

# 3:16

*John 3:16*

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the **world**, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

## The Most Famous Verse in the Bible

Growing up watching football, I remember seeing a strangely dressed guy with a rainbowed wig who always managed to get behind the goal posts to hold up a banner: **John 3:16**. Given our cultural ignorance of all things biblical, I've often wondered if people just thought some crazy lost man was looking for his buddy John in row 3 seat 16, and given that he seemed to be at every game, maybe he couldn't even remember what stadium his friend John was in. I haven't seen Banner-man for years. Then, several weeks ago, Tim Tebow beat the Pittsburgh Steelers in a Wild Card playoff game and it all came back to our public consciousness. I was listening to KOA 85 AM after the game when the

sports commentator pointed out within minutes of the game ending that Tebow threw for 316 yards and that his favorite Bible verse is John 3:16. But it gets much, much stranger. Later, it was discovered that he averaged 31.6 yards per completion; an important interception that led to a field goal for the Broncos came on third-and-16. The Steelers finished the game with a time of possession of 31:06. CBS's final quarter-hour ratings were 31.6.<sup>1</sup> His yards per rush were 3.16.<sup>2</sup> All this took place exactly three years to the day after Tebow wore the 3:16 makeup on his face for the college national championship. He asked, “**Is this a coincidence?**”



John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the Bible, and one of the most beloved. Yet, it is one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Scheffer, “Tebow Phenomenon Gets Eerie,” ESPN (Jan 13, 2012), [http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/\\_/page/10spot-divisional/tim-tebow-phenomenon-gets-erie-adam-scheffer-10-spot](http://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/page/10spot-divisional/tim-tebow-phenomenon-gets-erie-adam-scheffer-10-spot)

<sup>2</sup> According to Tebow in an interview with Harry Connick Jr. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILz\\_9KRwzB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILz_9KRwzB8)

most misunderstood, by pagan or Christian, Arminian or Calvinist. Among other things, it tells us about the love of God. I'm going to challenge some of you today with what **D. A. Carson** (a Calvinist by almost anyone's definition) calls *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult, he says, because there are various expressions of love that God has, and each must be kept in mind at all times. God has at least five expressions of love:

1. The peculiar love of the Father for the Son, and the son for the Father.
2. God's providential love over all that he has made.
3. God's salvific stance toward his fallen world.
4. God's particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect.
5. God's conditional love based on obedience.

**Unbelievers** often believe that God is love, but they deny several of these 5 tenants. Their view of God is wrong. Their view of love is wrong. The reasons why God loves is wrong. Almost everything about it is wrong, not the least of which is that they do not believe that God's love is expressed to them through Christ. Evangelicals of the

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000).

more **Arminian** variety love to talk about the love of God, but often in sentimental lovey-dovey boyfriend kinds of ways. For example, a church this week had as their billboard sign, “**Christ died to win your heart. Be his valentine.**” They usually deny at least one of these tenants, namely, God’s particular selecting love for the elect. **Calvinists** often over react against the sentimental view of God’s love and thus won’t talk about it much at all, or if they do, they too are often guilty of denying at least one of the tenants, namely, that God has taken a salvific stance towards the entire world. So, their talk about God’s love is often restricted only to the elect.

Carson explains what happens when we allow only one expression of love to dominate or control everything we think about the love of God.

If we begin with the **intra-Trinitarian love of God** and use that as the model for all of God’s loving relationships ... [we will take] too little account of how God manifests himself toward his rebellious image-bearers in wrath, in love, in the cross. If the love of God is nothing more than his **providential ordering** of everything, we are not far from [George Lucas’]

mysterious “force.” ... If the love of God is exclusively portrayed as an inviting, yearning, sinner-seeking, rather lovesick passion, we may strengthen the hands of Arminians, semi-Pelagians, Pelagians, and those more interested in God’s inner emotional life than in his justice and glory, but the cost will be massive ... If the love of God refers exclusively to his love for the elect, it is easy to drift toward a simple and absolute bifurcation: God loves the elect and hates the reprobate ... If the love of God is construed entirely within the kind of discourse that ties God’s love to our obedience (e.g., “Keep yourselves in the love of God”) ... [we may be driven] backward toward merit theology, endless fretting about whether or not we have been good enough today to enjoy the love of God. In short, we need *all* of what Scripture says on this subject, or the doctrinal and pastoral ramifications will prove disastrous.<sup>4</sup>

