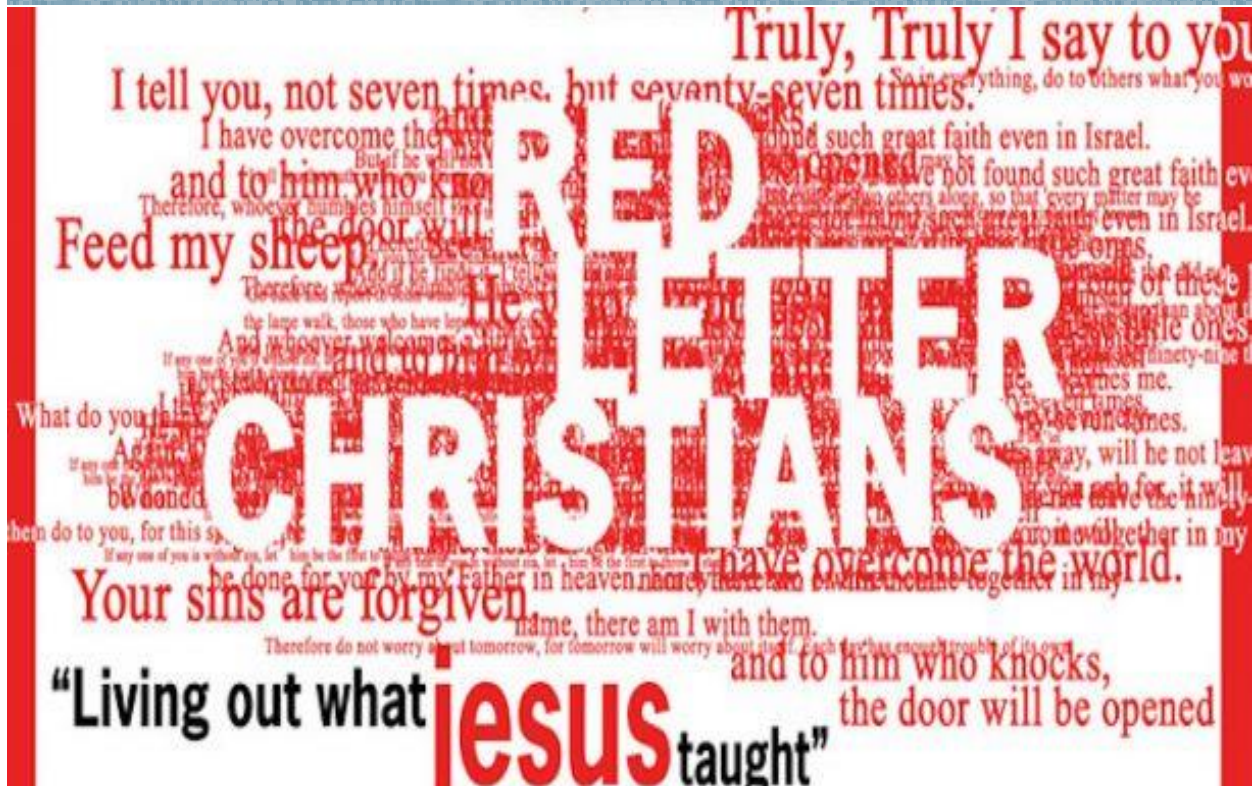
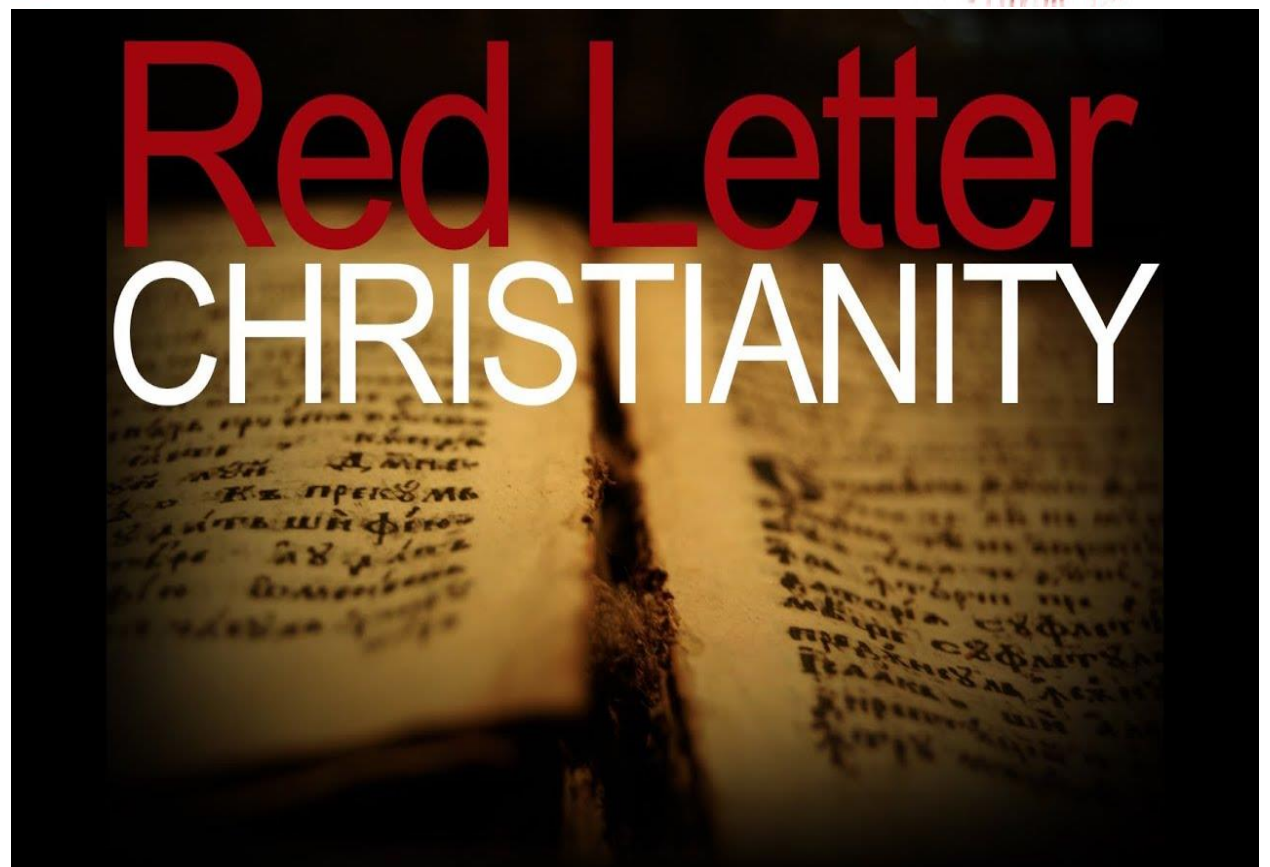
