Sagecreek Bible Church Al Albano

Hermeneutics (Bible Study Methods) Fall 2021

Interpreting John 3:16

What is hermeneutics? Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of biblical interpretation. It is a set of rules for interpreting Scripture. Like a tool box full of different tools for different uses to construct a building, hermeneutics is a set of tools for constructing an accurate interpretation of a biblical text. Hermeneutics is from the Greek verb hermenuo (hermenew), meaning to interpret. It is believed to have come from the Greek god Hermes who was the interpreter between the gods and humans.

Regarding all of us as Christians, the question is, do we believe each one of us should rightly divide the word of truth, or interpret Scripture correctly? Paul told Pastor Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”. Pastors are commanded to rightly divide God’s word. But are those who are not pastors, i.e. most people in the church, responsible for interpreting God’s word correctly as well? How do we know?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 (turn) Paul commands the church to “not despise prophecies [preachings or teachings]. Test all things [in those preachings or teachings]; hold fast what is good”. Here we see it is the congregation that is to evaluate the sermons or teaching lessons of the preachers and teachers. So, the answer is, yes. Every Christian should be able to interpret Scripture correctly so he or she can rightly evaluate what is being taught.

In Acts 17 (turn) Paul and Silas planted a church at Philippi and then were sent for by the Bereans to their city. And when Paul and Silas arrived, they went into the synagogue to teach the people, 10. Now verses 2-3 say that Paul’s custom was to go into the synagogues and reason with the people from the Old Testament Scriptures “explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ’”. So, when Paul and Silas got to Berea, we can assume they did the same thing there.

But notice how the Bereans differed from the Philippians in verse 11, “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”. So again, these were brand new believers who evaluated what Paul and Silas taught by searching the Scriptures to see if they were being taught correctly, even by an apostle and his close associate. The word for “searched” is avnakri,nw, meaning to interrogate or examine a witness, or investigate in a forensic sense what was taught, much like a criminologist or crime scene investigator would do today.

So, do you think folks in the church are to interpret Scripture correctly so they can evaluate what is being taught by their leaders? Of course, they are. This should be the goal of every Christian.

This is why every Christian should desire to understand and become knowledgeable in biblical interpretation. So, for a few weeks, this is what we will be focusing on. Together, we will interpret a few passages as we learn to interpret them correctly.

And I would like to begin with the most well know verse in the Bible, which is? John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”

Over the centuries there have been many sincere and not so sincere interpretations of John 3:16, many of which are out of the context of the passage.

So from the outset, and I’m sure you have heard this before, the basic format in approaching any passage in the Bible is:

* Observe what it says
* Interpret what it means
* Apply it according to the intention of the biblical author

To begin with, in any interpretation of any passage, the interpreter should put aside any previous interpretations or preconceived understandings of the passage and look at it as if it was being observed for the very first time. Unfortunately, many begin with interpreting a passage, or simply stating what they have been taught, without ever looking at the passage for themselves to simply see what it *says*. You cannot interpret any passage without first observing what it says. So, the first thing the interpreter must do is simply observe what the passage *says*—not more than it says and not less.

And in the case of John 3:16, what does the verse says. The verse simply says, “God loved the world with the result that He gave His only Son for the purpose of keeping all who believe in His Son from perishing but rather giving them eternal life”.

So, let us begin with “God loved the world”. How? By giving His Son. We don’t know what this *means* yet, we only know what it *says*. Remember, we must understand what it says before we can determine what it means. But notice something very important: the tense of God’s love. What is it? It is past tense. God “loved” the world. It does not say God “loves” the world—present tense. Now we know God presently loves the world in His common love from Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:44, 46 where we are told to love our enemies just like God loves His enemies. But this is not what John 3:16 says. It *says* that God, sometime in the past, loved the world—and the rest of the verse tells us that He did this in a very specific way.

So, if you are using John 3:16 in evangelism sense, you cannot use it to tell people that God loves them right now, but rather He loved them sometime in the past, namely when He gave His Son. So, keeping God’s love in the past, as the text *says*, prevents us from emotionalizing or sentimentalizing God’s love when we evangelize, something the Bible never does. But sadly, this is often the case when Christians present the gospel to unbelievers—"God loves you *so* much”. And just as a side note, whenever the New Testament speaks of God’s love, it is almost always in the past tense, not the present, again to point to a specific time in the past when God “loved” the world (follow along):

