

## **“Affirming The All-Merciful’s Affirmation of Us”**

**“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”**

John 3:16

Along with Philippians 4:13, Tim Tebow’s favored eyeblack is John 3:16, the *second* most tweeted Bible verse and the *most* searched verse at BibleGateway.com.

On Sunday, January 8, 2012, in the NFL AFC playoff game in Denver, Tebow led the Broncos to an overtime win against the Pittsburgh Steelers. He did it with an 80-yard touchdown pass on the first play of overtime. *Time* magazine said it “left the Steelers and the watching world simply stunned”. But the reporter could not resist labeling this “out” *Christian* quarterback, “polarizing”. Of course, had Tebow been an “out” *gay* player, “polarizing” would not have been the politically correct adjective.

Tebow had set an NFL playoff record by throwing *three* hundred *sixteen* yards, 31.6 yards per completion. 31.6? 31.6? *John 3:16!* And wait, there’s more! The CBS rating peaked at 31.6. 31.6? *John 3:16!* Wait, there’s more! CNN noted that Tebow had “John 3:16” painted under his eyes when, three years to the day before this Denver play, he led the Florida Gators to their national championship.

Well, Bible numerologists were off and running. And alongside them, it’s not surprising that, the next day, Google Trends’ top three searches were: “John 3:16”, “Tebow” and “Tim Tebow”.

But, as you know, neither John nor any of the original writers of the Bible divided their texts into *numbered* verses. These numbers were first inserted in 1551 by the meticulous printer, Robert Stephanus. So, even Luther would have been stumped had he been asked to quote “John 3:16”. He’d died five years before. And, of course, “John 3:16” wouldn’t have rung a bell for John himself. We shouldn’t read *into* strings of 3-1-6 what’s not in the text.

But, what’s *been* in John’s Gospel from the *beginning*, is so *infinitely more significant* than all the sports trivia and supposed numerical codes that get fussed over by folks with too much time on their hands, is this *utterly earthshaking* – indeed, *Heaven’s shaking earth awake*: “God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever trusts in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

*No* sentence in the whole Bible better sums up *the basic message* of the whole Bible than John 3:16. The world has *never* received *better news* than this *Good News* encapsulated in the words of John 3:16.

Trivialized, even mocked, by those who may *seem* to have no clue as to its *true* meaning, but then, possibly may *suspect something* of its true meaning, they reject it with defensive  *fury*. Meanwhile, its eternal *truth* has been and is still received with eternal *awe* and eternal *praise* by all who know even a *bit more than something* of its amazing grace, even while in *this* world.

Popular black contemporary gospel singer Kirk Franklin has been apologizing to gay people for antigay attitudes in black churches. He says: “More than anything, I’m trying to peel back those layers [that] keep people away from God and keep people away from experiencing the love of God and knowing God’s love as a father. I’m trying through [my recent] album to erase the dogma and the ideology that gets in the way of the true essence of one of the most simplest things we could ever say to somebody: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.’”

Now, although there’s some scholarly dispute as to whether the words of John 3:16 are *Jesus’* words or John’s *explanation* of what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, no less eminent a biblical

scholar than Raymond E. Brown affirms, along with other biblical scholars, that, *textually*, they clearly *are* Jesus' words.

So then, John 3:16 is a *red letter* text? John 3:16 is *the* red letter text. It *sums up* Jesus' Good News. But, some self-styled "Red Letter Christians" neglect John 3:16 in pursuit of their currently "progressive" readings of Jesus, trying to fit him into *politically correct* agendas that are often derived from worldviews at odds with the Gospel. Thus distracted, they miss the *unique* and *historical fact* that Jesus' Good News of God's *unmerited favor*, was and is the most *radically progressive* message that's ever been proclaimed. It surpassed and surpasses *all human efforts* to put God or the gods in *our* debt – whether propounded by liberal "progressives", by conservative "fundamentalists" or by anyone else.

In his exposition of John 3:16, J. C. Ryle wrote: "A more wonderful verse is not to be found in the Bible." Observing that the verse comes from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, Ryle notes that this Pharisee would have *assumed* God's love for obedient Jews but not for the "unclean". Ryle states: "A more startling declaration to the ears of a rigid Pharisee it is impossible to conceive."

