

John 3.16

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For evangelical Christians John 3.16 is perhaps the most often quoted verse in all of Scripture and the same could probably be said for unbelievers as well. In today's realm of Christendom it is trumpeted as God's all-encompassing love for the entire world and a completely unconditional call of salvation to "whoever believes." But is that what this verse means? Surely one could argue that it at least implies as much, but sound biblical hermeneutics maintains that what is implicit must be interpreted in light of the explicit (Hodge 187). How does what is implied in John 3.16 fare when measured against the explicit in the immediate context of the book of John as well as the overall explicit theological themes in the book as a whole? What constitutes "the world"? What is the scope and intention of God's "love" that he "so" loved "the world" that is applicable to "whoever believes"? John 3.16 does not exist in a theological vacuum but is part of an overall message and them, namely God's sovereignty throughout salvation. Therefore we will examine John's use of terms in John 3.16 as they relate to his theology and theme as it is revealed throughout his Gospel.

In order to properly understand John 3.16 we must understand the context in which it occurs. John 3.1-15 records the encounter of Nicodemus coming by night to seek Jesus. Like all of Jesus' encounters with the Jews in John there is an underlying spiritual lesson to be learned. This being the first encounter, it sets an important spiritual and contextual framework for the remaining encounters – unless one is born by the Spirit of God he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Spiritual truths can only be understood by those born by the spirit. We will expound upon this later in the treatment of the John 3.16; for now let it just be understood as providing the

context. It must also be understood that John 3.16-21 are not the actual words of Jesus; they are a spiritual commentary by the Apostle John concerning the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus (Bruce 89). Not that the words themselves are any less authoritative since they are not the words of Jesus, but contextually we should keep in mind John 3.16 is *about* the encounter, not Jesus commenting *further* on the encounter.

If there was one thing that was concrete in the mind of the Jew it was that God loved them and no other. Deuteronomy 7 explicitly states that God chose the Jews out of all the nations on earth and he set His love on them as a nation. For God to love a Gentile was unthinkable to the Jew (Morris 203). Yet it would also be a mistake to argue that because God set his love on the Jews that therefore every Jew was saved. Jesus debunks this very claim in John 8 when the Jews claim that being a physical descendant of Abraham is sufficient enough to call God their Father. If they were of God, Jesus assures them, they would hear and understand his words. Just as God loved the Jews, yet not every Jew was saved, now in the New Testament God loves the world, though not everyone in the world is saved. With the New Covenant the scope of God's salvation is extended to the whole earth: every tribe, tongue and nation. This should have been no surprise to the Jews since the Old Testament alluded to this fact. Isaiah 49.6b states "I will make you [The Messiah] as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth." So in this sense God loves the world, His salvific love is no longer specifically directed to the Jew but "whoever believes" throughout the whole world.

Yet in typical Johannine fashion, the use of the word world takes on a double meaning. In John 1.9 we read of "the true light, which enlightens everyone, coming into the world." In this sense world is used as an antonym for light. The world is full of darkness and wickedness and it is the world that is hostile towards Christ (Morris 112). So while the love of Jesus is now

extended to all peoples of the world, His love is contrasted with the world's system that opposed Him.

Taking both of these into consideration, it is clear that God's love is not directed to every individual in the whole world. The scope of his love now encompasses those who are His in the World. Jesus explicitly states this in his high priestly prayer to the Father that "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world" (John 17.6), and "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17.9). If in John 3.16 the Apostle means to tell us that Jesus' salvific love does encompass the entire world and Jesus tells us explicitly that it does not, how can that be reconciled? Quite simply put it cannot. Jesus' clear teaching in John 17 and his use of "the world" must be used to interpret the less clear John 3.16.

In what sense then has God "so loved" the world? The common interpretation is to explain God's love as limitless in its capacity. The "so" is then used as a modifier of love to emphasize the greatness of God's love. Although that is not necessarily false of God's love, this is not what it means here. God so loved the world, not that he had so much love for the world in and of itself, but his love is such that in the face of such severe opposition and wickedness he sent His Son. Keener rightly expresses the idea when he says "John's language is qualitative rather than quantitative" (Keener 556). To better state the verse would be to say "In this way God loved the world, that he gave His only Son" God could easily demonstrate the greatness of his love through earthly blessings such as wisdom, wealth, children etc. However, the love God intends to show is such that it cannot be earthly in nature; it can only be expressed in the sending of His one and only Son.

If God's love is directed only towards specific people in the world, who then constitutes the "whoever?" First, it must be noted that Jesus never prevents anyone from coming to Him. The offer of salvation truly is for all who will believe. To think otherwise would be to fall into the error Hyper Calvinism. The real question is how one comes to believe. We recall in Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus that Jesus was explicitly making the point that it is only by the Spirit that one can be born again. Doesn't that imply that "whoever believes" will then subsequently be born again? That can be implied, but it is not consistent with what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus nor with the Gospel of John as a whole (Witherington 103). Starting with Nicodemus and the necessity of the new birth, John labors the point throughout his Gospel that belief is a consequence of the new birth, not vice versa.

Truly anyone who wants to come to Jesus can. The problem is that no one wants to because no one has the moral ability without the Spirit first enabling him to do so. While man remains in his fallen state his desire is only for sin and the world's system (Calvin 74-75). It is the new birth by the Spirit that enables and draws men to Christ. Jesus again explicitly states, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). It is not a problem of seeking Jesus' permission, because as fallen individuals we lack the ability, hence Jesus' use of the word "can". As Lazarus lay dead in the tomb and could not resurrect himself, so we lay dead in our spiritual condition awaiting the Spirit to make us alive by the new birth.

Perhaps the clearest portion of John that enlightens John 3.16 is be Jesus' teaching of the Good Shepherd in John 10. Jesus stands at the door to the sheep pen and declares, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10.9) "Whoever will" enter the door will have "eternal life". Jesus is clear that the door is not just for the Jews but the "world" as he explains, "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold.

I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (John 10.16). Yet his salvific love does not encompass the world in its entirety because, “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” and “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10.3, John 10.14-15). Having prior knowledge of who his sheep are, because he chose them, Jesus’ mission on the cross was to die only for those particular sheep that were in the world, not the world in its entirety.

While John 3.16 remains popular among Evangelicals, it has fallen victim to the “make a decision for Christ” evangelism that is so prominent in America today. Poor hermeneutics and an insistence on topical preaching have stripped it of its immediate context as well as its overall context in the Gospel of John. Properly understood, it fits beautifully in the Nicodemus narrative and the theme and theology of John (White 87). For those of who are part of the “whoever” we are once again reminded that it is only by the power of the Spirit that we can experience the love that God “so loved” us with.

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