* Romans 8:37, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who *loved* us”
* Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved* me and gave Himself for me”
* Ephesians 2:4, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He *loved* us”
* Ephesians 5:2, “Walk in love, as Christ also has *loved* us and given Himself for us”. Are you beginning to see the New Testament’s emphasis on God’s love and Christ’s love being past tense, specifically pointing to His work on the cross 2,000 years ago?
* Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also *loved* the church and gave Himself for her”
* 2 Thessalonians 2:16, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has *loved* us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace”
* 1 John 4:10, “In this is love, not that we loved God [when He saved us], but that He *loved* us”. How? “And sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins”. Again, He loved people at the cross.
* 1 John 4:11, “Beloved, if God so *loved* us [again in the past at the cross], we also ought to love [presently] one another”
* 1 John 4:19, “We love [presently] Him because He first *loved* us [in the past at the cross]”

Now there are a couple of New Testament uses of God’s love in the present tense toward believers not unbelievers, but the vast majority of passages referring to God’s love speak of it in the past tense, emphasizing God’s love for sinners at the cross. One point to be drawn from this is that it can be dangerous to tell someone about God’s present common love for them without ever telling them about His love for sinners at Calvary, which is sometimes missed when presenting the gospel—“God loves you so much! You should put your trust in Christ” without ever getting to the reason, or the right reason, a person should put their faith in Christ. But certainly, in John 3:16 the emphasis is on God’s love for the world sometime in the past.

So, what does John 3:16 say? It says that God, in some form or fashion, loved the world sometime in the past, by giving His only Son, in some form or fashion, so that believers in His Son would not perish but rather have eternal life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now after being clear about what the passage *says*, the next question that needs to be asked is, what does the verse *mean* by what it says? This is where actual interpretation begins. As we can see, to determine what a passage says and what it means are two very different processes. And as we have said previously, what it says is a clear, concise statement containing no more and no less than what it actually includes.

But in this next step of interpretation, several questions regarding words need to be answered:

* What does the word “for” (ga.r) mean, and how is it connected to what goes before it?
* What does the word “so” (ou[twj) mean, and how does it relate to God loving the world in the past?
* What does the word “world” (ko,smoj) mean? Who does it refer to? Is it universal or limited? Is it general or specific? How many times is it used in the passage? Does it mean the same thing every time it is used? If so, why? If not, why not?
* What is the significance of the first “that” (w[ste))
* What is the significance of the second “that” (i[na)?

To begin with, the word “for” is a very important word in interpreting John 3:16. It is an explanatory “for” and refers to what goes immediately before it, specifically verses 14-15, a reference to Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness described in Numbers 21: 4-9.

“Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." 6 So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So, Moses prayed for the people. 8 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived,” Numbers 21:4-9**.**

In this passage the children of Israel complained against God and Moses about their circumstances in the wilderness. God’s response was to send deadly serpents to destroy the people and, as a result, many died from being bitten by the serpents. Others, after they were bitten but before they died, ran to Moses and confessed their sin of complaining and pleaded that he would “pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us”. Moses compassionately listened to the people and prayed for them. And God’s answer was for Moses to set a bronze serpent on a pole, so when anyone looked at it, he or she would live.[[2]](#footnote-2) Those who believed what God said and obeyed by looking at the serpent would be spared from perishing in a physical death.

The word “so” (ou[twj) is also very important. Sadly, almost every (if not every) English translation leaves us with a wrong understanding of John 3:16. In our modern day understanding of “so” it has become a superlative as in God loved the world “so” much or in an incomprehensible way, in an almost emotional way. But this is not the meaning of the term at all. The word means “thus” or “in this same way” or “in this same manner”—“For God, in the same way, loved the world . . .”. Or in the same way or manner that God loved Israel in the wilderness by giving them a physical remedy for their sin—how?—by trusting His word that if they looked at the bronze serpent on a pole, their lives would be saved temporally . . . , in the same way or manner, God loved the world by giving them a spiritual remedy for their sin—how?—by trusting His word that if they look at His Son on a cross, their lives would be saved eternally.

There’s also another very important truth to observe from Numbers 21: 4-9. We learn what it means to “believe”. Many think believe is merely intellectual, an assent to the truth about Jesus Christ. But here we learn that it is much more than that. When the Israelites believed what God said about looking to the bronze serpent, it was not just an intellectual belief. It was an absolute trust, a desperate trust, a repentant-turning-from-sin trust, a no-other-alternative trust in God to save them from physical death. They knew that if they did not fully and completely trust in what God said, their lives would surely perish.

This is the same believing John 3:16 is talking about. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ must have the same trust in God as the Israelites did— an absolute trust, a desperate trust, a repentant-turning-from-sin trust, a no-other-alternative trust in what God says about His Son, namely saving them from eternal condemnation. This is the only belief or faith or trust that saves. This is why verses 14-15 reference Numbers 21: 4-9—to show us what true saving faith is.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever *believes* in Him should not perish but have eternal life,” John 3:14-15.

