

# The Content of the World in John 3:16

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For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. - John 3:16

God's love for the world is universal according to John 3:16, but precisely how it is universal is debated. One characterization of "the world" in this passage takes the meaning to be such that it refers to every human person.<sup>1</sup> A second characterization takes God's love to be universal because God's love traverses categorical boundaries incorrectly thought to limit who could be an object of God's love, and without necessarily referring to every person. These characterizations arise in the theological debate concerning whether the Son of God came to save every person or only a subset, namely the elect.

This paper argues for the second characterization. According to John 3:16, God's love for the world is a repudiation of a kind of tribalism, one which treats persons with certain properties as non-recipients of God's love expressed through the salvific acts of the Son. The salient properties that mark others as beyond the pale are often properties that contextualize cultural divisiveness. Ethnic categories, for instance, are used by some to target others as impossible or unlikely recipients of God's love. But this paper

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus is the one exception for whom the term "sinner" does not apply. Depending on the theological tradition, Mary might count as a second exception. The paper assumes this caveat, as well as that human persons are the ones for whom Jesus came to save rather than angels, animals (if they are persons), or anything else.

argues that the universality of God's love for the world is categorical. That is, the recipients of God's love traverses any boundaries that we incorrectly place on one another.

Surprisingly, there has not been much focused defense of the second characterization in the context of the debate on the extent of the atonement as it concerns John 3:16, although John 3:16 is cited frequently.<sup>2</sup> Appeals to the context of John 3:16 from defenders of the second characterization are at best appeals to what a careful analysis *would* show, but they do not get down to brass tacks. The present paper fills this lacuna by providing evidence that the *content* of "the world" is universality in respect to delimiting categories. The content is the semantically salient properties conveyed by a word or expression. The content of the "the world" does not designate any particular referents even though it is a referring expression; the referents of "the world" are underdetermined by the expression itself. This is not to say we are without evidence of who the referents are; it is only that the content of "the world" does not settle who the referents are. The upshot is that appeals to God's love for the world in

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<sup>2</sup> Appeals to the second characterization are typically statements of it and that Biblical authors were concerned with ethnic and national categories together with citations of passages anywhere in the New Testament. The best defenses I could find are Owen (1647) and Pink (1949). Pink's work is discussed later in the paper. Owen's discussion of "the world" is brief although his explanation of the expression is clear and accurate.

John 3:16 to settle the election debate are misguided and the debate must be settled on other grounds.<sup>3</sup>

A sketch of the argument for the anti-tribal characterization runs as follows. The best evidence for interpretation aimed at understanding authorial intent is data that increases empathetic understanding of an author in a speech act. The data can be information about the author, the circumstances in which or about which the author writes, the intended audience, how information is presented by the author (e.g., the structure of a text, the choice by the author to use certain words, phrases, or symbols), and so on. Upon this all participants in the election debate should agree. But in practice this sort of evidence is not given the greatest weight as participants in the debate tend to rely on systematic theorizing from passages far removed from John 3:16. When the evidence that increases empathetic understanding is made explicit, the evidence reveals that the anti-tribal characterization is the most likely correct option.

The first section discusses philosophical issues that lay the groundwork for later sections. The reader will be positioned to see how certain characterizations fall short of others on the evidential scale or how they confuse semantical concepts. The remainder of the paper presents data from sources that increase empathetic understanding and

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<sup>3</sup> Another argument from John 3:16 is that God's love is universal in the sense that it applies to every person because of the use of πᾶς in "whosoever believes" (πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων), cf. Lemke (2010) and Mounce (2018). The soundness of this argument turns on how to understand the scope of "the world". Appeals to πᾶς alone are inadequate because the presence of ὅστε. Mounce (2018) sees as much and so appeals to "the world" to get every person in scope of God's love in John 3:16. This paper undermines that appeal, thereby taking away both arguments that suggest John 3:16 is evidence for God's universal love of every individual.

summarizes how this data is best explained by the anti-tribal characterization. The paper ends with a brief discussion of showing some of the advantages of this view.

## Evidential and Semantical Issues

This section discusses two issues that are relevant to the discussion of John 3:16. The first concerns the nature of evidence used to justify an interpretation. This provides clarity on how to assess the evidential support for different interpretations. The second issue is semantic in distinguishing the *content* of a term, phrase, or expression from the term's *referent*. The failure to distinguish these two sorts of meaning has led to unjustified inferences about John 3:16.

### Evidential

An interpreter's degree of reliability depends on the extent to which one can empathize with the interpreted person (agent) at the time of the speech act. To empathize means, roughly, that the interpreter can take on the perspective of the agent. The greater the empathy, the greater the ability to access the reasons that motivate the speech act. The acts of communication always take place in the context of some background, typically to some audience, expressed by linguistic mechanisms and cultural symbols shared among others at the time. By understanding (to the degree one can) the information about the circumstances in which the speech act occurs together with what can be known about the speaker and audience, one can explain the speech act or the artifact (e.g., text) that results.

The empathetic model of interpretative reliability provides insight into why some interpretations are better than others, where the aim is to understand authorial intent.

Consider the following scale of ways one might attempt to understand another's meaning (M) by an expression (E):

- The author meant M by E because <projection of interpreter's only conceived meaning>.
- The author meant M by E because many people mean M by E.
- The author meant M by E because other people at the time in the region of the author meant M by E.
- The author meant M by E because the author uses E to express M in various places.
- The author meant M by E because clues very close to the place in which E occurs are far better understood as M (for reasons close to E's occurrence) rather than any alternative M\*.

What follows *because* functions as the explanatory basis for how an interpreter justifies an interpretation. The first attempt to understand the meaning of an expression is unimpressive for the reason that the attribution of a meaning does not take into account the author's perspective. There is no attempt to empathize with the author and thereby make sense of what the author said for a reason. When one considers how others use the expression, this provides better evidence because it assumes the author is part of a cultural-lineage and shares in some of the cultural symbols or linguistic practices used to convey information to an audience. As one goes down the scale, the closer one gets to the reasons that motivate the speech act and thereby has greater justification to believe an interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stueber (2006); Kögler and Stueber (1999) are excellent resources on this for understanding empathy in the social sciences, history, and folk psychology.

