

## Red Letters

I'm sure you've noticed that in many editions of the Bible, maybe even the one you are holding, the editors have printed the words of Jesus Christ in red ink.

The first red-letter edition was conceived and printed by Louis Klopsch in 1899, first titled (in the long-winded style of the day) *The New Testament: With All the Words Recorded Therein as Having Been Spoken By Our Lord Printed in Color*.

Two things motivated Klopsch. First, he desired to get more people to read the Bible, and claimed the idea came to him while reading Luke 22:20, "...the new covenant in My blood."

Second, he lived in a time like our own, when liberal scholars were casting doubt on the sayings of Christ. Klopsch wished to elevate the words of Jesus to a position of prominence. He said in his introduction, "here are the actual words, quotations, references, and allusions of Christ, not separated from their context, nor in a fragmentary or disconnected form, but in their own proper place, as an integral part of the Sacred Record, to stand out vividly conspicuous in the distinction of color."

Klopsch was a no-name in the religious publishing world, and had to get a magazine publisher to help print his edition. His New Testament was such an instant success, he followed it in 1901 with a full Bible, *The Holy Bible: Red Letter Edition*. Major Bible publishers, such as A.J. Holman, saw the success and quickly began printing their own red-letter editions. No numbers are available, but it seems that in the last several decades the red-letter editions outnumbered the black-letter editions.

Klopsch's efforts were good and honorable, and probably resulted in an increase of Bible knowledge. After all, the words of Jesus are extremely important, and should be read, treasured, and obeyed. Red ink pops up in interesting places, not just in the four gospels. In Acts 9, for example, we see it's the resurrected Jesus speaking to Paul in a vision (and red ink appears each time Paul remembers the scene, such as Acts 22 and 26). Or, in Acts 20:35, Paul mentions a statement from the lips of Jesus that is not actually found in the gospel accounts; "it is more blessed to give than to receive" gets

the red ink treatment. Or, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul talks of Jesus' statements at the last supper. Or, in the first three chapters and the last chapter of Revelation, the glorified Christ sends instructions to His followers on earth. When you flip through a red-letter New Testament, you are immediately struck by how often the speech of our Lord appears.

But enough people get the wrong impression from red-letter editions that it's worth mentioning it in this bulletin. Some Bible students pay special attention to the red letters, and believe it's OK to deemphasize or even disregard the black letters. Some have started to think that God Himself (rather than a human publisher) has highlighted the words of Christ, and that the red letters represent the pure revelation of God, while the black letters represent less-inspired additions of Christ's followers. I have actually had people say to me, "Preacher, I just want to know what the red letters say." More than once I've heard people defend their disobedience of a commandment based on the lower frequency with which it appears in the gospels versus the epistles; for example, "Yes, I see that baptism is mentioned a lot in Acts and the epistles, but Jesus doesn't say much about it, so it's clearly not vital." I've heard people suggest that Jesus' teaching on marriage in Matthew 19 is weightier than Paul's teaching on marriage in 1 Cor. 7. I've heard people say that although Paul commands a collection in 1 Cor. 16 and 2 Cor. 8-9, there's no mention of it in red letters, and therefore it is not a necessary part of our worship. There are many more examples.

This is a misguided approach to Scripture. We must understand that Paul and the other apostles and prophets spoke with the authority of Jesus. There is, in a sense, a chain of communication. God delivered His will to His Son through the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 1:1-2 says "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son." Jesus claimed in Matthew 28:18, "all authority has been given to Me." Jesus stated plainly in John 14:24, "the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me." Jesus' words are God's words.

Jesus, in turn, entrusted His word to His handpicked apostles and prophets. Paul says, "we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). Jesus said to His apostles in John 20:21, itself a red-letter text, "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." Jesus revealed to the apostles how this would happen: "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 said to you” (John 14:26). And, “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12–13). Paul’s words are Jesus’ words.

Jesus sums it all up in Luke 10:16, speaking to his apostles, “The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me.” Thus, the epistles are, in effect, the very words of Jesus! The words went from the Father to the Son to the Apostles and prophets, and come to us on the printed pages from Matthew 1 all the way through Revelation 22.

Besides, common sense teaches us that it is silly to treat the red letters of Christ as authentic, and the black letters of the apostles as spurious. We don’t have one single word from Jesus’ own hand! The red letters aren’t really the words of Christ—they are the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John telling us what Jesus said. We don’t know one thing Jesus said except through the writings of the eyewitnesses. We trust that Christ inspired his Apostles to accurately record his words.

Again, please remember that the red letters are an addition of our Bible editors. Sometimes, I would question whether the right passages are highlighted. In John 3, for example, I believe that the actual words of Christ end in verse 15. If you compare 15–21 to John 1:1–18, you’ll probably agree that John 3:16–21 are the comments of the apostle John rather than the words of Christ. And what about O.T. passages where the Son of God is the speaker, such as Isaiah 6:9–13 (John 12:41 tells us that Jesus was the one on the throne); or Psalm 16 and 22 where the Savior speaks? It’s hard to be consistent with red lettering.

There is nothing at all wrong with a red-letter edition—it’s simply a matter of personal preference (I personally find it distracting, but a lot of people like it). Still, it’s good to remind ourselves that the red letters are no more or less authoritative than the black. What God commands through Paul is every bit as important as what God commands through Christ.

Besides, common sense teaches us that it is silly to treat the red letters of Christ as authentic, and the black letters of the apostles as spurious. The only thing Jesus wrote Himself were words in the sand in John 8. We don't possess one single line of text from Jesus' own hand! The red letters aren't really the words of Christ—they are the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul reporting the words of Christ. We don't know one thing Jesus said except through the writings of the eyewitnesses and prophets. We trust that Christ inspired his Apostles to accurately report his words.

Finally, remember that, like capitalizing “He,” red letters are an addition of our Bible editors, and are open to examination and debate. Sometimes, I would question whether the right passages are highlighted. In John 3, for example, I believe that the actual words of Christ end in verse 15. If you compare 15–21 to John 1:1–18, you might agree with me that John 3:16–21 are the comments of the apostle John rather than the words of Christ. And what about O.T. passages where the Son of God is the speaker, such as Isaiah 6:9–13 (John 12:41 tells us that Jesus was the one on the throne); or Psalm 16 and 22 where the Savior speaks? It's difficult to be perfectly consistent with red lettering.

There is nothing at all wrong with a red-letter edition—it's simply a matter of personal preference (I personally find it distracting, but a lot of people really like it). Still, it's good to remind ourselves that the black letters are every bit as authoritative as the red. What Paul and James and even Jude said is every bit as important as what Christ said.

—*John Guzzetta*