Ryle went on to say: "God's eternal Election is the first link in that chain of a sinner's salvation of which heavenly glory is the end. None ever repent, believe, and are born again, except the Elect". He explained: "The primary and original cause of a saint's being what he is, is eternal God's election."

This statement displays Ryle's belief in "predestination", a dogma that's sadly and so often misunderstood. Yet Ryle himself noted: "Those who confine God's love exclusively to the elect appear to me to take a narrow and contracted view of God's character and attributes. They refuse to God that attribute of compassion with which even an earthly father can regard a profligate son, and can offer to him pardon even though his compassion is despised and his offers refused. I have long come to the conclusion that men may be more systematic in their statements than the Bible, and may be led into grave error by idolatrous veneration of a system."

John Owen sometimes allowed his Calvinism to eclipse the foundational biblical teaching of God's love for *the whole world*. Indeed, he so accommodated Calvinism's rigid "limited atonement" schema as to import it into the ancient Greek text itself, rendering John 3:16 in tortured paraphrase: "God so loved *his elect throughout* the world that he gave his Son with this intention, that by him believers might be saved."

Still, as Owen grew in God's grace, he recognized temptations to "make an idol in our mind and worship a god of our own making". He compared that contrivance to a "god of wood or stone". And, as we've noted, Owen finally quite frankly confided: "All things I thought I knew; but now confess, the more I know, I know, I know the less." This wisdom is evidence of spiritual maturation, what Calvinists call the Spirit's "perseverance of the saints".

But an old habit has persisted among *hyper-Calvinists*. In the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the popular Bible teacher, A. W. Pink, went so far as to spout this blasphemy: "God loves whom he chooses. He does not love everybody!" Yet, even for Pink, this could sometimes seem a dogma too far and he was known to be more ambivalent about it from time to time.

Still, there are self-styled "Calvinists" who persist in pushing back against the *literally overwhelming* Good News of John 3:16. They do it with their system's supposedly necessary spin on snatches from, for example, John 6: "all that the Father *gives* me will come to me" (6:37), "*no one can* come to me *unless* the Father who sent me *draws* him" (6:44), and "*no one can* come to me unless the Father has *enabled* him" (6:65).

*Who's the Father* in Jesus' mind when he made these statements? What *father* comes to mind

among the “systematic” hyper-Calvinists? Don’t all of Jesus’ further words, reported by John, *explicate* rather than *eradicate* the amazingly Good News of this historically unexpected *wideness* of God’s *mercy*, revealed to Nicodemus, a member of yet another *rigid, exclusivist, even self-righteous sectarianism*? Said Peter: “God is patient, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (II Pet 3:9) Salvation is surely *all of grace*. Yet some try to pin everything down into a self-satisfying systematics that’s surely *beside the point* of God’s *amazing grace*, if not utterly *pointless*.

Now, it’s not at all strange that, in order for *anyone* to turn around and turn to Christ in repentance, he or she does so through God’s *gracious intervention*, for on one’s own, by oneself, one is, after all, a self-centered sinner, and so, defensively resistant to admitting it, even to self, let alone to anyone else and even to the *most merciful* God who went all the way to the cross to save us.

All of this world’s denial of its sin, its self-pity, its self-righteousness and its self-justifying rationalizations evidence our *total depravity* that stretches across everything. It all adds up to the absolute necessity for the Lord’s *eternally efficacious, grace-filled intervention* if *anyone* is to be saved. Paul wrote: “No one is righteous, no, not one; no one *understands*; no one *seeks* for God.” (Rom 3:10f)

As it’s noted by an insightful veteran British psychiatrist who’s worked for many years with prisoners: “No one, not even the most murderous psychopath, is so lacking in compassion that he does not pity himself. Indeed, exaggerated self-pity may be one of the salient characteristics of those who commit the most awful acts, for it is what justifies almost anything in a mind devoid of balance and proportion.” (Theodore Dalrymple) Such is the ugly self-righteousness that, in one way, or another, is everyone’s.