To give an example of how this model treats the evidential weighting of interpretations, assume that “the world” meant *every individual* in every other passage found in the New Testament. That would be evidence for treating “the world” in John 3:16 as every individual.<sup>5</sup> But there could be even better evidence for that interpretation of John 3:16. That better evidence would be found close to John 3:16 and not just anywhere in the New Testament or even John’s writings. John is writing at a specific point in the text with carefully chosen stories, words, and phrases to an audience believed to have certain properties. The evidence E close to John 3:16 might be consistent with the larger scope of evidence E\*. The evidence E may be indecisive and one might place one’s bet with the general use if it is reasonable. Or the evidence E may be that the author used “the world” idiosyncratically (given the initial assumption) because the context in which the “the world” occurs at John 3:16 demands assigning a different meaning than E\*. Determining which interpretation is correct requires that one evaluate the speech act as close to the context in which it occurs.<sup>6</sup>

## Semantic

Philosophers of language and linguists distinguish between the *content* or *character* of an expression (term, phrase, etc.) and its *reference*. This distinction was made famous by Frege (1892), which distinguishes between *sense* and *reference* of a

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<sup>5</sup> I think of *evidence* as information that increases the likelihood of some proposition conditional on that information as opposed to the probability of the proposition without being so conditioned. That is, if  $P(H|E) > P(H)$ , then E is evidence.

<sup>6</sup> There is complexity due to texts being rich with meaning beyond what the human author might have recognized if a text is divinely inspired and so more than a human author guides the speech act, e.g., when New Testament authors quote Old Testament texts in ways that outstrip what may be been known by an Old Testament author.

term. The sense (what this paper calls “content”) is the mode of presentation, which illuminates some aspect of the object, and the reference is the object designated by the expression. Frege’s example of the distinction is that the ancients used “the morning star” and “the evening star”, which had two different modes of presentation, but which were later discovered to be coreferential for Venus. Russell’s theory of descriptions also makes use of this distinction when explaining how non-referring terms seem to have a meaning because the terms contain a sense.

This distinction between content and reference is important because some expressions (terms, non-phrases, etc.) can be informative without identifying which objects are the referents. For example, indefinite expressions like “some person” or “a cat” do not designate any particular object but they are meaningful. Even definite expressions (i.e. those containing a definite article) can be indeterminate in their reference because they involve collective singular terms, e.g., “the team”. For example, “*the team* was disappointed by losing the game” says something about a collection without saying something about any particular members of the collection. There is no contradiction in asserting that one member of the team was not sad even while expressing sadness was true of the team in general. So in John 3:16, “the world” can convey a mode of presentation without the mode of presentation thereby designating any particular referents. These two types of meaning can come apart. Interpreters need to be clear on whether the meaning of “the world” conveys the content or the reference.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One of the disputes in the philosophy of language is over whether a singular term refers by means of the content (descriptivism) or if reference can succeed but not by means of the content (direct reference theory).

## Contemporary Interpretations

In *The Sovereignty of God*, A. W. Pink argues that the salvific acts of the Son do not extend to every person.<sup>8</sup> In a chapter called “Objections and Difficulties”, John 3:16 is addressed. After considering passages apart from John 3:16, Pink infers that “world” in John 3:16 is used in a general way for different kinds of people at high levels of categorization, e.g., ethnicities or nationalities. Pink devotes a single paragraph to explaining its meaning in the context of John 3.

Now the first thing to note in connection with John 3:16 is that our Lord was there speaking to Nicodemus—a man who believed that God’s mercies were confined to his own nation. Christ there announced that God’s love in giving His Son had a larger object in view, that it flowed beyond the boundary of Palestine, reaching out to "regions beyond". In other words, this was Christ’s announcement that God had a purpose of grace toward Gentiles as well as Jews. "God so loved the world", then, signifies, God’s love is international in its scope. But does this mean that God loves every individual among the Gentiles? Not necessarily, for as we have seen, the term "world" is general rather than specific, relative rather than absolute. The term "world" in itself is not conclusive. To ascertain who are the objects of God’s love other passages where His love is mentioned must be consulted.

Apparently few people, perhaps even Pink, found this to be satisfactory because he includes an appendix on the meaning of “world”.<sup>9</sup> The appendix begins as follows.

It may appear to some of our readers that the exposition we have given of John 3:16 in the chapter on "Difficulties and Objections" is a forced and unnatural one, inasmuch as our definition of the term "world" seems to be out of harmony with

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<sup>8</sup> Pink (1949).

<sup>9</sup> Pink (1949), appendix ii.



the meaning and scope of this word in other passages, where, to supply the world of believers (God's elect) as a definition of "world" would make no sense. Many have said to us, "Surely, 'world' means world, that is, you, me, and everybody."

Pink lists seven different possible meanings of "world" with citations throughout the New Testament. He suggests that the best choice among possible meanings be ascertained by a "careful study of the context" and by a comparison with other "parallel passages". But the details in Pink's commentary are too sparse to establish the conclusion he seeks. He does raise the issue of Gentile nation idolatry in covering John 3:17, but his commentary at John 3 largely assumes the view above rather than arguing for it in detail.<sup>10</sup>

The fundamental error in Pink's argument is that it is built primarily on an evaluation of uses of "world" in other passages, which are given a more prominent evidentiary role than details about the meaning "the world" as it appears in the context John 3. This allows critics of Pink's view to make a similar move. For example, Roger Olson argues against this view by stating it contradicts scripture.<sup>11</sup> As evidence of this, he offers two quotes from theologian Vernon Grounds:

"A mere *catena* of passages discloses the fact, for fact it is, that the divine purpose in Jesus Christ embraces not a segment of the human family but the race *en toto*" and "It takes an exegetical ingenuity which is something other than

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<sup>10</sup> This is not an indictment of his commentary as such because commentators have more content and space limitations than is permissible to take a deep dive into all of a text's content. But Pink has left readers with an incomplete argument.

