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Applying Biblical Hermeneutics to Important Issues Facing the Church

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The Problem With “Red-Letter” Bibles

by Dave James

I have and use a Bible with the words of Jesus in red. But do “red-letter” Bibles inadvertently pose a potential problem for some?

In 2008, Phyllis Tickle published a book entitled *“The Words of Jesus: A Gospel of the Sayings of Our Lord with Reflections by Phyllis Tickle.”* A review by “Publisher’s Weekly,” as posted on Amazon.com, states, “Award-winning author and speaker Tickle (*Rediscovering the Sacred; The Divine Hours*), who is PW’s former contributing editor in religion, chooses to take the red letter Bible one step further in this excellent study tool.” Of the four reviews on the Amazon site, they are at least as positive as the publisher’s review.

However, I don’t really think “red-letter” Bibles should be taken a step further. Rather, I would suggest that the decision to print red-letter Bibles was probably a mistake in the first place. My experience tells me that because the words of Jesus appear in red, a popular and broadly held view is that what Jesus said is more important and to be taken more seriously than the rest of the Bible.

At the very least, there is a temptation to do this —and this is unfortunate if we aren’t as careful as we need to be when studying the Bible. We are to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4) - and a high view of the inspiration and authority of the Bible as Scripture, as the very Word of God, leads us to conclude that every word in the Bible is from the mouth of God (2 Timothy 3:16).

Of course, what Jesus said had special significance to those who heard him and in the context of His earthly ministry. And we know with certainty that every word Jesus said was completely true and accurate because He is God. Yet, in the broader context of the Bible, Jesus’ words are not “more inspired” - and from that perspective, they are not more important.

This is even more important to understand in a day when groups like “The Jesus Seminar” try to figure out just what of those “red-letter” words Jesus actually said. And their conclusions are that He probably didn’t actually say much, or most of it.

And, we live in a day when more and more of those who are gaining notoriety as evangelical leaders and spokesmen (like Rob Bell for example) are trying to redefine “inspiration” and see the Bible not so much as inherently inspired and infallible, but rather as the product of men, who were occasionally blessed by God with spiritual insights.

This isn’t how we should handle the Bible. We need to

understand and believe that when Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” - this was truth that was as great and profound as when Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

We understand that when the Bible is taken as a whole, each and every word is understood as equally the Word of God. Though certainly of no less importance, the words of our Lord do not carry more significance than those which form the literary context in which His words appear. In the original manuscripts, every word, being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is of equal weight. All Scripture is equal - fully and in every respect.

A temptation to which many succumb is to lift verses out of their literary context and use them independently as if there were no context. This tendency can be compounded when using a red-letter Bible. First, we assign more significance to the words in red and then we use those verses having little knowledge of what is found in the immediate or preceding or following passages. I haven’t read Mrs. Tickle’s work, so I can’t comment if she has appropriately dealt with Jesus’ words in context. I hope she has. And I hope that each of us, whenever we study any verse or passage, we will not conclude our work until we know and understand the context.

As I frequently told my students, “The context is not the main thing - context is the only thing” (a saying I’m sure I stole from another thief). A serious student of the Word of God should try to overlook the verse and chapter divisions, which can often be a distraction. And he needs to be able to look past the words in red - so that appropriate value can be assigned to the “words in black” - those that are equally God-breathed.

I’m not just singling out this work by Phyllis Tickle, which I’m sure she would describe as being faithful to Jesus’ intent. But I am suggesting that perhaps this type of work is not necessarily taking us in the right direction in our overall understanding and appreciation of the Word of God.

I do use red-letter Bibles. And it can make things easier to find if you’re looking for something specific. But if all you have ever had is a red-letter Bible, maybe you should consider buying one that isn’t - and start your study of the Gospels afresh. It might be a very helpful exercise.