political context or position shapes his or

---

<sup>23</sup> Berit Van Neste, “Cicero and St. Augustine’s Just War Theory: Classical Influences on a Christian Idea” (2006), Graduate Theses and Dissertations, accessed 09-05-2017, <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/3782>

<sup>24</sup> Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church rather than the State* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 28, 105.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> See especially article VI of the Schleithem Confession, adopted by a Swiss Brethren Conference on February 24, 1527.

her understanding of Romans 13. Christians living in North Korea or Burma tend to read Romans 13 differently than Americans do... Not more than a generation ago, Romans 13 was hailed as the charter for apartheid in South Africa. American Christian leaders did the same during the years of slavery and segregation.<sup>27</sup>

“Most now would see such a view of Romans 13 as going a bit too far,” Sprinkle continues. “But only a bit.” He notes how Wayne Grudem has applied this chapter to America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, assuming that America is the good government and that Iraq and Afghanistan are the bad governments. “Were it flipped around and Romans 13 was used to validate Afghanistan’s invasion of America as punishment for horrific drone strikes on civilians,” Sprinkle suggests, “most Americans would see this as a misreading of Romans 13.”<sup>28</sup>

Which brings us to our final point: Paul is far clearer on nonresistance than many Christians, red letter or not, tend to acknowledge. In fact, Paul’s writings are in line with the entire New Testament, which “highlights Jesus’s nonviolent response to violence as a pattern to follow *more often than any other aspect of his ministry*.”<sup>29</sup> Paul “has the Sermon on the Mount ingrained in his soul,” Sprinkle observes, and most of “Paul’s litany of commands... in Romans 12... has the scent of Jesus’s Sermon.”<sup>30</sup> “Repay no one evil for evil... never avenge yourselves... if your enemy is hungry, feed him... overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17-21). The clarity of Romans 12 and other Pauline passages should remove all doubt that when Romans 13 puts the sword into the hand of the third-person government (“he,” not “you”), Paul cannot be affirming Christian vengeance. After all, “Paul explicitly forbids the church in Romans 12 from doing what the government does in Romans 13.”<sup>31</sup>

Paul is just as interested in radical discipleship as Jesus is. Both taught cruciform, nonviolent love. Paul’s gospel demands a response of obedience as surely as Jesus’ “gospel of the kingdom.” Both said, in effect, “I have good news! God is coming to reign as King! The King wants to ransom you and give you the kingdom! Believe and live accordingly, so that this announcement can truly be good news for you!” It is time to end the quarreling about “I follow Paul” and “I follow Christ” (1 Cor. 1:12). And rather than rejecting a false Paul, let’s listen more closely to the true Paul.

For Paul *did* expect to be listened to. More than any of the other apostles, Paul left a record of his own apostolic claims to authority.<sup>32</sup> When compiled, Paul’s claims create a long list! You may be tempted to skip over the following quotations, but a careful reading reveals a cumulative case both for Paul’s apostolic authority, and also for his keen self-awareness of that authority. Consider the following:

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God... concerning his Son... through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations... God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son... I long to see you, that I may impart some spiritual gift to strengthen you... I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish... I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit... Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify

---

<sup>27</sup>Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Nonviolence* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 166-67.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 146. Emphasis in original.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-72. See Sprinkle’s longer discussion of Romans 13 (*ibid.*, 166-170).

<sup>32</sup> Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart has suggested that the phrase “Thus says the LORD” was used most often by those prophets whose authority was most often challenged. (From his lecture “Prophetic Books,” part of his Old Testament survey course: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/prophetic-books/old-testament-survey-0> Retrieved 2013-12-13.) A similar pattern is found in the New Testament with the distribution of apostolic claims of authority; many are found in Paul’s letters to the churches in Corinth and Galatia, who were questioning his authority.

my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them... By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you... I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation... Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed..." (Rom. 1:1, 3, 5, 9, 11, 14; 9:1; 11:13-14; 12:3; 15:15-20; 16:25-26).

"Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes... We impart ['the things freely given us by God'] in words not taught by human wisdom but by the Spirit... This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God... I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy... to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church... I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing... Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my workmanship in the Lord?... Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!... I am... entrusted with a stewardship... I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you... I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you... If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized... Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you" (1 Cor. 1:1; 2:12-13; 4:1, 16-17; 5:3; 9:1, 16-17; 11:2, 23; 14:37-38; 15:1-2).

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother... We are... men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ... God... has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant... God... gave us the ministry of reconciliation... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us... Though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh... We destroy arguments and... take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience... Even if I boast a little too much of our authority... I will not be ashamed... I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me... I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me" (2 Cor. 1:1; 2:17; 3:5-6; 5:18-20; 10:3-6, 8; 13:2-3, 10; see also all of chapters 10-13).

"Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead... Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed... For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ... He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles... In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!... I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised... From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 1:1, 8, 11-12, 15-16, 20; 2:7; 6:17; see also all of chapters 1-2).

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God... You are... members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone... You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit... Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God... Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift... And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the

shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints... Now this I say and testify in the Lord... Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication... also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 1:1; 2:19-20; 2:2-5, 7-9; 4:7, 11-12, 17; 6:18-20).

“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus... I am put here for the defense of the gospel... My beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling... Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us... What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 1:1, 16; 2:12; 3:17; 4:9)

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother... Continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister... In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints... For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for... all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged... to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ... For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit... Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak... When this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea” (Col. 1:1, 23-26, 29; 2:1-2, 5; 4:3-4, 16).

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy... Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you... Our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery... God is witness. Nor did we seek glory... though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ... We proclaimed to you the gospel of God. Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you... And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God... We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God... that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification... Whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God... I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” (1 Thess. 1:1, 5; 2:3-6, 9-10, 13; 4:1-3, 8; 5:27).