## **An Arminian/Pelagian/Semi-Pelagian View of John 3:16**

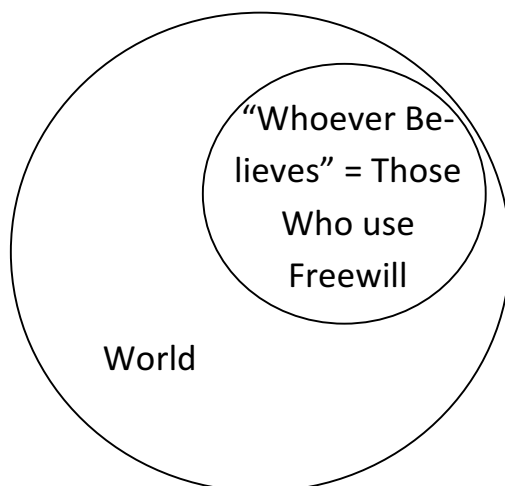
Our inability to think about the total picture of God’s love deeply affects the way we understand **John**

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<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), 21-23.

**3:16.** Let's look at Arminianism for a moment. Those who believe that there is **no particularizing aspect** to God's love (that is that he does not love the elect in a special way) take this verse as proof that **anyone can believe**. They read in a command here (you must believe) when it is simply a statement of fact (whoever believes). They read the definite group "whoever believes" as an indefinite group of "whosoever." That is, they bring their theology into the verse, rather than getting their theology from the verse. They insist that whoever believes is *able* to believe of their own free will. Thus, John 3:16 becomes a proof-text for freewill, when in fact it doesn't say anything about who can or cannot believe. It simply says that some will believe.

## Erroneous Arminian View



Only the larger context of the verse can determine who can or cannot believe, if it speaks to that issue, which it does. The context, both before and after this verse, tells us about **total depravity**. **John 1:12-13** which has many similarities to the discussion of Jesus with Nicodemus (see chart), explains that people are not born again by human will. That alone ought to settle the issue. But we have the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus to reinforce it. Jesus tells him that he has not received his witness because he has not been born from above by the Spirit. Only those who have been born of the Spirit can understand the things of the Spirit. People can't believe in order to get the Spirit, because it is the Spirit who causes belief.

John 1:12-13	John 3:2, 6, 11
But to all who did <b>receive</b> him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,	<sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you (plural) <b>do not receive</b> our testimony.
<sup>13</sup> who were <b>born</b> ,	<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is <b>born</b> again (or from above) he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the <b>flesh</b>

not of blood nor of the will of the flesh	is <b>flesh</b> ,
nor of the will of man, but of <b>God</b> .	and that which is born of <b>the Spirit</b> is spirit.

After Jesus' discussion which most likely ends in vs. 15,<sup>5</sup> picking up on Nicodemus coming to Jesus in by night (**John 3:2**), John explains that the judgment has come: "The light has come into the world, and *people loved the darkness* rather than the light *because their works were evil*. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed" (**John 3:19-20**). This is what comes right after John 3:16, and it is rarely ever mentioned by cherry-pickers of **John 3:16**, because it doesn't fit very well into their interpretation of an indefinite "whosoever." But **Total Depravity** sandwiches the teaching of **John 3:16**, and the verse can only be properly understood in that light. Therefore, when it teaches us that "whoever believes in him," we are **not** to see this as a statement of **moral ability**, as if it is teaching freewill, **but** a statement of God's **incomprehensible grace** that he

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<sup>5</sup> I take the common view that John 3:16 begins John's commentary on the encounter. Some see the verse (usually all the way through vs. 21) as a continuation of Jesus' words to Nicodemus.



should bring anyone to a state of belief at all. For who comes to the light? There is no one who seeks God, no not one. Our verse is simply a statement that some will believe, and those who believe are those who have been born of the Spirit. This is all according to the inscrutable plan of a loving God in election. This is one way to destroy the meaning of the verse. If I were preaching this in a church full of those who believe this way, understand that it would be difficult for them to accept the context, because **presuppositions** blind them and make it very difficult.

## **A Common Reformed View of John 3:16**

I say that, because I'm now going to do something uncomfortable for some Reformed people. Remember how hard it is for our Arminian brothers to get past their presuppositions? We are no different. There is another way to twist this verse, and it is held by many so-called Calvinists who, as we will see later, do not hold to Calvin's view of this at all. I used to be among them as a very ardent proponent of this view. I've actually had to change my understanding twice with this verse, not because I drift with the wind, but because the text

compels me. That is never easy. This view denies that there is **a universal aspect to God's love** (that he loves everyone in some way). This view takes our verse to mean only that God loves the elect and that the elect will believe. This interpretation fails in a different way; it fails to see that there are actually **two different groups** spoken about in this verse. There is the "world" and there is "whoever believes." These are not the same group of people. One is a subset of the other.

