

For God So Loved

B. B. Warfield was born on November 5, 1851 and died on February 16, 1921 at the age of seventy. Like many children of his day that were born into a wealthy family, his childhood education was private. He entered Princeton University in 1868 and graduated in 1871 with high honors. It goes without saying: he was a highly gifted man. In 1887 he became the principal of Princeton Seminary and stayed in that post until 1921. He made his mark on that institution before the split in 1929 that formed Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Warfield was considered by many of his colleagues as a highly esteemed, and a highly skilled theologian. He often thought of John 3:16 and the word “world.” What does it mean that God so loved the world?

What troubled Warfield about this question was that he understood how undeserving the world is of God’s love, so he probed the depths of John 3:16 to find the answer. What is the meaning of the word “world” in John 3:16, what does Jesus mean by this?

In the insight of Warfield, he said there are four possible answers:

In the first place, many people believe that “world” means all people without exception. In other words, when John 3:16 says that God loves the world, it means that He loves every person, head for head, equally. The logic goes something like this: God loves every person; Christ died for every person; therefore, salvation is possible for every person. However, this view seems to suggest that God’s love is impotent and Christ’s death is ineffectual. Otherwise, the natural conclusion of this position would be that every person is actually saved rather than just potentially saved. If God loves every person, and Christ died for every person, and God’s love is not impotent, and Christ’s death is not ineffectual, then the only conclusion one can draw is that salvation has been secured for every person. Yet this viewpoint contradicts the Bible’s teaching on God’s judgment as is evidenced by the immediate context in John 3:17–21.

Second, others argue that “world” means all people without distinction. This option emphasizes that God loves more than one type of person or ethnic group. The death of Christ on the cross was not only for Jews but also for Gentiles. The love of God is not confined to national boundaries but extends to all kinds of nations, tribes, cultures, tongues, and peoples. To this, all God’s people—Arminian and Calvinist alike—say a hearty “Amen.” While this view has the benefit of being undoubtedly right and fits within the larger context of John’s gospel concerning the global identity of the “children of God” (e.g., John 1:9–13; 4:42), it doesn’t quite capture the jolting contrast between “God so loved” and “the world” that John 3:16 deliberately draws.

Third, a popular nuance of the previous option among Reformed theologians is to argue that “world” in John 3:16 refers to the elect. Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus emphasizes the particularity of His grace. “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (6:37). “I am the good

shepherd. I know my own and my own know me....I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:14–18). “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” (15:9). “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours” (17:9). And so on. The point is that God’s people are chosen from an unbelieving world. Again, this view strikes an important note by underscoring the biblical doctrine of election, but the focus of the term “world” in John 3:16 is not so much on the identity of God’s people but on the nature of God’s love.

This leads us to the final option. A solid case can be made for believing that “world” refers to the quality of God’s love. Warfield convincingly states:

[World] is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is ethical, and the point of its employment is not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when he gave his Son for it.

The world represents sinful humanity and is not worthy of God’s saving love. Apart from the love of God, the world stands under God’s condemnation. But in Christ, believers experience God’s surprising, redeeming, and never-ending love. John 3:16 is not about the greatness of the world but about the greatness of God.

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