
Deconstructing John 3:16

John 3:1-17

Everyone is wearing *brand markers* . . . symbols which are tiny signals we flash to tell one another who we are—or who we hope to be. Logos stitched on jackets, on our shirts and hats, even hashtags pasted onto social media bios, flags on porches, tattoos inked on skin. We display these markers on our bodies and carry them in our pockets. We curate them for algorithms, so to let them speak of our belonging and values before we do. I wear the Nike swoosh logo because I subscribe to their lifestyle aspirations: a life of motion, of endurance and hard work. I display the once-bitten apple logo because I subscribe to the company's way of innovation and accessibility to technology, that values simplicity and aesthetics. *Brand markers* speak for themselves. They bespeak *what we're about*—no explanation, no context, no interpretation necessary.

So, if Christianity had *brand markers*, one of them has to be "John 3:16". Displaying that book, chapter, and verse has become ubiquitous. Maybe it's because we are a broadcast culture. Flashing "John 3:16" signs may be seen by some Evangelical Christians as a way of spreading the good news. What quicker way is there to "spread the gospel throughout all the world" than utilizing the speed and reach of media?! So you see it on shirts, on placards, even football players inscribe it on their black undereye paint. "John 3:16"

You ever heard of "Rainbow Man" Rollen Stewart? Well, he was an icon at sporting events in the 70's and 80's. "Rockin' Rollen"—as he was also called—was famous for wearing a rainbow-colored curly wig and holding a sign, or wearing a t-shirt, with "John 3:16" on it. He was a fanatic, with infectious energy, presumably for both sports and his Christian faith.

He would appear at all the high-profile events, like the Super Bowl, the NBA Finals, and the World Series, with the goal of getting on air. But his obsession with television fame eventually led to criminal behaviors like detonating stink bombs at events and, in 1992, holding a hotel maid hostage. He's now in jail serving three life sentences. I kind of wish he hadn't been rockin' the brand, or at least, wearing those rainbow colors.

What is it about "John 3:16" that Evangelical Christians love so much? Why do they do some of the most socially-outrageous things to publicize its message in some of the most public places? I'd like to think that it's those opening words: "For God *so loved* the world..." Wouldn't that be great—If they just wanted the whole world to know that they are loved *so much* by their Creator?! Wouldn't that feel like sharing the good news? That's a message I too want to get out into the world. But I fear that often it's the last part of that verse that gets emphasized—the part about perishing unless one believes in the only begotten Son. So, instead of Jesus being a physical representation, a manifestation, of God's undying love for creation, they wield him like a club in the threat of eternal damnation, a "you better or else" ultimatum. That can hardly come across as good news?!

If you are born in the Christian West, you have an infinitely better chance of this kind of saving belief in Jesus. But think about the chances of someone born into a Hindu family in Nepal, or among a Buddhist community in Southeast Asia. This would seem unfortunate for them, wouldn't it? How are *they* to get to Jesus as the only way to eternal salvation before they die?! But this is not what John 3:16 is about. Jesus's message in today's gospel reading isn't remotely that narrow. So, if we're going to wear the "John 3:16" *brand marker*—or at least live by its words—we must understand what Jesus is really saying here.

Notice with me that Jesus is the one speaking here, not your Sunday School teacher. Did you know that John 3:16 is a *red letter* text, the words of Jesus? How did we miss this? By the time we get to verse 16 in the chapter, he is still speaking to Nicodemus about what it means to be "born from above". He's making the point that no one can see the Kingdom of God unless "they are born of water *and* spirit." If we thought John 3:16 was *about* Jesus, it can be a bit confusing. Because he says things like ". . . God gave his only Son . . ." and ". . . everyone who believes *in him* shall not perish. . . " Is Jesus, here, speaking of himself in the third person? Is he being a narcissist? Shouldn't he

have said, “God sent *me* . . .” and “. . . everyone who believes in *me* . . .” But he’s not speaking of himself in the third person because he’s not referring to himself, directly.

The titles Jesus uses here—“Son of God” and “only begotten Son”—these are terms to describe the Christ, something other than Jesus’s last name. The Christ is the Divine DNA that was there at creation, billions of years before Jesus was born. The writer of John calls the Christ spirit, *Logos*, or Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

At creation, *there* was the Christ spirit, infusing everything with the fingerprint of God. “Let there be light!” That was the spark of Christ which was diffused throughout creation on every single light particle. So Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand that in order to see the kingdom of God you have to widen your gaze, as wide as the cosmos itself. After all, when the verse mentions God loving *the world*, it implies something way more cosmic and universal than just the people who lived on earth at the time. If we think of that as being sort of a linear, even time-based, understanding, then he is expanding Nicodemus’s horizontal imagination.

