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A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO FAITH & POLITICS

RED LETTER CHRISTIANS



Regal

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WHO ARE RED LETTER CHRISTIANS?

Given the general contemporary meanings and connotations ascribed to the word “Evangelical,” a group of us who are speakers and authors and who share an evangelical theology got together and confessed that we have a hard time applying the label to ourselves anymore. This group included Brian McLaren, a leader in the emerging church movement; Richard Rohr, the well-known Catholic writer and speaker; Cheryl Sanders, a prominent African-American pastor; Noel Castellanos, a strong voice in the Latino community; and Jim Wallis and Duane Shank, two key leaders of the Sojourners Community and the Call to Renewal movement. We struggled to come up with a new name to define ourselves.

As you can well imagine, we had a hard time. We did not want to call ourselves “progressive Evangelicals,” because that might imply a value judgment on those who do not share our views. We batted around several possible names, and then, in the midst of our discussions, the name “Red Letter Christians” was proposed.

Actually, the name was first used by a secular Jewish country-western disc jockey in Nashville, Tennessee. During a radio interview with Jim Wallis, the DJ tried to nail down Jim’s particular breed of Christianity and finally said, “So you’re one of those Red Letter Christians—you know—who’s really into those verses in the New Testament that are in red letters.”

Jim answered, “That’s right!” And with that, he spoke for all of us.

By calling ourselves Red Letter Christians, we are alluding to those old versions of the Bible wherein the words of Jesus are printed in red.

In adopting the name, we are saying that we are committed to living out the things that Jesus taught.

The message in those red letters is radical, to say the least. If you don't believe me, just read Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5–7. In the red letters of this sermon, Jesus calls us to an “upside-down Kingdom,” far away from the dominant values of the modern American consciousness. For instance, Jesus tells us that we cannot be sucked into a system that seeks life's meaning and satisfaction in materialism and self-gratification while still claiming to serve God. Furthermore, He challenges many of the social policies that too many Evangelicals fail to question. Consider the fact that He calls us to be merciful (see Matt. 5:7), which has strong implications for how we should think about capital punishment—and since Jesus also tells us to love our enemies, we probably shouldn't consider it an option (see Matt. 5:44). These words should cause us to examine our attitudes about war, as well. Most important, when we reflect on all Jesus had to say about caring for the poor and oppressed, committing ourselves to His red-letter message just might drive us to see what we can do politically to help those He called “the least of these” (see Matt. 25:31-46).

It seemed to us newly named Red Letter Christians at one of our early meetings that Evangelicals often evade what Jesus said in those red letters in the Bible, and that this evasion lends some credence to Mahatma Gandhi's claim that everybody in the world knows what Jesus taught—except for Christians!

We decided to refute that claim. And we began with the grounding essentials that make us *Christian*.

First, Red Letter Christians hold to the same theological convictions that define Evangelicals. We believe in the doctrines set down in the Apostles' Creed, which states the central beliefs the Church has held over centuries:

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*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried;
He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand
of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come
to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church;
the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.*

Second, we are Christians with a very high view of Scripture. The writers of Scripture, we believe, were invaded by the Holy Spirit and were uniquely guided by God as they wrote, providing us with an infallible guide for faith and practice. We emphasize the “red letters” because we believe that you can only understand the rest of the Bible when you read it from the perspective provided by Christ.

Third—and this is most important—we claim that the historical Jesus can be alive and present to each and every person, and that salvation depends on yielding to Him and inviting Him to be a vital, transforming presence in our lives. The same Son of God described in the Apostles’ Creed will spiritually invade any of us who will receive Him (see John 1:12) to initiate in us an ongoing process whereby we are transformed into persons who are increasingly like Him (see 1 John 3:2).

From those essentials, we turned to what priorities make us *Red Letter*. What differentiates Red Letter Christians from other Christians is our passionate commitment to social justice—hence, our intense involvement in politics. This involvement sometimes makes us controversial.