So, when John uses the term “believe” in his gospel for true saving faith, this is the type of belief or faith he is referring to. And if the Numbers 21: 4-9 passage is properly understood [and it doesn’t need much explanation], no one ever has to wonder what John means by believing in Christ.

But there’s another important question here that needs to be answered here. Why did God give His Son? Did He give His Son to save the whole world (the Arminian view)? Or did He give His Son to save only the elect (the Calvinist view)? If God gave His Son with the intention of saving the whole world (the Arminian view), He failed miserably, because not everyone has, is, or will be saved, not even the majority of people. But if God gave His Son with the intention of saving only the elect, how do you explain the word “world” in the passage?

And to better answer this, we need to find out what the word “world” means? But how do we do that? Context. Context always determines the meaning of a word. Did you notice I said “always”? Context *always* determines the meaning of a word.

Notice the word “world” is used five times in verses 16-19 (16 once, 17 three times, 19 once-you might want to highlight these). But now the question is, is it used the same way all five times or is it used differently within the passage? If it is used differently, the author should likely give an indication of a change in his meaning. But is there any indication in the text that there is a change in meaning within the paragraph? There does not seem to be any indication that there is. So, if this is the case, we must assume that the usage of the word “world” is consistent in all five cases.

So how do we determine the meaning of the word “world” in John 3:16? We list all the possibilities of how it can be used in verse 16 and then insert those different meanings in each of the other four places to see if those meanings work in all five cases. Does this make sense? So, what are the possibilities?

* The physical world, 2 Samuel 22:16
* The evil world’s system, 1 John 2:15-16
* Every person ever born from Adam to the end of time, Romans 3:6
* The world of the elect, John 1:29
* The world of humanity in general, Romans 10:18
* The world of sinful humanity in general, Romans 3:6

Inserting these possibilities, the physical world and the evil world’s system make no sense. Every person ever born from Adam to the end of time cannot work either, since God would have given Jesus on the cross to save people already in in hell.

Neither can the world of the elect work in John 3:16. Why would the text say that God loved the world of the elect for the purpose of giving whoever believes in Him (from the world of the elect) eternal life? This would mean that only believing elect persons would be saved, but unbelieving elect persons would not be saved. This makes no sense. Also, verses 19-20 say the light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than the light, and “everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” But if light comes into the world of the elect, how can they not come to the light to be saved? Again, this makes no sense. So, whatever “world” means, it cannot mean only the world of the elect.

So, what does this all mean? It means that neither the Arminian or Calvinist view is supported by John 3:16. So if you want to argue for Aminianism or Calvinism, you cannot go to John 3:16 to do that; you would have to go elsewhere.

But getting back to our question, what then does the word “world” mean? It can only mean the world of sinful humanity in general. God sent His Son into the world of sinful human beings—the world of men who loved darkness rather than light.

But why did God send His Son into this world (and we need to get this)? Look at the last half of the verse. The Bible gives us many reasons why Jesus came into this world, but here it gives us only one reason. And what is that reason? To keep believers from perishing and instead give them eternal life. This is what the verse says—nothing more and nothing less.

Isn’t this good? John 3:16 tells us that God sent His Son into the world to keep you and me (believers in Christ) from perishing and instead give us eternal life! According to John 3:16, this is the reason why God sent His Son into this world.

So, in the context, in the same way God loved Israel by saving all who turned from their sin and looked on the brazen serpent, in the exact same way, He loved the world of sinful humanity by saving from perishing and giving eternal life to all who turn from their sin and look to Christ on the cross.

So, reviewing, we need to look at every passage the same way:

* Observe what it says – nothing more and nothing less
* Interpret what it means – in its immediate and surrounding context
* Apply it – according to the intention of the biblical author

So how do we apply John 3:16? By using it the same way John did—telling people that if they believe they are sinners in severe trouble with God, under His eternal wrath, and they cry out to Him for salvation from wrath and sin, and if they completely trust in Jesus Christ on the cross to bear the penalty for their sin, God will save them from the eternal death sentence they are under.

1. The past tense of “love” (hvga,phsen) John 3:16 has led some to conclude that Jesus’ words stop at verse 14 and that verses 15-21 are John’s later comment on Jesus’ words when he penned his Gospel. This view is entirely plausible but in no way diminishes what the text teaches. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The fact that the serpent was made of bronze was to reinforce to the people that this was God’s judgment, bonze being the metal the alter of sacrifice was made of where animals were consumed “by God’s judgment”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)