

Bible Study

Christ's Words are Spirit and Life!

(But are they superior to or more important than other Scriptures?)

By Craig M. White

Version 1.1

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. **The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.**” (John 6:63)

“Jesus answered and said unto him, **If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him,** and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.

He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: **and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me.**

These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you.” (John 14:23-25)

What did Christ mean that His words “are spirit and life”? Do they mean that the writings of the Apostles and also that of the Old Testament men of God are less important as postulated as some? Why would they do that?

Or could it be that Christ somehow changed the emphasis or even meaning of the Bible to be different – almost as if He was diminishing the rest of the Bible and His Father’s commandments?

Yet Scripture after Scripture informs us otherwise – that Christ was subject to the Father and represented Him. See Matt 3:17; 4:10; 26:39; John 3:35; 4:34; 5:19-20; 6:38, 45; 10:15, 17; 12:27-28, 49; 14:31; 17:4, 24; Phil 2:6-11.

NB: All Scriptural quotes are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Quotes from Christ

During His famous discourse on the Bread of Life, Christ states several times that it is essential to receive and believe His words. Following are several key verses which underscore this:

“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:40)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.” (John 6:47)

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” (John 6:63)

“Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68-69)

How can believing mentally what He said be all there is to salvation without putting it into practice? Where does He state that only what He spoke in the first century was important for salvation? What does *believe* really mean in the Bible -after all it is an ancient text, not a modern book written in English or other modern tongue?

Notice what several scholars assert:

"The greatest danger in biblical interpretation is the assumption that we can read the Bible as though it were written in our own time and culture. The Bible is an ancient document, and its authors thought in categories foreign to us." (Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind*, p. 47).

"Our own cultural conditioning is the lens through which we read Scripture, and unless we become aware of it, we will impose modern categories on ancient texts, distorting their meaning." (Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 26).

"We modern Western readers—whether scholars or laypeople—tend to assume that the Bible speaks our language, addresses our issues, and shares our cultural assumptions. But the Bible is an ancient text, written in ancient languages, by ancient people, for ancient audiences in ancient contexts." (Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, p. 13). [NB: the Word of God certainly *does* address our issues, but in ancient ways and means]

"One of the greatest obstacles we face in trying to interpret the Bible is that we are inclined to think in our own cultural and linguistic categories. This is no surprise since our categories are often all that we have, but it is a problem because our own categories often do not suffice and sometimes mislead." (John Walton, *Genesis. NIV Application Commentary*, pp.67-68).

Given the above, how can we understand Christ's words to be eternal life unless we read them in Biblical context and not adapt them to our thinking which can be foreign to the ancient ideas and phrases He used?

Of great importance, they must be adopted, internalised and expressed. Just reading them or not aligning them with the rest of the Bible leaves out vast portions of His words. Restricting Christ's words to the red letters of the New Testament is tantamount to blasphemy.

Additionally, Jesus makes other explicit declarations linking His words to salvation in the Gospel of John:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24)

“And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” (John 12:50)

It is rather obvious that Christ's words and life are critical for eternal life – the gift of salvation.

The clearest and most direct reference to the importance of His teachings is found in John 6:63, where Jesus states that the words He speaks are life itself. In verse 60 many disciples could not accept His teachings and in verse 66 many turned away from Him.

The questions which arise are:

- Are the words of Christ (ie the red lettering in the New Testament) more important than other parts of the Bible, especially the Old Testament?
- By extension, is the New Testament more important than the Old Testament?
- If one or both of the above are correct, then are parts of the Old Testament now not important or spiritualised etc, leading to the Church replacing Israel?
- Should we spend less time in the New Testament (21% of the Bible) than the Old Testament 79% of the Bible)?
- And are Psalms and Proverbs mainly the best books to read from the Old Testament?

What drives people to want to virtually eschew the Old Testament? Does this wrong approach concerning the words of Christ lead to antinomianism?

New Testament Approval of the Old Testament

Following are quotes direct from Christ Himself and several New Testament writers on the subject.

Jesus Himself:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matt 5:17-18)¹

“For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.” (Matt 12:48)

¹ *The Laws and Torah Are Not Done Away. Christian Technical Notes. Matthew 5:17-20* by Wayne Atchison explains:

“For example: Matthew 5:18 “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law **until everything takes place.**” The Greek text is translated by men of the Pauline Theology in a biased way (Reference "The Complete Word Study New Testament with Parallel Greek" _ 1992 Spiros Zodhiates and AMG International, Inc. AMG Publishers; and "Analytical Greek New Testament" _ 1981 Baker Book House Company). In the beginning of the sentence they completely leave out the Greek word (Strong's) #302 which means “[by] perchance”. Actually this Greek word has no English-word equivalent, it is a concept, and was used to convey the notion or nuance of “limits” or “perhaps”.

