

God So Loved the World

by

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Preface

John 3:16 is probably the most frequently misinterpreted and misused verse in all of Holy Scripture. I refer to the fact, of course, that so often it is explained as meaning that God loves all men and that he gave his Son for all men.

Nothing could be farther from the truth!

The sad part of this misinterpretation and misuse is that it deprives the child of God, who is in himself an utterly lost sinner, of the very comfort and solid assurance that this Word of God is intended to convey.

If this little booklet may serve to contradict the misinterpretation referred to, and may serve positively to explain the text correctly and also to convey to the reader something of the tremendous wonder of God's sovereign love, it will have achieved its purpose.

May the Lord use it to that end.

'GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD . . .'

That Great Question:

There is a very important question involved in the subject of this booklet. That question is: whom does God love? To this question we must by all means have the right answer, the answer of God Himself, the answer of the Scriptures, therefore. John 3:16 teaches us: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' What is the 'world' which God loved? Who belong to that world? Do all men belong to that world, or do only some men belong to it? And if only some men belong to that world, who are they?

I called this a very important question; and indeed it is.

1. For, in the first place, it is important personally. From this point of view,

the question may be formulated: does God love me? And in that form the critical importance of that question at once impresses you and me. Does God love me? Can I be, may I be, am I certain of that love? Then all is well. For the love of God is certainly all-important. If God loves me, then I am an heir of eternal life. If God loves me, I shall never perish. If God loves me, then I may lose all, yea, even my very life, and still possess that which is precious above all. If God loves me, then my father and my mother may forsake me; but the Lord will take me up, and clasp me to His divine bosom. But, by the same token, if God does not love me, that is, if He hates me, then all is ill. Then I shall perish eternally. Then, though I possess all things, yea, the whole world, I am the most impoverished among men. Then His face is against me for evil. Then I am of all men most miserable. Then I face the prospect of everlasting suffering in hell, where shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Indeed, this is an all-important personal question. Whom does God love? Does He love me?

God Must Provide the Answer

To this question I must needs have the answer. I must have God's answer. Man cannot convince me. A human answer cannot possibly satisfy me. Nothing less will do than the answer from the mouth of God Himself. Then only will I have peace, when I hear His own voice, 'My son, my daughter, I, Jehovah God, love you!'

Let this personal question be before your consciousness as you contemplate this Word of God. For not only is it true that you urgently need an answer to this question, but it is also true that as this Word of God comes to you, you shall be confronted by that question and shall have to give an answer to it. You cannot escape it.

2. In the second place, and in closer connection with the preceding than is sometimes thought, this question is important with respect to the content of the preaching of the gospel. When the gospel is preached, the question, 'Whom does God love?' must be answered. And again, the answer must be that of the Scriptures. Only that answer may be proclaimed as the gospel of Jesus Christ. The text says that God loved the world. And by far the most common explanation which is given of this expression, 'the world,' is that this means that God loves all men, every individual member of the human race. This is the open teaching of all Arminian, free-will pulpits. We have all

heard this kind of preaching many times, if not in our own church, then via radio or television. According to this position, God loved all men. Because He loved all men, God gave His only begotten Son. God's only begotten Son died for the whole world, that is, for all men, thus making provision for all men to be saved. The gospel is for all sinners. And now it is up to the sinner to believe or not to believe, to embrace the love of God or not to embrace it, to be saved and to have eternal life, or to perish. The opposite position is that of the Reformed faith, sometimes called Calvinism. It holds that as far as men are concerned, God does not love all, but only His elect, that is, those whom he has sovereignly chosen in Christ Jesus from before the foundation of the world. It teaches, further, that Christ died only for His own sheep, that is, those whom the Father gave Him. Furthermore, the Reformed faith maintains that when the gospel of Christ crucified is proclaimed, the gift of faith is sovereignly bestowed only upon the elect through regeneration and the efficacious calling, that then the elect repent and believe and have everlasting life. In a word, we proclaim that the love of God is absolutely sovereign and particular, not general and conditional, in its origin, its revelation, its operation, and its fruit.

