

2. THE “WORLD” AS DEFINED BY SCRIPTURE WITH A SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO PEOPLE

MANKIND OR THE HUMAN RACE

“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom 3:19). It would appear that this is a case where “every human being” could be substituted for the term “world”. Another passage would be Rom 5:12. However, it should be noted that this is rather RARE. Often it is clear that κόσμος must mean only a part of the human race, sometimes even a small part. You might say today: “Nuclear war is threatening to destroy the world (mankind).”

THE GENERAL PUBLIC

“For there is no man that doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, shew thyself to the world” (Jn 7:4). “Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing” (Jn 18:20). The brothers of Christ urged Him to go to Judea and to preach and do miracles publicly before the people. And Jesus in His defense before the high priest of Israel indicated that all that He taught was public knowledge. Our Lord did not show Himself to every human being nor did He speak to every human being (you and I were not privileged to hear Him speak as well as the vast majority of the people living in His own time). You might say today: “If you have made such a discovery, tell the world about it,” meaning people generally, the public.

THE NON-ELECT

“If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you” (Jn 15:19). “I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me” (Jn 17:9). “The world of the ungodly” (II Pet 2:5). “And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness” (I Jn 5:19). “And all the world wondered after the beast...and it was given unto him to make war with the saints [who did not follow the beast], and to overcome them” (Rev 13:3,7). In these passages there is a contrast between the people of God and the world. They are considered different and distinct groups of people. World here means humanity minus the elect of God. It is impossible to substitute “every human being” for κόσμος in these passages without creating a contradiction in the Word of God! It is very common to distinguish between “the Church” and “the World” - i.e. the religious and the secular. Separation of Church and State is a frequently used phrase even by those who know nothing about the Bible.

THE GENTILES

The key to this use of the term “world” is that it is contrasted with Israel or the Jews. It thus refers to the Gentiles alone. In this sense it may be used to indicate the lost and darkened condition of the Gentiles. “He [Jesus Christ] was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the WORLD [Gentiles] KNEW HIM NOT. He came unto His own [Jews], and HIS OWN RECEIVED HIM NOT (Jn 1:10-11). It should be obvious that the “world” (V-10) cannot mean

every human being for it is contrasted with “His own” (V-11) and indeed there were some who did know and receive Christ (V-12-13). “His own” refers to the Jews, Christ’s own nation, the Israelites. The “world,” therefore, must be understood as non-Israelites (Gentiles). This interpretation provides some insight as to the change from “knew Him not” [ignorance] (V-10) to “received Him not” [knowledge of Christ but rejection] (V-11).

However, very frequently the “world” is contrasted with Israel to refer to those saved or who will be saved out of the Gentiles.

“I say then, Hath God cast away his people [Israel]? God forbid...but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles....Now if the fall of them [Israel] be the riches of the WORLD [the Gentiles], and the diminishing of them [Israel] the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their [Israel’s] fulness?...For if the casting away of them [Israel] be the reconciling of the WORLD [the Gentiles], what shall the receiving of them [Israel] be, but life from the dead?...For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Rom 11:1,11-12,15,25).

The term κόσμος is used here to refer to those non-Israelites which God has called and will call to salvation. It is not every single Gentile which enjoys the “riches” of God or is “reconciled” to God. There are a certain number of Gentiles, called here “the fulness of the Gentiles,” which make up the total of God’s elect among them. Yet Paul refers to these Gentiles as the WORLD. He does not mean “every human being” by that term but those non-Israelites who come to know Jesus Christ - “through their [Israel’s] fall SALVATION is come unto the Gentiles” (V-11). See also Acts 13:44-48, 18:4,6, 28:22-28. We might say today: “The book wasn’t received well in the author’s own country, but world-wide it is selling sensationally.”

Summary: The term “world” is a general term which is used in a multifaceted manner in the Bible. There are times when in the same verse “world” is used with two different meanings such as the earth and the people of the world (Jn 1:10, 3:17). Very often it is used in a way which cannot possibly include “every human being” and therefore you cannot argue that κόσμος means everyone when it refers to people. Anyone who honestly assesses the term will have to grant this much. However, as John Owen points out some are not satisfied with the Scriptural teaching of the word κόσμος:

“The extent, nature, and signification of those general terms [like world] which we have frequently used indefinitely [in Scripture], to set out the object of the redemption of Christ, must seriously be weighed...The world, the whole world, all, all men ! - who can oppose it? Call them [those who hold that God desires the salvation of all men and that Christ died for all men] to the context in the several places where the words are; appeal to rules of interpretation; mind them of the circumstances and scope of the place, the sense of the same words in other places;...[and] they presently cry out, the bare word, the letter is theirs: ‘Away with the gloss and interpretation; give us leave to believe what the word expressly saith.’”

It should be clear that the context of a particular verse must be weighed carefully in order to understand how the term

κόσμος is being used.