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy... We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us... Let no one deceive you in any way... Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?... God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved... To this he called you through our gospel... So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter... We have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command... Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us... Such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly... If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him... I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine” (2 Thess. 1:1; 2:1-3, 5, 13-15; 3:4, 6-7, 12, 14, 17).

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope... The gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service... This charge I entrust to you, Timothy... Some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan... There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth... I do not permit a woman to teach... I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God... Command and teach these things... Command

these things as well... In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules... Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he... understands nothing... I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus... to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach... O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you” (1 Tim. 1:1, 11-12, 18-20; 2:5-7, 12; 3:14-15; 4:11; 5:7, 21; 6:2-4, 13-14, 20).

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God... The gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do... I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me... By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you... What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also... My gospel... Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved... rightly handling the word of truth... I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the death, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word... The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might here it” (2 Tim. 1:1, 10-14; 2:2, 8, 15; 4:1, 17).

“Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior... Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you... The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things... These things are excellent and profitable for people” (Tit. 1:1-3; 2:15; 3:8).

“Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother... Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you... Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (Phlm 1:1, 8-9, 21).

This list of claims includes some statements that no preacher today should be comfortable making. Consider three passages more closely:

1. *Paul believed that what he was writing was commands of the Lord*: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Cor. 14:37-38). As commentator Thiselton explains, it is a logical “self-contradiction” to claim to be of the Spirit and yet “dismiss apostolic disclosure as not of the Spirit of Christ (to whom apostleship by its nature points).”<sup>33</sup> Paul’s message to such people parallels Samuel’s message to disobedient Saul: “You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you” (1 Sam. 15:26).
2. *Paul believed that Christ was speaking through him, and that he was authoritatively commissioned to administer the new covenant*: “God... has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant... We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us... Even if I boast a little too much of our authority... I will not be ashamed... I warn... that if I come again I will not spare [those who sinned]—since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me... I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me” (2 Cor. 3:5-6; 5:20; 10:8; 13:2-3, 10). Matera comments on 13:3: “Literally translated the Greek reads ‘in me’... but the sense is that the Corinthians want proof that, when Paul speaks, Christ speaks through him.”<sup>34</sup> Paul warned that he would “not spare” in providing such proof.

---

<sup>33</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1164.

<sup>34</sup> Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 303.

3. *Paul believed that his gospel proclamation, both orally and in print, was “the word of God”:* “Just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak... When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God... I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers” (1 Thess. 2:4, 13; 5:27). As commentator Green explains, the Thessalonian converts “had listened to the voices of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, but they heard what their proclamation actually was, the word of God. God spoke to them in this proclamation.”<sup>35</sup> So, too, with Paul’s letter: “The letter stood in the place of the apostle and was representative of his presence and authority... As the Law was read publicly for the Jewish people gathering in the Synagogue..., so now the Christians gather to hear not only [Old Testament] Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13) but also the apostolic letters (Col. 4:16).”<sup>36</sup>

While the gathered church today does indeed bear an authority greater than what is sometimes acknowledged (Matt 18:18-20), no one individual today bears the authority that was granted to Paul. No one alive today has been commissioned, as Paul was, to lay a gospel foundation for the entire Gentile church. And this commission was given by Jesus himself, in words that have been preserved for us—in red letters!—in several passages in the book of Acts (9:15-16; 26:16-18; see also 9:6; 18:9-10; 22:10, 18, 21; 23:11).

Paul functioned as an ambassador. A king's ambassador has no intrinsic authority. Rather, the authority he bears is a mediated authority. It is the authority of the king, an authority used for the glory of the king. On the one hand this means that an ambassador must not speak on his own initiative. On the other hand, this means that when an ambassador speaks faithfully on behalf of his king, his words are fully authoritative. To question the faithful words of the ambassador is to question the King and detract from his glory.

Keen readers will have noticed that I passed over several passages that may appear to undermine the authority of Paul's writings. For example, sometimes he buttresses his own statements either by saying Christ is actually speaking (1 Cor. 7:10) or by citing the Mosaic Law (1 Cor. 9:8). Does this mean that the rest of Paul's words—the ones unsupported by Christ or the Law—are less authoritative? And what about when Paul writes, “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)” (1 Cor. 7:12)? Or when he writes “I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy” (1 Cor. 7:25)? Is he merely voicing his own opinion?

Several suggestions may help. First, we should remember the abundant evidence for Paul's own apostolic authority. Paul did not need to cite either Christ or the Law for his words to bear authority. Rather, it appears that he sometimes chose to make such citations to add rhetorical power to his writings—to convince those who may have doubted the true apostolic authority that he already bore. Therefore, statements that lack citations do not lack authority, even though they may have less rhetorical force.

Second, when Paul says “I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)” (1 Cor. 7:10), he seems to be referencing a teaching that Christ gave during his earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 5:32; 19:9). This happens again in Acts 18:35, where Paul quotes Jesus' words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” The Corinthian passage seems to be built on the teachings of Jesus about divorce that we can find in the Gospels; the Acts quotation reminds us that the apostles knew of other teachings of Jesus that have not

---

<sup>35</sup> Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 140.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

been preserved in our Bibles (see John 21:25). Paul treasured the words of our Lord and was glad to share them in his ministry.

