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Thinking and Speaking Biblically About the Death of Christ, Appendix 3:

The Redemptive Love of God and the Meaning of “the World” in John 3:16

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All that are within the circle of Christ's love must be within the circle of our love, and to contend for doctrine in a manner which ignores this truth is a rending of the unity of the true church, which is His body.

Nevertheless it is equally evident that no man's beliefs or preaching are above the need of testing, and it is the duty of ministers to oppose errors even when they are held by sincere and saintly believers.

(Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*)

Some readers have undoubtedly wondered where I fit John 3:16 into my understanding of God's love for man, unconditional election, and limited atonement. I have not forgotten about this familiar verse. Rather, I have chosen to give it an isolated and extensive treatment because I find it to be the most difficult and controversial reference to God's love for man. This is particularly true when it comes to identifying the objects of that love in the words recorded by the Apostle John:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Precisely *who* is God said to love in this verse? The answer to that question may be discovered by answering another question: What sort of love is it? Is it God's benevolent kindness as in Matthew 5:43-45, Luke 6:30-36, and Deuteronomy 10:18? Is it His redemptive love, as in Romans 5:8 and Ephesians 2:4-5? Or is it a third, as yet undefined love for man, one that hovers somewhere in between these other two?

Sadly, John 3:16 is one of the most abused and misunderstood verses in the Bible. When most Christians consider John 3:16, they promptly arrive at conclusions that are nowhere to be found in Scripture. For example:

- “The world” means every single member of humanity.
- God loves every single person in the same way.

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- God desires (and, some would even say, is trying) to save all of them.
- God has given all people “free will” (meaning both the *freedom* and the *ability* to obey the gospel¹) as the ultimate determiner of their eternal destiny.

These unbiblical assumptions (and that truly is how they should be labeled) are not only contrary to the doctrine of salvation, they also do not take into account the facts of redemptive history. Many who hold these views do not seem to have considered the fact that the same God who allegedly loves and wants to save every member of humanity never even attempted to reveal His redemptive love to millions who have lived and died in the history of the world. More than that, He providentially withheld it from them.

In Colossians 2, Paul spoke of “God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (vv. 2-3). This mystery was a revelation from God that “in other generations was not made known to the sons of men” (Ephesians 3:5). God sent Christ at the divinely appointed time (cf. Galatians 4:4), after millions had already perished in ignorance. Paul reminded the Ephesians that before the mystery of the gospel was revealed to them, they had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Biblically, two facts are certain: 1) Salvation comes *only* through God’s revealed truth, and 2) God reveals His saving truth *when* and *to whom* He chooses, but certainly not to everyone. Both facts are plainly revealed in Colossians 1:25-27 where Paul speaks of the gospel,

... that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (emphasis added).

God’s concealment of saving truth is once again affirmed in Romans 16:25-27:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to the

¹ The Bible clearly affirms human *freedom*. Every person is free to choose and do what he wants. But the Bible also clearly rejects the idea of natural human *ability*. Even though the natural man (i.e., the one who has not been born again) is controlled by his own will, he is so inclined, by nature, *toward* evil and *away from* God that he does not *want* to do (and therefore *will not* and *cannot* do) those things which please God (cf. John 3:3; 6:44; Romans 8:6-8; 1 Corinthians 2:12-14). For more on this topic see “*Thinking and Speaking Biblically about the Natural Condition of Man*” Part 1, at www.CCWtoday.org.

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obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen (emphasis added).

The gospel was not merely *undiscovered* for long ages. It was *hidden* from generation after generation while people continued to perish in their ignorance. And this was not some sort of providential accident or an unavoidable tragedy. This was God's good and perfect plan! Paul's words are in perfect keeping with what Jesus said immediately after being rejected by the inhabitants of three cities. In response to this evangelistic "failure," Jesus glorified the Father, saying,

"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight (Matthew 11:25-26, emphasis added).

God is *selective* in revealing the gospel to people. And the knowledge of the gospel is the only means by which a person can be saved. Popular *opinions* about God's universal redemptive love and His supposed desire to save every single person everywhere simply cannot be harmonized with these *facts*.

