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Only The Red Letters?

by Bill Lockwood

There are those who say that they accept only the “red letters” of the New Testament because “those are the words of Jesus.” By this they limit what is to be taken as authoritative for doctrine and practice in the New Testament church. In reality, this view is a subtle misconception and self-deception. Why?

First, the red letters themselves are those that are recalled by the apostles and written down. It is the apostles such as Matthew and John who transcribed those letters and words for us. In other words, those who think that the “red letters” *only* get back to what Christ actually said are dependent upon the authors of Scripture for those words. To rely upon “red letters” only supposedly “cuts out the middle man” because one goes straight to the words of Christ. But the “middle man” (those who wrote Scripture) is the one upon whom we depend to recount for us those words! Since the red letters are direct quotations from Christ and the black letters are not words that fell from his lips, this objection is like a person going to a newspaper and saying, “I don’t trust newspaper writers” so “only the words which they quote as coming directly from the source will I accept.”

Second, the red letters show us to accept the black letters. The red letters are the words which Christ spoke, being direct quotations. The black letters are not direct quotations. But Jesus told us in so many words *to accept the black letters as well!* In John 14:26 and 16:13 Jesus promised inspired guidance upon the apostles to “reveal things which are to come” as well as to recall perfectly what Jesus had said. They were going to be guided “into all truth” because Jesus could not at that time reveal unto them all that they needed.

Third, the red letter only view fails to recognize that Jesus’ personal ministry was merely a preparatory school for the apostles. (Matthew 16:18; 18:18; John 20:22).

Fourth, there is a question remaining about some of the red words as to whether or not Christ spoke them or that they were recorded by John in summary of what Jesus said.

Fifth, many red words of Christ are merely summary reports by the apostles as to the gist of Jesus’ conversations. Here we must rely upon the inspired memory of apostles to represent it accurately.