But there is also a verticality here. Look at all the *up and down* language:

“No one can see unless they are born *from above*”—that’s up!

“I have told you about earthly things”—that’s down!

“But you didn’t understand. How then will you understand heavenly things”—that’s up!

“No one has ascended into heaven”—that’s up! “except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”—that’s down!

And the reference to what Moses did with the serpent in the wilderness: A snake has the lowest possible earthly position. So, a quintessential creature of *down here*!

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”—that’s a movement from down to up!

Up, down, up, down, up, down.

You can get a bit dizzy in this passage. But, you see, there is a verticality to what Jesus is saying. Salvation is raising the plane of your understanding. Like that old gospel hymn, *Higher Ground*: “I want to live above the world . . . A higher plane than I have found, Lord plant my feet on higher ground.”

Jesus is saying: "Don't be like a snake! . . . Be lifted up." As a shorthand, Jesus calls this higher plane, "heaven"—seeing things as God sees things. And what better example of being lifted up than the whole of Jesus's life which will be literally lifted up on a cross—at the center of those horizontal and vertical beams. Jesus says, watch me. I'll show you what this looks like. But Jesus isn't narcissistic. Jesus calls himself the "Son of *Man*" (which is another way of saying *human being*)—that's down here!—who will be lifted up as the "Son of God", the Christ—that's up!

When we break down this text, one of the words that has been soooo misunderstood is that word, "so". "God so loved the world . . ." We often read that in the sense of extent. God loved the world SO much, he gave his one and only Son. But this is not the way the word is used here. A second way to understand this is *in the manner of* or *in the way of*. For this to make sense, it's usually gesturing to something. (Like *so*.) This verse is gesturing to the life and Way of Jesus, the Christ. God loved the world in *this* way, in how Jesus lived. I think that's a beautiful expression of the text. Because immediately I can know what God's love looks like, because I recall everything about Jesus—showing up for those without a voice, challenging the authorities on the behalf of the oppressed, being broken and poured out in sacrificial self-giving, serving others in humility.

But Wow, what high stakes. I mean, Jesus can boldly say this because he's Jesus. But do you ever think about representing God's love to the world that way? Do you ever say to those around you, not even in words: Watch my life and how I treat others, I want to make visible the unseen love of God. Watch me: This is how God loves the world. Well, this is what Jesus was saying.

We also have to look at that word, "believe". We usually take this to mean mentally signing off that we understand something to be true, which is usually followed by saying the sinners' prayer and then we are all set to go for the rest of life and eternity. But the word "believe" had much more to do with actions than agreeing that something is certain. Because if you agree that something is true, you form your life around that belief. . . So that, whosoever *acts* in the manner of Jesus will most certainly have eternal life.

We also have to understand that the words "Eternal life" here are given in the present tense. This isn't speaking of some life to come but something that begins NOW in the present. In fact, the Greek word used for "eternal", *aiodios*,

isn't referring to something that is everlasting in regard to time but is something closer to what is meant by the abundant life, or full life. Like when you've fallen in love and time seems to stand still because of how full the moment might feel. You wouldn't say that time went on forever, even if it felt that way.

Finally, our greatest clue in interpreting John 3:16 rightly is John 3:17. And yet how many of us when memorizing Scripture stopped short of this next verse? God didn't send the Son to condemn the world but that through him it might know liberation, salvation. The God who blows like the wind is gently prodding us always toward liberation, toward deeper connection, with self and with others, toward being saved. Waking up to this is like being born all over again in this life.

So, if we read all of this understanding back into the passage, John 3:16 would sound more like this: Look at the way God loved the world: God infused the cosmos—the very fabric of life—from the very beginning with Christ-light and love. That to the extent that someone wakes up to this spiritual reality, they will know such a fullness of life, an eternal life. Can you hear how the message of the Gospel starts to sound like good news again in this understanding?

To close, we can memorize John 3:16, but I think the point here is to live it out.

Remain in darkness or live in the light. Slither along the ground of your understanding, or be raised up in the manner of Jesus—to see the world as God sees the world. The choice might start with belief, but it is only revealed in actions. So, don't tell me your beliefs, show them to me. Don't put it on a t-shirt, let it infuse your life and change your way of being in the world. For me, there is an unspoken charge that echoes behind most of the stories we read in the Gospels. It is what Jesus actually says at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan: "Now go and do likewise."

So anytime we read one of these stories, we should assume a final: "Now, go and do likewise".

My friends, God SO LOVED the world . . .

Now go and do likewise.