

Two Interpretations of John 3:16

By David Pyles

There are two major views of the famous John 3:16 among Christians. These views agree that all true believers in Christ are eternally saved, but they significantly differ at nearly every other point pertaining to the text. These differences have unexpected effects. The first view will commence by putting great emphasis on the love of God, and will promote itself for so doing, but will tacitly disparage that love before done, even to the point of denying it. Strangely, this is the view that is held by the vast majority of modern Christians. The second view will do exactly the opposite. It will strike the eye as limiting the love of God in the beginning, but will make it the eternal bond of both heaven and earth when all is fully reasoned.

The first view is popular because it superficially accords with human ideology, but it seriously clashes with inspired scriptures. It also fares poorly under deeper scrutiny. A book can have a pretty cover but ugly contents. Such is the case here.

This first view may be summarized with:

- 1) God loves all humans without exception. Whether it is the Christian who is being beheaded or the infidel who is beheading him, God loves them both, and God has done no more for the salvation of one than He has for the other. Of course, few will question that God can love and save the vilest of sinners, but this interpretation says that all men, even those who live and die in heartless wickedness, were loved the same as the most sacrificial Christians.
- 2) God loved them all spontaneously and for no underlying reason.
- 3) God therefore sent His Son to die for them all.
- 4) But the death of His Son did not truly save any man. It only made it possible for every man to save himself by right decisions and actions.
- 5) A man saves himself by his freewill decision to believe the gospel.
- 6) Those who do not believe the gospel will be cast into eternal hell.

Not all of this is false, but closer inspection will show that we are in a precarious predicament if it is all true. This is because:

- a) This interpretation has God changing His mind somewhere between point (2) and point (6). He had been willing to love without any reason before, but He demanded a reason in the end. That is, He began by loving unconditionally, but ended by loving only conditionally. Since most consider love to be the greatest when the demanded conditions are the least, this interpretation carries us along a troubling trend in the love of God. Scriptures are much more reassuring. They say that God's mind is unchangeable and that this fact is the very bedrock of our salvation (2Tim 2:19, Heb 6:17).

b) Evidently, either the death of Christ or the preaching of the gospel brought about this change of mind from unconditional to conditional love. There is nothing else in the text to account for the change. However, such ideas are overtly absurd and can only be implied by faulty premises.

c) This interpretation has God loving enough to sacrifice His Son for men, but this does not imply that He loves enough to deliver the same from hell. It would follow that it takes more love to graciously deliver men from hell than it takes for God to sacrifice His Son. This claim is flatly contradicted by both conscience and scriptures. Scriptures surely say there is no greater love than what motivated God to sacrifice His Son (Jn 15:13, 1Jn 4:9-10).

Some have sought to repair this problem by claiming that God loves even those He casts into hell, but that He could not and cannot save them because He is bound to His own justice. This explanation is nowhere offered in the Bible. It is mostly a crutch that was invented to prop up other feeble human ideas. While it is true that God strictly adheres to His own system of justice, the Bible says this system never compels Him to damn anyone. *“For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion... Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth,”* (Rom 9:15-18). This liberty of God to show mercy as He pleases derives from the fact that His system of justice affords Him the absolute and unconditional latitude of transferring the sins of any man to Christ and transferring the righteousness of Christ to any man. This divine right pertains even to men who are cast into hell.

d) This dubious interpretation also implies there is no credible sense in which His love is eternal because somehow the alleged love He had in (2) got turned into effective hatred by (6). This surely contradicts those scriptures that resolutely affirm that God’s love is eternal (Jer 31:3, Mal 3:6, Heb 13:8, Rom 8:35-39). If it were not this, so that God’s love could be turned into hatred, then a man could not have security in heaven itself even if he managed to get there

e) Since millions have been deprived of hearing the gospel, it seems contradictory that God loved too little to provide them this, even though He loved enough to sacrifice His very Son. To the contrary, Paul very sensibly said, *“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). Hence, this view has questionable ideas about the role that the gospel plays in God’s scheme of salvation.

f) It would also follow that Jesus did no more for the saved in heaven than He did for the damned in hell. He loved one the same as the other, and died for one the same as the other. The difference would be in the decisions and actions of men, not in Jesus Christ. If this is true, then the redeemed in glory seem to be ignorant of it. Their famous song of praise to Christ is, *“Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth,”* (Rev 5:9-10).

g) Finally, the whole argument is predicated upon the dubious premise that our beliefs are voluntary. Of course, a man can choose what he *claims* to believe, but can he choose what he

really believes? A man can claim to believe that fire is cold, but no sensible man is capable of really believing such a claim, particularly after he has stuck his hand in the flames.

So this common interpretation of John 3:16 is fraught with perilous problems, and while it seems to exalt the love of God on first impression, deeper inspection divulges a concept of love that seems rather disingenuous. Thankfully, when John 3:16 is interpreted in light of other scriptures, a sensible and reassuring interpretation will emerge. This interpretation says:

1) In His original purpose to create man, God gave a large element of the human race to His Son to serve to the Son's glory. Jesus Christ Himself spoke of this gift to Him in several places (Jn 6:37-40, 10:25-30, 17:1-3). God created the human race in innocence, but the entirety of it fell in Adam, including the ones who had been given to Jesus Christ (Rom 5:12, 1Cor 15:22). While God treats all men with justice, He has a special, merciful and redemptive love for those He gave to His Son. This is because they are viewed by God as being in Christ (Eph 1:1-2:10, 2Tim 1:9) and as being one with Him (Jn 17:11-23, Heb 2:11).