Whom Does God Love?

Now it is perfectly obvious that both of the above views cannot be true. Even a child can understand this. It is either...or. Either God loves all men; or he loves only His elect. It is also perfectly obvious that those who maintain the above views both claim to preach the gospel when they proclaim these views. Both the Arminian and the Reformed preacher will tell you that he is preaching the gospel. That is to be expected. No preacher will come right out and tell you that what he is preaching is not according to the Bible. They both claim, 'The Bible says....' Further, it is also evident, unless you would maintain the impossible position that God contradicts Himself, that one or the other (not both) of the above views is according to the Scriptures, and constitutes the true preaching of the gospel. And whoever proclaims what is not according to the Scriptures has no business to pretend that he is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What, therefore, is the test? How can we determine which of the above is the Word of Christ according to the Scriptures? Remember, the question is not what you or I would like to think about this question. It is not which of these

two ‘gospels’ is the most popular, which apparently brings the greatest fruits, which is supposedly the warmest, the most appealing, the most stirring. The question is not what this or that theologian maintains. And, though you may love your church very dearly, it is not a question of what your church teaches. In fact, if you love your church, you certainly do not want your church to walk in error. The sole question is: what does the Word of God say? And let every earnest-minded Christian, who wants to walk in obedience to the will of Christ, and who wants the church to be faithful to its calling to preach the gospel, bow before that Word. You do not have to bow before me and my word; but you must bow with me before the Word of God! And you may expect the Word of God to be very clear on this question.

3. In the third place, this question, ‘Whom does God love?’ is of great importance because if there was ever a time when the Reformed community stood at the crossroads with respect to the preaching of the gospel, it is today. With ever greater boldness and bluntness it is being taught in Reformed circles today that God loves all men. It is even maintained that this doctrine, against which our Reformed fathers fought so gallantly at the Great Synod of Dordrecht, is Calvinism. More and more Reformed churches make common cause with Arminians and join them in supporting wildly evangelistic movements. As an example of this blatant Arminianism let me quote from the writings of a Reformed seminary professor concerning this very text of John 3:16:

‘How much did God love? So much that He gave His only begotten Son. So much that He emptied Himself; He gave Himself. The amount of the love is indicated by the amount of the gift. That means no less than an infinite love.

‘Love without limit! Can an unlimited love be limited in its scope? Can an unrestricted love be restricted in those whom it loves? Can the infinite love of the incarnation have as its object only a part of mankind? Hardly. Neither does the Bible teach this. Rather we are told, ‘God so loved the world that he gave.’ Whether taken as the cosmos or as the human race, ‘world’ in this passage clearly covers all men. By no strain of exegesis can God’s redemptive love be confined to any special group. Neither the language of this verse nor the broadest context of Scripture will allow any other interpretation but that God loves all men.’

And again, note this very bold statement: ‘If the Church is unwilling to say in

any sense that Christ died for all men and refuses to say to unbelievers, in addition to ‘God loves you,’ ‘Christ died for you,’ it places the infinite love of God under an illegitimate restriction.’

Now, if that is the direction in which Reformed men want to go, then let them openly disavow the Reformed position and the Reformed confessions as being unscriptural. But let no one be deceived that such Arminianism has anything in common with the Reformed faith. It does not. And let all who love the truth of God’s Word and who purpose to be faithful to that Word examine this matter with me. Let us put this question to the test of Holy Scripture.

Whom does God love?

God’s Love According to Scripture

Our text in John 3:16 answers, ‘God so loved the world . . .’

In the first place, let us view the matter from the point of view of that term ‘world’ in Scripture. Does that term actually mean all men? This is frequently taught. And I will admit that this is a very easy assumption to make. There are undoubtedly many who quite uncritically accept this claim, and believe that John 3:16 means that God so loved all men.

But let us put this to some simple Scriptural tests. First of all, let us examine some other passages of Scripture that make use of the same term.