Whereas some leading Evangelical spokespersons focus almost all their attention on preventing gay marriages and overturning past

Supreme Court rulings on abortion, Red Letter Christians, while recognizing the great importance of these issues, embrace a broad range of social concerns, giving special attention to legislation that provides help for the poor and hope for the oppressed. Declaring that there are more than 2,000 verses of Scripture that call us to express love and justice for those who are poor and oppressed, we promote legislation that turns biblical imperatives into social policy. We again concur with Gandhi when he said, “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.”

An example of this elemental relationship between faith and politics was William Wilberforce, a political leader who became a leading influence in the British Parliament for the abolition of slavery. The recent motion picture *Amazing Grace* gives us a portrait of this relentless man of faith, whose religious convictions compelled his sustained campaign against slavery. The idea that Wilberforce’s religion should have no place in the civic sphere would never have occurred to him—it was his faith that thrust him into politics!

Poverty is a major concern for Red Letter Christians. We find it significant that in Christ’s story of the rich man and Lazarus, as recorded in Luke 16:19-31, the sin that warrants the rich man’s condemnation is that he “feasted sumptuously” while remaining indifferent to the poor man at his gate. Given such biblical illustrations of God’s concerns, we contend that we have a God-given responsibility to share with the poor and to be a voice for the voiceless oppressed. On the day of judgment, the Lord will not ask theological questions so much as He will ask if we fulfilled our social obligations. He will ask whether or not we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, received and cared for aliens, and brought deliverance to captive peoples (see Matt. 5:31-46).

Several years ago I was having dinner in a restaurant in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I was seated comfortably at a table next to the front window of the restaurant, ready to begin enjoying my meal, when I realized I

was being watched. With their noses pressed flat against the glass, three raggedy, dirty Haitian boys stared at the food on my plate. Their hair was rust-colored because of a lack of protein and they had the distended stomachs that give evidence of extreme malnutrition. Their eyes, riveted on my food, were disturbing. To say the least.

The waiter, recognizing how upset I was, moved quickly to pull down the window shade. “Don’t let them bother you! Enjoy your meal!” he said.

As if I could.

In a sense, isn’t that what we all do? Don’t those of us who live comfortable lives “pull down the shade”? Don’t we hide ourselves from those millions of desperate people who press their noses against the glass barrier that separates them from sustenance we have on this side? Don’t we, for the most part, ignore the 6 million children who die each year of either starvation or diseases related to malnutrition?¹

We Red Letter Christians are committed to raising the window shades and confronting the needs of the poor. We are Christians who will press for social policies that address and meet these needs.

Presently the United States allocates less than four-tenths of 1 percent (0.4%) of its federal budget to address world poverty.² While much has been done by voluntary organizations, and especially by churches and other faith-based organizations, the richest people on the face of the earth ought to have a government that does better than that. Americans make up 4.5 percent of the world’s population and consume more than 40 percent of the world’s resources.³ Given that reality, there is something terribly amiss when our national budget ranks second to last of the 22 industrialized nations for assistance to the world’s poor.⁴

Poverty, however, is not just a malady that affects developing nations. Extreme poverty is an increasing reality here in our own country. You don’t have to go to the Third World anymore to visit the Third World. Third-World conditions exist in urban neighborhoods in cities across America and in the lonely hills of Appalachia.

If you need a case study to illustrate the dire consequences of poverty for its victims, take a look at Camden, New Jersey. In that city, just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia (the birthplace of American independence), the ravages of poverty are in blatant evidence.

One out of every seven houses has been abandoned over the last decade. Conditions in the city are so bad that those who could, got out of town—even though buyers for their property could not be found.⁵

Only 13.6 percent of families with children under 18 are headed by married couples.⁶

In a city of 80,000, there are only two emergency rooms.⁷

Crime is rampant—year after year, Camden registers the highest per-capita murder rate of any city in the nation.⁸

More than 10,000 outsiders drive into the city each day to buy drugs.⁹

If you are a 15-year-old male, there is a nearly 40-percent probability that you will spend two years in jail before you are 30.¹⁰

Recently, both the mayor and the district attorney were arrested on charges of ties to the Mafia.¹¹

The school system is in shambles—there was so much inefficiency and corruption in the administration that the state’s board of education had to intervene and take over.¹²

Less than 50 percent of those who attend the two major high schools in Camden ever graduate,¹³ and there is no telling how many of them are functionally illiterate.