Moreover, the Good News is, indeed, *too good to believe* by anyone bent on trying to put God in *his* or *her* debt – as is the wont of all who do, in fact, sense their guilt. But such attempts to haggle is hatred of God’s gift. To be in debt, even to God, is simply too demoralizing to dissembling demigods.

Said Paul: “Human beings, in their fallen nature, don’t accept revelation of God’s Spirit since such is nonsense to them, they’re not able to grasp it, since such is *spiritually* discerned.” (I Cor 2:14) Jesus said: “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Again, Paul wrote: “It is God who moves in you, both to *will* and to *do*, His good will” (Phil. 2:13). Reasoning with his recipients, Paul asked rhetorically: “What do you have that you haven’t *received*?” (I Cor. 4:7).

Yet, even some preachers, when reminded of God’s bountiful *mercy*, are so quick to bark back with *their* little system’s version of God’s *justice*. Their “*yes, but*” seeks to dismiss, in short shrift, what they seem to affirm with their “*yes*”, so as to shut you up, and then bury you in what they really mean that comes out after their “*but*”.

They somehow imagine an unbridgeable gulf between *God’s justice* and *God’s mercy*. But aren’t *Christ’s outstretched arms on the cross that very bridge* between death and life? Didn’t Christ take into himself – down to death – the sins of the world? Didn’t Paul tell the Corinthians: “God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them”? (II Cor 5:19) Yes, God, in Christ, *so loved* – and *so loves* – *the world*!

Whether one knows that the death penalty for sin was paid on the cross, the death penalty for sin was paid on the cross. The One who paid that penalty in the blood of his son, is not willing that *any* should *perish*. And he who paid that penalty in his blood on the cross prayed to his Father, “Your will be done.” (Matt 26:42)

Historically, biblical Christians have called what Jesus did on the cross, the “substitutionary

atonement". Jesus was *our substitute* on the cross. He was the *final sacrificial lamb*, slain for sinners. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, John the baptizer had pointed to him and exclaimed: "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world!*" (John 1:29) God's *justice* and *mercy* are met *in Christ on the cross* so that no sinner should *perish*.

"Perish" – that's a crucial word at John 3:16 that, given its misinterpretations and resultant atrocities over centuries, needs serious attention and ecclesiastical confession of sin.

In the Greek, the word is *apolatai*. It means "destroyed", "destruction". The same word is used to render Jesus' warning: "Don't be afraid of those who can *kill* the body but *cannot* kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can *destroy* both body and soul in gehenna." (Matt 10:28)

But the all too common *misunderstanding* of this *perishing* is not *destruction*, but *perpetual, never-ending torture*. Among those who've refuted such misunderstanding is, for example, the eminent philologist of ancient Greek and noted New Testament translator R. F. Weymouth, a Baptist, who, along with his fellow scholars, repeatedly explained that the *misreading* is inexcusable in terms of the Greek vocabulary, not to mention common sense decency that finds such a caricatured interpretation of God, theologically obscene and emotionally revolting. Weymouth wrote: "My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying 'destroy' or 'destruction' are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. To translate black as white is nothing to this."

The same Greek term is used in Matthew's account of Jesus' warnings about the different destinations that lay ahead through what he calls the wide and narrow gates. The *wide* gate leads to *destruction*, the very *opposite* of *life*, and the *narrow* gate leads to *life*, the very *opposite* of *destruction*. (Matt 7:13f)

Whether Christians are burned to death by other Christians or by Muslims or others, the sordid history of setting "others" on fire to burn to death, demonstrates humanity's total *depravity* in self-serving *self-righteousness*, not to mention utter ignorance, even disdain, for the Good News that God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself. (II Cor 5:19)

Obviously, when this term, "perish", is twisted into what it does *not* mean, i.e., God's everlasting infliction of never-ending torture in flames that never utterly destroy the victim, what stops self-righteous religious zealots who refuse to take the Gospel seriously, from rationalizing *their* own alleged "imitation" of God, in spite of what they plainly see is the excruciating agony in their victims they burn alive at the stake? Of course, they rationalize *their evil*. They permit themselves to inflict this torture for a few minutes, claiming that, after all, God, as they see him and in who's name, taken in vain, they perform their atrocities, will *never ever stop torturing* these damned "heretics", "unbelievers", "infidels", Romanists, Protestants, *shirks* and *kafirs*, in literal fires of Hell.