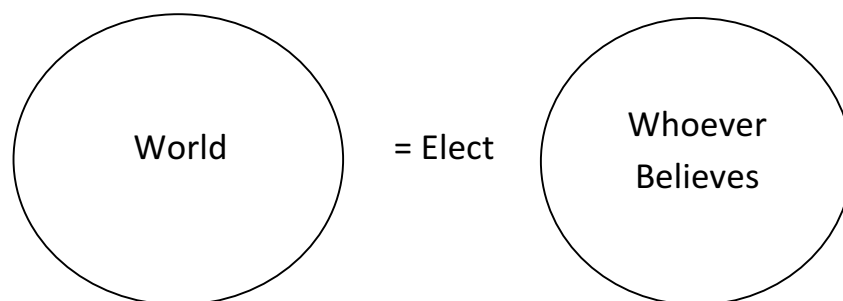
To help you see this, **draw a circle on a page**. Label this circle "**the world**." Now, draw **another circle** beside it (the size for now is irrelevant) and label this "**whoever believes**."

Now, it is common amongst Calvinists *in our day* (as we will see later, this has not always been the case) to insist that "world" really means "elect."<sup>6</sup> So go ahead and put that title next to the first circle near the world "world." Then we may ask them, who is it that believes? Again, the answer is "the elect." Now put this title near "whoever believes." If "world" means "elect" and "who-

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<sup>6</sup> There is often a middle step. Ask them what "world" means, and they will tell you it refers to people groups: all people without distinction as opposed to all people without exception. But when pressed to answer the question who make up these people groups, the answer is, "the elect."

ever believes” means “elect,” then you have one group, not two.



The problem is that it also destroys the context, not to mention the plain sense of the verse.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the world is viewed as **unbelievers**, because in **John 3:18** (which continues to explain **John 3:16**) you have two groups: “**Whoever believes is not condemned**” vs. “**whoever does not believe is condemned already.**” You also have two groups in **vv. 20-21** with “**everyone who does wicked things**” vs. “**whoever does what is true.**”

Do you see the problem? The term “**elect**” is *not* equivalent to “**whoever does not believe**” (**vs. 18**) or to people who “**loved the darkness**” (**vs. 19**) or to “**everyone who does wicked things**” (**vs. 20**), because most of the people who fit into this category are as a matter of fact

<sup>7</sup> An excellent exegesis showing this error is by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed Southern Presbyterian **Robert L. Dabney** in his Lectures (Systematic Theology) which you can access here: <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=45>.

... *not* elect. If “world” equals “whoever does not believe,” and “people who love darkness,” and “everyone who does wicked things,” then world cannot be equal to elect in **John 3:16**. Jesus later explains to the disciples this very point, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (**John 15:18-19**).

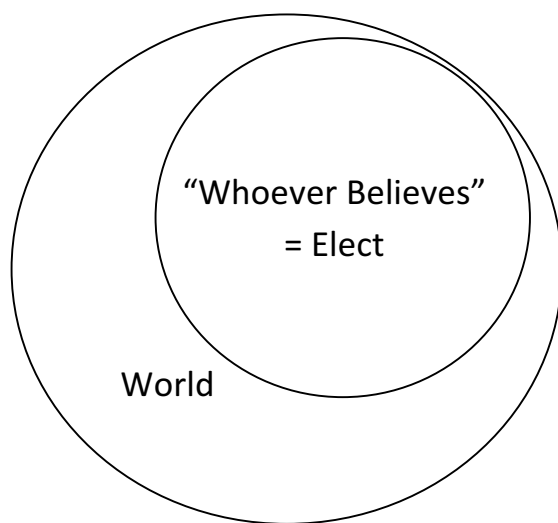
## **The First Reformed View of John 3:16**

Thus, a proper understanding of the verse, the one common to all the first and second generation Reformers<sup>8</sup> (as I will show you shortly), is that there are two groups, drawn as a circle within a circle. Arminians would also draw the circles like this, but they would deny that the smaller circle does in fact equal the elect, which is the proper Calvinist view of “whoever believes.”

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<sup>8</sup> This is a bold statement made to me by David Ponter, who has documented scores of Reformed views on this subject in these generations, who has documented many others who have taken the more common approach today beginning in the third generation after Calvin, but who has yet to find a single statement made by a first or second generation reformer of the more common contemporary approach. His library of quotes can be accessed at: <http://calvinandcalvinism.com/>. He acknowledged that many of these first two generations works have not been translated into English.