Various industries that once provided jobs are gone. Campbell’s Soup, RCA, Whitman’s Candies and Sheaffer Pens have all moved out. The downtown stores are closed and banks have relocated. The unemployment rate in Camden now stands at approximately 15 percent.¹⁴

Those who say that the problems of places like Camden can be resolved in a libertarian fashion—with churches and other voluntary organizations meeting the needs of the city without government programs and dollars—have a hard time convincing people like me.

I strongly believe that while churches and charities have done incredible work to alleviate the suffering of the needy, they cannot provide universal healthcare or guarantee a minimum wage. These fall under the province of government.

At election time, questions should be asked about what candidates propose for places such as Camden. We dare not walk away from such social chaos.

Edmund Burke, the British social philosopher, once said, “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.” Most of us have heard those words at one time or another. But now is the time for us to respond to Burke’s ultimatum.

Red Letter Christians accept that challenge as a call to political action. We are people who, when the death knell sounds on behalf of the poor and socially downtrodden peoples of the world, do not ask for whom the bell tolls. The prophetic words of the poet John Donne resound in our ears: “The bell tolls for thee!”

Consider the fact that 47 million Americans have no medical coverage, and the insurance situation for the poorest Americans is worsening every day.¹⁵

The gap between the rich and the poor widens each day. Corporate executives now have incomes that are 400-times greater than the average worker.¹⁶

Given inflation, the buying power of the typical worker has dropped dramatically over the past 15 years.¹⁷

Every day, thousands more of our fellow citizens fall below the poverty level.¹⁸

Foreclosures on house mortgages are rising exponentially while homelessness has become a national epidemic. Presently it is estimated that more than 3.5 million people—1.5 million children among them—experience homelessness every year.¹⁹ Those who provide shelters for people living on the streets claim that they cannot meet the demand.

At least 20 percent of homeless people are military veterans, shameful evidence of our hypocrisy when we talk patriotically about honoring those who have served in the armed services.²⁰ What's even more shocking is that half of all homeless people are women and children.²¹

There are Evangelicals who argue against environmentalism, claiming that global warming is a myth (or at least grossly exaggerated), and that environmental concerns distract Christians from those matters that should fully occupy our moral and political attention: gay marriage and abortion. They seem to have ignored the biblical assertion that God didn't create land and sea to be abused and misused for our own selfish purposes. These brothers and sisters in Christ do not give adequate attention to God's call to be stewards of the natural world, not just for our own sakes, but also for the good of others. Yes, the environment is a justice issue. It's easy to disregard the mounting urgency of environmental issues when one doesn't have to live in places where noxious fumes from oil refineries and toxic waste make for increased cases of cancer and lung disease, or where rapidly changing climate threatens the community's livelihood.

These Christians don't understand that environmental degradation in the developing world is a major contributor to extreme poverty. In Haiti, for example, there has been incredible deforestation over a very short period of time, directly contributing to the hunger of Haiti's citizens. There are 84 percent fewer trees standing today than 20 years ago.²² Consequently, when there are heavy rains in Haiti, there is vast soil erosion, which dramatically diminishes the capacity of the land to grow good crops. Not to mention that when hurricane season comes, torrential downpours create flooding and landslides that wipe out entire villages.

Another example of the developing world hit hardest by environmental carelessness is in Africa, where changing weather patterns contribute to desertification. The Sahara is expanding across the African

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continent at the rate of three miles a year, exacerbating widespread droughts and famine, and exponentially reducing tillable land.²³

It is the epitome of selfishness for those Christians who are least affected by the destructive exploitation of the earth to suggest that environmental issues ought not to be among our primary political concerns.

We Red Letter Christians consider ignoring the necessity of legislation to address such careless disregard as more than a disgrace: We call it sinful. And if some of those old Hebrew prophets were around today, they would have a lot to say about it.