<sup>11</sup> Olson (2006), 65.

a learned virtuosity to evacuate these texts of their obvious meaning; it takes an exegetical ingenuity verging on sophistry to deny their explicit universality.”<sup>12</sup>

Set aside the error of thinking that a word having a particular meaning in John 3:16 that differs from its meaning elsewhere is a contradiction. Nevertheless, it would have been preferable for Pink to have cited other passages to establish that “world” *might* take that meaning in John 3:16, and then go on to argue from details surrounding John 3 to justify that it *actually* has that meaning.

A second author who takes “the world” in John 3:16 to have ethnic or nationalistic content is D. A. Carson. Carson regards the fourth gospel as an evangelistic work from John 20:30-31 and John 3:16 epitomizes the good news for sinners.<sup>13</sup> In Carson’s commentary on John 3:16, he writes:

More than any New Testament writer, John develops a theology of love relations between the Father and the Son, and makes it clear that, as applied to human beings, the love of God is not the consequence of their loveliness but of the sublime truth that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:16).... Jews were familiar with the truth that God loved the children of Israel; *here God’s love is not restricted by race*. Even so, God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so bad: that is the customary connotation of *kosmos*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Olson (2006), 65, footnote 6.

<sup>13</sup> Carson (1987) and Carson (1991), 87-95.

<sup>14</sup> Carson (1991), 205, my emphasis. Carson likewise interprets John 1:29 similarly: “... the sacrifice is not restricted in its purpose or effectiveness to the Jewish race. The Lamb of God takes away the sin *of the world* - that is, of all human beings without distinction, though not, as the Prologue has already made clear (1:11-12) of all without exception”, 151.

But consider what Carson believes about the possibility that the elect are the object of God's love in the passage from the fact that moral connotations are involved in the use of "world" throughout the fourth gospel. In a more recent work on the love of God, Carson writes concerning John 3:16:

I know that some try to take *kosmos* ("world") here to refer to the elect. But that really will not do. All the evidence of usage of the word in John's Gospel is against this suggestion. True, *world* in John does not so much refer to bigness as to badness. In John's vocabulary, world is primarily the moral order in willful and culpable rebellion against God. In John 3:16 God's love in sending the Lord Jesus is to be admired not because it is extended to so big a thing as the world, but to so bad a thing... Nevertheless elsewhere John can speak of "the *whole* world" (1 John 2:2), thus bringing bigness and badness together. More importantly, in Johannine theology the disciples themselves once belonged to the *whole* world but were drawn out of it (e.g., John 15:19). On this axis, God's love for the world cannot be collapsed into his love for the elect.... [God] presents himself as the God who invites and commands all human beings to repent.<sup>15</sup>

When Carson says that the world cannot be "collapsed into his love for the elect", does Carson mean that that the *content* of the expression does not reduce in such a way as to designate only the elect? That may be true, and so substitutions of "the elect" for "the world" would be inappropriate. But it hardly follows that the elect are not designated as referents by anything else in John 3 even if the content of "the world" does not justify that claim.

One possible reason to think "the world" cannot refer to the elect is because of an inference *from* the general content of "the world" *to* any member who might satisfy

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<sup>15</sup> Carson (2016), 27-28.

the description of being a member of the world. Jerry Vines appears to make this inference in his discussion of John 3:16.

The object of God's love is "the world." In Greek the word is *kosmos* and is an accusative, masculine, singular direct object. The word occurs 78 times in the Gospel of John and 24 times in 1, 2, and 3 John — over half of its 185 occurrences in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to a world system organized in antagonism to God, but most often the word refers to the realm where human beings live... most often it refers to the people who live in that realm. A.T. Robertson says it means "the whole human race." It refers to the sum total of all people. The verse provides no hint here that "world" refers only to the world of the elect. God does not love just the elect; God loves everyone.... God does not just love Americans; God loves all nations. God does not love just white people; God loves all races.... Put all those people in a line and walk them before God. John 3:16 teaches that God would say "I love you" to each one.<sup>16</sup>

Notice how both Carson and Vines appeal to passages elsewhere to claim the referent of "the world" in John 3:16 is not scoped to the elect. Carson cites John 15:19 and 1 John 2:2. Vines counts up uses across the New Testament and infers from the general to the particular. Although both authors interpret "the world" differently, both import a meaning from texts far removed from John 3:16. Neither argues from John 3 that the referent extends beyond the elect.

The next sections present data surrounding John 3 to justify that the author of the fourth gospel has in mind categorical concepts rather than all individuals. The data collected reflects the different types of data that would increase empathetic understanding. The different types to be discussed are the audience who would have read the fourth gospel, the structure of the text, the symbols chosen by the author, and

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<sup>16</sup> Vines (2010), ch.1.

linguistic patterns. The data to be presented focuses on ethnic or nationalistic categories and finally suggests expansion beyond them.

## The Audience

To begin to understand the perspective of the author, it helps to know something about the intended audience for whom the text is written. Having an understanding of the intended audience allows an interpreter to reverse-engineer one's understanding of what an author may be trying to convey.<sup>17</sup>

The literature on the identity of the intended audience of the fourth gospel is complicated. Scholars often refer to it as the "Johannine community" and scholars disagree about that community's identity. To get a sense for how complicated this literature is, consider the range of diverse groups identified as potential influences on the author.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars cite Philo of Alexandria. Others insist that John was a Palestinian Jew who should be sharply distinguished from Philo. Some propose Hellenistic influences, Stoicism, or even examining the backdrop of the mystery religions and Gnosticism. Others intentionally avoid appealing to non-Christian influences altogether.

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<sup>17</sup> It is often reasonable to begin with the author rather than the audience. I do not start here because as far as I can tell there is agreement between myself and others in this debate that the author of the fourth gospel is John, son of Zebedee. Also, I do not see what proposition of relevance follows from that fact.