Other Christians recognize the above problems with the commonly assumed meaning of John 3:16. Some conclude that "the world" is a reference to humanity as a singular mass—mankind in general—but not a reference to each person as an individual. I have the greatest respect for many who hold this view. I formerly held it myself. But I have since come to question whether it is the biblical view. If it is, at least one thing is certain: We must also conclude (as I formerly did) that John 3:16 represents a totally unique sense in which God's disposition toward fallen man must be understood.

The love described in John 3:16 is *greater* than the universal kindness that moves God to send rain and sunshine (as in Matthew 5:45). We know that it *is* greater because it moved God to do something greater—give up His beloved Son to die on the cross. But if the love described in John 3:16 is a *universal* love (i.e., for all people everywhere), then it falls short of the redemptive love described in Ephesians 2:4-5—God's "great love." We know this is true because the love described in Ephesians 2:4-5 moves God to actually save those who are loved in this way. God's "great love" is not merely a hoping and wooing love; it is a powerfully effective love. Consider this critical passage:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6, emphasis added).

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As Christians, we were made alive with Christ, raised up with Christ, and seated in the heavenly places in Christ (in other words, we were saved), for one reason and one reason only: *God loved us!* His redemptive love did not merely prompt Him to *offer* salvation to us or to *create the potential* of our salvation. His redemptive love moved Him to *accomplish* our salvation.

God *loved* us, therefore He *saved* us.



It is crucial to note that the first move (so to speak) in our being saved was God's work of regeneration. He "made us alive" when we were dead in sin, when we were "by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (Ephesians 2:1-3). We did not set ourselves apart from the rest of humanity by reaching out in faith. We were not saved because of our "free will." We, like the rest of humanity, were dead! Our wills were dead to God and alive to sin. In that condition, we would no sooner have chosen God and holiness over self and sin than a dove will choose to eat rotten meat over birdseed. Until God made us alive, we were without hope. But because He loves us, God made us alive while the rest were left in their deadness. The reason "the rest" were *not* made alive is that God does not love them in the same way He loves us. If He did love them with His "great love," just as He loves us, He would have made them alive just as He made us alive. This is all plainly evident in a careful reading of the text of Ephesians 2:1-7, and it has great bearing on our interpretation of John 3:16.

Before examining John 3:16 more closely, consider these four preliminary conclusions:

1. The redemptive love described in Ephesians 2:4 moves God to save all who are loved by Him in this way. In other words, the first and moving cause of a person's salvation is God's redemptive love for that person, not the person's exercise of "free will" in response to an offered salvation.
2. If all people everywhere were the objects of this redemptive love, all people everywhere would be saved.
3. If the love described in John 3:16 is the same as the love described in Ephesians 2:4, then it is a love that moves God to actually save the people whom He loves in this way.
4. If "the world" in John 3:16 means all people everywhere, and if God's "great love" is in view, then all people everywhere will be saved.

If these four preliminary conclusions are valid, and if we are to avoid *universalism* (the heretical doctrine that says every single person will actually be saved), we must give ground in our interpretation of John 3:16 on one of two points:

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We must either ...

- understand the love of God described in John 3:16 to be a lesser love than the “great love” described in Ephesians 2:4-5, or
- understand “the world” in John 3:16 to be a reference to something less inclusive than the whole of humanity.

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I will begin by examining the first option—the possibility that the love of God in John 3:16 might be a lesser love than His “great love” as described in Ephesians 2:4-5.

No Greater Love

First, the love described in John 3:16 is the love that moved God to give His Son as a sacrifice for sin. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son ...” (emphasis added). The word “gave” in this context carries the same meaning as “offered up.” When God sent Christ into the world, He was offering Him up as a sacrifice for sin. In case someone might object, saying that the language of John 3:16 only encompasses the *sending*, yet not the *sacrifice* of Jesus, consider 1 John 4:10: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” This verse undoubtedly binds the sending of Christ with the sacrifice of Christ as a single demonstration of God’s redemptive love. In the next verse John even uses the same emphatic language as John 3:16 when he writes, “Beloved, if God *so loved* us ...” (1 John 4:11, emphasis added).