Whoever believes does in fact equal the elect (I am assuming true, saving belief here).



## Why Do We Bring in Our Presuppositions?

Now I want to ask, why would Arminians read their presuppositions into **John 3:16**? Also, why would Reformed people do the same? Maybe neither one realizes they are doing it? If that is all there is to it, then just looking at the whole passage should change minds in both camps. However, for the Arminian, I believe it often has to do with **an unwillingness to accept God's holiness, justice, judgment, and wrath** in a way that is consistent with the Bible. This doesn't fit their view of God's love. How could God love all people and yet

predestine some to hell? Ironically, for many Reformed people, I believe it has to do with the exact same thing. They can't figure out how a universal love of God could fit with another biblical fact of God's divine hatred of sin and even sinners. To love someone and to hate them is incompatible in *both* kinds of logic. How ironic, that both groups who think they are so far apart, actually start with the same problem. Never mind that God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. It is human nature to want to think that we know God's thoughts perfectly. We like to think that we have access to and understand the mind of God. How could God love someone and yet send them to hell. The Arminian says it is not possible, so they deny election. Many Reformed people say it is not possible, so they deny that God loves the non-elect. This is not good exegesis.

## **Which Expression of Love is John 3:16?**

Now, some Reformed Christians who hold to this view that "world" really means "elect" in John 3:16 will admit that God does have a love for the non-elect. It is a general love, a common grace. This is certainly true. "God is good to all creation" (Ps 145:9). "The rain falls

on the just and unjust” (Matt 5:45). No one deserves even this from God, and so it must be an act of grace. What I want you to notice, however, is that **the love spoken about in John 3:16 has a context**. It was his love for the world that caused Christ *to die on the cross*. Notice, John 3:16 starts with that seemingly insignificant little word “for.” “**For God so loved the world...**” When you see a for, you should ask what its for. Why is this word important? It shows you that 3:16 is commenting directly upon **vv. 14-15**. If Arminians don’t like to keep reading, Reformed people often stop reading at **vs. 15** and don’t make the connections to **vs. 16**.

*“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,  
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,  
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.  
For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,  
that whoever believes in him should not perish  
but have eternal life.”*

These verses clearly parallel each other. God’s love of the world is paralleled to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. That is, God’s love for the world leads

him to send his son to die on the cross, just as Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole. Let that sink in. This is not some shapeless nebulous love, but the love of Christ dying on the cross for the “world.”

Perhaps it is because they know this that many Reformed people are forced by their theology to say that “world” means “elect.” As I just said, it makes no sense to them how Christ could love the world and die for them and yet not save them. That is impossible. Therefore the world *has to mean* elect. This question strikes at the heart of the atonement. It brings a whole bunch of baggage about what the atonement is, what it does, what it does not do. I can't possibly talk about all of that this morning, but I can tell you that God could have more than one purpose (that is to just save someone) in the death of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Dabney lists this as a starting point. 1. *A reprieve of doom for every sinner of Adam's race who does not die at his birth.* 2. Many substantial, though **temporal benefits**. Among these are **postponement of death** and perdition, **secular well-being**, and the **bounties of life**. 3. A **manifestation of God's mercy** to many of the non-elect, to all those, namely, who live under the Gospel, in sincere offers of a salvation on terms of faith. And a **sincere offer** is real and not a delusive benefaction; because it is only the recipient's contumacy [i.e. stubborn rebellion] which disappoints it. 4. A **justly enhanced condemnation** of those who reject the Gospel, and thereby a clearer display of God's righteousness and reasonableness in condemning, to all the worlds. 5a. A disclosure of the **infinite tenderness and glory of God's compassion**, with purity, truth and justice, to all rational creatures. 5b. It makes a display of **God's general benevolence** and **pity** towards all lost sinners, to the glory of his infinite grace. Dabney, *Points of Calvinism* (p. 63-64).



I can also tell you, as **Dabney** explains,<sup>10</sup> that many Calvinists collapse redemption accomplished and redemption applied into one thing, so that it makes no sense to them that Christ could die for the world and yet not save it. They will say, “**I was justified at the cross,**” for instance, forgetting that justification is by faith and that they were actually born under God’s wrath. How could God’s wrath be on a person who has been justified? Earlier “Calvinists” like Calvin and all of his contemporaries had no such problem seeing Christ’s death as being for the world and yet its application limited by the intention of God only to the elect. They didn’t think this put the Trinity at odds. They didn’t think it meant that God has some unfulfilled desire. They didn’t see this as some kind of double jeopardy or justice being thwarted or Christ’s blood wasted or anything else. They were completely at ease with both things.