<sup>18</sup> C.f. Barrett (1975) for a survey of these views.

One way to cut through this complexity of possible influences is to begin with examining the purpose of the fourth gospel.<sup>19</sup> Carson has been one of the leading voices defending the view that gospel's purpose is evangelistic, specifically to evangelize Jews and Jewish proselytes; he argues for this from considerations around John 20:30-31.<sup>20</sup> Carson is aware of the significance of this connection between the purpose of the book and the identity of the audience. He concludes on the topic with the remark that his paper "may have some further bearing on the confidence with which some reconstructions of the history of the Johannine community are currently being undertaken."<sup>21</sup> More recently, Hwang and van der Watt have argued that the audience is to be understood primarily as Diaspora Jews and proselytes specifically in light of the question of the purpose of the book.<sup>22</sup>

These authors have to say something about the diversity of potential influences, which is a view endorsed by a scholar like C. K. Barrett.<sup>23</sup> Carson writes that Barrett "objects to this thesis [about the primarily evangelistic purpose] largely because he finds other emphases than Jewish ones in the Fourth Gospel. But that is scarcely an impediment to the thesis. Diaspora Judaism was nothing if not syncretistic."<sup>24</sup> In other

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<sup>19</sup> The thought is that by getting clear on the purpose of the book and thereby the author's values, we can get a better sense of what the audience was like or what influences the author had.

<sup>20</sup> Carson (1987). Also see Carson (1991), 87-95.

<sup>21</sup> Carson (1987), 651.

<sup>22</sup> Hwang and van der Watt (2007).

<sup>23</sup> Barrett (1975).

<sup>24</sup> Carson (1991), 92.

words, the audience of Jews have a certain amount of complexity in their beliefs and practices woven in from other influences. Carson writes:

This is not to say that Barrett is entirely wrong. The early Christians were aware that they were expanding outward into a frequently hostile set of world-views, and the most farsighted of them, however evangelistic their vision, were quick to distinguish between the 'world' and those whom the Father had given to the Son (to use John's expressions). But even such polarization means that influence has been exerted. John's effort to communicate the truth to men and women far removed from Palestine ensured that, if he was at all thoughtful in his task, he would not simply parrot the received traditions, but try to cast them in ways that would make them most easily understood.<sup>25</sup>

Hwang and van der Watt suggest that those of Samaritan descent may have been part of the Johannine community, and non-Jewish Greeks may have also been part of the larger intended audience.<sup>26</sup> This response expands the immediate audience to be composed mostly of a certain background, yet the larger audience is still diverse. So on the assumption that there is such a thing as a Johannine community, either the audience of the fourth gospel was diverse or it was composed of a mostly syncretistic group with even broader potential audience members in mind.

An alternative view among scholars is skepticism about the existence of a Johannine community.<sup>27</sup> These scholars challenge the consensus view that the gospels - the Synoptics and John - were written for distinct communities. They argue that "it is probable that the Gospels were written for general circulation around the churches and

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<sup>25</sup> Carson (1991), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Hwang and van der Watt (2007), 689, cf. the conclusion on 695.

<sup>27</sup> Bauckham (1998).

so envisaged a very general Christian audience.”<sup>28</sup> Several lines of evidence are raised against the consensus view, such as that mobility and communication among churches in the Roman world were high; the early Christian movement thought of itself as a worldwide movement; the fact that Christian leaders in the New Testament moved around.<sup>29</sup> If it is true that the gospels were intended to be widely circulated as these scholars argue, then consideration of audience alone suggests that John’s use of “the world” may indeed be a useful generic for capturing different audiences, whoever the readers happen to be.

It is time to take account of data about the identity of the audience and how it evidentially bears on understanding John 3:16. Consideration about the audience - whether there was a Johannine community or not - suggests the author understood the audience to be either a single syncretistic Jewish group or perhaps geographically diverse groups, including non-Jewish readers. The audience would be encountering a text in circumstances in which ethnic identity was of paramount significance, and they would have to ask themselves what Jesus has to do with them.<sup>30</sup> It would have been important then, as it is today, for them to hear that God’s love for the world is for different kinds of people.

The data about the audience is the weakest evidence that John 3:16 should take on a categorical interpretation, but it primes the context for the next sections where data close to John 3:16 is presented. The next section examines the structure of the text close to John 3.

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, introduction paragraph 2. Kindle locations 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, chapter 1.

<sup>30</sup> For Gentile adoptions of Jewish practices, cf. Murray (2004).



## The Structure

It can be shown that there is wide agreement about the boundaries of the unit of thought surrounding John 3:16, fuzzy though those boundaries may be. So there can be shared agreement about the parameters within which the evidence may tip the scales in favor of one interpretation.

At the highest level of abstraction concerning the structure of the fourth gospel, some authors propose that in between the prologue (John 1:1-18) and epilogue (John 21:1-25) sits two subsections, John 1:19-12:50 and 13:1-20:31. In her commentary on John, Marianne Meye Thompson suggests that the “first four chapters of John constitute a thematic and narrative unit...”<sup>31</sup> Barrett begins in chapter two: “2.13-4.54 forms a whole, in which we see Jesus first as the fulfilment [sic] of all that the Temple represented; next as the fulfilment of apocalyptic and Pharisaic Judaism (3.1-21), and of what the Baptist foretold (3.22-36); then in relation to heretical Judaism (4.1-42) and to the Gentile world (4.43-4.54).”<sup>32</sup> A third view begins earlier in chapter two and ends at 4:54, enclosed by the two miracles at Cana. Craig Blomberg describes the third view as follows.