<http://strongnumbers.com/greek/302.htm>: “302 (άν) is often called the "untranslatable particle." However, **it always influences ("conditions") its sentence** and is key to properly understanding the verse (passage) in which it occurs.”

This Greek word was used to tell the reader that there is uncertainty or limits about what is being stated. Thus it is much more than saying “until heaven and earth pass away”, it is more like saying “**until [by] perchance heaven and earth [could] pass away**”” (p. 3)

“And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is* none good but one, *that is*, God: but **if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.**

He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and *thy* mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” (Matt 19:16-19)

“But Jesus answered them, “**You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures** nor the power of God.” (Matt 22:29. Cp. Mark 12:24)

“And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath:

Therefore **the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.**” (Mark 2:27-28)

“But **it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.**” (Luke 16:17)

“Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, **that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.**” (Luke 24:44)

“You search the **Scriptures** [ie Old Testament] because you think that in them you have eternal life; and **it is they that bear witness about me.**” (John 5:39)

“If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and **Scripture cannot be broken.**” (John 10:35)

The Apostles and New Testament Writers:

“...just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and **ministers of the word have delivered** them to us...” (Luke 1:1-2. Thereby affirming the Old Testament foundation)

“Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, **examining the Scriptures daily** to see if these things were so.” (Acts 17:11)

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and **through the encouragement of the Scriptures** we might have hope.” (Rom 15:4)

“Now these things happened to them as an example, but **they were written down for our instruction**, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” (1 Cor 10:11)

“...the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand **through his prophets in the holy Scriptures...**” (Rom 1:2)

“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, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” (Heb 1:1-2. See 3:7)²

“...and **how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching**, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:15-17)

“knowing this first of all, that **no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation**. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Pet 1:20–21)

“And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, **as they do the other Scriptures.**” (2 Pet 3:15-16. Peter treats Paul’s letters as part of the same category as “the other Scriptures” which was the Old Testament)

There is not a thing stated or implied anywhere in the New Testament that the New Testament replaces, supersedes or is somehow superior or more important than the Old.

What Experts Write

It may come as a surprise that some mature, conservative academics have written papers arguing that Christ’s statement in John 6:63 does not imply that only the specific words spoken by Jesus during his earthly ministry somehow excludes the rest of the Bible. These works argue that this and similar statements, must be read within context which pertains primarily to the nature of reception by the hearer rather than an exclusively being somehow life-imparting at the expense of others. Or downgrading others to be less important.

These are real specialists, not shallow ‘theologians’ like Pentecostals and liberal evangelicals. These are men who know what they are talking about, not pipsqueak antinomians trying to undermine the Old Testament and God’s eternal commandments.

1. Walter C. Kaiser, jnr:

Kaiser is a distinguished conservative evangelical scholar of the Old Testament who addresses John 6:63 directly in various works.

Kaiser interprets John 6:63 within the immediate context of the Bread of Life discourse (John 6:25–71), during which many disciples abandon Jesus after He states, "Unless you eat the flesh

² Evidently, the writer of Hebrews asserts that the prophetic revelation found in the Old Testament anticipates an ultimate message from God. That ultimate message is not delivered by another prophet or an angel, but by the Son Himself! This realisation fulfills the Messianic expectation of a forthcoming "Prophet like Moses" (Deut 18:15-18) who would convey God’s words flawlessly, as well as the Davidic king who would reign at God’s right hand (Ps 110:1). Christ is the One Who fulfills all this – He was prophesied in the Old Testament and centuries later many of those prophecies came to pass at Christ’s first coming. Many more will be at His second coming. This verse says nothing about the Old Testament being minimised.

of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (6:53). The crowd, along with some disciples, interpreted this literally and were deeply offended:

"The reader of the entire Gospel has the advantage of knowing how to take such language, but the original audience did not." (*Hard Sayings of the Bible*, p. 57)

Throughout his many works (<http://www.walterckaiserjr.com>) he upholds the Bible's inspiration and coherence (drawing on 2 Timothy 3:16 and statements like "God has said" or "the holy spirit spoke") and stresses that *all* Scripture - Old and New - is God's unified "promise-plan," progressively revealed but equally authoritative. One is not superior to the other.

He certainly does not claim that Jesus' sayings "trump" or supersede the rest of the Bible as this would contradict his core convictions about Scripture's unity and inerrancy. In fact, his writings explicitly reject any "canon within a canon" that prioritises the New Testament (or Jesus' words alone) over the Old, viewing it as a modern error that undervalues the Old Testament's foundational role. See his *Recovering the Unity of the Bible* where he argues for a "continuous story, plan, and purpose" across the entire canon, rejecting forced reinterpretations of the Old Testament through a New Testament lens. He critiques approaches that "find Jesus in every verse" at the expense of the Old Testament's narrative, insisting every part proclaims God's full revelation.