In the high-priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus, preserved for us in this same gospel narrative of John, chapter 17, verses 8 and 9, we read: ‘For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me. I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.’ From this passage, in comparison with John 3:16, it is evident, in the first place, that the term ‘world’ here in John 17 is not the same as in John 3. This is evident from the simple point that Jesus does not pray for this ‘world.’ And certainly, it would be blasphemous to assume that our Lord Jesus Christ does not pray for the world which God loved. In the second place, it is evident that the term ‘world’ in John 17 cannot possibly mean ‘all men.’ This is plain from the fact that the Lord Jesus makes a very clear distinction between His disciples, who believed that the Father had sent Him, who were given unto Jesus, and who

are the Father's, on the one hand, and the world, on the other hand. Notice: 'I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me, for they are thine.' In the third place it is also clear that in John 17 those whom God loved are just exactly not the world, but those whom God gave to Christ in distinction from that world.

Turn next to I John 2:15-17. There we read: 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' Here again, it is evident that the term 'world' cannot possibly mean all men, and that it does not and cannot possibly have the same connotation as in John 3:16. For, in the first place, would it be possible that God loved the world, and that He would enjoin His people, 'Love not the world, that is, the same world that I love?' And, in the second place, the world of which I John 2 speaks passeth away. And is it possible that the world which is the object of a divine love could nevertheless pass away? To ask these questions is to answer them.

These are but two of the many passages in the Bible in which the term 'world' appears. But wherever that term appears in Scripture, and whatever else that term 'world' may mean, you can put every passage to the test, and you will discover that the word never simply means all men. By no strain of exegesis can this faulty assumption be maintained.

In the third place, let us not forget that the same Scriptures which speak of the love of God also speak of the very opposite of His love, namely, His divine hatred. Now if it is true that God loves all men, then it must also be true that He hates no man. But if the Scriptures cannot be broken, and if then it can be shown by those very Scriptures that God hates so much as even as one man, then it also follows that God does not love all men, and that the term 'world' in John 3:16 cannot possibly mean all men.

Let us examine the Scriptures with a view to this question.

In Psalm 5:4, 5 we read: 'For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity.' In Psalm 11:5, 6 we read: 'The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul

hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup.’ And in Romans 9, a chapter that is very significant for this whole question, we read in verses 10-13: ‘And not only this; but when Rebecca also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac; For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth; It was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.’

From all these passages it is perfectly evident that there is a hatred of God as well as a love of God, and that some men are the object of the divine hatred, while others are the object of the divine love.

God Does NOT Love All Men

Therefore, our first answer to the question, ‘Whom does God love?’ must be a negative one: God does not love all men. Let us obediently bow before this plain Word of God.

Hence, to proclaim nevertheless that God loves all men is false, and contrary to the church’s mandate to preach the Word. Moreover, that pseudo-gospel cannot be anything else than devastating for the Christian’s personal assurance of the love of God. And remember, all the while that we consider these words, that is after all the significant personal question: does God love me?

Next, let us explore that important question, ‘Does God love all men?’ from another viewpoint, namely, that of God’s love itself.

1. In the first place, let us notice that the text speaks emphatically of the love of God. This certainly implies that the love of God is almighty as He is almighty, sovereign as he is sovereign, unchangeable as He is the Unchangeable One, and that therefore the love of God is divinely able to seek and to find and to save its object. If God, therefore, so greatly loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son for the salvation for that world, could it possibly be that the world, or any part of that world, goes lost? Yet the Scriptures themselves teach us plainly that not all men are saved. There will be thousands and millions of men who will never see eternal life, who have never been touched by this love of God. The choice therefore is obvious. Either you must maintain that God loves all men, and then accept the consequence that this love of God is powerless to reach and to save its object

and to attain its purpose — the very thought of which is blasphemous; or you must acknowledge that the almighty, sovereign, efficacious love of God is not for all men.

