

The particularity of John 3:16

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Whenever the Bible doctrine of election is presented to those who reject the Bible's teaching of God's sovereignty in salvation you can be sure John chapter three and verse 16 will be trotted out in defence of their position. I have come to the conclusion that there are only two reasons for this.

The first reason is genuine ignorance. For many, this verse is one of the few Bible verses they know, and they simply assume that knowing the words they also know its meaning. In their ignorance of many other passages of scripture that help provide a true understanding of John 3:16 they make an attribute of their ignorance and retire content to impugn the glory of God.

The second reason is pride, or what might be called wilful (as opposed to genuine) ignorance. Men and women will clutch at any straw to avoid having to accept what they do not wish to believe. Evidence for this can be seen all around. The scientist who places his faith in evolution rather than accept the evidence for an intelligent creator is demonstrating a desire to believe anything, be it ever so fanciful, rather than acknowledge the existence of God. This is pride and wilful ignorance. Similarly, the religionist who pleads for free will and man's choice over and against God's omnipotence, omniscience and eternal purpose is demonstrating pride by declaring he has more confidence in his own opinion, borne of ignorance, than he has in God's clearly revealed truth.

For those who are ignorant of other scriptures that illuminate and help to interpret John 3:16, the beloved disciple's famous verse settles every argument against election and predestination. They quote the words as if those who believe in God's sovereignty in salvation never encountered it before, and have no defence against it. But what defence do we require? We have no argument with John and no embarrassment regarding his statement. We believe exactly what he says to be true. But we invite those who ignorantly assume John contradicts sovereign grace to put away childish things and dig deeper into the word of God.

It is necessary therefore to challenge free will believers firmly on this matter of John 3:16 because their employment of this verse as an argument against free grace manifestly fails to deal with both the words and sense of the text. Only ignorance or pride can be tendered to explain their attitude and both these traits must be corrected if we are to glorify God, uphold the truth and do the souls of men any good. Children have to grow and develop

in knowledge and sometimes we all have lessons to learn. Care must be taken to properly explain the real meaning of John 3:16 to those who are ignorant that they may learn, and to those who are proud that the word of truth may itself humble them before God's glory.

In the opinion of free will advocates there are two main planks of opposition to free grace in John 3:16. The first is John's use of the word 'world' and the second is the word 'whosoever'. These terms, we are told, show that salvation is for everyone and is grounded in God's love for the whole world. Furthermore, we are informed that the words expressly refute any suggestion of particular or special grace. God's love is bestowed upon all, His grace is common to all, His mercy is extended to all. But do they?

Bible commentator and author Arthur Pink has shown that contrary to the assumption that 'kosmos,' and its English equivalent 'world,' may be simply understood to mean all people in the world, an examination of other examples of New Testament usage reveals at least seven distinct meanings. He identifies some of these passages where the term occurs and offers a definition in each case. He writes:

'**Kosmos**' is used of the Universe as a whole: Acts 17:24 - 'God that made the **world** and all things therein seeing that He is Lord of heaven and earth.'

'**Kosmos**' is used of the earth: John 13:1; Ephesians 1:4, etc., etc.- 'When Jesus knew that his hour was come that He should depart out of this **world** unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world He loved them unto the end.' 'Depart out of this **world**' signifies, leave this earth. 'According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the **world** .' This expression signifies, before the earth was founded—compare Job 38:4 etc.

'**Kosmos**' is used of the world-system: John 12:31 etc. 'Now is the judgment of this **world**: now shall the Prince of this **world** be cast out'—compare Matthew 4:8 and 1 John 5:19, R. V.

'**Kosmos**' is used of the whole human race: Romans 3:19, etc.—'Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the **world** may become guilty before God.'

'**Kosmos**' is used of humanity minus believers: John 15:18; Romans 3:6 'If the **world** hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you.' Believers do not 'hate' Christ, so that 'the world' here must signify the **world** of unbelievers in contrast from believers who love Christ. 'God forbid: for then how shall God judge the **world**.' Here is another passage where 'the world' cannot mean 'you, me, and everybody,' for believers will not be 'judged' by God, see John 5:24. So that here, too, it must be the **world** of unbelievers which is in view.

'**Kosmos**' is used of Gentiles in contrast from Jews: Romans 11:12 etc. 'Now if the fall of them (Israel) be the riches of the **world**, and the diminishing of them (Israel) the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their (Israel's) fulness.' Note how the first clause in italics is defined by the latter clause placed in italics. Here, again, 'the **world**' cannot signify all humanity for it excludes Israel!

'**Kosmos**' is used of believers only: John 1:29; 3:16, 17; 6:33; 12:47; 1 Corinthians 4:9; 2 Corinthians 5:19. We leave our readers to turn to these passages, asking them to note, carefully, exactly what is said and predicated of 'the **world**' in each place.

How, one might ask, are we to know which meaning to employ in John 3:16? Pink helps us here too. He tells us, 'This may be ascertained by a careful study of the context, by diligently noting what is predicated of 'the world' in each passage, and by prayer fully consulting other parallel passages to the one being studied.'

Our free will believers have a second string to their bow. Surely, they say, there can be no disagreement regarding 'whosoever'. Whosoever means everyone! But, it does not. We need to remind all those who quote John 3:16 against free grace that the emphasis within the verse is not upon whosoever but upon believeth. Everlasting life is given to those who believe and to none other. Contrary to this word opening salvation to all men it is actually limiting it to those who believe and only to those who believe. With this we completely agree.

Supposing a teacher tells the children in her class to raise their hand if they require a pencil. Whosoever raises their hand will be given a pencil. The pencil is not for everyone, only for those who ask for it. Only those who hear the instruction and, seeing their need of a pencil, raise their hands will obtain what they ask for.

In our verse, the word 'whosoever' implies particularity and distinguishes between those who believe and those who do not. Salvation comes by faith and is received by trusting in the perfect righteousness and complete sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ's sacrifice and death. There is no way of salvation apart from Christ. By believing in Christ preached in the gospel sinners are saved and no unbelievers ever receive the benefits of that salvation.

Here then is our utterly biblical interpretation of John 3:16, consistent with sovereign grace and upholding the broad teaching of scripture without contradiction.

The first clause tells us what moved God to 'give' His only begotten Son,

and that was His great 'love;' the second clause informs us for whom God 'gave' His Son, and that is for, 'whosoever (or, better, 'every one') believeth;' while the last clause makes known why God 'gave' His Son (His purpose), and that is, that everyone that believeth 'should not perish but have everlasting life.' That 'the world' in John 3:16 refers to the world of believers (God's elect), in contradistinction from 'the world of the ungodly' (2 Peter 2:5), is established, unequivocally established, by a comparison of the other passages which speak of God's 'love.' 'God commendeth His love toward US'—the saints, Romans 5:8. 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth'—every son, Hebrews 12:6. 'We love Him, because He first loved US'—believers, 1 John 4:19. The wicked God 'pities' (see Matthew 18:33). Unto the unthankful and evil God is 'kind' (see Luke 6:35). The vessels of wrath He endures 'with much long-suffering' (see Romans 9:22). But 'His own' God 'loves'!

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