II. CHRIST’S USE OF “WORLD” IN JOHN 3:16 REFERS TO THE INCLUSION OF THE GENTILES IN HIS REDEMPTION

1. COMMON JEWISH PERCEPTIONS COUNTERED

In John 3 Jesus is conversing with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and “ruler of the Jews” (V-1). This Jewish Rabbi believed the commonly held teaching that God’s mercies were confined solely to his own nation. The Gentiles were considered outcasts, filthy dogs, mere kindling wood for God’s righteous wrath. Our Lord, and then later His apostles, had to address such a prejudice. Such thinking was contrary to the plan of God and the prophetic utterances concerning the Messiah’s kingdom. “I will give the Holy One of Israel for a light to the GENTILES, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6). The middle wall of partition which kept the Jews separate from all other nations was to be broken down (Eph 2:14). The Jews would not have a virtual monopoly on the salvation of God.

2. GOD’S SON GIVEN FOR GENTILES AS WELL AS JEWS

WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH

Notice the repetition found in V-15-16 of our text. Whenever God repeats something it is always wise to consider why. Repetition is often for the purpose of emphasis (Gen 41:32). “Whosoever believeth” or more literally “he that believeth” is meant to emphasize that the sacrifice of Christ is international in scope. “For the scripture saith, WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the JEW AND THE GREEK: for the same Lord is rich unto all them that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:12-13).

Paul argues from the Old Testament Scriptures that the Gentiles would find mercy and come to trust in the Messiah: “And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with His people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud Him, all ye people. And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and He that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in Him shall the Gentiles trust” (Rom 15:10-12). [Deut 32:43, Psa 117:1, Isa 11:1,10]. This was a mystery which God was now making known “that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the Gospel” (Eph 3:4-6).

THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS

Jesus uses the illustration of the “SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS” in order to explain the significance of His own death on the cross (V-14). The account of this story is found in Numbers 21. The people of Israel once again became rebellious and spoke against God and Moses. “And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died” (Num 21:6). The Israelites then confessed, “We have sinned” and sought for Moses to intercede for them before God. So Moses “prayed for the people” (Num 21:7). God’s remedy for His sinful nation was then revealed: “And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when

he looketh upon it, shall live” (Num 21:8).

Now Christ makes a direct connection between this brass serpent being lifted up and Himself being lifted up on the cross. And the sparing of the lives of the Israelites portrayed the eternal life which is found in acknowledging your sinfulness and looking to Christ in faith (Jn 3:15). This illustration, however, had a specific JEWISH REFERENCE. It was Israel in the wilderness which found mercy through the lifting up of the Brazen Serpent. The Brass Serpent was not lifted up for the benefit of the Canaanites, Egyptians, Assyrians or any other Gentiles. Our Lord wishes to shatter the notion of the Jews that the Messiah’s coming was exclusively for Israel. The application of His illustration must therefore be expanded to suit His purpose.

SALVATION FOR THE GENTILES

Jesus immediately makes reference to God loving the “world” [Gentiles] and providing salvation for “whosoever believeth” regardless of nationality or race. Christ explains that He did not come into the world to “condemn” the Gentiles [“world”], but rather to save them (V-17). This text is similar to Romans 11. Whenever κόσμος is used in contrast to Israel it refers to the Gentiles. Isn’t that exactly what Christ is doing here? There is a reference to Israel (V-14) and then a reference to the world (V-16). This was done so that there was no question as to whom the “whosoever believeth” (V-15) had reference. Jesus is teaching that God delights in saving Gentiles as well as Jews. All who believe shall have eternal life! Not every Jew and every Gentile but multitudes out of the great masses of mankind will be saved from eternally perishing.

Summary: The term “world” must be evaluated in light of the context in which it is used. Since our Lord refers first to Israel and then to the world it is clear that He is making a special reference to the Gentiles when using the word κόσμος.

III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD’S LOVE PRECLUDE THE “WORLD” OF JOHN 3:16 FROM MEANING EVERYONE

There are many today who do not understand the love of God. Divine love is commonly regarded as a mere feeling or desire, patterned after human emotion. If God has all the ability and means to save His creatures and proclaims He longs to save every human being, why is it that He never actually accomplishes it? A proper grasp of Biblical love is essential for understanding John 3:16.

1. SOVEREIGN LOVE - “God...loved”

This world which God is said to love cannot be every individual of mankind because God does not love all men. Anyone who comes to the Bible with an unprejudiced mind ought to realize this plain truth. Since God is sovereign (Dan 4:35) He is under no obligation to love anyone. He loves out of the mere good pleasure of His will (Eph 1:3-6). He may bestow love upon one individual and not on another. “Thou hatest all workers of iniquity” (Psa 5:5). “The wicked and him that loveth violence His soul hateth” (Psa 11:5). “All their wickedness is in Gilgal: for there I hated them” (Hos 9:15). “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (Rom 9:13). There is a hatred of God as well as a love of God. Some are the objects of divine hatred, while others of divine love.