2. Or, in the second place, consider that love of God from the viewpoint of its revelation, namely, the gift of God's only begotten Son. That love of God is redemptive. God gave His Son in the fullness of time, in order that He might die the death of the cross, and that He might offer Himself on the altar of the righteous love of God as a perfect sacrifice for sin, for the sin of those whom God loved. Could it possibly be that the gift of God's Son was either wholly or partially in vain? To put it concretely, could it be that even one drop of His precious blood was shed for a man, and that then that man goes lost forever? Yet that must needs be the conclusion if we would maintain that God loved and gave His only begotten Son for all men.

3. Or again, consider that love of God, in the third place, from the point of view of its proclamation. Millions upon millions of men, from both the old and the new dispensation, have never heard of the love of God. That is, it was never preached to them. But could it possibly be that God would love any man, love him so greatly that He gave His only begotten Son for him, and then would never tell that man of His love? What a strange love of God that would be! You say, perhaps, that that is the fault of the church for failing to preach the gospel to all men? But is not the sovereign and almighty God powerful to cause the gospel to be preached to whomsoever He wills? And is not the very scope of the preaching of the gospel a matter of His own sovereign determination and sending? How shall they preach, except they be sent — sent by God in Christ?

God Loves His Elect People

But now let us face the question positively: whom does God love? Whom did God eternally love? Whom did God love so greatly that He gave His only begotten Son?

John 3:16 answers: God loved the world, the cosmos. The general meaning of that term is that of harmony, orderly arrangement, beauty. Our word 'cosmetics' is derived from it. And the term is used to denote the created universe, all creatures in heaven and on earth, as an organic whole, from the viewpoint of its order and harmony. This fundamental idea is never absent from the term in its various uses in Scripture. Often the word 'world' in

Scripture refers especially to mankind, or to a part of mankind. But because man is closely related to the world outside of him, in fact, stands at the head of the universe as we know it, lives and moves and develops in that universe, the word 'world,' even when it has man especially in view, never excludes the universe, but denotes mankind as it is organically related to the orderly whole of created things.

And while that same term 'world' is used in Scripture to denote the whole of reprobate, wicked men, as they are in darkness, and as they subject all things in their universe to their own sinful mind and will, and use all things in the service of sin, it is used in John 3:16 to denote the sum total of the elect as an organic whole, the body of Christ, the church, again in connection with the whole universe. We must always remember that in His elect God does not merely save a number of individual men. God saves an organism, a whole world!

That implies, in the first place, that when God saves His elect people in Christ Jesus, He saves the real organism of the human race. Many individual men go lost; but mankind is saved. But, in the second place, God does even more. Not only the elect body of Christ is saved, but God saves and glorifies the whole creation. The whole creation, which groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, being subject to vanity because of sin and the curse, shall participate in the glorious liberty of the children of God. That entire world of God's elect and of all created things, organically conceived, God loved and saves. This fact, that God saves an organism, explains also why, though many individual creatures go lost, the world is nevertheless saved. When, for example, an orchardist goes out to prune his fruit trees, and presently a large heap of branches is accumulated on the ground and burned up, you certainly do not say that he destroyed his trees and his orchard. No, the trees are saved; the orchard is still standing. But some individual branches perished. Thus, not those men who are lost, but those who are saved constitute, together with the rest of creation, the world of God's love. When all the lost are separated from that world finally in the day of judgment, it is still the world which is saved. The world of John 3:16 is the world in Christ, the Firstborn of every creature, as God conceived of it in His eternal and sovereign counsel, and as it shall one day be revealed and shall appear in perfect harmony and heavenly beauty and glory, united in the Son of God.

That world God loved

The Profound and Blessed Mystery

The text speaks of a profound and blessed mystery, a mystery which becomes more profound and more blessed according as we, poor, miserable, sinful creatures of the dust, pause to consider this wonder.

Consider for a moment the implications of that one, simple, and oft-repeated truth: God loved the world.

