

Red Letter Christians

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective
of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

The Red Letter Christians (RLC) is a religious/political movement that hopes to live out Jesus' "radical, counter-cultural teachings as set forth in Scripture, and especially embracing the lifestyle prescribed in the Sermon on the Mount."¹

Note: *The Red Letter Challenge* (2017) book and study program by Lutheran pastor Zach Zehnder is not related to the movement that is the subject of this evaluation.

Founder(s):

The Red Letter Christian movement was founded by Christian activists, including Tony Campolo, an American Baptist Church minister and professor of sociology at Eastern University in St. David's, Pennsylvania, Jim Wallis of *Sojourner* magazine and Shane Claiborne, founder of the Simple Way Community in Philadelphia.

Statistics:

No membership statistics are available, although the RLC movement claims to have followers in United States, England and Germany.

History:

The Red Letter Christian (RLC) movement was organized in 2006 by Christian activists who were disturbed by what they perceived as an alliance between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party. The Red Letter name—from red letters highlighting the words of Jesus in some editions of the Bible—was chosen after a radio disc jockey remarked in an interview that Jim Wallis was one of those "red letter Christians" who are "really into those verses in the New Testament that are in red letters!"² Founder Tony Campolo prefers the Red Letter name because the term "'evangelical' is too closely identified with the Religious Right."³

The movement's leaders, sometimes called "progressive evangelicals," are committed to living out the red letter words of Jesus, a commitment that includes their political views: "We're not

¹ "About Us," at <https://www.redletterchristians.org/what-is-rlc/>, accessed December 2, 2019.

² Tony Campolo, "What's a Red Letter Christian?" *Beliefnet*, February 27, 2006.

³ Tony Campolo, "Another Reason for Being a Red Letter Christian," <https://sojo.net/articles/another-reason-being-red-letter-christian>, accessed November 16, 2019.

into partisan politics, though we have a bias for political policies that foster justice for the poor and oppressed, regardless of which party espouses them.”⁴ Tony Campolo comments, “Red Letter Christians are above [all] else a challenge to the Religious Right. We want to challenge them on their own ground.”⁵

The RLC website states their mission: “Staying true to the foundation of combining Jesus and justice, Red Letter Christians mobilizes individuals into a movement of believers who live out Jesus’ counter-cultural teachings.”⁶ They believe that “Jesus calls us away from the consumerist values that dominate contemporary America. Instead, he calls us to meet the needs of the poor. He also calls us to be merciful, which has strong implications in terms of war and capital punishment.”⁷ The RLC movement maintains a blog on current events, global justice issues, theology, and daily life. They also have a newsletter, a radio program, podcasts and an annual gathering.

Texts:

There is no single founding text, but books by the founders of the movement include *Is Jesus a Republican or a Democrat?* (Tony Campolo, 1995); *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (Tony Campolo, 2006); and *Red Letter Revolution* (Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, 2012).

Beliefs and Practices:

Scripture

RLC advocates believe that all of Scripture is inspired by God, but they not only “say that the red letters are superior to the black letters of the Bible, but *Jesus* said they were! . . . we don’t think you can really understand what the black letters in the Bible are telling you until you first come to know the Jesus revealed in the red letters.”⁸ RLC leaders comment that even the apostle Paul gave priority to Jesus’ words, for example, when the apostle writes, “Not I, but the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:10). “The Gospels provide us a prescription for a kingdom lifestyle, and the other books of the New Testament provide us with a solid theology.”⁹

⁴ Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 5.

⁵ Frank James, “Group Asks: What Did Jesus Say?” *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 2006, at https://www.chicagotribune.com/chinews-mtblog-2006-09-group_asks_what_did_jesus_say-story.html, accessed December 2, 2019.

⁶ “About Us,” at <https://www.redletterchristians.org/what-is-rlc/>, accessed November 21, 2019.

⁷ “About Us,” at <https://www.redletterchristians.org/what-is-rlc/>, accessed November 21, 2019.

⁸ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 5. They refer to Jesus’ repeated expression, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you” in the Sermon on the Mount.

⁹ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 9.