DOES GOD DESIRE THE SALVATION OF ALL MEN?

JOHN 3:16

BY JACK A. WERTH

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. 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. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” - John 3:14-17 KJV

The most common understanding of John 3:16 is that God had such a loving desire for the salvation of all the human race that He gave His Son to die for the potential salvation of everyone. And that those who are inclined to embrace the message of salvation in Christ by believing may obtain eternal life.

In contrast to this, the text should be understood in this manner: God had such a great love He willed that people from all races should be saved. Therefore, He appointed His Son to be the Savior who would obtain eternal redemption for Jews and Gentiles alike. This would make it certain that all believers (i.e. all God’s elect people from all nations) would most certainly possess everlasting life.

I. THE WORLD AS DEFINED BY SCRIPTURE

1. DEFINING THE WORD “WORLD”

The vast majority of people think that the term “world” [κοσμος] means EVERY HUMAN BEING from Adam to omega man (last person to be born). The world is portrayed as the ever increasing swarm of individuals that cover the earth (everyone without exception). It is simply assumed, without any Biblical support, that this must be the meaning of the term. However, even an English dictionary provides a vast array of meanings for the term:

1. The planet earth
2. The earth and its inhabitants
3. The human race; mankind
4. Some part of the earth
5. People primarily concerned with secular affairs
6. A large amount; great deal

Of course, you do not define Biblical terms through the use of an English dictionary. But it is obvious that even in English the word “world” has a multiplicity of meanings. Pick up a Bible concordance and carefully read the passages in which the term “world” is used. You will find that it is not so easy to give the PRECISE MEANING of the term. It is not used in a uniform sense for κοσμος has a great variety of meanings. Sometimes it is used of the MATERIAL UNIVERSE (Acts 17:24), the EARTH (Eph 1:4), a CORRUPT SYSTEM (Eph 2:2, Jam 1:27), the HUMAN STATE (Jam 18:36), or SATAN’S KINGDOM (Jn 14:30, Eph 6:12, II Cor 4:4). Obviously, you cannot substitute “every human being” for the term “world” in the above passages. At this point it may be argued that whenever κοσμος is used of the PEOPLE of the world it always means “every human being.” Are you willing to search the Scriptures to see if this is so?

impossible to create a scenario in which God loves less all the workers of iniquity and yet sends Christ to save them as well as the elect! A so-called general love for all mankind and a special love for the elect will never fit in this text regardless of all the theological contortionists who attempt it.

3. IMMUTABLE LOVE - “For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world”

“I am the LORD, I change not” (Mal 3:6). With God there is “no variableness neither shadow of turning” (Jam 1:17). Therefore, God’s love cannot change or diminish. It remains unalterable. If you are an object of God’s love you will never cease to enjoy it. It is an “everlasting love” (Jer 31:3). “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

If the world of John 3:16 refers to every human being, then mankind can never be separated from the love of God. There can never be a time when a person is shut out from God’s love. Are you willing to accept the idea that God loves those who are in hell? Does God love the reprobate as long as he lives upon the earth but when he dies suddenly the man is cut off from God’s infinite love? Doesn’t Romans 8 teach that even “death” cannot separate you from God’s love? If God’s love is immutable (which it is), and God loves every human being (if this is the meaning of “world”), the conclusion which must be drawn is that those suffering the awful and eternal wrath of God are actually the objects of His love! This is the absurd position to which you are reduced unless you deny the immutability of God! You must accept that God is frustrated by the sinner and bitterly weeps throughout eternity because the object of His love is suffering the horrific torments of hell-fire. Or you must confess that God may change His mind about the objects of His love, which destroys any comfort the believer may possess.

The “love of God” is “in Christ Jesus.” And who are those who are “in Christ” but the elect who are “chosen ... in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4). “There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). The “world” of John 3:16 is not “condemned” because it is a group of people who actually believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. EFFICACIOUS LOVE - “that the world through Him might be saved”

To many God’s love is a powerless love, which leaves the vast majority of people still in their sins and hopelessly doomed. God “so loved” as to give His Son to die for every human being, but not enough to grant faith and repentance to all. However, the great love which moved God to send His only begotten Son is so powerful and effective that it actually brings about salvation: “For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.”

