

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

by

Rev. David J. Engelsma

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 Dort.

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.