In *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, Kaiser proposes interpreting later revelation (including Jesus' words) in light of earlier Scripture, not vice versa. This "inductive" method treats the Old Testament as the "base" for New Testament theology.

2. Donald A Carson:

In "The Meaning of 'Spirit' and 'Life' in John 6:63" in *The Gospel According to John. Pillar New Testament Commentary*, pp. 290–295 Carson offers a comprehensive exegetical examination of John 6:63, highlighting that the expression "the words that I speak to you" specifically pertains to the Bread of Life discourse found in John 6. He categorically dismisses the interpretation that this verse confines life-giving authority solely to Jesus' spoken words.

"It is true that Jesus here says "the words I have spoken to you are spirit and life," and it is just possible to take this to mean that life-giving authority belongs to Jesus' words alone. But that would cut against the grain of the rest of the Gospel, which repeatedly affirms the life-giving power of the words of Scripture (3:34; 5:39–40; 7:38; 8:31–32; 12:50; 15:3; 17:17; cf. 4:41; 15:7; 17:8). Moreover, the parallel with v. 68 ("you have the words of eternal life") is not exact: there Peter is referring to the entire message of Jesus, not just to the words of the immediately preceding discourse." (p. 294) [emphasis mine]

"The antithesis between "spirit" and "flesh" here has nothing to do with the content of what Jesus says (as if his words were spiritual and not carnal), but with the means by which they are received: they must be received in a spiritual way, by the Spirit, if they are to be life-giving, and not merely in a "fleshly" way (i.e. with merely human perception and understanding)." (ibid)

3. Colin G Kruse:

Kruse wrote "John 6:63 and the Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel" in *The Gospel of John: An Introduction and Commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, pp.170–172 in which he asserts that John 6:63 does not create a qualitative difference between the words of Jesus and

the other Scriptures. He maintains that the verse addresses the misinterpretation of Jesus' audience, who interpreted his statements about consuming his flesh in a literal sense rather than spiritual and argues that Christ does not confine the spiritual power to a selection of His statements. Therefore, the verse does not preclude the wider body of Scripture from having a similar life-giving effect.

One can say that this is common sense or logical thinking or interpretation.

4. Andreas J. Köstenberger:

In his "The Words That I Have Spoken to You Are Spirit and Life (John 6:63)." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1995), pp. 347–359, he claims that the expression "the words that I speak to you" must be read in context with the preceding discourse and does not represent a claim that only the words recorded by Jesus hold authority or provide life.

Köstenberger asserts that Johannine theology consistently portrays all of God's revealed word - whether brought to us by Jesus, Moses, or the prophets - as capable of bestowing life. As such he counters any effort to utilise John 6:63 as a foundation for limiting the life-giving nature of Scripture solely or mainly to the words of Jesus.

"Far from constituting a blanket statement that only Jesus' words are spirit and life while all other Scripture is not, John 6:63 must be understood in its immediate context as a corrective to the disciples' carnal (σαρκική) misunderstanding of Jesus' preceding discourse. **The contrast is not between Jesus' words and the rest of Scripture, but between a fleshly, materialistic interpretation of Jesus' words and a spiritual understanding enabled by the Spirit.** Johannine theology consistently teaches that all Scripture, whether the words of Moses, the prophets, or Jesus, is spirit and life when received in faith by the enabling of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 5:39–40, 46–47; 10:35). Thus John 6:63 cannot legitimately be invoked in support of a restriction of the life-giving character of Scripture to the words of Jesus alone." (pp. 358-59) [emphasis mine]

5. Frederick F. Bruce:

In *The Gospel of John*, pp.159–161, Bruce refutes the idea that the verse restricts life-giving power solely to the spoken words of Jesus, noting that such an interpretation would be at odds with the Gospel's own portrayal of the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God!

"Some have understood our Lord here to mean that life-giving efficacy resides in the words which He Himself spoke during His ministry, and in those alone. But this would be quite out of keeping with the Johannine presentation of the Old Testament Scriptures as the authoritative word of God (cf. 10:35, 'the scripture cannot be broken'; 5:39, 'it is they that bear witness to me')."

"What Jesus says here is rather the enunciation of a principle: it is the Spirit who gives life; that which is merely 'flesh' (human nature in its weakness and limitations) is unavailing. The words which He has spoken are 'spirit and life' in the sense that they are uttered under the direction of the Spirit and can be received only in the power of the Spirit; they are the vehicle by which the Spirit conveys life to those who receive them in faith." (ibid)

“The principle here laid down applies to all divinely revealed words, whether uttered by Jesus Himself or recorded in the Old Testament or elsewhere in holy Scripture. They are ‘spirit and life’ only as they are quickened by the Spirit and received in the power of the Spirit.” (p. 161)
[emphasis mine]

6. Herman Ridderbos:

The work *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend), pp. 237–240, by Ridderbos masterfully argues that the statement in John 6:63 relates to the spiritual essence of Jesus' words in the context of the Bread of Life discourse, and it does not preclude other sections of Scripture from having the same spirit-driven, life-giving quality. He points out that the contrast between 'spirit' and 'flesh' pertains to the attitude of the listener. He further highlights that the Johannine understanding consistently sees the whole of God's self-revelation - including both Jesus' words and the Scriptures – as holding the same value.