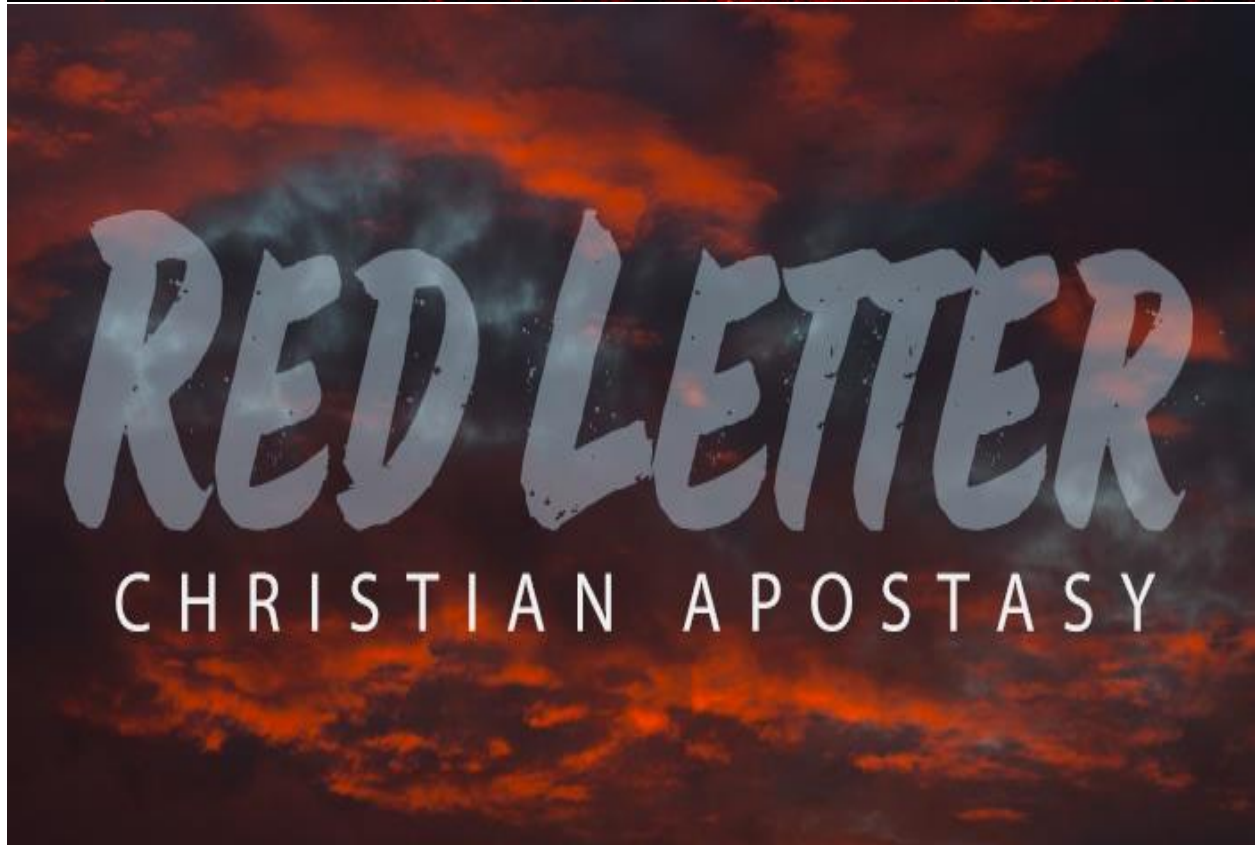


