

“God So Loved”

Have you noticed that words set to music are often easier to remember than just the words alone? Madison Avenue has. They know the value of a good jingle. There are jingles that you have not heard for ages that you can probably sing right now. What about the Green Giant jingle? How about Oscar Meyer hot dogs? One of the most irritating and therefore most memorable was for Meow Mix cat food. Do you remember that? Even if there is not a tune, if it is given a unique rhythm it will stick in your head. I bet many of you can remember the ingredients in a Big Mac because of the way it was presented.

When I was in Vacation Bible School and had to memorize Bible verses, I took my cue from the advertisers and made the verses sing song to make them easier to remember. John 3:16 was one of the first Bible verses I memorized this way. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”¹

John 3:16 is one of the most famous of all Bible verses. It is so iconic you do not have to write out or say the whole verse. People put just the words John 3:16 on billboards, caps, and t-shirts. Forever 21 put it on shopping bags, and In-N-Out Burger put it on the bottom of drink cups. For years there always seemed to be someone sitting in the end zone waiting for an extra point to be kicked so he could stand up and hold his homemade cardboard sign that simply read John 3:16. Martin Luther is said to have called John 3:16 “the Gospel in miniature.”

That is a nice idea. Take all sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible plus the twelve or so of the Apocrypha and distill them down to one verse of twenty-five words. Because we humans like things to be even more succinct we can go for the heart of the verse. That is the word “believe.” Thus, all we must do is believe in Jesus and it is all taken care of. We are on the express lane to heaven.

The problem with belief being the centerpiece and guarantee of salvation is that belief has come to be a litmus test for being a true Christian (I think it may work this way I other religions, philosophical and political systems also). If you do not believe the things that a group sets up as important then you are out.

The Christian Fundamentalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries produced such a litmus test. The five fundamentals that gave the name to their movement are: 1) belief in the Divine inspiration of the Bible, and the inerrancy of scripture; 2) the virgin birth; 3) Jesus died as an atonement for our sins; 4) the bodily resurrection of Christ; 5) the historical reality of Christ’s miracles.

On the surface it may seem to be a no brainer to accept these beliefs, but the leaders of the movement would not have produced them if there were not people who questioned them. The power of these fundamentals was to determine who was a true believer and who was not. Who was in and who was out. If you had any doubts or questions about any of the five fundamentals you were out. There was no room for that.

I think, and so do the dictionaries, that believing is more nuanced than intellectual assent. To believe in someone is to put trust in them. To believe in a

¹ John 3:16 KJV

proposition is to have faith in it. To the biblical writers' belief in God was much more than accepting a proposition. To believe in God meant to have trust and confidence in God. They were willing to put their whole heart, mind, and body into God's hands.² That level of trust goes way beyond the assent of a belief or a fundamental.

To my mind when humans start setting up tests like these, they have made themselves into gods. I have some strong opinions about what makes one a faithful Christian, but I know better than to think my opinions are God's. When I am at my best, I am clear that the best thing I can do is put my opinions aside and to love everyone I meet, because that is what God asks of me.

Which brings me to another problem with focusing on the word "believe." There are twenty-four other words in that verse that we should be paying attention to. For example, the very first words, "God so loved the world..." The set up for the concept of believing is that God loves the world. It is not that God loves a part of the world, a certain group of people, a certain racial group, economic group, political system, or any other aspect that we humans use to parse and divide up humanity. God loves the world. Full stop. God loves all of creation, every single aspect of creation. Remember that when God creates in the first chapter of Genesis at the end of each day God sees what has been created and pronounces it good. On God's part there is no equivocation about the goodness of all creation.

Additionally, the following verse ought to put the fear of God into anyone who thinks that they have solved the whole issue with belief. For John adds, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."³ Instead of spending our time deciding who is in and who is out according to the set of beliefs that we think are essential so that we can condemn others, perhaps we ought to be focused on how we can love the world.

Helping others to know Jesus is not some blunt force practice of beating it into them. Helping others know Jesus is living the life he lived. A life of self-denial, asceticism, poverty, and most importantly love and care for others. Those others were often the people that the fundamentalists of his time considered the outsiders. They were the people that the religious elites considered sinners. They were the people that the good and faithful would have nothing to do with. Yet Jesus ate with them, consorted with them, talked with them, and loved them.

Before we get down to deciding who is in and who is out based on our set of beliefs, let's start at the beginning. "God so loved the world..." when we have perfected our love for the whole of creation in the way that Jesus did, perhaps then we will know what it means to believe in the one whom God sent to bring salvation to all of the world.

² Paraphrase of Debie Thomas on Journey with Jesus website <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1687-in-a-nutshell> . Accessed March 9, 2024

³ John 3:17 NRSV