John 2–4 forms a literary unit within the Fourth Gospel, with 3:1-15 and 4:4-42 as the central dialogues of this section.... Chaps. 2–4 are thus set apart not merely by these geographical and conceptual disjunctions but also by the inclusio of the

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<sup>31</sup> Thompson (2018), 40. Thompson writes, the unit “introduces Jesus, appropriate designations for him, and the gifts that he brings; epic differing but complementary witnesses to him; and show that his work brings to fruition God’s promise to create, through the Spirit, a holy people who offer true worship,” *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Barrett (1978), 196.

two miracles at Cana (2:1-11 and 4:43-54), the only two signs in John's Gospel explicitly enumerated (2:11, 4:54). What is more, each of the pericopes in these three chapters contributes to introducing the radical newness of Jesus' person and work vis-à-vis much contemporary Jewish practice and belief: water into wine (2:1-11) parabolically symbolizing the new joy of the kingdom, the cleansing of the temple (2:12-25) focusing on the new worship centered in the resurrected Jesus (as against the limitations of temple or certain holy places — cf. further 4:20-24), the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-15) calling attention to the new birth which he needs to experience, with the appended commentary (3:16-21) and material on Jesus and the Baptist (3:22-36) elaborating the themes introduced in this dialogue. Chap. 4, finally, combines the lengthy episode of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (vv. 1-42) with the healing of a presumably Gentile official's son (vv. 43-54) so as to stress a new, universal scope to Jesus' mission.<sup>33</sup>

If evidence from the first four or second through fourth chapters could inform the meaning of “For God so loved the world” in John 3:16, then that may constitute better evidence than going to John 15:19 or John 20:30-31 as Carson does.

One might ask how the structure of a text evidentially impacts an interpretation of a passage at all. Joseph R. Dongell provides a plausible answer.

Structural analysis involves dividing a discourse into segments that can then be shown to form larger units of text. The necessary outcome of forming such clusters of passages is that major breaks are established within the discourse separating one cluster of passages from another. When interpreters differ in how they join or separate the material within a discourse, they usually differ also in what sense they make of the discourse as a whole. Structural analysis and interpretation are closely intertwined.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Blomberg (1995), 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Dongell (2014), 114.

The discussion of empathetic understanding supports what Dongell says. Interpreters must contextualize what sort of inputs pertain to the reasons that motivate and give content to another's assertions. Interpretation is partly a pragmatic activity because there must be limits to the extent of reflection about interpreting another if any interpretation is to be settled upon. Discerning contextual boundaries guides reliable interpretation.

Dongell proposes an analysis with the boundaries between John 1:19 and 4:54. According to that analysis, the unit of thought begins with the disciples coming to faith in Jesus and it moves by a sequence from Jew to Samaritan to Gentile, where the royal official of 4:46-54 is a Gentile. The upshot is that "Jesus is thereby demonstrated as qualified to be Savior of the world."<sup>35</sup> Dongell writes that "If Jesus is to play a central role in God's redemption of the whole world (3:16), and if the Samaritans' declaration that Jesus was the Savior of the whole world is true (4:42), then Jesus must demonstrate a capacity to deal with the whole of humanity."<sup>36</sup> Exactly.

An attractive feature of Dongell's structural analysis is that it fits with the narrative that Jesus is uniquely positioned as the Son of God around whom a holy people would be gathered from different segments of society. In John's prologue, Jesus is said to be rejected by his own people, and only those who believe in his name are given the right to become children of God (1:11-12). Jesus is described as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). What follows is an expansion on that thought culminating in the broadest category of Gentiles in chapter four. Dongell could extend the starting

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 124-25.

boundary to the prologue as well because it is evidence of Jesus' unique position to be the savior of the world. Jesus is identified as one with a special relationship to the Father (John 1:1-3). Both the unique role of Jesus and the globalization of his mission are captured in this structural analysis.

One can stay within the boundaries of passages localized around John 3:16 in order to determine the meaning of "For God so loved the world." But notice that the structural boundaries remain at the categorical level and do not expand to every individual, which is what would be expected had the content of "the world" in John 3:16 been sufficient to fix the reference as every individual. The structure of the text does not itself contain inferences from the variety of ethnicities to individuals as Vines suggests, nor that John 3:16 conveys information along an axis of bigness and badness as when Carson appeals to 1 John 2:2 (which is itself a debatable interpretation). The structure of the text suggests that the content of "the world" in John 3:16 is categorical.

## The Symbols

Identifying global concepts with wide applicability for diverse audiences is not limited to the first four chapters. Thompson's commentary, from which this section draws heavily, indicates the presence of such symbolism throughout the gospel.<sup>37</sup> She writes, "John's basic symbols are universal, fundamental to human life, and part of the landscape of the ancient Mediterranean world: life, water, light, food; vines; sheep; friendship.... For example, some of John's language, such as being 'born again,' is found in Greco-Romans, but not Jewish, literature." (Thompson, 20) This section will identify global allusions and references within the first four chapters.

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<sup>37</sup> Page citations of Thompson in the body of this paper all refer to Thompson (2018).

In the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus preceding John 3:16, Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be “born again” (3:3). When Nicodemus expresses bewilderment at this expression, Jesus clarifies that it is “being born of water and the Spirit” (3:5), which is contrasted with being “born of the flesh” (3:6). Readers of the gospel should not be as puzzled because the author has already informed them of these concepts, as will be explained now.

In the first chapter, the reader is told that the true light - the Word - has come into the world and was rejected by his own, i.e. Israel (1:11). Those who did receive him were given “the right to become children of God,” (1:12) and they “were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1:13). It is not physical birth or descent that qualifies one to be a child of God but rather being begotten by God, which is manifested in belief in the Son. Although the concept of being born again is a Greco-Roman concept, Jewish readers of the first chapter would be familiar with being children of God. Thompson notes:

In several places in the Old Testament, the “children of Israel” are called “the children of God.” [Ex 10:20; Deut. 4:44, 45; 33:1, Judg. 10:8] In Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, Jubilees expresses the hope that when God creates a new Spirit for the Israelites, they will all be called “the children of the living God” (Jub. 1.23-25). In the Psalms of Solomon, the Messiah brings together a holy people who are all “children of God” (*huioi theou*, 17.27). According to John, God has sent his Son, and God will send his Spirit to accomplish this work of creating and calling together the children of God. The children of God are those “begotten of God” (1:13), by the agency of the Spirit (3:3, 5), because they have “believed in his name.” Ultimately it is the death and resurrection of Jesus that will precipitate and enable the ingathering not only of