PARTIAL OBEDIENCE OF RED LETTER CHRISTIANS

by David Lee Burris









What Are Red Letter Christians?

Red Letter Christians describes itself as "a movement of believers who live out Jesus' counter-cultural teachings." They cast their vision for recapturing the term to mean a people who bring good news to the world. They chose the name Red Letter Christians to point to their primary commitment to following the words of Christ which in many Bibles are printed in red.

Unfortunately there are several problems associated with the Red Letter movement. The first problem is the primacy they place on Jesus' words. To concentrate solely on certain parts of the Bible to the exclusion of other parts and without placing those passages in the context of the whole Bible is imbalanced and leads to incomplete understanding of God's truth.

Second Timothy 3:16 teaches that "All Scripture is breathed out by God." Jesus describes Himself as the fulfillment of Old Testament law (Matthew 5:17). Paul's words are equally as relevant as Jesus' words. Perhaps, one could argue that Paul's words are more relevant considering his letters were written to instruct the early church in the practical outworking of Jesus' teaching. In any case, Christians should remember that **"All Scripture is breathed by God for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work"** (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

ARE BIBLE WORDS WRITTEN IN RED MORE IMPORTANT?

The first red letter edition of the Bible was printed in 1901. The first red letter New Testament was printed just 2 years before in 1899. The idea to print the words of Jesus in red is credited to Louis Kopsch. He was the editor of a Christian magazine and committed to distribution of the Word of God. He hit upon the red-letter idea in the hope of encouraging people to read the Bible. The first red letter editions printed in red the words spoken by Jesus and any passages in the Old Testament that Jesus later quoted. Today most red-letter Bibles only print in red direct quotations of Jesus.

The majority of Bibles today are red-letter. With large blocks of red-ink the four gospels have a distinctive appearance. An unfortunate side effect of this printing innovation is readers who treat the red letters as more important than the rest of the Bible. **The red letters become the lens through which the rest of the Bible is interpreted. In cases where there appears to be contradiction, the words of Jesus are given the priority in resolving the contradiction.**

This seems reasonable. The words in red are direct quotes from Jesus. The rest of the Bible is what God said through men. Shouldn't we give priority to the words of Jesus?