The late and respected evangelical Anglican, John R. W. Stott, was among a growing number of evangelical ministers and biblical scholars who see their way clear, even up against risks of ecclesiastical politics, to frankly admit that the *perishing* in John 3:16 clearly meant and means *utter destruction, annihilation* and not *never-ever-ending torture chambers*.

*Christianity Today's* 2011 obituary of Stott honored him as "an architect of 20<sup>th</sup>-century evangelicalism [who] shaped the faith of a generation." Nearly a quarter century before that, Stott wrote this: "I find the concept [of everlasting torment] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain." He did acknowledge that, "our emotions are a fluctuating, unreliable guide to truth and must not be exalted to the place of supreme authority in determining it", so, he said, "As a committed

Evangelical, my question must be, and is, not what my heart tells me, but what does God's word say?" And Stott urged that, "in order to answer this question, we need to survey the Biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilationism, and that 'eternal conscious torment' is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture."

Since the biblical illustration of this *perishing* is what happened to the rubbish that was dumped into the burning pits of "gehenna" or Hinnom valley outside Jerusalem *and* what happened to the innocent children who'd been burned alive to bribe the false gods, Baal and Molech, in that same ravine, the rubbish and the bodies were utterly *destroyed*. That was the *purpose* and that was the *result* of those fires. As Stott recognized, "It would be very odd if what is thrown into [the fire] proves *indestructible*. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever."

Evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock, in the conservative *Criswell Theological Review*, asked rhetorically, "How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself." Yet, depraved humanity has been up for doing just that.

Well, a major Johannine scholar says that, John 3:16 "sums up the whole Christian message of redemption". And, he adds, "the best commentary is provided by [John, himself, in his first epistle] which agrees with John 3:16 in form and content." (Rudolf Schnackenburg) There, John writes: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (I John 4:9f)

The "eternal life" to which John refers, is "eternal" in both *quantity* and *quality* of the life given to all who trust in Christ who is, himself, "*the life*" (11:25; 14:6), and it is the gift of God who "has life in Himself" (5:26) and is therefore, the Giver of all life.

Paul reassured Christians at Rome that, against an exhaustive list of what they may fear would separate them from God's deep love: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 8:38f)

Oh, hold on: Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord *except* God's *will* to withhold what it takes for folks to repent and be saved? No! Peter wrote that the Lord, "is not *willing* that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (II Peter 3:9)

Yet, in spite of God's generous love for us all, humans *do relentlessly resist* God's gift of life and *do relentlessly rebel* with self-deceiving plans to save themselves from their God-given awareness that, indeed, something is deeply and terribly wrong with us as we choose to remain.

Humanity's irrationally angry denial of guilt and its fear-filled insecurity is expressed in self-righteous self-worship and affirmation-seeking through attempts at self-actualization, pretentiousness, identity group attachments and associated blame games against other identity groups, fantasies of materialism, fame, sexual promiscuity, drugs and disdainful, even violent, persecution of Christ's followers all through history, whether by those who call us mere ignorant rubes in flyover country or despised "infidels" who must be decapitated.

All of these humanly devised substitutes for the substitutionary atonement of Christ are so tragically worse than useless. Yet still, *fallen* humanity continues to *fall* for them in order to suppress all the spiritual hunger pangs and the Gospel message itself.

A particularly ludicrous but current notion these days is in proud praise of *pretension*. That, itself, blatantly reminds us of our foolish refusal to face reality.

This proud praise of *pretention* bounces off a nihilist 1996 diary from Brian Eno, a '70s Leftist composer and musician who mused: "My assumptions about culture as a place where you can take psychological risks without incurring physical penalties make me think that pretending is the most important thing we do."

Note his gnawing sense that something is, indeed, *dangerously wrong* – for why else take risks requiring him to try to convince himself, against all the evidence to the contrary, in the frightening contexts of the '70s and '80s – that there are no physical penalties?