Jesus' own people, but also of all people, the "children of God who had been scattered" (11:52; cf. 3:15; 10:16; 12:32, 47; see also 7:35). (Thompson, 31)

For this reason, Thompson can plausibly suggest that "John reshapes the identity of the 'children of God,' neither linking that identity to ethnic heritage nor denying it to any on that basis." (Thompson, 32)

This reshaping of the concept of the identity of the children of God is further alluded to in the first chapter. John the Baptist denies that he is the messiah, that he is Elijah, and that he is a prophet (John 1:19-28). Thompson considers this to be important because "the three roles — Messiah, Elijah, prophet — are all 'final' figures expected to lead and teach Israel, and to gather the tribes of Israel together." (Thompson, 45) John the Baptist's baptism with water points to the cleansing work that the Son of God provides. So by the time the reader reaches the statement that Jesus takes away - to remove or purify - the sins of the world in John 1:29, the reader has already been primed for the global significance of Jesus's coming.

The allusion to global significance appears in the calling of the first disciples. Among the first followers are Andrew, Simon Peter, and Philip; all are from Bethsaida. (John 1:44) Based on a description by Josephus, Thompson writes, "this was a Greek-speaking or bilingual area, with a population of both Jew and Gentile. Andrew (Andreas) and Philip (Philippos) are both Greek names, and Simon is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Simeon." (Thompson, 51)

The second chapter is replete with hints that draw the reader's attention to the expansion of the children of God beyond Jewish identity. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus' mother tells him that the hosts have run out of wine (John 2:3). When Jesus responds

“Woman, what does this have to do with me?” the identification of his mother as “woman” creates a type of separation between them. Jesus elsewhere in the fourth gospel tells John the Beloved to care for his mother instead of his brothers (John 19:26). The separation Jesus stresses is replaced by new bonds that extend beyond natural ties.

The miracle of turning water into wine is notable for its connection to other themes with which first century readers of the gospel might have been familiar. The choice to turn water into wine in abundance has significance in both Jewish and non-Jewish settings. From Jewish, the prophetic literature (Amos 9:13-14; Isaiah 25:6-9; Jerermiah 31:10-14). From the non-Jewish pagan world, wine was connected to festivals for Dionysus. Readers familiar with the Dionysian story - and there is no reason to think all readers should have been so familiar - could have understood the wedding narrative as “Jesus’ sign as surpassing the acts of the pagan deities.” (Thompson, 64)

Others are not convinced of this connection. Carson writes, “Older attempts to interpret this sign as a Christianized version of the Dionysus myth ... or of related stories have largely been abandoned in the light of evidence that the alleged parallels are wholly inadequate. Other backgrounds have been proposed, equally interesting and equally unconvincing.”<sup>38</sup> The strength of Carson’s response rests upon the intended use of those parallels. One possibility is that the author was attempting to draw entirely from another myth. But another possibility is that the author was attempting to use myths and events that would inform readers of diverse backgrounds about Jesus’ unique ability to satisfy abundantly (cf. John 4:14). The differences in the stories are tolerable, even

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<sup>38</sup> Carson (1991), 167.

welcomed, provided they could clue diverse readers into the special significance of Jesus by something with which they were familiar. If the gospels were intended to be widely circulated, this explanation of differences would be unsurprising. The differences are important, but so are the parallels.<sup>39</sup>

The second event symbolic of the global character of God's people is Jesus' clearing of the temple. The temple was a symbol of Jewish and national religious identity. But this event occurs in the court of the Gentiles. According to Andreas Köstenberger, the selling of animals in the court was an obstruction to its purpose. He explains:

This was contrary to the vision underlying Solomon's construction of the original temple (cf. 1 Kings 8:41–43). As the prophet Isaiah expresses God's desire, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations," not merely Israel (Isa. 56:7). By selling sacrificial animals and setting up their currency exchange in the court of the gentiles, the outer area of the temple, the merchants in effect torpedoed gentile worship in the only place where it was possible. And that flew in the face of God's, and Jesus's, desire for the temple to become a place of worship, not just for Israel, but for people from all nations.<sup>40</sup>

By the time the second chapter is finished, the reader is well-primed with numerous examples to suggest that Jesus has a salvific role far beyond the boundaries of

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<sup>39</sup> The parallels within the pagan tradition also have their differences. According to Keener, "Although most pagan parallels to miracle worker stories first appear in third-century literature, after accounts of Jesus' miracles had become widely known, the known powers of Dionysus, Asclepius, and others before their apotheosis refutes in advance any possible suggestion that pagans had no pre-Christian stories of healers. Indeed, given the passage of sufficient time, Greek and Roman tradition often transferred miracles from one character to another, and sometimes intensified them." Keener (2003), 254.

<sup>40</sup> Köstenberger (2013), 61-62.



Palestine. It is ironic that Nicodemus, a Jewish leader with a common Greek name, finds it difficult to understand the expression “born again.” The reader, by contrast, is positioned to see what Nicodemus does not.

Consider, next, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. This occurs in the “town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.” The reader is told that “Jacob's well was there” (John 4:5-6). This detail about the well might merely be an interesting fact to transition the narrative to a conversation where Jesus asks the woman for water. But this is unlikely because details about the fact that the well is Jacob’s and the land given to Jacob by Joseph play no explicit role in the story. It is more likely that the author is attempting to draw attention to something that the audience might understand. According to Thompson, “references to Jacob and his well, and to the land he gave to Joseph, remind the reader that this conversation takes place in territory once inhabited by the patriarchs — and that Samaritans and Jews share a common ancestry.” (Thompson, 98)

The conversation becomes more explicit about globalization when it turns to the difficult relation between Jews and Samaritans. When Jesus requests a drink, the woman responds, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” (John 4:9). After Jesus reveals that he knows intimate details about the woman’s life (4:16-18), the woman announces that she believes Jesus to be a prophet (4:19). But due to the strained relationship, she remarks that they are bound to different religious practices: Samaritans worship on the mountain where they are conversing but Jews worship in Jerusalem (4:20). Jesus responds, “You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know,

for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:22-24). Jesus then reveals to her that he is the Christ (4:26). This story fits the continued theme from the first chapter, that Jesus has come to gather a people not built on a foundation of ethnic identity; people of different ethnicities can receive living water from the same spring.