While the argument sounds good because it gives Jesus the most important place, it misunderstands the nature of inspiration. The doctrine of inspiration teaches that the entire Bible are the words of the Son of God. The things Hosea wrote are no less God's Word than the things Jesus said. Inspiration is described in 2 Peter 1:21, "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

Biblical inspiration refers to the process by which God's Words were written down by God's prophets and God's apostles. Human authors of the Bible wrote exactly what God told them to write. This does not mean God dictated to them what to write.

The authors of the Bible were not like secretaries typing up a letter as dictated by the boss. **God spake His Word using the personality and intellect of the men.** The writing style of Paul is very different from that of Peter. **God used these men in such a way that they wrote in their own style but still wrote exactly what God intended to be written.**

All of the Bible claims to be the very words of God. How many times does the Bible say, “The Lord said”? **Are the quotes of God the Son on the earth less important than the quotes of God the Father from heaven?**

Jesus Himself spake the words of the Old Testament as if they were as authoritative over Himself. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness He responded by quoting the Old Testament. **Jesus was showing that the Word of God was the authority over His life. He did not assert His own superiority, but declared His humble obedience to the Bible.**

Jesus quoted the Old Testament in His own life. While on the cross Jesus cried out the words of David from Psalm 22. The words of David were prophetic of Jesus. Are those words to be more true than the rest of the Psalms because Jesus said them?

The Bible cannot be split into various parts with some more important than the others. The Bible is all the Word of God, equally true and important no matter who is being quoted, or it is not. Emphasizing any section as greater than the rest is a dangerous path which inevitably compromises the authority and perfection of the Bible. – *Everlasting Truth*

Are Jesus' Words More Important Than Those of the Bible Writers'?

ERIC LYONS, M.Min.



BULLETIN ARTICLES INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE DEFINED FACTUAL ACCURACY

From Issue: [R&R – April 2018](#)

Occasionally, Christians will make the statement that “Jesus’ words are more important than the words of the Bible writers.” Allegedly, the words of Christ deserve greater attention, allegiance, and admiration than the inspired words of Paul, Peter, James, and every other Bible writer. Some even go so far as to say, “Jesus’ teachings must be obeyed, while the teachings of the Bible writers could be overlooked.” After all, **Jesus** is the Son of God (Acts 9:20). **He** died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3). **He** saves us (Luke 19:10). The Bible writers were merely men—fallible men who made numerous mistakes in their lives, and whose salvation, like ours, comes only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6). So why should we consider their teachings on par with the teachings of Christ?

It clearly needs to be established that **no one is equal to God**. The Creator and Sustainer of the Universe is infinite in all of His glorious attributes. He **alone** is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. The Son of God is the only accountable person never to sin (Hebrews 4:15). It has always been wrong to attempt to put men, even Bible writers, on par with God (cf. Genesis 3:5; Ezekiel 28:1-8). Only the wicked try to elevate themselves to the status of deity. Herod, for example, flirted with self-deification—and died in a horrific manner as a result (Acts 12:21-23). This incident stands in stark contrast to the reaction of a Bible writer, Paul, when the heathen at Lystra attempted to worship him. Rather than accept worship that is reserved only for God (Matthew 4:10), Paul and Barnabas refused it and rebuked those who attempted such worship (Acts 14:8-18).

Jesus, as God in the flesh (John 1:1-5,14,17), rightly accepted (and still accepts) His followers’ worship (John 9:35-38; Luke 24:52; Revelation 5:8-14). However, the fact the words of the Bible writers deserve the same level of attention & allegiance as the words of Christ has nothing to do with attempting to put weak, finite, sinful humanity on par with God.

To say that **all** of the words of the Bible deserve our utmost respect and attention is actually in harmony with what the Bible itself teaches.

First, the only reason we have the words of Christ is because God used **men** to write them down. Jesus did not write the gospel accounts; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all wrote about the life and teachings of Christ years after His death, resurrection, and ascension back into heaven. The apostle Paul also quoted Jesus occasionally (2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 Timothy 5:18; Acts 20:35; 22:7-21).