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<sup>10</sup> His shortest treatment of this comes in his little booklet on the *Five Points of Calvinism* (p. 60-66) where he explains that “atonement” only occurs one time in the English NT (KJV; it occurs exactly zero times in the ESV, NAS, etc). There “atonement” means “reconciliation” or redemption applied. You can read about this at length in his Systematic Theology, as well as in the Systematics of Charles Hodge, William Shedd (Dogmatics), J. P. Boice, and other 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed Christians. Visit the links to these men and others at [www.calvinandcalvinism.com](http://www.calvinandcalvinism.com).

## John 3:16 in the Reformation and Beyond ...

This is what I meant that I am going to confront some of you with the uncomfortable idea of God's love. I want to spend a little time quoting many Reformed Christians on this topic. Many you will have heard of, some not. But this unquestionably was what the Reformation believed and taught. Later that changed. What I ask you to do is to think long and hard about how these serious uniformly predestinarian minds would see no contradiction here, and then ask yourself whether or not they might have believed some things differently that allowed them to see things this way. Unless you do this, all you will be able to hear in these quotes are aberrations or meaningless nonsense, and you will not be able to be confronted with God's love as you ought.

**Martin Luther** (1483-1546) writes, "To whom was this grace shown? To 'the world,' that is, *to those who were condemned and lost ...* To whom does God give His Son? To the world, that is, to *the wayward multitude*, which has not merited this but, on the contrary, should reasonably expect to be doomed and damned. The Son

is given that those who were lost may be saved through Him.”<sup>11</sup>

**Ulrich Zwingli** (1484-1531) writes, “How much more had the victim to be absolutely spotless which made atonement for the sins not only of *all who had been*, but of *all who were yet to come*.”<sup>12</sup> “Christ is the lamb that atones for *the universal disease of sin*.”<sup>13</sup> “Original sin is not the only sin in the world, and Christ takes away *all the sins of the world*.”<sup>14</sup>

**William Farel** (1489-1565) the famous reformer who persuaded Calvin to remain in Geneva, “Let all therefore, whether priests or preachers, have respect to the great shepherd Jesus Christ, who *gave his body and his blood for the poor people*. Let us prefer to be nothing, if only the poor sheep, gone so far astray, may find the right way, may come to Jesus and give themselves to God. That will be better than if we should gain all the world and *lose those for whom Jesus died*.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, on John 3:16, in *Luther's Works*, 22:374-75.

<sup>12</sup> Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion* (Labyrinth press), p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>15</sup> J.H. Merle d'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, vol. 6 (Sprinkle Publications, 2000), p. 238-239.

**Pierre Viret** (1511-1571) who joined William Farel in the Swiss Reformation, “As for *man ... he was created to the image of God ... God his creator having pity on him, has loved the world, that he has given his only son Jesus Christ, for mediator, patron, advocate, and intercessor between him and man, to reconcile them to him, even when they were his enemies.*”<sup>16</sup> As with the others, Viret’s starting point for God’s love is not the fall, but all people as being made in God’s image.

**Peter Martyr Vermigli** (1499-1562) a very famous Italian reformer who stood up for Protestantism in the heart of the Roman Catholic world said, “They [the anti-predestinarians] *also grant* that ‘Christ died for us all’ and infer from this that his benefits are common to everyone. *We gladly grant this, too,* if we are considering only the worthiness of the death of Christ, for it might be sufficient for all the world's sinners. Yet even if in itself it is enough, yet it did not have, nor has, nor will have effect in all men. The Scholastics also acknowledge

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Veret, *A Christian Instruction, conteyning the law and the gospel. Also a Summarie of the Principall poyntes of the Christian faith and Religion, and of the abuses and errors contrary to the same*, trans., I.S. (London: Abraham Veale), 1573), 10-11.

the same thing when they affirm that Christ redeemed all men sufficiently but not effectually.”<sup>17</sup>

**Girolamo Zanchi** (1516-1590) another Italian reformer who studied under Peter Martyr and was deeply influenced by Calvin wrote, “It is certain that there is nothing in Scripture found more often, then that God loves. What? His Son, his church, the elect, *all men, the world*, and to conclude, all things that are: so as nothing wants [lacks] God’s love toward it.”<sup>18</sup>

**Wolfgang Musculus** (1497-1563) a French and German reformer writes, “That he gave his only begotten Son, that everyone which believes in him, should not perish, but have ever life everlasting. *So that by the world he means all mankind.*”<sup>19</sup>