Second, the love that moved the Father to *give* His Son as a sacrifice also moved the Son to willingly *become* that sacrifice. Just as the Father offered up His Son, the Son “offered up Himself” (Hebrews 7:27). Relating this to John 3:16, God the Father “so loved” us that He gave His Son as a sacrifice. In the same way, God the Son so loved us that He gave Himself as a sacrifice (cf. Ephesians 5:2, 25). One would be extremely hard-pressed to make any distinction between the Father’s expression of love in offering up the Son, and the Son’s expression of love in offering up Himself. In fact, the redemptive love of God and the redemptive love of Christ are said, explicitly, to be one and the same. In Romans 8:39, “the love of God” is the love “that is *in Christ Jesus our Lord*.” And in Romans 5:8 we are told that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, *Christ died for us*” (emphasis added in both previous quotes).

Finally, understanding that the love of the Father and the love of the Son are one and the same, we must also understand that there is no greater love than that which motivates self-sacrifice. As Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). So the first possibility (that John 3:16 might represent a lesser

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love than Ephesians 2:4-5) may be conclusively ruled out. There is no greater love of God for man than that described in John 3:16. Therefore, the love described in John 3:16 is the same love as described in Ephesians 2:4-5—God’s “great love,” the love that *saves*.

What Is “the World” in John 3:16?

We now turn our attention to an examination of the second possibility—the question of whether “the world” in John 3:16 might be less inclusive than “all people everywhere” or “mankind in general.” To begin the process of answering this question, we look to Romans chapter 8 where Paul ties the redemptive love of God and the sacrifice of Christ together as a single demonstration of God’s redemptive love for man.

In Romans 8, Paul sees the love that moved God to sacrifice His Son as a guarantee of something: *All whom God loves with this love will be saved*. He presents an airtight and logically powerful argument for this conclusion in verses 31-39 where he casts the full weight of His eternal confidence on the redemptive love of God *as demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ*.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ... But in all these things [referring to tribulations] we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31-35, 37-39).

The personal confidence Paul expresses in this passage is unshakable. But upon what is it grounded? What had God done to convince Paul beyond doubt that with respect to believers, “God is for us” (v. 31)? How had God proven His love for believers in such a way that Paul knew beyond question that the elect could never be separated from it? His full confidence centers on his own rhetorical question in verse 32:

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (emphasis added).

It was unthinkable for Paul that God might sacrifice His Son for sinners as a demonstration of His love for them, yet fail to save those very sinners. By Paul’s reasoning in this passage, if God sent Christ to die for you, then you may be assured of

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God's redemptive love for you. And if you can be assured of God's redemptive love for you, then you can also be assured that you will never be separated from that love. Based on Paul's reasoning, if God sent Christ to die for all people, then all people can be assured of God's redemptive love for them. And if all people can be assured of God's redemptive love for them, then no person will ever be separated from that love.

Furthermore, Paul goes on to appeal to the love of *Christ* to prove the same thing. In verse 35 he asks, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" Looking back to verse 34, we see that the basis for Paul's assurance in the unfailing love of Christ for believers was the fact that He had 1) died, 2) been raised, and 3) was presently interceding for them. In other words, if Jesus died for you, was raised for you, and is interceding for you, then you may have the assurance that you will never be separated from His love. Again based on Paul's reasoning, if Jesus died for all people, was raised for all people, and is interceding for all people, then all people may have the assurance that they will never be separated from His love. As I have already said, this is precisely where the common interpretation of "the world" in John 3:16 becomes a huge problem.