Third, when Paul writes, “To the rest I say (I, not the Lord)” (1 Cor. 7:12), he has just finished referencing a teaching that Christ gave during his earthly ministry. His clarifying statement thus functions primarily to specify that he is no longer directly transmitting Christ's earthly teaching. Rather, he is making an application of Christ's words to a specific situation facing the Corinthians. Paul's application and elaboration, however, bear apostolic authority. Notice that this passage contains the very same imperatives (“should not”) that Paul used when transmitting Jesus' teachings. Kruger explains:

Although some have understood this [Paul's clarification in 7:12] to be Paul's making a distinction between his own lesser authority and Jesus' higher authority, a closer reading of the passage reveals the opposite. Paul's statement... makes it clear to the Corinthians that Paul has the authority to issue binding commands and therefore to speak for Jesus on topics that have not been directly addressed by him.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, when Paul writes “I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy” (1 Cor. 7:25), Paul is addressing a question that was not a matter of right and wrong. Rather, Paul was giving his Spirit-guided judgment (1 Cor. 7:40) on a question that allowed for a variety of valid choices. The question at hand (“concerning the betrothed”) was not a question that called for a command, either from the Lord or from Paul.<sup>38</sup> After Paul gave his judgment as to the best course of action, he clarified that each person could “do as he wishes” (1 Cor. 7:36). This passage, therefore, does not throw Paul's authority into question. Rather, it demonstrates that he did not use his authority indiscriminately or wrongfully (see also Phlm 1:8-9). He recognized that his authority was untrusted to him by Christ. He refused to use this authority to turn his preferences into commands.

Passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 are very rare in the Pauline letters. Our task is to notice when Paul clarifies that he is not issuing commands, while also acknowledging the apostolic authority that his letters bear. In addition, this passage seems to address a specific historical crisis (“in view of the present distress,” 7:26) and should be interpreted accordingly. In this sense our interpretive task with the Pauline letters is similar to our interpretive task with Jesus' words, for many of Jesus' words were also addressed to specific historical circumstances (see Luke 22:35-36).

### ***John 3:16 as a test case: “My sheep know my voice”***

Red letter Christians are presented with an interesting challenge when they come to the Gospel of John. In the third chapter of John, which records Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, it is unclear where the words of Jesus end. In the King James Version, which uses no quotation marks, the red letters continue all the way until verse 21. Similarly, the English Standard Version uses quotation marks to indicate that Jesus' words continue until verse 21. A footnote, however, states that “some interpreters hold that the quotation ends at verse 15.” Some other modern translations contain similar footnotes. A quick scan of some popular English translations reveals that the ESV, New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, Holman Christian Standard Bible, and New Living Translation adhere to the traditional

---

<sup>37</sup> Kruger, 187.

<sup>38</sup> Some believe that Paul's teaching here mirrors Jesus' response to a similar question about chastity: “There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (Matt. 19:12). This reading understands Jesus' second sentence above to be an invitation rather than a command. Other scholars understand Jesus' statement as a call to recognize the cost of true discipleship, much as his statement “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” This reading understands Jesus' reference to “eunuchs” to be specifically about those who have been divorced, rather than (as with Paul) about single Christians in general.

long quotation, while the NET Bible and the New International Version end Jesus' words at verse 15.

So here is the question: Which is right? And, more importantly, *does it matter?* Would it change the authority of John 3:16 if it was written by the apostle John rather than spoken by Jesus? Would it make any difference in the way we would use the verse? Would it mean that we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in verse 15 but not in verse 16?

For the sake of argument, let's say that we conclude that John 3:16 was *not* spoken by Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Now let's try a little *reductio ad absurdum* test on red letter Christianity. Should we teach children to memorize verses 14-15 instead of verse 16? (After all, they contain a somewhat similar message: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.") Should we remove verse 16 from our gospel tracts and our theological statements, replacing them with red letter texts? Should we likewise reduce our use of John's prologue, with its marvelous description of how "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14)? Should we stop reading Jesus' birth stories from Matthew and Luke, since we have no record of what he spoke before the age of twelve?

Would our Gospels be better off if they contained no authorial comments or narratives whatsoever? Would such an abbreviated gospel be more authoritative? Would it be more trustworthy? Were the ancient Gnostics right when they compiled their "gospels" which consisted almost entirely of *sayings* of Jesus, with little reference to either the historical details of Jesus' life or the Old Testament?

### ***The identity of Jesus: "But who do you say that I am?"***

Red letter Christianity—even the kind that includes Jesus' actions along with his words—tends not to grasp the full identity of Jesus. It correctly recognizes that Jesus is the perfect revelation of God ("Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," John 14:9), but it sometimes forgets that *we have not yet seen all there is to see of Jesus*. The disciples knew Jesus (and therefore God) meaningfully, but not comprehensively. On this side of Pentecost, we can know Jesus (and therefore God) more comprehensively than they did. Yet we are still awaiting the day when "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Red letter Christians, like the ancient Jews, seem to expect the full revelation of the Messiah in one coming. They tend to emphasize Jesus as Suffering Servant, but spend less time considering that Jesus is also the coming Judge.<sup>40</sup> They hear the Lamb of God on the cross crying "Father, forgive them!" (Luke 23:34) but sometimes forget that there is coming a day when another cry will be heard: "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:16-17). Red letter Christianity hears Jesus telling his disciples to turn the other cheek and thinks God should be held to the same moral code—forgetting that we do not avenge ourselves precisely because we "leave it to the wrath of God" (Romans 12:19). Thus, red letter Christianity commonly downplays the wrath of God while focusing

---

<sup>39</sup> This is indeed my conclusion; I think that John's quotation of Jesus' words probably ends at verse 15. The following verse (16-21) contain vocabulary and concepts that sound more like the apostle John than like the other words of Jesus recorded in this Gospel. In particular, these verses are similar to another passage (31-36) later in the same chapter, a passage that functions in parallel fashion as authorial commentary, this time upon the words of John the Baptist. This passage is also similar to John's prologue (1:1-18) and his purpose statement (20:30-31).

<sup>40</sup> In contrast, Paul draws from the same Old Testament prophet who describes the Suffering Servant to describe Christ returning in judgment. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 Paul borrows language from Isaiah 66:15 and Isaiah 2:10, 19 and 21, thus portraying Christ as exercising Yahweh's wrath.

on the love of God.