God

According to RLC leaders, the Bible “is the account of those events in history through which we gain progressive insights into the nature of God, but in the end, it’s in Jesus that we get the full story.”¹⁰ Tony Campolo writes, “There is a whole different feel about God when we move from the black letters in the Old Testament. While Red Letter Christians believe that the Old Testament is also the inspired Word of God, it’s hard to ignore that there is a contrast between the image of God that many people get from what they read in the Old Testament and what they find in the teachings of Jesus.”¹¹

Red Letter Christians view Jesus as a social justice hero who spoke out against inequality, condemning those who oppressed others and caring for people alienated by society; His radical lifestyle brought Him into conflict with the government and the aristocracy of His day. Red Letter Christians comment that Jesus’ life and teaching were “full of political satire.”¹² Jesus’ kingdom is an alternative empire to that of Rome: “We hear Jesus say, ‘I bring peace, but not the way Rome brings it’ (Matthew 10:34). Those words resonate with a world that has grown weary of America’s wars.”¹³

Salvation

Red Letter Christians believe that people are justified by grace through faith, trusting in Christ’s work on the cross “as the basis for salvation.”¹⁴ The authors of *Red Letter Revolution* write, “Being saved is trusting in what Christ did for us, but being Christian is dependent on the way we respond to what he did for us.”¹⁵

They are not universalists (that is, believing that people of all faiths or of no faith will be saved) but Tony Campolo writes, “I believe that Christ is the only way of salvation, but I am open to the possibility that there are those outside what I believe to be true Christianity who might have an indwelling presence of the will of God, and who could be saved even though they do not say yes to *my* doctrinal beliefs and commitments (Romans 2:14-16).”¹⁶

According to an article on the RLC website, “Our need to be born again is not to ensure we will get into heaven when we die. Jesus didn’t come down from heaven to show us how we can go back there with him. The Good News that Jesus taught and embodied is that, ultimately, heaven is coming here, and that has already started in his life, death and resurrection. Jesus coming down from heaven was the beginning of the renewal of all things.”¹⁷

¹⁰ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 8.

¹¹ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 7.

¹² Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 172.

¹³ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 172.

¹⁴ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 9.

¹⁵ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 11.

¹⁶ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 48.

¹⁷ Nils Von Kalm, “Being Born Again is Not about Going to Heaven,” May 10, 2014, at <https://www.redletterchristians.org/born-going-heaven/>, accessed November 16, 2019.

Politics and Culture

Red Letter Christians are pro-life, a view that also includes their concern for the environment and opposition to the death penalty since they want to be “consistently pro-life.”¹⁸ For the RLC, the use of alternate sources of energy (wind, thermal, solar), indicates that a new kingdom is breaking through in the present day.

RLC advocates believe that the government should “get out of the marriage business and instead focus on civil rights for all of its citizens.”¹⁹ They say that Jesus did not comment on homosexuality but instead criticized religious leaders who burdened others. The RLC movement wants Christians to stand up for gender equality, end human trafficking and promote fair trade.

The RLC movement calls on Christians “to exercise an ongoing involvement with the political process, to constantly speak truth to power in those places where power seems to be asserting itself in ways that are contrary to the will of God.”²⁰ The authors of the *Red Letter Revolution* comment that, like Babylon in the book of Revelation, “America is also mesmerizing and beautiful. But we have to be careful that we do not settle for counterfeit splendor that falls short of God. At one point, Revelation even says that Babylon offers her cup, which conjures up the Statue of Liberty-type image ([Rev.]16:19).”²¹ According to RLC leaders, God will judge the nations according to the way each nation cared for the poor, cared for those in prison and how well they accepted immigrants and refugees.

Lifestyle

One Red Letter Christian writes that he wants to give up “doing” as a follower of Jesus in favor of “being.” He says, “By ‘doing’ I believed that my ‘being’ would be consumed by an experience of the life of God. ...the Holy Spirit invites us to stop and to ‘be.’”²² A Red Letter Christian will want to “be” the person who serves the poor and goes the extra mile (Matt.5:41).

Red Letter Christians are activists for social justice. They practice spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, serving others and observing liturgical practices) that, according to leaders, “keep us focused on Christ and facilitate our surrendering to an infilling of Christ’s spirit.”²³ They do Jesus’ work, question cultural norms and share power and influence with the poor and oppressed. The Red Letter Christian movement “will continue to be a positive irritant to a church that has the tendency to become complacently conformed to cultural values.”²⁴

¹⁸ Clairborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 90.

¹⁹ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 127.

²⁰ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 184.

²¹ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 176.

²² Kurt Williams, “I’m Done with Living Like a Christian,” August 4, 2011, at

<https://www.redletterchristians.org/im-done-with-living-like-a-christian/>, accessed November 16, 2019.

²³ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 40.

²⁴ Claiborne and Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution*, 258.

A Lutheran Response

Scripture

Holy Scripture testifies to God's actions in human history for the sake of our salvation. Jesus said of the Old Testament Scriptures, "It is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39). All of Scripture is the inspired, inerrant Word of God (2 Peter 1:21; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). While we honor the teachings of Jesus, the Word made flesh, we also remember that He is the Word who is God (John 1:1-3). All of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is the Word of our Lord. His Word works upon us, convicting us of our sins and working forgiveness and saving faith (Isaiah 55:10-11; Jeremiah 23:29; Hebrews 4:12-13; John 6:68).