“It is therefore not correct to understand vs. 63 as though Jesus' preceding words — because they are ‘flesh’ — have no significance or value in themselves and only derive their life-giving power from the Spirit in a kind of added, supernatural way. **The antithesis is not between the word of Jesus and the Spirit, but — exactly as in 3:6 — between Spirit and flesh as the two possible modes of human existence.** The word of Jesus is spirit and life, not because it is materialized in ‘flesh’ and then spiritualized again by the Spirit, but because it is **spirit and life in itself**, that is, because it is the word of him who has and gives the Spirit without measure (3:34) and who therefore speaks with absolute authority and power. That the flesh ‘is of no avail’ does not mean that the word as such is flesh, but that **the flesh — the natural man — cannot appropriate the word of Jesus except through the Spirit.**” (p. 238)

“The contrast is accordingly not between the word and the Spirit, but **between the Spirit who makes alive and the flesh that is powerless**; not in the word itself, but **in the hearing and receiving of it.**” (p. 239)

“What Jesus says here about his words **is not limited to the discourse just delivered**; it applies to everything he has said and will say. **It is the Johannine view of revelation in general: the word of God is spirit and life, but it can be received only in the Spirit; the flesh profits nothing** (cf. 3:6; 8:15; 15:5).” (p. 239)

“There is no difference in this respect between the words of Jesus and the Scriptures; both are ‘spirit and life’ only for those who are ‘of the Spirit’ (cf. 8:43–47; also 1 Cor 2:10–16; 2 Cor 3:6ff.)” (p. 239–240)

“Accordingly, **the statement that the words Jesus has spoken are spirit and life is not intended to restrict the life-giving power of his word to the pneumatic sphere in contrast to the fleshly, but to indicate the pneumatic nature and origin of his word as such.** The flesh profits nothing, not because the word is flesh, but because the flesh cannot receive the word except through the Spirit.” (p. 240) [emphasis mine]

So, many academic texts collectively illustrate that interpreting John 6:63 as limiting life-giving authority exclusively to the words uttered by Jesus lacks support from the exegetical and theological framework of the Gospel of John!

Each of these references reinforces this conclusion by considering the immediate context and the wider Scriptural context within which the Gospel is situated.

As such, they debunk the skewing toward antinomianism that the misinterpretation of John 6:63 and other verses invites.

Concluding Remarks

I asked earlier on in this study “What drives people to want to virtually eschew the Old Testament?”

My observations have resulted in the following arguments as far as I can make out:

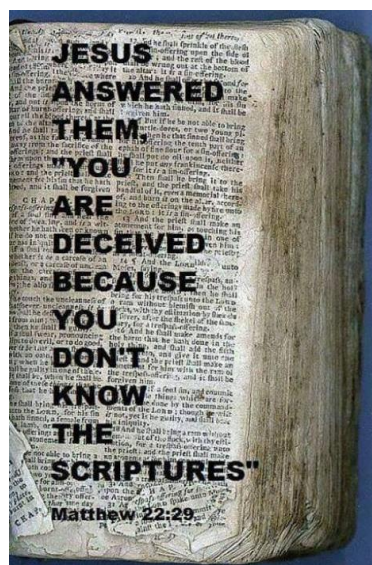
- An undergirding antinomianism – that somehow believing in Christ and having faith negates or minimises or changes the requirement for Commandment-keeping.
- They find the Old Testament too difficult to understand, except Psalms and Proverbs.
- And they come from a long tradition of eschewing the Old Testament, grabbing at a very small number of verses – taken out of context – to justify their view.

Yet, such defies both a simple reading of the Bible and logic. The only conclusion using exegetical modes of interpretation and pure logic, is that John 6:63 et al cannot be interpreted to mean that Christ's specific statements or phrases are somehow more important than other portions of Scripture.

After all, such leads one down the slippery-slope of anti-nomianism and watering-down the Old Testament resulting in a religious system of beliefs rather contrary to what the Bible reveals.

Suggested Reading

- Beale, G.K., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.
- & Carson, D. A
- Kaiser, W.C.(et al), *Hard Sayings of the Bible*.
- Kaiser, W. C., *Toward Old Testament Ethics*.
- White, C. M., *Law of God Resources & Handbook of Quotes*.



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