This means that in His sovereign and eternal and unchangeable thoughts God beheld that world in its perfect beauty in Christ Jesus, the Firstborn of every creature, and united that world with His own divine Father-heart in the bond of perfectness. His heart goes out to that world. He is attracted to that world. Even when in time that world was in itself lost in sin and misery, and lay under the curse, God still loved the world. He longed for that world. He could not rest, so to speak, until He sought that world, saved it, drew it unto Himself with cords of love, and clasped it to His heart, safe in the harbor of eternal life, where He might bestow all the tokens of His love upon that world in the fullness of perfection.

Consider too: God loved the world. Not only did the Father, the First Person of the Holy Trinity, love that world.

Not merely did our Lord Jesus Christ love the world. Certainly not is it thus, that God hated the world, but that our Lord Jesus Christ came and by His death and atonement changed the hatred of God into love. But God, the ever blessed Triune God, loved the world. This love is of the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. And even as the love, so also the gift is of the Triune God. The Father gave the Son in the Holy Spirit; and the Son gave Himself in the Spirit.

The Greatness of God's Love

Oh, if you would ask the question, 'How much did God love?' you must not try to limit the limitless character of that love by the quantitative characterization that God loved 'all men.' After all, that is still attempting to portray the infinite love of God in finite terms. Indeed, the love of God is infinite. It is limitless. It knows no bounds. And my text sets this forth not in terms of those who were the objects of that love, but in the amazing and mysterious terms of the revelation of that love. How much did God love? The

text gives the answer: 'God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son!'

Consider this. Ah, if you look at Calvary's cross outside of the light of revelation, you see there but a mere man hanging on the accursed tree. And in that mere man you cannot behold the revelation of the infinite love of God. But the Word of the cross is: God gave His only begotten Son! And in that only begotten Son, nailed to Golgotha's cross, shines the wondrous light of divine love into our night, penetrating, piercing, swallowing up the darkness of judgment and death. That love is strong as death. Its jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its coals are the coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench that love; neither can all the floods of our guilt and iniquity drown it. For God gave His only begotten Son! He gave Him Who is eternally in the bosom of the Father, Him Who is the contents and the representative of all His love, Him upon Whom all the infinite love of the Father is concentrated, God of God, Light of Light, His only Son, His all, Himself.

God gave Him! He gave Him freely. He gave Him, not because He was obligated to do so, but because He wanted to do so, wanted to reveal His infinite love. He gave Him not because that world deserved that gift, but of free, sovereign grace. And He gave Him up, that is, He gave Him as a sacrifice for sin, gave Him up unto death, the death of the cross, and poured out over His head all the vials of His fierce and holy wrath. Mystery of mysteries! God gave up God! Ah, do you not see that this is just exactly the tremendously profound thrust of this Word of God? God's love of the world cost Him something! It cost God his all!

For, in the first place, remember that it was the Person of the Son of God Who came in the likeness of sinful flesh. He took upon Himself all our sins, and suffered and died on Calvary. And to be sure, we are very careful to state that as to His divine nature He could not and did not suffer; all the agonies of death and hell were suffered only in the human nature. But at the same time, never may that be understood so that dogmatically we destroy the mystery that it was nevertheless the only begotten Son of God Who suffered on the cross! While all the agonies of Calvary were suffered only in the human nature, the Word of God nevertheless draws our attention to the fact that at Calvary you behold the suffering of God's Son, and that by that suffering you

may measure the infinite height and depth of the love of God. For, in the second place, even on Calvary you dare not separate between the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. To be sure, the Person of the Son of God died on Golgotha; but his death was the revelation of the love of the Triune God! God Himself suffered the agonies of death in the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ. Or, to put it otherwise, do you imagine that the Father and the Holy Spirit looked coldly on while the only begotten Son died on the tree? No, that were impossible! The message of the love of God, the Word of the cross, is this: God spared not His own Son! When faced, as it were, with the alternative of giving His only begotten Son or letting the world perish, God so loved the world that He sent His Son to the death of the cross.