This focus often leads to an overly-narrow view of even Jesus' first coming. Red letter Christianity likes the Christus Victor theory of atonement (Christ defeated Satan on the cross) but is uncomfortable with the suggestion that Jesus may have experienced God's wrath on our behalf. Thus, it tends to reduce the multifaceted splendor of the biblical portraits of Christ and his atoning work.

Surprisingly, Red letter Christianity can lead to an impoverished understanding of even Jesus' words. For example, when Jesus instructs his disciples to treat the unrepentant brother “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17), do we interpret that phrase only by Jesus' example of befriending tax collectors, thus concluding we should *fellowship closely* with unrepentant “brothers”? Or do we also remember that Jesus is discussing the coming “church” that he will build through the apostles? Do we, then, allow Paul's teachings about church discipline to shape our understanding of Jesus' words—thus concluding that we should *avoid* close fellowship with unrepentant “brothers”?<sup>41</sup> Do we let Jesus' apostles' words help us understand Jesus' words?

Have we unwittingly tried to trim Jesus down to size, focusing only on those parts that fit our theology? Is our focus limited to a select set of themes such as kingdom ethics and values? On the one hand, are we sure we are following Jesus as fully as we ought? What about when Jesus heals the sick, casts out demons, and raises the dead? Do we consider that these actions, too, may be examples for us to follow? Do we remember that Jesus instructed his disciples to also perform miracles (Matthew 10:8) as they announced the kingdom, and that they did so throughout the book of Acts? On the other hand, do we remember that King Jesus is not only our perfect Example, but also the unique Son of God, doing many things that it would be an abomination for us to imitate?

In short, the entire New Testament describes a Christianity that is “bigger” than the Christianity found in the gospels, and the gospels in their entirety present a Jesus that is “bigger” than the Jesus found only in the Sermon on the Mount.

***The Sermon on the Mount and the gospel: “How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”***

So what about the Sermon on the Mount? Should we call it the “Constitution of the Kingdom of God”? Perhaps we can. Commentators note remarkable parallels between the lives of Moses and Jesus, parallels that Matthew seems to intentionally note as he leads up to his record of the Sermon on the Mount. There are also explicit connections between the Sermon on the Mount and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. But just as the Ten Commandments (and the other laws) were only part of the Mosaic Covenant, so the Sermon on the Mount is only part of the New Covenant. (In addition, a constitution is different from a covenant.)

Like many other ancient covenants, the Mosaic Covenant includes many components: preamble (identifying the giver and the recipients of the covenant), prologue (a reminder of the prior relationship between the two parties), stipulations (or laws), witnesses (such as God himself, or heaven and earth), a document clause (instructions to write down the covenant for future review), and sanctions (blessings

---

<sup>41</sup> The former interpretation also forgets that Jesus himself uses the term “Gentiles” elsewhere as a typical Jewish short-hand reference to those who are not God's people; see Matthew 5:47; 6:7, 32. Additionally, it forgets that Jesus commanded his disciples to “shake the dust from [their] feet” when they left any house or town where the people did not listen to them; see Matthew 10:12-15.

and curses as incentives for obedience).<sup>42</sup> Notice especially the prologue. In the Mosaic Covenant, the prologue (as found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy) summarized God's great redemption of Israel from Egypt. This redemption was an essential part of the covenant, establishing the relationship between the two parties. *God's work preceded man's obedient response.*

When we consider the Sermon on the Mount, we find that much of it focuses on one element of a covenant—the stipulations, or laws. Elements of a preamble and sanctions are also included. Sanction clauses (“all these things will be added to you,” 6:33b, for example) hint at the gospel and assume its reality. But there is nothing like a prologue. Why? Because God's mightiest work of redemption was still to come! Jesus' death and resurrection were still in the future and are never explained in the Sermon on the Mount. It was that great saving work that would define our relationship with God.

How should this affect our reading of the Sermon on the Mount, that favorite text of red letter Christians? On the one hand it should reinforce its importance. Yes, God seems to have inspired Matthew to give special prominence to these great teachings of Jesus. They are indeed a wonderful summary of the ethics of the kingdom of God. But they are not the entire new covenant! They are not even a *summary* of the entire new covenant. The Sermon on the Mount reveals the very heart and essence of Christian *ethics*, but only speaks in general terms about *the gospel* and *Christianity*. We read things like “your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matt. 6:14), which is certainly a gospel message, but no more specific than “the gospel [preached] beforehand to Abraham..., 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'” (Gal. 3:8). And we read nothing like “Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel” (2 Tim. 2:8) or even passing mention of “the word of the cross,” as Paul summarized the gospel he preached to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 17-18).

The ethical instructions of the Sermon on the Mount, by themselves, are most certainly *not* good news. Persecuted Christians, unlike liberal humanists and prosperity theologians, know that Jesus' commands to avoid lust, turn the cheek, and lay up treasures in heaven were not designed to give us our “best life now.” Jesus never says anything like “Stay faithfully married to your wife and you will enjoy a better sex life” or “Love your enemies and you will enjoy peace on earth.” Rather, he says “Blessed are those who are persecuted” and “The way is hard that leads to life” (Matt. 5:10; 7:14). Properly understood, Jesus' commands are an invitation to suffer. These ethical imperatives are not “good news” at all—unless the gospel assurance of eternal rewards through the work of King Jesus is true. The Sermon indeed emphasizes these rewards, but it does not elaborate how God made the rewards available or how we can perform the ethics that characterize those who will enjoy those rewards.

Preaching the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount without clearly presenting the good news of Jesus' saving work will lead to a self-righteousness of arrogance or, if we are more honest, of despair. It will place a crushing load on our hearers. (Read Tolstoy if you want an historical example.) Law without grace is not good news. It is not the gospel. The good news is not first of all instructions but *news*—news that the King is establishing his kingdom and that he has died and risen to save a people for himself. Until people are truly justified, born again, filled with the Spirit, and aware of the rich heritage of manifold blessings that is theirs in Christ (read Ephesians 1-3 for a start), the Sermon on the Mount will only deal death. You have heard that it is said that no one can perfectly obey the Ten Commandments, but “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Did the disciples obey the Sermon on the Mount before they had experienced Pentecost? Can we?