John 3:16 and Romans 8:31-39 describe the same *event*—God giving up Christ as a sacrifice because of His love for people. Both passages also describe the same *love*—God's redemptive love, a love that actually saves (cf. Ephesians 2:4-5). But if "the world" in John 3:16 means all people everywhere, then all people everywhere are the objects of God's redemptive love and will actually be saved. No one will ever be separated from the love of Christ (Romans 8:34-35). Nothing in all of creation could ever separate *any* person from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). The simple and biblical fact, however, is that many people *will* perish. Therefore it is impossible to conclude that God loves all people everywhere in the redemptive sense spoken of in Romans 8:31-39, Ephesians 2:4-5, and John 3:16. This in turn means that "the world" in John 3:16 *cannot* be a reference to all people everywhere or the entire mass of fallen humanity.

Many will undoubtedly protest based on the "plain reading" of John 3:16. After all, it seems so obvious that it refers to all of mankind in some sense. I realize that my conclusion seems to be a stretch if one insists on interpreting John 3:16 *all by itself*. But no passage of Scripture is rightly interpreted *all by itself* when there are other passages that affect its interpretation. Romans 5:8, Romans 8:31-39, Ephesians 2:4-5, and 1 John 4:10 *definitely* affect the interpretation of John 3:16.

"The World" in the World of the New Testament

Two other factors are commonly overlooked when interpreting John 3:16, as well as other passages where "the world" is used: 1) the literary context—the widely varied usage of

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the term in the New Testament, especially in John's writing, and 2) the historical context—the racial fabric of the world in which the New Testament was born.

1. *The Literary Context*

The same Greek word (*kosmos*) is given a wide range of meaning in the New Testament, always determined by the context and not always conforming to any single dictionary definition. It can refer to the created universe and/or the planet Earth (John 21:25; Acts 17:24). It can refer to everything connected with this present life, apart from the kingdom of God and eternal life (Matthew 16:26; 1 John 2:15). It can even refer to all of the wicked people who lived before The Flood, without including Noah and his family or those who descended from him (2 Peter 2:5). The word simply does not always mean the same thing. The context determines its meaning.

John, who uses “the world” far more frequently than any other biblical author (103 times), commonly sculpts the term in different ways himself, sometimes even differing within the space of a single verse. Consider the following sampling of John's uses in which “the world” refers to:

- the general human population of the earth without moral reference to mankind's fallen condition (John 16:21).
- fallen humanity in general with reference to man's moral rebellion against God (John 15:19b)
- the realm of evil under the dominion of Satan (John 12:31; 17:14-16)
- the general public, with specific reference to those who were alive in Judea at the time of Christ's ministry (John 7:4 and possibly 14:22)
- the created universe (John 17:5, Revelation 13:8; 17:8)
- the planet Earth (John 21:25)
- the remaining body of fallen mankind after the elect have been chosen out of it (John 15:19a; 17:9; 1 John 3:1; 5:19)
- A limited representation of both Jewish and Gentile worshippers (but not every single Jewish or Gentile worshipper) who were in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast during which Christ was crucified (John 12:19)

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- God's elect, chosen from every nation including the Jews, but not from the Jews only (John 3:16; 6:33, 51; 1 John 2:2; 4:14).

This wide variety of usage does not in itself determine the meaning of the word in John 3:16, but it does necessitate taking a closer look before assuming any particular meaning.

2. *The Historical Context*

Most important for this discussion, “the world” is commonly used, both by John and the other writers of the New Testament, not as a reference to any universal broadness in God's redemptive love or intent, but rather to emphasize His New Covenant impartiality—the fact that His redemptive favor is no longer limited to Jews, but extends to all types of people *without distinction* (as opposed to every single person *without exception*).

The New Testament was produced in a largely Jewish culture. Much needed to be said by the writers of the New Testament in order to reorient the intensely nationalistic Jews to the idea that salvation was not only for them, but also for “the world”—Gentiles as well as Jews (see Romans 11:11-15 where this distinction is made quite clearly). That was the great mystery Paul spoke of—the fact that in Christ, God “made both groups into one.” He made “the two into one new man” (Ephesians 2:14-15). Though plainly and repeatedly revealed by the writers of the New Testament, this concept was not an easy one for Jewish Christians to grasp.