Such is the revelation of God's infinite love. And the end attained by that love is everlasting life: 'that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' That world as it is in itself is perishing because of sin and guilt and corruption. So great is that power of sin and guilt that there is no way out as far as that world is concerned. But that world is saved through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. All the power of salvation, of wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and complete redemption, is in Him. And apart from Him Who is the life and the resurrection there is no life for the world. That world, therefore, must be united with the Son of God, and through Him to the heart of God. It must become one with Him, must partake of His death and resurrection. And the bond that so unites that world with Him is faith. Faith is the God-given bond of the union with Christ. The activity which proceeds from that bond is the act of believing, whereby one consciously clings to Christ, the only begotten Son of God, as the revelation of God's redemptive love. That faith, as a bond and as a power and as an activity, is not of ourselves: it is the gift of God, bestowed sovereignly upon all the elect members of that world that God saves in redemptive love.

And therefore the Word of God says: 'whosoever believeth shall not perish, but have everlasting life.' All, without exception, who believe shall never perish. They have everlasting life now, in principle. They shall endure unto the end, kept in the power of God's infinite love. And in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ they shall have everlasting life in perfection. Then God shall take them to His bosom forever, and they shall enjoy the highest realization of the covenant of friendship in His heavenly tabernacle, and shall see Him face to

face.

In conclusion, let us return to our original question, and ask it from a personal point of view. Whom does God love? Does He love you? Does He love me? I ask: do you believe in the only begotten Son of God? Then you may be assured of His love, and then only, but then certainly. And then yours is and shall be forever the gift of everlasting life. And mark well: not because you believed, but because God loved you, loved you with eternal, sovereign, unchangeable love. Glory to His Name!

Appendix

‘THE ‘WORLD’ OF JOHN 3:16 DOES NOT MEAN ‘ALL MEN WITHOUT EXCEPTION’

by

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It is now common among Reformed people that, when one confesses God’s election of some persons to salvation, God’s particular love for the elect, and God’s exclusive desire to save the elect, his confession is immediately contested by an appeal to John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ Indeed, this is almost the rule. The one who thus appeals to John 3:16 intends to assert that God loves all men without exception and that God desires to save all men without exception. The basic assumption underlying this appeal to John 3:16, as an argument against election, is that the word, world, in John 3:16 means ‘all men without exception.’

We do here announce, declare, and proclaim that this assumption is false. It is unbiblical. It commits one to a teaching that deviates from the gospel, fundamentally. The word, world, in John 3:16 does not mean ‘all men without exception.’

We plead with our Reformed brothers and sisters who insist on understanding ‘world’ in John 3:16 as ‘all men without exception’ and on using this text against the confession of God’s particular love for the elect to face up to the doctrinal position that they are taking. This, now, is their position: – God

loves all men without exception, with a love that gives His only begotten Son for their salvation, that is, with the (saving) love that desires their salvation from sin and their eternal life in heaven.

1. God gave His only begotten Son for all men without exception, that is, Jesus died for all men without exception.
2. Nevertheless, many people whom God loves, whom God desires to save, and for whom Jesus died perish in hell, unsaved.
3. Therefore,
 - (1) many persons are separated from the love of God;
 - (2) God's desire to save is frustrated in the case of many persons; and
 - (3) the death of Jesus failed to save many for whom the Son of God, in fact, died.
4. The reason for this sad state of affairs is that those persons refused to believe in Jesus, although they were able to do so by virtue of their free will.
5. On the other hand, the reason why the others are saved is not that God loved them, desired their salvation, and gave His Son to die for them (for He also loved those who perish, desired their salvation, and gave His Son for them), but that they, by their free will, chose to believe.
6. In conclusion, the damnation of the wicked is the defeat and disappointment of God, whereas the salvation of the believers is their own work.

When the all-men-without-exception-people quote John 3:16, this is how they are reading it: 'For God so loved all men without exception, that he gave his only begotten Son to die for all men without exception, with the desire that all men without exception be saved, so that whosoever believeth in him, of his own free will, should not perish, but have everlasting life.'