---

<sup>42</sup> These covenant components can be found in many Bible study aids. I've adapted this summary from Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 439.

Training in grace is what prepares us to be “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11-14; 3:3-8). What you *believe* about Jesus and his saving work determines whether you will *follow* his example. What you believe about God (theology) determines whether you will obey (ethics). If we are to “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), then we must first have a “knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness” (Titus 1:1). Our hearts and minds must grasp the good news before our hands can zealously perform good deeds. No, we do not need full understanding before obedience is possible. And yes, obedience will lead to more understanding—to better theology. But obedience that pleases God is impossible unless it springs from a heart of faith.

The Sermon on the Mount is a powerful call to live beautiful, gospel-shaped lives. Any person gripped by the gospel of grace should be eager to obey its teachings. But we will want to look elsewhere for a fuller understanding of gospel theology. And *it is good theology that makes good ethics possible and purposeful.*

### ***Excited about the gospel: “Apart from me you can do nothing”***

There are only three Bible verses where the noun “gospel” is coupled with the verb “obey.”<sup>43</sup> None are found on Jesus' lips. Two are from Paul (!) and one from Peter (Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17). The occurrence in Romans 10:16 is very instructive. Here is the verse, in context:

As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!' But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?' So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:15-17)

Let's consider both the word “gospel” and the word “obey.” First, notice that the word “gospel” is set in parallel with a term in the previous verse: “good news.” (These closely related terms share the same Greek root.) The term “good news” is part of a quote from Isaiah. When we examine the original Isaiah context of that quote, we find that the “good news” being preached is the news that “Your God reigns” (Isa. 52:7). So the gospel here is a message about God reigning—the same message Jesus announced when he proclaimed “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; etc). Second, notice that the verb “obeyed” in verse 16 is set in parallel with the verb “believed” later in the same verse, and that the word “believed” is then linked to the noun “faith” in verse 17. Thus the obedience that Paul mentions is an expression of faith, not merely behavior that conforms to a set of commands (cf. Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

When we synthesize our brief word studies, we see that the gospel is a message about God reigning, a message that demands a response of faith and obedience. In fact, Paul says “faith comes by hearing,” thus suggesting that it is the proclamation of the gospel message itself that makes the faith-obedience response possible. In summary, despite the pairing of “gospel” with “obey” in this passage, we still see that *the gospel is first of all a message—a message about something that God is doing.* This message becomes good news to us personally as it enables us to respond with faith and obedience. This definition of the gospel as *news about God's doings* (which is intended to awaken a human response of faith and obedience) closely matches the use of the term in the four Gospels. There the noun “gospel” is usually paired with the verbs “preach” and “proclaim,” never “obey.”

Menno Simons understood these truths well and it is worth quoting several of his explanations of the gospel at length. In Simon's most important book, “A Foundation and Plain Instruction of the Saving Doctrine of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” there is a chapter entitled “Faith.” There we read the following:

...We teach with Christ and say, "Believe the gospel," Mark. 1:15. *That gospel is the glad tidings and*

---

<sup>43</sup> This statement is based on my concordance search of the ESV.

*promulgation of the favor and grace of God toward us, and the forgiveness of our sins through Christ Jesus.* The believer, by faith, receives this gospel through the Holy Ghost, and does not look upon his former righteousness or unrighteousness, but hopes against hope, Rom. 4:18, and with the whole heart depends upon the grace, word and promises of the Lord; since he well knows that God is true, and that his promises are sure, Ps. 33:4; Rom. 3:4; 1 Cor. 1:9; thereby the heart is renewed, converted, justified, made pious, peaceable and joyous, Rom. 14:17; Gal. 5:22; he is born a child of God, John 1:13, approaches, with full confidence, the throne of grace, Heb. 4:11, and thus becomes a joint heir of Christ and a possessor of everlasting life, Rom. 8:14; 1 Tim. 1:16...

Therefore, we exhort you, with Christ Jesus, "Believe the gospel;" that is, believe *the joyful news, the message of divine grace through Jesus Christ*; leave off sinning, manifest repentance for your past lives, submit to the word and will of the Lord; then you will become heirs and joint-heirs, citizens and children of the new and heavenly Jerusalem, made free from your enemies, hell, sin, death and the devil, and walk according to the Spirit, and not according to the flesh, Rom. 8:6.<sup>44</sup>

Earlier in the same book, in a chapter entitled "The Day of Grace," Simons discussed Jesus' proclamation found in Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." After several paragraphs elaborating on the first clause ("the time is fulfilled"), Simons mediated on the gospel of the kingdom of God. Notice again how Simons understood the gospel to be essentially a message about God's manifold saving actions:

He has declared the gospel of the kingdom, the word of his Father; he taught and left unto his followers, an example of pure love, and an unblemished life, Matt. 4:17; Jn. 7:14, 15; conquered the mighty, destroyed the power of the devil, bore our sins, abolished death, reconciled the Father, acquired for all the chosen children of God, grace, favor, mercy, eternal life, dominion and peace, Heb. 2; 1. Pet. 2; 1. Cor. 15, and has been ordained by his Eternal and Almighty Father as an omnipotent King over the holy Mount Zion, as the head of the Church, a Provider and Dispenser of heavenly blessings; yea, an Almighty Ruler over all in heaven and on earth, Is. 2; Eph. 2; and *this is what Christ here declares*, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand," Mark. 1:15.<sup>45</sup>

No one can accuse Menno Simons of "easy believism." He was absolutely clear on our need to "awake, with sober hearts, and give ear to the inviting voice, and in this accepted time arise from the deep slumber of our abominable and offensive sins."<sup>46</sup> Yet when defining the gospel itself, he was equally crystal-clear: it is "joyful news, the message of divine grace through Jesus Christ." Have we forgotten this truth—that the gospel is primarily about God's actions, not human actions?