**Augustine Marlorate** (1506-1562), a French Reformer sent out by Geneva, “Our minds have no peaceable rest or quietness in which they may stay themselves, until we come to the free love of God. For he so loved the world that he sent life to the same by his only Son to

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<sup>17</sup> **Peter Martyr Vermigli**, *Predestination and Justification* vol., 8, trans., by Frank A. James (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 2003), p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> **Girolamo Zanchi**, *Live Everlasting: Or The True Knowledge of One Iehova, Thre Elobim and Jesus Immanuel: Collected Out of the Best Modern Divines, and Compiled into one volume by Robert Hill* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1601).

<sup>19</sup> **Wolfgang Musculus**, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, trans., John Merton (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578), 962-63.

save mankind from destruction ... He might by the sending of his Son utterly condemn and destroy the world (for *the world by its wickedness and impieties* has deserved perpetual condemnation): but such is the love of God toward the same, that he had rather *spare it*, and by sending his son to be a Savior, sought rather to offer the cause of salvation, than of condemnation ... For thus says the LORD: ‘[Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked], but rather that he turn from his wickedness and live’” (**Ezek 18:23**).<sup>20</sup>

**Thomas Becon** (1512-1657) a British reformer from Norfolk, “Is not the merciful Lord, therefore, worthy to be loved again? And ought we not to put our whole confidence in him, who forgives us our sins, yea, and *the sins of all the world*, and doth not reckon them, although they are innumerable? For seeing that the sins of *one man* are infinite, who can number *the sins of the whole world*? And yet is this sentence true and certain, that *God forgives the world all their sins*. For wheresoever is the love of God, there is also remission of sins. We should have ready hearts diligently to meditate on this

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<sup>20</sup> **Augustine Marlorate**, *A Catholike and Ecclesiasticall exposition of the holy Gospel after S. John*, Trans., Thomas Timme (London: Thomas Marshe, 1575).

love, whereas God gives to *the world which is his enemy*, even his own self.”<sup>21</sup>

Among the Puritans, **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677), “Cannot I bless God for Christ, without reflection on my own particular benefit; *his general love in sending a savior* for mankind? (John 3:16) ... his philanthropy, his *man-kindness*, should put that home upon us, that there is a sufficient foundation for the truth of this proposition, that whoever believeth shall be saved, that *Christ is an all-sufficient Savior*, to deliver me from wrath and to bring me to everlasting life ... he had *all mankind* in his prospect and view, as lying in the polluted mass, or in a state of sin and misery, and then provided a Redeemer for them.”<sup>22</sup>

**George Swinnock** (1627-1673), “When God sent his Son into the world, he did, as it were say to him, My dear Son, thou Son of my chief love and choicest delight, go to the *wicked, unworthy world*, commend me to them, and tell them, that in thee I have sent them such a love-

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<sup>21</sup> **Thomas Becon**, in (London: Religious Tract Society, 1830).

<sup>22</sup> **Thomas Manton**, “Sermons upon 2 Corinthians 5,” in *Works*, 13:155.

token, such an unquestionable testimony of my favor and good-will towards them, that hereafter they shall never have the least color of reason to suspect my love, or to say, Wherein hast thou loved us?” (Mal 1:2).<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Boston (1676-1732), “God hath so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son ... Of this giving of Christ to mankind lost ... are we to think that the rejecting of the record of God is a bare disbelieving of this proposition, that God hath given eternal life unto the elect? No, surely: for *the most desperate unbelievers*, such as Judas and others, believe this; and their belief of it adds to their anguish and torment ... they still continue, notwithstanding of all this, *to make him a liar*, in ‘*not believing this record of God*,’ that to *lost mankind*, and to *themselves* in particular, God hath given eternal life by way of grant, so as they as well as others, are warranted and welcome; and every one to whom it comes, on their peril, required by faith to receive or take possession of it.”<sup>24</sup> I haven’t even told you about Augustine, Athanasius, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Heinrich Bullinger, William Ames, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, Thomas

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<sup>23</sup> George Swinnock, “Heaven and Hell Epitomised,” in *The Works of George Swinnock*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: James Nicol, 1868).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Boston, “The Marrow of Modern Divinity: Appendix,” in *Works* 7:485-87.