Whenever anyone challenges the confession of God's particular, exclusive love for His elect by quoting John 3:16, we must regretfully conclude that he holds the doctrinal position set forth above and wishes to confess it publicly, in order thus to overthrow the Reformed doctrine of predestination, limited

atonement, total depravity, effectual grace, and the preservation of saints (which is only an elaborate way of saying, salvation by grace alone – the gospel).

The word, *world*, in the gospel of John does not mean ‘all men without exception.’ Proof:

1. John 1:29: ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ Did Christ by His death take away the sin of all men without exception? If He did, all men without exception shall be saved.
2. John 6:33. ‘For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.’ Does Jesus give life (not, ineffectually offer life, but, efficaciously give life) to all men without exception? If He does, all men without exception have eternal life.
3. John 17:9: ‘I (Jesus) pray not for the world.’ Does Jesus refuse to pray for all men without exception?

This last text points out that the word, *world*, in the gospel of John does not always have the same meaning. In John 3:16, the world is loved by God, with a love that gives the Son of God for its sake; in John 17:9, the Son of God refuses to pray for the world. The saints must not come to an understanding of the world of John 3:16 by a quick assumption, but by careful interpretation of the passage in the light of the rest of Scripture.

What then is the truth about the *world* of John 3:16? Loved by God with Divine, almighty, effectual, faithful, eternal love, the world is saved. All of it! All of them!

Redeemed by the precious, worthy, powerful, effectual death of the Son of God, the world is saved. All of it! All of them!

The salvation of all the persons included in the world of John 3:16 is due solely to the effectual love of God and the redeeming death of Christ for them; whereas the persons who perish were never loved by God, nor redeemed by Christ, that is, they are not part of the world of John 3:16.

The world of John 3:16 (Greek: *kosmos*, from which comes our English word, *cosmos*, referring to our ‘orderly, harmonious, systematic universe’) is the creation made by God in the beginning, now disordered by sin, with the elect from all nations, now by nature children of wrath even as the others, as the core of it. As regards its people, the world of John 3:16 is the new

humanity in Jesus Christ, the last Adam (I Corinthians 15:45). John calls this new human race ‘the world’ in order to show, and emphasize, that it is not from the Jewish people alone, but from all nations and peoples (Revelation 7:9). The people who make up the world of John 3:16 are all those, and those only, who will become believers (whosoever believeth); and it is the elect who believe (Acts 13:48).

This explanation of John 3:16 is not some strange, new interpretation dreamed up by latter-day hyper-Calvinists, but the explanation that has been given in the past by defenders of the Faith we call Reformed, that is, by those who confessed the sovereign grace of God in the salvation of sinners.

This was the explanation given by Frances Turretin, Reformed theologian in Geneva (1623-1687):

The love treated of in John 3:16 . . . cannot be universal towards all and every one, but special towards a few . . . because the end of that love which God intends is the salvation of those whom He pursues with such love . . . If therefore God sent Christ for that end, that through Him the world might be saved, He must either have failed of His end, or the world must necessarily be saved in fact. But it is certain that not the whole world, but only those chosen out of the world are saved; therefore, to them properly has this love reference . . . Why then should not the world here be taken not universally for individuals, but indefinitely for anyone, Jews as well as Gentiles, without distinction of nation, language and condition, that He may be said to have loved the human race, inasmuch as He was unwilling to destroy it entirely but decreed to save some certain persons out of it, not only from one people as before, but from all indiscriminately, although the effects of that love should not be extended to each individual, but only to some certain ones, viz, those chosen out of the world? (*Theological Institutes*)

About the word, *world*, in Scripture, Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian (1837-1920) wrote:

For if there is anything that is certain from a somewhat more attentive reading of Holy Scripture, and that may be held as firmly established, it is, really, the irrefutable fact, that the word, world, in Holy Scripture, means ‘all men’ only as a very rare exception and almost always means something entirely different.

