

Red-letter Bibles, godless gospels



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

One family Bible I used in my youthful evangelistic years had a zippered leather cover, gold-edged pages and the words of Jesus in red.

I also still have the Bible I used in seminary and it's a "red-letter edition" too. Flipping through the four Gospels, it's easy to see at a glance what Jesus actually said (you might say I've been "seeing red" for a long time).

Of course, no one knows what Jesus actually said. We don't have even one original copy of those early writings. And if we did, we can be sure anything Jesus may have said wouldn't be in red, yellow or green. We don't even have it in black.

Are we certain that the Sermon on the Mount was spoken by Jesus? Let's say that it was. Did someone record all those words? John, Chapter 17 is one long prayer Jesus spoke to his heavenly "Father." Was someone there to hear the prayer? If they were, why on Earth would they write it down and how would they do that? It also seems disrespectful to be writing while someone is praying.

I know the objections. "Bible believers" believe the scripture was "God-breathed" — the Holy Spirit dictated each and every word directly to the writer of each verse. No one had to write down or even remember the words. The Spirit whispered them later and each word is exactly the way God meant it to be (many Christians don't view the Bible this way, of course).

As you thumb through the Gospels there's a lot of black ink on the pages. It isn't all red. Someone, a narrator, is telling the story. We don't know exactly who wrote those stories, but the early Church put names on each collection: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John (Thomas, Judas and Mary were voted out). As far as we know, Jesus never wrote one word, let alone one letter or book. All we have are officially approved quotes.

This brings me to the "red-letter Christians." These are believers who try to live by the "actual words of Jesus" written in red in some versions. I'm curious about these folks since most of the Christian scriptures (the "new" testament) is not in red.

Red-letter believers give priority to "what Jesus said," which doesn't mean they don't believe the rest of the Bible. They just think Jesus' words are primary, central to a life of faith (and it's nice to read a book where the "best parts" are already highlighted).

How are these Christians different from other Bible believers? Well, they feel that the "heart of the Gospel"

is found in the teachings of Jesus and not in Paul, Peter, James, John of Patmos or any other assumed writer in the Bible. It simplifies things, in a complicated way.

You see, if a person doesn't turn to Paul and his theological speculations about Jesus or doesn't get distracted by Church politics, they are left with ... well I suppose, they're left with Jesus alone.

The Red Letter Christians (RLC) website states "Staying true to the foundation of combining Jesus and justice." They choose to "take Jesus seriously by endeavoring to live out His radical, counter-cultural teachings."

I saw that an RLC group held a revival by Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. They feel that the university is not being faithful to the red letters (for instance, the university just opened a \$3 million dollar range on campus).

All this got me thinking: Do secular people have any "red-letter" writings? Are there "original sources" and teachings that could be viewed as the "heart" of our unfaith?

They wouldn't have to be written by atheists, only freethinkers.

My mind goes to the wisdom of Thomas Paine, Frances Wright, Sojourner Truth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and John Burroughs. I reflect on central texts from Robert Green Ingersoll, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass and others. In our time I think of Carl Sagan, Neil deGrass Tyson, Stephen Hawking, Susan Jacoby, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and many others.

What about ancient voices? Plato, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius and Hypatia.

Then there's the red-letter man himself, Jesus. Could anything spoken by the Palestinian Jewish heretic be in the Red-Letter edition of the Secular Scriptures?

Consider: "don't judge others," "do to others as you want them to do to you" and "the truth shall make you free." I'd include one of my favorites, "every good tree bears good fruit." Let's not focus on what we believe or don't believe. Let's grow some healthy produce.

Some might call these "Godless Gospels," but haven't all inspiring words, texts and the teacher themselves been called "godless," "heretics" or "infidels"?

Call me a red-letter (or green-sentence) secular.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.