Cranmer, Jonathan Edwards, Matthew Henry, Charles Spurgeon, Charles Hodge, William Shed, Louis Berkhof, Leon Morris and others all on the love of God for the world, and many on the death of Christ for the same (For the record, at least 1/3 of the Westminster divines who signed the WCF held to this view, as did at least one Reformed Baptist who signed the LBC 1644).<sup>25</sup>

Of course, I can't leave out John Calvin (1509-1564), who writes about this in so many places, it would take longer than this entire sermon to begin to give you a feeling for it.<sup>26</sup> Consider just a couple. "It is true that Saint John says generally, that he loved the world. And why? For Jesus Christ *offers himself generally to all men*

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<sup>25</sup> This Paul Hobson (d. 1666) who is so bold as to write, "Christ tasted death for every man, and to deny it is heresie." *Fourteen Queries and Ten Absurdities About the Extent of Christ's Death, the Power of the Creatures, the Justice of God in Condemning Some, and Saving Others, Presented by a Free-willer to the Church of Christ at Newcastle, and Answered by Paul Hobson a Member of Said Church* (London: Printed by Henry Hills for William Hutchison Book-seller in Durham, 1655), 101. See also pp. 6-14. <http://theologicalmeditations.blogspot.com/2010/06/paul-hobson-d-1666-affirming-christs.html>. Later on, of course, came Charles Spurgeon who held the same views. "I do not see why the Christian may not transfer the idea and believe that there is a general influence for good flowing from the mediatorial sacrifice for Christ and yet its special design and definite object is the giving of eternal life for as many as the father gave him."<sup>25</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "General and Yet Particular," a sermon delivered on Sunday morning, April 24, 1864, Sermons vol. 10.

<sup>26</sup> A small sample includes his comments on Ps 81:13, Lam 3:33; Ezek 18:23, 31-32, 33:11; Isa 44:22; Matt 5:45; 23:37; Luke 19:41; John 1:29; 3:16; Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 5:20; Eph 2:3; 1 Tim 2:4-6; Heb 10:29; 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 4; 2 Pet 3:9; 1 Jn 2:2.

*without exception to be their redeemer ... Thus we see three degrees of the love of God as shown us in our Lord Jesus Christ. The first is in respect to the redemption that was purchased in the person of him that gave himself to death for us, and became accursed to reconcile us to God his father. That is the first degree of love, which extends to all men, inasmuch as Jesus Christ reaches out his arms to call and allure all men both great and small, and to win them to him. But there is a special love for those to whom the gospel is preached: which is that God testifies unto them that he will make them partakers of that benefit that was purchased for them by the death and passion of his son.*<sup>27</sup> “For as He declared his *love toward mankind* when He spared not His Only Son but delivered Him to death for sinners, also He declares *a love especially toward us* when by His Holy Spirit He touches us by the knowledge of our sin which He bears and He makes us wail and draws us to Himself with repentance.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Sermon 28, 4:36-38, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, *Sermons on the Deity of Christ*, Sermon 6, Matt 26:67-27:10, p. 108.

# Application of the Love of God to the World

There is much more that could be said, but I have to bring this to an end. Therefore, let me make some observations and applications to leave you with today. First, the [love of God is the starting point for the gospel in the book of John](#). In his first real discussion in this book, Jesus confronts Nicodemus with his depravity and with his coming death on the cross. John interprets this through the lens of God's love for [the world](#). Many professing Christians and not a few pagans start with God's love, but it is not a biblical view of love. Rather, it is often an emotional, sentimental, even sappy feeling that basically says, "Of course God loves the whole world. He's like that. Besides, why wouldn't God love me? I'm very lovable!"

Many Reformed people on the other hand, don't start with the love of God which is revealed to us. They start with the decrees of God, which are not! We love to delve into the mysteries. We want the secrets. We like to feel like we have inside information. It is fine to think about the decrees, but not if this is allowed to eclipse that which is revealed, not if it causes you to get so

caught up in hidden secret things that rightly and properly belong only to God that you can't see the love of God even when it slaps you across the face. "The secret things belong to God, but that which is revealed belong to us and to our children" (Deut 29:29).

Some Calvinists have had this terrible problem of not seeing God's love in Christ towards others, and even worse towards themselves. This is an intensely practical thing. In some it causes *no end of worry*, doubt, and lack of assurance; and rightly so. For logically, in order *to believe that* Christ died for you, you would first have to *know if* he died for you.<sup>29</sup> It would be erroneous presumption to believe Christ died for you if in fact he didn't.

I tell you this, not only because I'm a preacher and it is my calling, but because it seems to me that the love of God for all mankind is *the fire for evangelism*. That God will in fact not let his word fall upon deaf ears all the time is *its fuel*. Election is its fuel. Without the fire, we have no logical reason to evangelize. Without the fuel, we will despair of doing so.