In explanation, specifically, of the ‘world’ of John 3:16, Kuyper went on to say that the reference is to the ‘proper kernel’ of the creation, the elect people of God, ‘which Jesus snatches away from Satan.’

. . . out of this kernel, out this congregation, out of this people, a ‘new world,’ a ‘new earth and new heaven,’ shall one day appear, by a wonder-work of God. The earth does not merely serve to allow the elect to be saved, in order then to disappear. No, the elect are men; these men form a whole, a collection, an organism; that organism is grounded in creation; and because now this creation is the reflection of God’s wisdom and the work of His hands, God’s administration of it may not come to nothing, but in the Great Day God’s will with this creation shall be perfectly realized. [*Dat De Genade Particulier Is* (That Grace is Particular). My translation of the Dutch.]

Essentially the same is the interpretation of Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952):

Turning now to John 3:16, it should be evident from the passages just quoted that this verse will not bear the construction usually put upon it. ‘God so loved the world.’ Many suppose that this means, The entire human race. But ‘the entire human race’ includes all mankind from Adam till the close of earth’s history: it reaches backward as well as forward! Consider, then, the history of mankind before Christ was born. Unnumbered millions lived and died before the Savior came to the earth, lived here ‘having no hope and without God in the world,’ and therefore passed out into eternity of woe. If God ‘loved’ them, where is the slightest proof thereof? Scripture declares ‘Who (God) in times past (from the tower of Babel till after Pentecost) suffered all nations to walk in their own ways’ (Acts 14:16). Scripture declares that ‘And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient’ (Rom. 1:28). To Israel God said, ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth’ (Amos 3:2). In view of these plain passages who will be so foolish as to insist that God in the past loved all mankind! The same applies with equal force to the future . . . But the objector comes back to John 3:16 and says, ‘World means world. ‘True, but we have shown that ‘the world’ does not mean the whole human family. The fact is that ‘the world’ is used in a general way . . . Now the first thing to note in

connection with John 3:16 is that our Lord was there speaking to Nicodemus, a man who believed that God's mercies were confined to his own nation. Christ there announced that God's love in giving His Son had a larger object in view, that it flowed beyond the boundary of Palestine, reaching out to 'regions beyond.' In other words, this was Christ's announcement that God had a purpose of grace toward Gentiles as well as Jews. 'God so loved the world,' then, signifies, God's love is international in its scope. But does this mean that God loves every individual among the Gentiles? Not necessarily, for as we have seen the term 'world' is general rather than specific, relative rather than absolute . . . the 'world' in John 3:16 must, in the final analysis refer to the world of God's people. Must we say, for there is no other alternative solution. It cannot mean the whole human race, for one half of the race was already in hell when Christ came to earth. It is unfair to insist that it means every human being now living, for every other passage in the New Testament where God's love is mentioned limits it to His own people – search and see! The objects of God's love in John 3:16 are precisely the same as the objects of Christ's love in John 13:1: 'Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His time 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.' We may admit that our interpretation of John 3:16 is no novel one invented by us, but one almost uniformly given by the Reformers and Puritans, and many others since them. (*The Sovereignty of God*)

We can only marvel that Reformed men and women are so soon removed from the truth of God's sovereign, particular, electing love in Jesus Christ, which truth has not only been confessed 'by the Reformers and Puritans' before them, but has also been confessed by the Reformed church herself in her Creed, the Canons of Dordt.

Who hath bewitched them?

As for us, we are determined, out of love for the truth, to oppose the lie of a love of God in Jesus Christ for all men without exception; to try to rescue those who have been taken captive by this doctrine; and to preach and testify, near and far, in season and out of season, a love of God for the world that saves the world, a death of the Son of God that redeemed the world, a

purpose of God for the saving of sinners that is accomplished, and a salvation of enslaved sinners by the sovereign power of the grace of God alone for the comfort of every believer and the glory of God.