In the context of the debate over how to understand the expression, “For God so loved the world,” the reader must decide whether the author intended to convey something about individuals or categories of people whom God loved enough to send the Son to die. Within the structure of the text outlined in the previous section, it is apparent that the author is taking every effort to expose the flaw in thinking God’s love is restricted to one type of group. The evidence here that the content of “the world” is about categories of people is abductive. That is, the best explanation for the types of data observed in the text surrounding John 3:16 is exactly what one would expect if the author of the fourth gospel intended the *content* of “the world” to be categorical rather than universal with regard to individuals.<sup>41</sup> According to the empathetic model, the evidence for a categorical interpretation of the content appears much stronger than authors who insist the meaning (content or reference) is all individuals.

The next section will add further evidential support in favor of the categorical interpretation by examining linguistic data concerning “the world” against a parallel

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<sup>41</sup> Of course, the *referents* of God’s love are not the categories themselves; Jesus did not die for abstractions.

dispute. As a result, the reader will have independent lines of evidence concerning “the world” in John 3:16 to support the conclusion that the content of “the world” is categorical and not connotative of all individuals.

## The World

In *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel*, Lars Kierspel addresses the question, “Who are ‘the Jews’ in the fourth gospel?”<sup>42</sup> Just as there were different answers to “who is ‘the world’ in John 3:16?” so too there is a plurality of answers here. Some proposed answers have been: the religious authorities; inhabitants of Judea; followers of the Jewish religion, not excluding Gentiles or Samaritans; Jewish Christians; or that it does not refer to an existing group at all but is representative of unbelief. (Kierspel, ch. 1) Kierspel’s work is written against the post-WWII Johannine scholarship concerned about whether the fourth gospel is anti-Semitic. Kierspel argues that “‘the Jews’ are paralleled throughout the Gospel with ‘the world’ which makes humanity in general, including Gentiles, the main antagonist against Jesus and the disciples.” (Kierspel, 12). This section will bring the results of that study to bear on the topic of this paper.

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<sup>42</sup> Kierspel (2006). All references to Kierspel in the body of the paper refer to this work. Kierspel assumes his audience is familiar with Greek, whereas I do not. I thus provide an English equivalent in square brackets. Instances of “[Jews]” or “[the Jews]” typically replaces “Ἰουδαῖος” and “[world]” or “[the world]” replaces “κόσμος”, ignoring matters of declension, quantity, and the presence of a definite article unless relevant.

Kierspel defends the conclusion that “the Jews” are not given a specifically negative connotation by developing two parallels between “the Jews” and “the world.”<sup>43</sup> The first type of parallel is called compositional parallelism. This focuses on the structure of the work as a whole and is compared to the synoptics. Kierspel finds that most uses of “the world” appears in the second half of the fourth gospel; “the Jews” is used 71 times and “the world” is used 78 times. (Kierspel, 77-93) The second parallel is called narratological parallelism. This parallel finds a balance in the expressions used by different speakers; Jesus uses most instances of “the world” and the narrator uses most instances of “the Jews”.<sup>44</sup>

According to Kierspel, this contrast between the Jews and the world is evident in John 3. He writes, “the narrator introduces Nicodemus in 3:1 as the ‘ruler of the Jews’ ... who comes to Jesus to speak to him. Attention to personal pronouns employed reveals that the following dialogue is not only one between two individuals but between two groups of people.” (Kierspel, 96) In John 3:1-12, Jesus switches from using pronouns directed at Nicodemus (3:3, 7a, 11a) to using plural second pronouns (3:11, 12). Kierspel suggests that it should be obvious to the reader that Nicodemus as “ruler of the

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<sup>43</sup> Kierspel (2006), chapter 2 presents evidence that “the Jews” is also used in a positive or neutral sense. That evidence is more crucial for his target than mine and thus I ignore it.

<sup>44</sup> Kierspel (2006), 93, provides the following useful table for an example of narratological parallelism.

	Ἰουδαῖος	κόσμος
Jesus (speech)	4	64
Narrator	59	7
Jews	3	6
Gentiles	5	1
Total	71	78

Jews” and “teacher of Israel” represents a larger group. However the character of the chapter changes in the next part. Kierspel writes:

Verses 13-21 leave the language of personal dialogue between Jewish individuals and groups behind and formulate a creedal summary in which God is the subject, the “only begotten Son” the agent and the world the object of redemptive as well as punitive action ([“world”] in 3:16, 17, 19). Thus, generally speaking, 3:1-21 develops from a personal dialogue between Jesus and a Jewish leader (3:1-8) to a monologue about the Son and the world (3:13-21) with a transitional we-you (pl.)-dialogue in between (3:7-12). The scope widens gradually from individuals to groups to “the world,” a surprising development considering the narrative introduction of the interlocutor (3:1) and the Jewish color of the course up until verse 14. (Kierspel, 96-97)

Interestingly, the switch from singular to plural occurs again in the discussion with the Samaritan woman, ending with the woman saying that Jesus is the savior of the world (4:42). (c.f Kierspel, 97-98) This suggests that the use of “world” in the context of John 3:16 is about groups rather than all individuals or all sinners understood as atomic units that collectively comprise humanity.

The theme that the “world” is the object of God’s love in John 3:16 follows in later chapters as well. In the bread of life discourse, Jesus gives life to the world, which there should be understood as Jews and Gentiles (John 6). In John 12, that the world has gone out after Jesus is followed with a comment about Greeks. Drawing all men to himself is not a statement about every person rather than some persons, but of all types of people (better: in the sense of universality defended here) as opposed to the Jews alone.