To say that the words of Christ deserve man's ultimate respect, while the words of the Bible writers warrant less appreciation, is to ignore the fact that God gave us the teachings of Christ **through** inspired **men** (Galatians 1:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; John 17:20).

Second, at times in the gospel accounts there is no clear way to know for sure if the Bible writers were quoting Jesus or simply narrating the inspired story. As commentator Leon Morris concluded:

*All are agreed that from time to time in the Gospel we have the meditations of the evangelist, but **it is difficult to know where they begin and end**. In the first century there were no devices like quotation marks to show the precise limits of quoted speech. The result is that we are always left to the probabilities and **we must work out for ourselves where a speech or quotation ends**.*

For example, we cannot say for sure if John 3:16—arguably the most frequently quoted Bible verse in the world—is a direct quotation of Jesus or a comment by John. The great thing is, we do not have to know this in order to know it's the teaching of God. Whether John 3:16 is a direct quote from Jesus or not, **it is from God**, and thus divinely authoritative.

Third, consider also the fact that Jesus quoted often from the Old Testament numerous times throughout His ministry. He quoted from Deuteronomy (6:13; 8:3) when tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). When conniving Pharisees asked Jesus a question about divorce (Matthew 19:1-10), the master Teacher directed their attention to God's plan for marriage as recorded in the first book of the Bible (Genesis 1:27; 2:24; 5:2). When dying on the cross (Matthew 27:46), Jesus quoted from Psalm 22:1. Genesis, Deuteronomy, and the book of Psalms did not **become** authoritative when Jesus quoted from them; **they were already authoritative**, because they came from God. After quoting from the relatively obscure words in Psalm 82:6, Jesus said, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). That is, it is impossible for Scripture to be annulled, for its authority to be denied, or its truth to be withstood. "It cannot be emptied of its force by being shown to be erroneous."⁴ Why? Because it was the authoritative, inspired, inerrant Word of God, even before Jesus quoted from it.

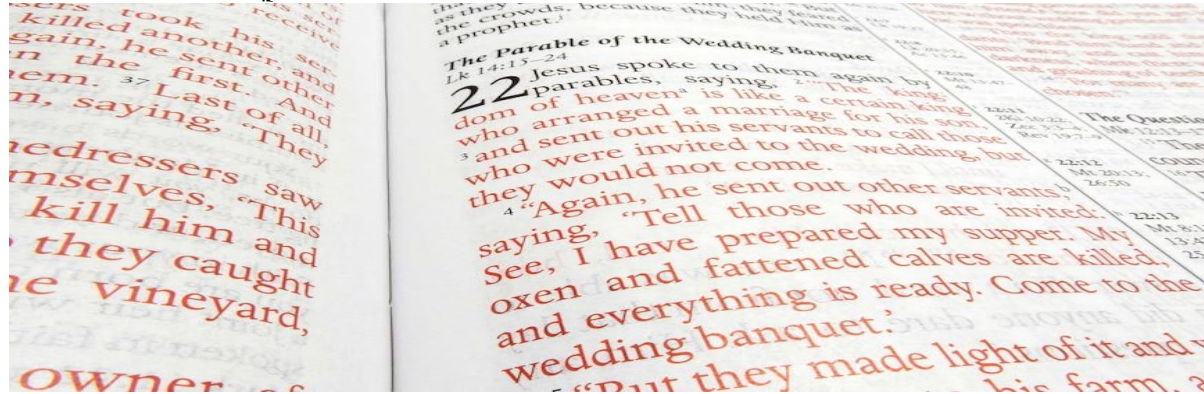
Indeed, the fact **Jesus** quoted extensively from the Old Testament, appealing to it as the authoritative “**Word of God**” (Mark 7:13; John 10:35), is further proof that **all** of the Scriptures—not just the words **Jesus Christ** spoke while on Earth — deserve our utmost respect. It is illogical and without biblical backing to suggest that the “Word of God” (whether the book of Genesis or the book of James) is somehow inferior to the “words of the Son of God.”