In 1993 Stephen F. Dintaman published an article called "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision."<sup>47</sup> In this article he summarized the Anabaptist vision, as outlined by Harold S. Bender in his 1944 essay by the same name. According to this vision, "the essence of the Anabaptist approach to Christianity consisted of 1) the Christian life as discipleship; 2) the church as community; and 3) the practice of nonresistant love." Dintaman notes that that Bender himself had "two unstated assumptions" that lay behind his expression of the Anabaptist vision: "1) he held firmly to basic evangelical doctrines about the being and work of God in Christ; and 2) he believed and taught that the living out of the vision was only possible through the indwelling presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit." However, as Dintaman notes, "Christianity as defined in the Anabaptist vision is essentially about

---

<sup>44</sup> Menno Simons, *The Complete Works of Menno Simons*, ed. John F. Funk (Elkhart, Ind.: 1871). Emphasis added. Accessed 2015-01-19, <http://www.mennosimons.net/ft007-faith.html>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added. Accessed 2015-01-19, <http://www.mennosimons.net/ft005-dayofgrace.html>

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Accessed 2015-01-19, <http://www.mennosimons.net/ft005-dayofgrace.html>

<sup>47</sup> Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 1993-03-05. Accessed 2013-11-22, <http://www.nextreformation.com/wp-admin/documents/Dintaman.pdf> All Dintaman quotes come from this article.

behavior.” Bender's adherents “taught passionately about Christian behavior and deepened the concept of discipleship. But they gave only passing attention to the work of Christ and of the Spirit in the inner transformation of the person.”

In the rest of Dintaman's article, he outlines the result. Anabaptists became, to use our term, red letter Christians. According to Dintaman, they had “little insight into human behavior” and an inability to help those who were trapped deeply in sin. They had “an inadequate awareness of the liberating work of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus” and proclaimed a gospel of social peace attained by human effort. They were “impoverished in [their] sense of the spiritual presence and power of the risen Christ.” Then, in words that should make every red letter Christian pause, Dintaman adds, “Perhaps the major fallacy of the modern Anabaptist vision is that it has taught prepentecostal discipleship.” Dintaman was writing about what he saw among Mennonite academics, students and church leaders in the world of the seminary. But I submit that his critique is equally valid for all Anabaptists who preach a gospel that is “essentially about behavior.”

D.A. Carson, research professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, records similar observations:

I have a colleague in the Missions Department at Trinity whose analysis of his own heritage is very helpful. Dr. Paul Hiebert labored for years in India before returning to the United States to teach. He springs from Mennonite stock and analyzes his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nonetheless. One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments [or necessary results and out-workings]. The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the “entailments” became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.”<sup>48</sup>

Hiebert, like Dintaman, is primarily describing academic or liberal Mennonites. But the same danger threatens conservative Anabaptists who mistake the entailments of the gospel of the kingdom for the gospel itself.

Why does this kind of drift happen? Carson's next words suggest the answer: “What we must ask one another is this: What is it in the Christian faith that excites you? What consumes your time? What turns you on?”<sup>49</sup> Or, as Carson writes elsewhere:

Recognize that students do not learn everything you teach them. They certainly do not learn everything I teach them! What do they learn? They learn what I am excited about; they learn what I emphasize, what I return to again and again; they learn what organizes the rest of my thought. So if I happily presuppose the gospel but rarely articulate it and am never excited about it, while effervescing frequently about, say, ecclesiology or textual criticism, my students may conclude that the most important thing to me is ecclesiology or textual criticism. They may pick up my assumption of the gospel; alternatively, they may even distance themselves from the gospel; but what they will almost certainly do is place at the center of their thought ecclesiology or textual criticism, thereby wittingly or unwittingly marginalizing the gospel... I must be concerned for what I am passing on to the next generation, its configuration, its balance and focus. I dare never forget that students do not learn everything I try to teach them but primarily what I am excited about.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 26-27.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Carson, “The Scholar as Pastor,” in *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, by John Piper and D. A. Carson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 98–99. Quoted by Andrew David Naselli in “D.A. Carson's Theological Method,” *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pages 248-49. Accessed 2013-11-23, [http://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/2011\\_Carson.pdf](http://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/2011_Carson.pdf)

Substitute “kingdom ethics and values” for “ecclesiology or textual criticism,” and Carson has just described red letter Christianity.

## Conclusions

So where does this leave us? We have seen that Jesus went to the cross still having “many things” he wanted to say to his disciples, things he promised to say later to his apostles through the Spirit. We have seen that the spiritual blindness of the disciples during Jesus’ earthly ministry necessarily limited the fullness of pre-Pentecostal revelation. We have seen how Luke’s Gospel is tied to his sequel, Acts, so that the apostolic sermons in Acts explain Jesus death and resurrection and his post-resurrection words, which are only mentioned without explanation in Luke. We have seen that Acts portrays the apostles as specially chosen, unrepeatable *eyewitnesses*, and that the apostles of Acts—Paul included—turn out to be the authors of most of the rest of the New Testament documents, a fact leading naturally to the formation of a closed canon of Christian Scriptures. We have seen Paul’s keen sense of his own divinely-appointed apostolic authority and how his gospel of grace-powered-obedience and his radical discipleship match the teachings of Jesus as found in the Gospels. We have seen that a red letter reduction approach to the New Testament tends to trim Jesus down to love (little wrath) and the gospel down to ethics (little theology of grace). Finally, we have been challenged to—like Menno Simons—get excited about the gospel as being “the message of divine grace through Jesus Christ.”