This ends the presentation of data from the context close to John 3:16 to support that the content of “the world” is universal with respect to categories rather than sinful individuals beyond the elect. The next sections summarize the argument and concludes.

## The Content of the World

The data presented thus far has been focused upon ethnic or nationalistic categories, which is not surprising because those identities played a significant role in first century minds. But those are not the only categories of note close to John 3. Besides the contrast between Jew and Gentile, there is also the contrast between Nicodemus (John 3), a respected religious leader who misses the significance of Jesus’ teaching, and the Samaritan woman who announces that Jesus is the savior of the world (John 4). Furthermore, the theme beginning in the Prologue is that Jesus is uniquely positioned to stand in a category all of his own to act as the savior for others. As a result, it is better to think of God’s love for the world not only as his love in merely the international aspect, but rather as a pithy way of saying that the extent of God’s salvific love is not limited by the categories in which humans place social significance. The extent of God’s salvific love is determined by the one who is not of the world; it is not determined or restricted by any of the categories within world itself although humans are prone to thinking it is.

The argument in favor of this view has been that when one considers the evidence that would best support an interpretation of authorial intent, that is, when one identifies evidence that increases empathetic understanding, the evidence is entirely on the side of treating the content of “the world” as universal with respect to categories.

The evidence considered in this paper includes the audience, the structure of the text, the symbols the author chose close to the passage, and the linguistic data that generally applies throughout the gospel but especially in John 3. There is no need to appeal to verses that appear much later in the fourth gospel, or in other texts, to fix a meaning to “the world”. In fact, doing so risks distorting the content of the expression.

One of the benefits of the anti-tribal characterization is that it can captures the evangelistic spirit behind the appeal to John 3:16. There are infinite ways to conceptually carve up humanity such that one group could - incorrectly - be thought to be outside the possibility of God’s redemptive love.<sup>45</sup> The potential limit of human antipathy toward one another is boundless. It can be aimed at people of a different races, sexes, ages, denominations, economic classes, political identities, positions of power or subjugation, and more. According to the anti-tribal characterization, John 3:16 challenges our resentment toward different groups and allows us to see members of those groups as possible objects of God’s love without having to imagine them as shedding those identities, although their significance as it pertains to being an object God’s love is removed. For that reason, the evangelical message in John 3:16 is universally applicable in endless circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

Someone might object that if God’s salvific love for the world were to mean that God’s salvific love is not restricted by categories, then God’s salvific love would not be restricted to the elect. But of course, so the argument goes, this would be a a self-

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<sup>45</sup> The categories need not be carved at nature’s joints. As Bob Wiley from *What About Bob?* distinguished, “There are two types of people in this world: those who like Neil Diamond and those who don’t.”

<sup>46</sup> This conclusion is compatible with the possibility of identities that should be shed.

defeating position for anyone who thinks the love of God in John 3:16 is restricted to the elect. There are two responses to this.

The first response is that the concept of the elect is not a concept that can be ostensibly applied by itself; rather, its application depends entirely on the application of other concepts. One cannot empirically check whether another is elect or not in the same way one can check whether an apple is red. Someone can only infer that someone is elect if one also believes that someone is a Christian; being a Christian is something that can be more or less empirically checked given its association to a vague range of beliefs and practices. It is not an accident that we do not in the first instance identify others as elect and then as Christians. This does not imply that the concept of election is useless, but only to point out that there is a reason why that concept would not be relevant to mode of presentation in John 3:16 as it pertains to God's love for the world. The concept of election is not pragmatically significant for the meaning of "the world" whereas the concepts that form the basis of social division are.

Second, consider what John Owen writes on "the world":

...we understand "the world" to refer to the elect of God only, *not considered as it is used in this place as such*, but under the notion of what serves to further exalt God's love towards them, which is the end intended here. And this notion is that they are poor, miserable, lost creatures in the world, of the world, scattered abroad in all places of the world, not tied just to Jews or Greeks, but dispersed in every nation, kindred, and language under heaven.<sup>47</sup>

The italicized remark can appear as a throwaway comment, but Owen is distinguishing between the content of "the world" and its reference (note this is centuries before

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<sup>47</sup> Owen (1647), Book IV., Chapter II.



Frege). Owen is right to make this distinction because substituting “the elect” for “the world” distorts the expression’s intension.

Recall that the audience of the fourth gospel is a diverse group of people. If “the world” were to convey “the elect” qua its content, readers may have been less sure of the Son’s significance for them. As the first response notes, they cannot in the first instance identify themselves as the elect. Second, Robert Dabney argues that were the content to be “the elect”, then “we reach the absurdity, that some of the elect may not believe, and perish.”<sup>48</sup> But if the content of “the world” is universal with regard to categories without itself denoting any particular referents, no such absurdity follows. Instead, the meaning would be that anyone of any nation, kindred, or language who does not believe perishes. Third, Carson is right that there are moral connotations to “the world” in the Johannine literature. The concept of “the elect” does not have the moral overtones that “the world” does. Rather, it conveys being chosen although of course it is true they were chosen to have eternal life. One could not substitute “the elect” for “the world” without obscuring the message of John 3:16. So there are independent reasons to exclude “the elect” from being one of the relevant categories intended by the content of the expression, even if the elect are the referents of God’s salvific love.

## Conclusion

Although “for God so loved the world” is frequently cited in the debate over the extent of the atonement, the emphasis upon “the world” to settle the dispute is

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<sup>48</sup> Dabney (1985), 525. Dabney says “mean” (i.e. meaning) as opposed to content. He is not clear which sort of meaning is in view.

misguided. The content of “the world” in John 3:16 supports a repudiation of tribalism rather than an affirmation of God’s love for a select few or for every person.

\* Thanks to Dan Anderson, Scott Christensen, Michael Preciado, Blake Reap, and Daniel Speak for feedback, and especially to Guillaume Bignon with whom I spent much time thinking and writing on John 3:16.

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