All of God's Word provides a guide for our life and teachings: "We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone, as it is written, 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Ps. 119:[105]), and Saint Paul: 'If...an angel from heaven should proclaim to you something contrary...let that one be accursed!' (Gal.1:[8])."²⁵

Law and Gospel

Lutherans understand that God speaks to human beings in both Law and Gospel. Luther repeatedly warned against making of Christ a "new Moses." Jesus is the Lord who has carried our sins in His body to death on the cross, purchasing and winning us to be His own. In the Gospel, He announces to us not a demand for perfection, but a word of forgiveness of sins. The Gospel is not a commandment to do something but a promise to be received in faith. The RLC does not speak so much about the Gospel as God's gift to broken sinners but as a blueprint for human performance.

God

Scripture says, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). God reveals Himself to us in the things He has created, in Scripture and, ultimately, in the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament is not merely a God of wrath and somehow different from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Lutheran theologian David Scaer comments that we should not think "that the stern God of the Old Testament is replaced by a loving one in Jesus. ...The contrast is between the written word of Moses and God's living word in Jesus, not between Law and Gospel."²⁶

²⁵ Epitome, Formula of Concord, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 486.1.

²⁶ David P. Scaer, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First Statement of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 103.

Salvation

We are saved only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ; there is no other way. As Scripture teaches concerning our Lord Jesus, "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12) and "No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). Nothing in us in any way merits God's grace through Christ (Romans 7:18-25).

Should we die before Jesus' return, we know that we will be in heaven, "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8; 1 Peter 1:8-9). We look forward to the day of Jesus' return when we will be raised bodily from the dead and we will dwell with God in the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:1-4).

We live now as God's holy, Christian people (1 Peter 2:9). Buried with Christ in Baptism, we have been raised with Him that "we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Born again of water and the Word, we have been brought into the kingdom (John 3:5; Col. 1:13-14).

Politics and Culture

Viewing itself as a challenge to the "Religious Right," the RLC movement wrongly stirs together church and state. In Lutheran teaching the doctrine of the two kingdoms describes God's rule over all things. The kingdom of grace (sometimes called the kingdom of God's right hand) is God's rule over His Church through the Gospel. God's rule over creation, carried out through earthly callings, institutions and governments, is called the kingdom of power (or the kingdom of God's left hand). As Christians, we live in both kingdoms at the same time, citizens of earth who are also citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). The civil government receives its authority from God and must be respected and obeyed (Matt. 22:15-22; Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13-17), yet when necessary we must always "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

God's rule in both realms is visible only to the eyes of faith. We cannot and must not attempt to force this world to become what it can never be—an earthly Christian kingdom. Such forceful attempts may create the appearance of Christ's kingdom, but do not express the reality of His sovereign rule (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20-22). The church should not be jeopardized by immersion in secular politics. Its primary concern must always be the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name (Luke 24:46-47). As individual Christians, we work and speak in the public square. Through our individual relationships and occupations, the church reaches out to the world with Jesus' love.

Scripture speaks clearly concerning God's gift of life, so the church has spoken out about the issues such as abortion and euthanasia (Gen. 1:27). Although we have no word from Scripture saying that the Lord Jesus addressed the issue of homosexuality during His earthly ministry, He spoke clearly of marriage as the union of one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6). This, with other clear references from Scripture, have led the church to speak against homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage. Out of love for our neighbor we serve others (Gal. 5:13-14), even though

we may have various political views and differing opinions as to the best way to address the issues that confront society today.

Lifestyle

The RLC movement presents an unnecessary distinction between “being” and “doing” as a Christian. Created anew in Christ, the works that we do flow from faith in Him (Eph. 2:8-10). According to the Lutheran Confessions, “We also believe, teach and confess that not our works, but only God’s Spirit, working through faith, preserves faith and salvation in us. Good works are a testimony of his presence and indwelling.”²⁷

Redeemed in Christ Jesus, we use our freedom from the demands and accusations of the Law to serve others in love (Gal. 5:13-14). This may mean political involvement in issues that are important to us, yet it also means living as servants of Christ as we go about the ordinary activities of our daily lives. Martin Luther wrote: “It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world. They are not uncommon and showy, reserved to certain special times, places, rites, and ceremonies, but are common, everyday domestic duties on one neighbor to another, with nothing glamorous about them.”²⁸

For Further Reading

Claiborne, Shane and Tony Campolo. *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said*. Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2012.

Scaer, David P. *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church’s First Statement of the Gospel*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000.

Links and Websites

www.redletterchristians.org

²⁷ Epitome of the Formula of Concord, Article IV, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 499.15.

²⁸ Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 428:313.