“It is to be remarked that the word ‘might’ here does not express any uncertainty. Instead it declares the purpose of God in the sending of His Son. In common speech the word ‘might’ signifies a contingency. It is only another case of the vital importance of ignoring man’s dictionaries and the way he employs the words, and turning to a concordance to

“The attentive reader, by comparing this verse [Jn 3:16] with other Scripture, will see that some restriction is to be placed upon the word ‘world.’ One writer asked, ‘Did God love Pharaoh?’ (Rom. 9:17). Did He love the Amalekites? (Ex. 17:14). Did He love the Canaanites, whom He commanded to be exterminated without mercy? (Deut. 20:16). Did He love the Ammonites and Moabites whom He commanded not to be received into the congregation forever? (Deut. 23:3). Does He love the workers of iniquity? (Ps. 5:5). Does He love the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction, which He endures with much long-suffering? (Rom. 9:22). Did He love Esau? (Rom. 9:13)” (Loraine Boettner).

“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25). What comfort would it be for a husband to say to his wife, “Honey, I love you just like I love every other woman?” Is the love which Christ has for His Bride the same as He has for everyone else on earth? What nonsense it would be for Christ to say, “I love my elect people and I love the reprobate as well!” What significance is there in Christ giving Himself for His Church if He also gave Himself out of love for all of mankind as well?

The writer of Hebrews says, “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all [sons] are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons” (Heb 12:6-8). Do those who are illegitimate (“bastards”) receive divine chastening? No! Religious pretenders are not true sons of God. They are not loved by God, for whom the Lord loves He chastens! And He lovingly chastens only His sons - i.e. elect. So the divine love of John 3:16 is not something every human being is privileged to experience.

2. INFINITE LOVE - “God so loved”

Jesus stresses the greatness and magnitude of God’s love by saying “God SO loved the world.” This love is so infinite that it moved God to give His only begotten Son as a sacrificial substitute. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

“Everything about God is infinite. His essence fills heaven and earth. His wisdom is unlimitable, for He knows everything of the past, present, and future. His power is unbanded, for there is nothing too hard for Him. So His love is without limit. There is a depth to it which none can fathom; there is a height to it which none can scale; there is a length and breadth to it which defies measurement by any creature standard. Beautifully this is intimated in Ephesians 2:4, ‘But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us.’ The word ‘great’ there is parallel with the ‘God so loved’ of John 3:16. It tells us that the love of God is so transcendent it cannot be estimated” (Arthur W. Pink).

This being so, it is impossible to whittle down the hatred of God so that it simply means “love less” and therefore fit every human being into John 3:16. The Bible doesn’t teach, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I loved less.” Try that approach with Heb 1:9 which contains the same Greek words for love and hate. “Thou [Christ] hast loved righteousness, and hated [loved less??] iniquity...” It is

see how the Holy Spirit uses each word in the Scriptures themselves. The word ‘might’ - as part of the verb - expresses design. When we are told that God sent His Son into the world that through Him ‘the world might be saved,’ it signifies that ‘through Him the world should be saved,’ and this is how it is rendered in the R.V. For other instances we refer the reader to I Pet. 3:18 - ‘might bring us to God’ implies no uncertainty whatever, but tells of the object to be accomplished. For further examples see Gal. 4:5; Titus 2:14; II Pet 1:4, etc., etc.” (Arthur W. Pink).

“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things” (Rom 8:32). The same love that moved God the Father to give Christ, moves Him to bestow ALL THINGS needed for salvation. Love will not withhold the light of the Gospel of Christ. Love will not withhold the gift of repentance and the faith to savingly trust in Christ. Love guarantees everything necessarily for one of “God’s elect” (Rom 8:33) to reach glorification. The “all things” of V-32 includes every spiritual blessing found in Rom 8:29-39:

- 1) Conformity to the image of Christ
- 2) Calling to salvation by the Holy Spirit
- 3) Justification before God
- 4) Glorification
- 5) Christ’s intercession as High Priest
- 6) Victory over tribulation, persecution, distress, etc.
- 7) Eternal security

Summary: “Unless ye will grant, - first, Some to be beloved and hated also from eternity; - secondly, The love of God towards innumerable to be fruitless and vain; thirdly, The Son of God to be given to them who, first, never hear word of him; secondly, have no power granted to believe in him; fourthly, That God is mutable in his love, or else still loveth those that be in hell; fifthly, That he doth not give all things to them to whom he gives his Son, contrary to Rom viii. 32; sixthly, That he knows not certainly beforehand who shall believe and be saved; - unless, I say, all these blasphemies and absurdities be granted, it cannot be maintained that by the world here is meant all and every one of mankind, but only men in common scattered throughout the world, which are the elect” (John Owen).

MAIN CONCLUSION:

The Bible uses the term “world” in a multiplicity of ways. The context is always crucial to its proper meaning. In John 3 Jesus is countering common Jewish misconceptions. He declares that in God’s redemptive plan Gentiles are divinely loved and will definitely be brought to salvation. The Messiah did not come to condemn the Gentiles but rather to save them. Whosoever believes, Jew or Gentile, shall not perish but have everlasting life. Any notion that the “world” must mean mankind is dispelled by a careful consideration of the characteristics of divine love.

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