He said, "It's the way we make our thought experiments, find out what it would be like to be otherwise." But there is no finding out "what it would be like to be otherwise" – except, of course, by way of *irrationality*, daydreams and fantasy scenarios of roads not taken. Who but a fool can rely on *otherwise* scenarios? "If only" means, *it ain't!*

Yet, in spite of its irrationality, Eno's diary is now the inspiration for art critic Dan Fox's new self-help book, *Pretentiousness: Why it Matters*. Fox endorses "Fake it till you make it" gibberish – as if one can actually escape awareness of one's own unwanted version of self that he or she is trying to camouflage by his or her faking. The effort at faking, itself, only reinforces one's painful awareness of what one's trying to hide behind one's contrived camouflage. One can't help but see right through the fakery of what one simply makes up in order to hide what one can't hide from.

But it gets even worse than this. Fox mentions the fact that, obviously, everyone hates pretentiousness in others. And, they do! So, he observes: "Pretentiousness is always someone else's crime. It is never a felony in the first person." It is when, helplessly, one extrapolates what's in one's own awareness of oneself into what one assumes is in another's awareness of oneself. If one is aware of and hates pretentiousness in others, doesn't it follow that one should expect that one's own pretentiousness which one still sees, is seen and hated by others? One still sees what one tries to hide. One is continually aware of and distracted by one's own pretentiousness while pretentiously pretending otherwise. So one's still on shaky ground inside one's own head? Since the felonious pretentiousness is inside the head of the one who's pretending, there in his or her head, his or her own faking is, indeed, in "the first person". So he or she is, indeed, paying the *first* penalty, and the *harshes*t penalty, for others are distracting themselves with their own pretentions, and no one distracts himself or herself more than with his or her own pretentions, feared as they are, to be found out. From the launching of the pretense and all through the charade, the faker fears exposure – sooner or later.

Still, it's not at all surprising that *Pretentiousness: Why it Matters* has received an "Editors' Choice" award from the clueless *New York Times Sunday Book Review* and rosy acclaim as "elegantly righteous" from the gullible *Guardian* in the UK. Why? Self-doubters are all in denial and they desperately want to buy into such crap. But, they can't.

If you can't hide from realistic, as well as irrational, dissatisfaction over your own version of yourself, and if you can't hide from your own fear that others are also dissatisfied with what you don't like about you, how, besides defensively *rationalizing*, do you think you can hide from God?

Does God not see how you *really don't* measure up or how *obsessing over your own myopic version* of you *really is* beside the point? Does He not see through all of your useless *faking*? Self-righteousness, whether expressed in *postures* of religiosity or atheism or in any other defensive effort, ultimately evidences an attempt to hide from the Creator and Redeemer. How futile! And, given God's grace to you in Christ, how foolishly ungrateful!

God loves you and all humanity so much that He gave His only Son so that, whoever relies on him should not *perish* into nothingness, but *live* eternal life?

In nearly a half-century of the practice of psychotherapy, I find that what everyone wants is to *be affirmed*. People seek it in all kinds of ways. They try by self-justifying, but *ineffectual*, efforts to cover up their disappointing versions of themselves. They seek it from parents, families, partners, bosses, colleagues, and even from strangers. They seek it on social media, in pets, in porn, in materialism, in celebrity, etc. The long list goes on and on. But hope in unreasonable expectations is dashed in disappointment and delusion and by desertions and deaths. *No human relationship* can ever meet the *deepest* need of heart and soul. We're created *in the image of God for relationship with God* and only in relationship with God can we be Home.

Good psychotherapy can help people get rid of self-inflicted irrationality that leads them to make bad choices, have unreasonable expectations, misuse their sense of self, hurt their feelings, frustrate themselves, scare themselves and exaggerate or minimize and otherwise distort, and fail to learn the lessons of life in relationship to others.

But there is only one True Source of Affirmation that goes to the very heart and deepest depths of human need. The answer is in affirming the gracious affirmation of the All-Merciful Creator and Redeemer Who so loved the world, including each and every human being that He gave His only Son, that we might *not perish* but have *eternal life*.

Affirming that All-Merciful Affirmation is the affirmation we *need* and are graciously *offered*. "For God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son that *whoever* trusts in him should not perish but have eternal life."

(Presented by Ralph Blair at the Evangelicals Concerned weekend at Ocean Grove, NJ, Saturday afternoon, October 8, 2016)