Consider the amazement of Jewish believers when Cornelius, a Gentile, was given the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:45; 11:18). Remember that years later, Peter, the same man who had seen the vision from God and had preached the gospel to Cornelius, stumbled due to pressure from other Jews and avoided eating with Gentiles (cf. Galatians 2:11-12). In Acts 22, Paul was able to speak to an angry crowd of Jews about his encounter with the resurrected Jesus without getting any reaction. The same people who had called for Jesus' crucifixion remained silent when Paul spoke of Him as the resurrected Messiah. But when Paul recounted how Jesus sent him to the *Gentiles*, the people went wild with anger (vv. 22-23). The fact is, the Jewish culture of the first century was steeped in a centuries-old separation between the races. The thought of a God-sanctioned union between the two was nearly impossible to accept.

All of this considered, it should not surprise us to find “the world” used where God's New Covenant impartiality needed to be emphasized. And if the commonly-intended emphasis of “the world” is “people from every nation *without distinction*,” no necessity exists whereby we must understand it as a reference to all people *without exception*.

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What about "Whoever"?

When we combine what we have already learned about the objects of God's redemptive love with the variable and often less-than-universal ways in which "the world" is used in the New Testament, it is at least a legitimate possibility (even if some will not admit certainty) that in John 3:16 it was intended to mean "God's elect from every nation." There is, however, one remaining obstacle to this view. It will undoubtedly be asked, "What about the word 'whoever' in John 3:16? 'For God so loved the world ... that *whoever* believes ... shall not perish.'" Many will insist that the use of this word indicates that those who believe are a sub-set of those whom God loves. In other words, they will insist that John 3:16 says that God loves all people, but out of that whole group, only those who believe will be saved.

I would agree that this is one *possible* way of understanding John 3:16. But before you rest too solidly on that view, notice that in the New Testament, the word "whoever" (or "everyone who") is sometimes used just as "the world" is commonly used, to emphasize the distinction between God's Old Covenant *partiality*, and His New Covenant *impartiality*.

For example, in Acts 2:21, at the end of Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-32) quoted by Peter, we read, "And it shall be that everyone who [or whoever] calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Looking back a few verses to find out why Peter quoted this passage from Joel, we learn that those who witnessed the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit were amazed that not only Jews, but also Gentiles from many nations were able to hear "the mighty deeds of God" in their own languages. "And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' " (Acts 2:11-12). As Peter went on to explain through Joel's prophecy, it meant that God was now pouring out His Spirit on "all flesh" (2:17), meaning Jew and Gentile alike. As a result, "everyone who [or whoever, Jew or Gentile] calls on the name of the Lord" would be saved. This removal of racial separation in God's redemptive purpose may not be amazing to us, but it certainly was to Jews of the first century. In fact, it is arguably the main theme of the entire book of Acts.

This way of using "whoever" is even more obviously the case in Romans 10:11-13. We find this passage in the middle of Paul's extended defense of his own statement in Romans 9:6: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." Paul was assuring the Romans that the nearly universal rejection of Christ by the Jews was no proof that the promises of God had failed. For it is not Jews alone, Paul was saying, but Gentiles also, who have *always* been the objects of

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those promises. In defending this idea Paul quotes first from Isaiah 28:16 and then from Joel 2:32 as he writes,

For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed" [Isaiah 28:16]. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" [Joel 2:32] (Romans 10:11-13).

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Returning now to John 3:16, remember that in the previous verses Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, a Jewish Pharisee who thought his Jewish heritage would gain him entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus had already explained that it was not his *physical* birth, but only a new *spiritual* birth from God that would make him fit for heaven (3:3, 5, 8). With that, the stage was set for the words of John 3:16. It would have been perfectly normal for Jesus to conclude His teaching by saying that not only Jews but also Gentiles were the objects of God's redemptive love. And if that is the case, it would also seem likely that John used the word "whoever" in the same way as Paul, Peter, Isaiah, and Joel. His intent, in other words, was not to indicate a believing sub-set of the entire population of the earth, but instead to further emphasize the same racial impartiality as intended by his former use of "the world."