In conclusion, then, let me offer one more argument against red letter reductionism—this time from the favorite book of red letter Christians, the Gospel according to Matthew. Then let me offer two clarifications and five concluding suggestions.

So far I have presented no arguments from the Gospel of Matthew against red letter reductionism. This is a weakness, for Matthew is probably the favorite book of red letter Christians. So does this mean—at least from Matthew’s perspective—that there is indeed some disagreement within the New Testament about the role that the red letters should play in our Christian thought and practice? Does Matthew promote a red letter Christianity that is different from the black letter Christianity of the rest of the New Testament?

David Starling addresses such questions in his recent book *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship*.<sup>51</sup> First, Starling notes that both the Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel and the six “antitheses” of Matthew 5 give Jesus’ own words a prominence that matches and perhaps even exceeds the law of Moses. Similarly, at the center of Matthew’s Gospel we find the mount of transfiguration, where God the Father exalts Jesus with an assertion (“this is my Son”) and a command (“listen to him!”). Starling suggests that “the assertion and command... (echoed by Jesus’s own assertion and command in Matt. 28:18-20a) are the twin foci around which Matthew arranges the material of his Gospel.” Thus, there are “five big blocks of red-letter content (chs. 5-7; 10; 13:1-52; 18; 24-25) in Matthew,” each underscoring “the identity and authority of Jesus as the Son of God.” Starling summarizes what this reveals about Matthew’s purposes as a Gospel writer:

The bulk and the prominence of these five blocks of teaching suggest that Matthew intended not only to narrate Jesus’ story but also to preserve and propagate his teachings, so that his disciples might learn and obey them. Evidently, according to the shape and content of Matthew’s testimony, the redness of the red letters in his Gospel is of no small significance to Jesus, to Matthew, and to God himself, and ought to be of no small

---

<sup>51</sup> See “Everything I Have Commanded You,” in *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretive Habits and Practices* by David L. Starling (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 93-103.

significance to the Gospel's readers.<sup>52</sup>

So far, so good for red letter theology. But Starling continues:

But what exactly is the nature of that significance? How does Matthew want us to understand the relationship between Jesus's words and the words of the Old Testament Scriptures (and, for that matter, Matthew's own words as the writer of the Gospel)?<sup>53</sup>

Starling answers by examining both Jesus' words and Matthew's words. The first words of Jesus recorded in Matthew (at his baptism) implicitly appeal to Scripture (Matt. 3:15). The next recorded words (at his temptation) directly appeal to Scripture (Matt. 4:1-11). The Beatitudes "are soaked in recollections of the Scriptures," and "it is harder to imagine a stronger claim for the enduring importance of the Law than the language Jesus uses" in Matthew 5:18: "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."<sup>54</sup> As we continue reading Matthew's record of Jesus' words, the pattern of quoting and honoring the Scriptures continues. So Starling concludes:

The red letters of Matthew's Gospel can hardly be interpreted as an attempt to wrest authority away from the black. Any notion we might have that Jesus's words could replace or supersede the words of Old Testament Scripture is dispelled as soon as Jesus starts speaking.<sup>55</sup>

Matthew's own words have a similar effect. Starling suggests that Matthew is teaching a way of reading the Scriptures. He does this by using a "constant interleaving of biographical narrative [about Jesus' life], typological allusions [from the Old Testament], and scriptural citations [also from the Old Testament]."<sup>56</sup> Craig Keener explains:

Matthew has constructed almost every paragraph following the genealogy and until the Sermon on the Mount around at least one text of Scripture. He thus invites his ideal audience to read Jesus in light of Scripture and Scripture in light of Jesus.<sup>57</sup>

The references to the Old Testament continue throughout Matthew's narrative, "so that we might learn to read Scripture, and to understand Christ, accordingly."<sup>58</sup>

Starling ends his chapter with insightful and mature reflections, worth quoting at length:

The red letters of Jesus's teachings do indeed... fulfill a particular function in the economy of Scripture. Christians who... attempt to read the Scriptures as a timeless, undifferentiated compendium of divine commands, may revere Scripture but can hardly be said to have understood its message: those who faithfully trace the lines of Scripture's black letters must inevitably be led to the place where they become hearers (and doers) of the red.

But the relationship between the black letters and the red is not a one-way street; it is a recursive, reciprocal relationship. The black letters of the Old Testament prophecy and apostolic testimony lead us to Jesus and urge us to listen to him; the red letters of Jesus's teaching, in turn, commission and authorize his apostles as heralds of the gospel and send us back to the Old Testament to learn its meaning and its implications afresh in

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>57</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 81. Quoted by Starling on page 102.

<sup>58</sup> Starling, 102.

light of his coming. The red letters of Matthew's Gospel are joined to the black in an indispensable, mutually authorizing, and mutually interpretive relationship; what God has joined together no interpreter should attempt to separate.

For evangelicals in our own time, confronted with the claim that we must choose between two different kinds of Christianity—one defined by the red letters of Scripture and the other defined by the black—the Gospel of Matthew provides a timely warning against false dichotomies and needless schisms. It reminds “red letter Christians” of the indispensability of the black letters and reminds “black letter Christians of the centrality of the red (or, more precisely, of the one who speaks them).<sup>59</sup>

To this exhortation I say “amen”—adding only a little more precision by reminding us that it is actually the risen Jesus himself who is speaking in the black letters of the apostolic writings, as we noted above. In summary, Christians who try to use Matthew's Gospel to create a more perfect red letter version of Christianity do dishonor to Matthew and to Jesus himself.

Let me end, then, with two clarifications and five concluding suggestions.

First, I want to clarify once more that *I am not attempting to de-emphasize the words of Jesus*. Rather, I am pointing out that Jesus wasn't done talking when he ascended. I am trying to emphasize *all* of his words, including his post-ascension ones.