Fourth, **Jesus** and the Bible writers even referred to narrational comments, and not just direct quotations from God, as being God’s Word. For example, when **Jesus** reminded His hypocritical hearers of God’s original design in marriage (Genesis 1-2), He quoted from **Moses** in Genesis 2:24. Yet **Jesus** explained that “He [**God**] who made them at the beginning **said**” the words (Matthew 19:4-5). How could **God** have “said” this statement when **Moses** was not directly quoting God? Answer: **If it is in Scripture, it is “God’s Word”** (i.e., it was given by inspiration of God). When the writer of Hebrews quoted from the words of the psalmist (95:7), where nothing was said about this psalm being inspired by God, the Hebrews writer noted that these words were from “the Holy Spirit” (Hebrews 3:7-11). Why? Because the Holy Spirit guided the psalmist in what he wrote.

To treat the words of **Moses**, **Paul**, **Peter**, and other inspired penmen as “second class” Scripture is equivalent to saying that “God’s Word is not as important as God’s Word.” The fact is, “**All** Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). **Paul** quoted from **Jesus** and the God-inspired prophet **Moses** when writing Timothy and elevated both as “Scripture” (1 Timothy 5:18; 2 Peter 3:15-16). Therefore, whether we are reading a direct quotation from God the Father (Matthew 3:17), or a statement made by God the Son, or a truth revealed by God the Spirit through one of His inspired penmen (1 Corinthians 2:10; 2 Peter 1:20-21), **all** of Scripture should be respected and be rightly divided (2 Timothy 2:15). “I love Your commandments more than gold, yes, than fine gold!... Consider how I love Your precepts... My heart stands in awe of Your word. I rejoice in Your word as one who has found great treasure... I love your law... My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly” (Psalm 119:127,159-163,165,167).

The logical – and theological – problem with Red Letter Christians

By Joel Looper



So-called 'Red Letter Christians' risk leading evangelicals toward a Christianity that looks less like the Jesus the first Christians knew and more like a Jesus in our own image.

Jesus, Red Letter Christians remind us, cared for the poor and the downtrodden. He called his followers to abandon materialism and love their enemies. He identified peacemakers and the merciful as the truly blessed ones. Too often, Red Letter Christians say, Christians today don't even aspire to live a life like this — and the world has taken notice.

Red Letter Christians have indeed done crucial work in reminding us of some of Jesus's central teachings about the way his people should live. Regardless, there is a fundamental logical problem with the movement's central claim, the claim distinguishing Red Letter Christians from other evangelicals. That claim is that we should rank the words of Jesus in the gospels — those that appeared in red type in many older Bibles — as more important than the rest of scripture, including the rest of the New Testament.

If there seems to be a conflict between the words of Jesus and other commands or ideas in the Bible, Red Letter Christians tell us, it's best to put aside Paul and Peter, Isaiah and Hebrews for the time being in favor of those words that are explicitly attributed to Jesus. "Jesus shows us," Derek Flood writes, "that to be faithful means that we must question & think critically in love, rather than blindly adhering to scriptural precepts."

On one level, this might sound entirely reasonable. Why not stick to the words of Jesus if we find ourselves confused or troubled? And what serious believer has not been confused or troubled by something in the Bible? If we take this path, we will end up ignoring the very basis for the claims of the New Testament about Jesus: *eyewitness testimony*.

It's not hard to see why this is so. Those who followed Jesus during his public ministry spoke about and eventually wrote down testimony about Jesus's life and teachings. Whatever one's view of the shape of oral tradition and of theological reflection among the first Christians, their decision to put what they witnessed in writing is the only reason we have the gospels at all, and it is undoubtedly the reason we have four of them. Luke, for example, discusses his investigative work of compiling eyewitness testimony in his prologue.

Eyewitnesses, especially the Apostles themselves, attempted to relay not only the particular words Jesus spoke, but also his deeds, his ethical teachings and the context and meaning of it all to those who came after them. In other words, we cannot separate the words of Jesus from other eyewitness testimony, as if his words could simply be detached from their context and applied to our lives in whatever way seems right to us.

We are totally dependent upon the eyewitness testimony of those who first believed.

There are at least three connected reasons why this is the case. First, the apostles and other New Testament authors were in better position to understand the context for Jesus's preaching, sayings and commands than we are. They were Jesus's friends and students, and they knew both Aramaic and koine Greek better than anyone alive today. However positively we feel about the advances of biblical criticism, it would be foolish to subordinate what they wrote about Jesus to our interpretation of Jesus's words.