Consider John 3:16 again, with my suggested explanatory comments in brackets:

For God so loved the world [that is, God's elect whom He has chosen from *every* nation, as opposed to His Old Covenant people, the physical nation of Israel], ***that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him*** [that is, any person, whether Jew or Gentile, with no remaining racial distinction] ***shall not perish but have eternal life.***

This interpretation, while radically different than most modern interpretations, is much more consistent with

- 1) the biblical view of God's elective purpose in redemption,
- 2) the nature and effectiveness of His redemptive love as in Ephesians 2:4 and Romans 8:31-39, and
- 3) the cultural climate in which the New Testament was born.

It may sound strange to many Christians today, but it would have made perfect sense to a first century Jew. And it would have caused great rejoicing among Gentiles who formerly saw themselves as excluded from God's redemptive purpose (cf. Acts 13:46-48). Further, there are no exegetical or grammatical factors that rule it out as being at least a

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possibility. The *only* factor that makes this interpretation unacceptable to most Christians is the modern *presupposition* about the universal meaning of “the world.”

The Hebrews 12 Dilemma

For those who continue to insist that God’s love in John 3:16 is a love for every single person everywhere, there is one more difficult (if not impossible) question to answer. What about the distinction made in Hebrews 12:5-8 and Revelation 3:19 between those who are loved by God and those who are not loved by God?

“My Son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov- ed by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons (Hebrews 12:5-8, emphasis added).

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline (Revelation 3:19).

By referring to those whom the Lord *does* love, both writers logically and powerfully imply that there are those whom the Lord *does not* love. By simply reversing the absolute statements made in these passages, we learn that those who are not disciplined by God as by a loving father are not true sons (Hebrews 12). Such people, therefore, are not loved by God. Without legitimate argument, these two passages create two distinct categories of people:

- those who *are* loved by God
- those who are *not* loved by God

If John 3:16 means that God loves all people in the same way, how can it be said in these two places that God *does not* love certain people at all?

Conclusion

I realize that it seems strange to think that a universal term (“the world”) might indicate a less-than-universal object (God’s elect from every nation). I find it interesting, however, that there is no complaint when the same term is used to indicate just the opposite— passages like John 17:9 where Jesus prays for the elect, but not for “the world,” and 1 John 3:1-2 where “the world” does not know those who believe. In these verses, Christians themselves are excluded from the meaning of the term. Yet I have never heard anyone

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say, "Unfair! Bad interpretation! The world must *always* mean all people!" If "the world" in one place may refer to the non-elect while excluding believers (as in John 17:9 and 1 John 3:1-2), why may it not in another place refer to the elect while excluding everyone else?

Additionally, unfamiliar concepts, or ideas that conflict with ones held by most Christians, are not necessarily unbiblical. Think of how foreign it must have sounded to the first-century Jew to hear Paul say, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Romans 9:6). Strange? Yes. Unbiblical? Certainly not. The term "Israel," as used in this one sentence by Paul, clearly has two different meanings, the first of which would have seriously challenged the popular though unbiblical presuppositions of most Jews. I believe "the world" in John 3:16 should be understood in a way that will present a similar challenge to the popular yet unbiblical presuppositions of our day. Even so, I understand the difficulty. I struggled through it myself. Perhaps you will be helped, as I was, by the words of Ambrose, the fourth-century bishop of Milan, Italy:

The people of God hath its own fullness. In the elect and foreknown, distinguished from the generality of all, there is accounted a certain special universality; so that the whole world seems to be delivered from the whole world, and all men to be taken out of all men.^{2 2}

Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he spoke of God making Jew and Gentile into "one new man" (Ephesians 2:15). He certainly was not speaking of one new *individual* man. He was referring to a whole new *race* of men, neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, barbarian nor Scythian. Perhaps he was describing a whole new "world," a completely new humanity, chosen by God and saved from among the existing "world" of fallen and rebellious humanity that has existed since Adam. I would suggest that this is "the world" that "God so loved" with the love that moved Him to send His Son.

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<https://www.ccwtoday.org/2004/04/thinking-and-speaking-biblically-about-the-death-of-christ-appendix-3/>

² Quoted from *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, by John Owen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 311.