2) Hence, God's love for those given to His Son was not without reason, as is claimed by the first interpretation, neither does it change from one reason to another. God's special love for them derives from His love for His Son. Whether past, present or future; whether before they live, while they live, or in eternity after they die; they are loved and blessed for the sake of the Son (Rom 8:35-39). God's love for them is unchangeable because His love for His Son is unchangeable. God's love for them is eternal because His love for His Son is eternal.

3) God lovingly elected those given to His Son for salvation while leaving all others to their just condemnation. God sent His Son into the world to die for those elected, who are an innumerable multitude from all over the world, being out of "*every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation,*" (Rev 5:9). This principle of election is one of the most frequently taught doctrines in the Bible (e.g. Ps 65:4, Mt 20:16, 22:14, 24:24, 24:31, Mk 13:20, Lk 18:7, Rom 8:33, 9:11, 11:5-7, Eph 1:4, Col 3:12, 1Thes 1:4, 2Thes 2:13, Tit 1:1, 1Pet 1:2, 2:9, 2Pet 1:10).

4) The death of Christ secured the salvation of those elected (Mt 1:21, Jn 6:37-39, 10:11+10:26, 11:51-52, 15:13, 17:1-2, Rom 8:32-33, Eph 5:25-27, Tit 2:14, Heb 9:15), either meeting the necessary conditions or assuring that any such conditions would be met by other grace that His death acquired. Jesus did not die to make eternal salvation a mere possibility. He died to make it an absolute certainty for all His elect. A loving parent would not merely throw its drowning child a rope; rather, such a parent would dive into the water after it to remove all peril and doubt. Jesus took the consummate dive for His people by submitting to crucifixion.

5) Belief of the gospel is of the grace acquired by Christ's death, and it serves as confirmation of our salvation in Him (e.g. Ps 65:4, 110:3, Prov 16:1, Mt 16:17, Jn 6:44-45, 6:64-65, Acts 13:48, 15:9, 16:14, Rom 12:3, Gal 5:22, Eph 1:3-5, 1:19-20, 2:8-10, Phil 1:29, 2:12-13, 1Thes 2:13, 2Thes 2:13, 1Tim 1:12-14, 1Pet 1:21, 2Pet 1:3). All believers in the world can confidently say that Christ died for them, forever putting away their sins and buying an eternal home in heaven.

6) Accordingly, in absence of this acquired grace, a man will invariably reject Jesus Christ and His gospel, thereby manifesting his corruption and just condemnation (Mt 12:33-37, Jn 3:18, 6:44, 8:43-47, 1Cor 1:18, 1Cor 2:14, Rom 8:5-8). This is why faith is a sure sign of salvation.

The error of the first interpretation is largely rooted in a misunderstanding of the term “*world*” in John 3:16. It is taken to mean “all men without exception.” The problem is that the underlying Greek word was commonly used by John but almost never did he intend such meaning (e.g. Jn 1:9, 1:10, 1:29, 6:33, 7:7, 8:12, 8:26, 9:5, 12:19, 14:17, 14:19, 15:18, 15:19, 16:8, 16:20, 17:9, 17:14, 17:25, 18:20, 1Jn 2:15, 3:1, 3:13, 4:14, 5:19).

Common interpretations of John 3:16 are so misguided that they even contradict the primary intent of the lesson there being conveyed. The common interpretation concludes that a person will not be born again until he decides to believe. However, the intended lesson was the reverse, or that a person will not believe until he has been born again and given a change of heart.

This lesson was taught to correct Nicodemus’ claim that he knew that Jesus was a teacher come from God on the basis of the miracles that He did. Now Jesus had just disregarded many pseudo-believers in Jerusalem who made exactly the same claim (Jn 2:23-25). While witnessing miracles might strengthen the faith of one who already has it, the experiences of the Old Testament plainly showed that miracles have remarkably little effect toward converting unbelievers into believers. For example, the children of Israel were neither converted by the miracles done in Egypt, nor by the parting of the Red Sea, nor by the miracles done in the wilderness. Rather, that generation became infamous for its unbelief. The same was true of generation in the times of Elijah. They were neither converted when he called down fire from heaven nor when he miraculously caused it to rain on their drought-stricken land. Even worse was the generation in the times of Christ. Miracles were so ineffective to them that He claimed they would not believe even if one were to rise from the dead (Lk 16:31). This implies that the gimmicks used by some modern churches to get people born do not accomplish what is claimed.

Jesus plainly said, “*Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,*” (Jn 3:3). The word “*see*” here means to perceive. Jesus did not say that a man is born again *by* seeing the kingdom of God, nor did He say that seeing the kingdom of God is the means or instrument of being born again. Rather, He said that being born again is *prerequisite* to perceiving the kingdom. Reason dictates that it must also be prerequisite to seeing the King. Jesus went on to say this new birth is brought about by a sovereign, irresistible and direct work of the Holy Spirit on the heart. This work is invisible, even as the wind is invisible, but it produces visible effects, even as does also the wind (Jn 3:8). The primary visible effect will be belief in Jesus Christ and His gospel. It is the spiritual birth that moves a man to faith, not the observation of miracles. So this faith is the *effect* and *confirmation*, not the *cause*, of the spiritual life that was freely given.

This second interpretation is sensible and gives due glory to Christ, to God and to their great love. The first interpretation pretends to exalt the love of God by applying it to all men, but it does this at the expense of diluting it to the point of doubt. This is high price to pay, particularly since it will not save one person to heaven that the second interpretation will not. 12/6/2023