Second, I want to clarify that *I am not arguing for a “flat Bible” approach*, which treats all words of the Bible as equally clear and significant for shaping our understanding and our behavior. Rather, I am arguing that red letter theology is a far too simplistic solution to the “flat Bible” problem.

So, what is a better solution? Space prevents a full answer, but here are some leads to follow. A better solution recognizes the unfolding of biblical theology, with its transitions between covenants and its movement from promise to “last days” fulfillment. It remembers that the earthly Jesus often cited Old Testament Scriptures to explain his own identity, ministry, and followers. It remembers that he also promised more revelation to come; he was living only in the very *first days* of the “last days.” It scans the entire Bible for those passages that speak God's viewpoint most clearly and fully, using them as guides for understanding more obscure passages. It understands literary devices such as genre and voice, denying that all texts or characters within the Bible directly express God's viewpoint, but affirming that all texts are equally God-breathed and thus equally authoritative. Many of the Bible's most prominent landmark mountains are found outside the red letters.

In this essay I am suggesting that the “raw data” of Jesus' perfect revelation of the Father is most clearly and fully understood when we interpret it through the lens of the Old Testament passages that he himself most often cited and through the writings of the apostles he himself commissioned.<sup>60</sup> Of course, it is also possible to wrongly relegate Jesus' words to a secondary position. Jonathan T. Pennington has argued strongly on historical and theological grounds that “the consummating narratives of the Gospels provide the interpretive key to the whole [biblical] story.”<sup>61</sup> I am not convinced his arguments are completely balanced (though his book is very helpful), but it is crucial to note that even if he were entirely right, he is not advocating a true red letter theology. First, he clarifies

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>60</sup> It is fascinating to explore which Old Testament passages were most foundational for Jesus and the apostolic writers. Two books are very helpful: *According to the Scriptures: The Substructure of New Testament Theology* by C.H. Dodd (London: Nisbet & Co., 1952) and *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* by R.T. France (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1998 [first pub. 1971]).

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 247.

that none of his arguments are intended “to diminish the role, importance, and canonical authority of the rest of the New Testament writings (or the OT writings for that matter).”<sup>62</sup> Second, and more importantly, he is arguing for the interpretive primacy of the Gospels *as a whole*—and especially of the *story* that they tell—not merely their red letters. The words of Jesus form only about half of text of the Gospels. And, despite the recent proliferation of publications of Jesus’ words extracted from the Gospels, many of his words are impossible to interpret correctly apart from their black-letter contexts.

The early church certainly would have thought red letter theology odd. In his classic work *Early Christian Doctrines*, J.N.D. Kelly summarizes the “the writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers... and the Greek apologists”:

For all these Christianity seems to have implied a complex of belief and practice... which in the final resort went back to Christ Himself. But if He was the supreme teacher, the immediately accessible authorities both for the facts about his Person and for His message were (a) the prophets, who had foreseen every detail of His ministry, and (b) the apostles, who had worked with Him and whom He had commissioned. This two-fold appeal to the united witness of the Old Testament and the apostles was characteristic of the age.<sup>63</sup>

In summary, biblical interpretation must indeed be Christocentric, but Christ is revealed in both the red and the black letters. This is the pattern modeled by Jesus himself, by the apostles, and by the writings and liturgy of the early church.

Finally, here are five suggestions. First, let us exercise some grace. Not everyone who is excited about the Sermon on the Mount or the kingdom of God is a red letter Christian. Not everyone who forgets to quote Paul in a sermon is preaching an impoverished gospel. And not all red letter Christians are equal. You may know few who have fallen into the dangers I’ve sketched in this essay. I’m not personally acquainted with any who possess all the flaws I’ve described.

Second, if you are in a church full of red letter Christians, learn from them! Then be sure to immerse yourself in the rest of the New Testament. Memorize Ephesians 1. Do a close study of Romans 1-8. Read how Paul motivates toward good works in his letter to Titus. Spend time with friends who consciously rely on the Holy Spirit and invoke his aid. Listen to recordings of preachers who enthusiastically celebrate the gospel of grace.

Third, if you are a red letter preacher yourself, or if an honest review of your preaching ministry reveals that you are majoring in “what you must do” while assuming everyone already knows “what God has done and is doing,” then seek a new balance. Preach the full gospel of grace-powered godliness. Do this before your old congregants shrivel under oppressive discouragement and your younger ones leave to follow another Piper who preaches both Pauline justification and passionate discipleship.

Fourth, let us celebrate (and obey!) the Sermon on the Mount for what it is—one of the key expressions of the ethics of Jesus’ kingdom—an ethics rooted in the hope of the gospel. I hope to study it more and perhaps even memorize it someday. It expresses much of the glory of Christ! We need more teaching on kingdom ethics and kingdom values, not less, and we need continued rigorous defense of the doctrines of nonresistance and “nonaccumulation.”

Fifth—and this is the burden of this essay—let us remember that the apostolic record of the earthly life and teachings of Jesus are not even the complete *foundation* of Christianity, let alone the whole house.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>63</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, revised edition, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 31.

The complete foundation includes also his death and resurrection, along with the Spirit-filled deposit of the apostles and prophets. If we build on only part of a foundation, we will miss much of the purpose of the architect and end up with an inferior shelter. Similarly, apart from the full New Testament revelation and the Old Testament foreshadowings that it unveils, we are likely to misinterpret and misapply Jesus' kingdom teachings. Indeed, apart from the events of Passion Week through Pentecost and on to the final return of Christ, the teachings and example of Jesus' earthly ministry are an insufficient gospel and cannot save.

Please don't preach a red letter reductionism, and please don't be a pre-Pentecostal disciple. What are you excited about? Only ethics and values? Or also—and *first of all*—the saving grace of God expressed in the full, unique work of Christ? There are “many things” from Jesus that you will miss if you value only what is found in red letters. How do we know? Jesus himself told us—in red letters, no less.