Second, we don't possess every word Jesus ever said. We simply don't have unmediated access to Jesus's words apart from those who first walked with him. The four gospels, though they give us what we need to follow Jesus, only tell us about a small portion of his life and teachings. As John recognised, if the apostles had even attempted to write down everything they had experienced with Jesus, "the whole world could not contain the books" (John 21:25). One cannot help but think that Jesus further elucidated the teachings that make up the Sermon on the Mount for his disciples, told parables we know nothing about, and gave further instruction on topics relevant to the disciples' lives. Undoubtedly, Jesus laughed with and encouraged scores of people who followed him, people who from our limited perspective are lost to history. **Therefore, we should never think we today have a clearer, more comprehensive understanding of Jesus's will for us than his first followers. They simply had more to go on than we do.**

Red Letter Christians are rightly troubled when evangelicals and other Christians seem to lose sight of who Christ is or downplay the significance of Jesus's explicit commands.

When we lose the centrality of Jesus, we end up talking a lot about things Jesus did not say anything about, and we don't say much about the things Jesus had a whole lot to say about. So Red Letter Christians is about a movement that wants a Christianity looking like Jesus again & known for love again.

The logical problem with this position is that the words of Jesus, like the rest of the New Testament, were filtered and interpreted by the eyewitnesses and the New Testament writers. **We simply cannot get back *behind* the text.** Thus, we can't understand the red letters or the centrality of Jesus without also heeding the black letters, the words of those who walked and talked with him, ate with him and sat under his teaching, the words of those whom Jesus entrusted with the gospel. [Red Letter adherents] imply that we do not need those first witnesses and that, once we have Jesus' words we somehow have unmediated access to Christ's teaching apart from their testimony.

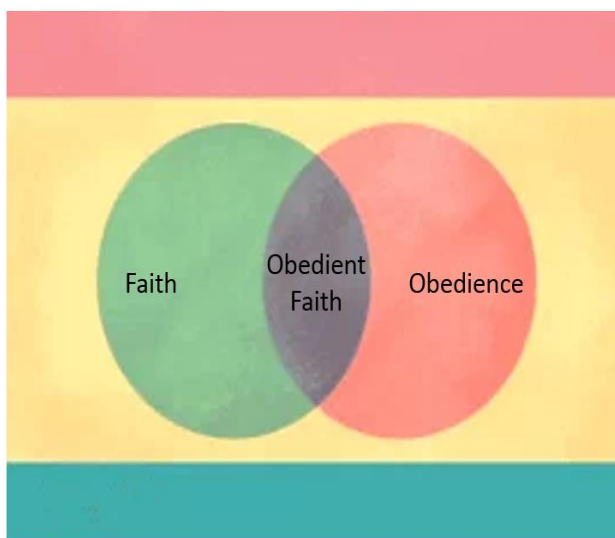
But by trimming the inconvenient or difficult parts of the testimony of the first Christians, Red Letter Christians have not succeeded in offering us a way to make our Christianity more like Jesus. Instead, they tacitly reject the very words that provide the necessary context for the words in red.

To the degree that they set aside the words of Paul and Peter, the Pentateuch and the Apocalypse, Red Letter Christians not only make a logical — or an epistemological — error. They also risk leading evangelicals and others toward a Christianity that looks less like the Jesus Christ the first Christians knew and more like a Jesus fashioned in our own image.

AT THE NEXUS OF GRACE & GLORY

Five Steps For Saving:

- HEARING:
- Romans 10: 17; Matthew 7: 24 - 27
- BELIEVING:
- Hebrews 11: 6; Mark 16: 15, 16
- REPENTING:
- Acts 2: 38; 17: 30; Luke 13: 3
- CONFESSING:
- Matthew 10: 32, 33; Acts 8: 36, 37
- BAPTISM:
- Romans 6: 3 – 5; Acts 8: 36 – 38



O That Will Be Glory

2. *Wh* O that will be glory for me, e grace,

I an Glory for me, glory for me; ce,

When by His grace I shall look on His face, e

That will be glory, be glory for me. me.