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<sup>29</sup> See Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 524.

In some, this lack of love in God (who is love) can bring a lack of patience, kindness, and gentleness, even hatred towards others. Let me boldly say this. If you have no room for the love of God for all mankind in your theology, then it *will* come out in the way you treat people or don't treat them. For you have created a theological rationalization for why you can now follow your God in your actions. If he doesn't love everyone, why should I? I'm not saying those who have room for God's love for all mankind will act this out consistently. Nor am I saying that those who do not have room will act this out consistently (we are all inconsistent). I am saying, there may in fact be reasons why some Reformed people can sometimes act as angry, know-it-all, never-wrong, belligerent, jerks; just as there are reasons why some Arminians seem sappy, sentimental, thoughtless, and careless about the doctrines of God's word. Both grow naturally from a bad theological seed of the love of God.

Children, God **LOVES** the **WORLD**. That's what the Bible says. I'm thankful that I can once again just say it without feeling like I have to justify how it doesn't really mean that. This love includes those whom you

may not like to think it includes. This includes even you. Consider this. He has shown great **patience** to the **objects of his wrath** (**Rom 9:22**). What is this patience if not love? Does not the Apostle say, “**Love is patient?**” (**1 Cor 13:4**). It’s the same word in Greek. He has shown **kindness** to them as it written, “**When the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind** (*philanthropia*<sup>30</sup>) **appeared ...**” (**Tit 3:4**).<sup>31</sup> What is love is not kind? Does not the Apostle say, “**Love is kind**” (**1 Cor 13:4**)? God has shown patience and kindness to his enemies. Patience and kindness are love. Therefore, God has shown love to his enemies. Such were *you* (**Rom 5:8**). *You* were under God’s wrath (**Eph 2:1-3**). But God loves you and Christ died for you, and therefore you ought to love him back and trust in the Son as the only means of obtaining eternal life. I know that this message will not fall on deaf ears, because God also elects people and

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<sup>30</sup> The word here is where we get philanthropy. Philanthropy comes from two words (*philia* + *anthropos*). *Philia* is love in the sense of caring for, nourishing, developing, or enhancing. It is a brotherly love. *Anthropos* is humanity in the sense of what it is to be human. In all lexicons, this love refers to all mankind and it is always used this way in the Greek world.

<sup>31</sup> Zanchi writes, “*Philanthropo*, as in third of Titus: “But when the goodness, and *philanthropia* of our Saviour Christ did appear”: which is as much to say as love to mankind.” See Zanchi, *ibid*.

causes them to be born again by the Holy Spirit at his sovereign good pleasure. Praise be to God.

I know that there are all kinds of reasons people have come up with, be they Arminian or a newer form of Calvinism not to believe what I'm saying today. What I ask is that you go home and think about it. If you come to the conclusion that "whoever believes" implies freewill, I can't stop you. If you come to the conclusion that "world" really does mean "elect" and no one else, I can't force you. But I am convinced through exegetical reasons that neither one is the case. I've come to see personally that both views often lead to dangerous outcomes in faith and practice. I also rest that this view is absolutely perfectly orthodox and Reformed. There was a reason why the Reformation changed the world like nothing else before or after it, and that includes the Great Awakening. It is because it seems that in all of history, it and it alone held to a consistent, exegetical, passionate view that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. This is the difficult doctrine of the love of God.

# God's Multi-Faceted, Trinitarian Love

	<b>The World</b>	<b>The Elect</b>
<b>The Father</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not delight in the death of the Wicked (Ezek 33:11)</li> <li>• Gives blessings to the children of Adam (Matt 5:45); Will redeem the <i>kosmos</i> (Rom 8:21)</li> <li>• Has general love for all mankind (John 3:16)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will save a limited number of people (John 6:39)</li> <li>• Gives faith and belief to a limited number of people (Eph 2:8-9; Php 1:29)</li> <li>• Has special love for the elect (John 3:16)</li> </ul>
<b>The Son</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weeps over Jerusalem (“who killed the prophets”) (Matt 23:37)</li> <li>• Lifted up as a propitiation for the sins of the world (John 3:14-15; 1 Jn 2:2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loves his bride with a special love (Eph 5:25; Rev 19:7)</li> <li>• Will lose none that the Father has given him (Eph 5:25; John 6:39)</li> </ul>
<b>The Spirit</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calls all men with a general calling (Matt 22:14)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calls the elect with an effectual calling (Acts 13:48)</li> </ul>