FOR GOD SO... WHAT?

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John 3:16 is well known and is a perfect summary of the gospel message. Or is it?
Category: Observations

I have to admit that I am more than a little allergic to attempts to summarise the Christian message in one or two short sentences or soundbites, even when they come from the Bible. Perhaps the most common "summary" of the gospel comes from Jesus discussion with Nicodemus in John 3.

> *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.*

To Christians who have some background in the Bible story, this appears to be a clear and concise statement of what Christianity is all about. However, to people who don't share that knowledge, it may be more than a little confusing. Let me work through the passage raising a few issues that might occur to people from different backgrounds as they read this passage.

- **For God: which god?** *What is this* god like*? The rest of the verse doesn't really help much in explaining this.*
- **so loved the world...** *What do you mean loved the world? Is that like a sex thing? Or is this god co-dependant? He can't cope on his own and, like Freddy Mercury, he needs somebody to love?*
- **he gave his one and only Son...**Â *Hang about, what is God doing having a son? Doesn't that mean that he had to sleep with someone? I thought Christians didn't do that sort of thing? Anyway, if god is so great, how come he only has one son? Real men have lots of sons, it's a sign of power. This god can't be much cop.*
- **that whoever believes in him**... *What exactly does believe in mean? And who is it that we are supposed to believe in, god or his son?*
- **shall not perish but have eternal life.**Â *I'm sorry, but who wants to live forever? What's the point of that? Buddhists and Hindus have it right, they want to escape the wheel of suffering, rather than keeping on going pointlessly. This whole thing of sitting on clouds playing the harp forever really doesn't attract me.*
- *Anyway, this comes from the Bible, why should I believe what an old book says?*

OK, running all of these objections together like this is a bit of overkill. However, these are all real and I've come across all of them in one context or another. More than that, I hope they make my point that John 3:16 is not an altogether clear presentation of the gospel if people don't have the background to understand it.

The thing is, John 3:16 doesn't really exist on its own. It occurs in John's Gospel in the context of Jesus' response to a question from Nicodemus. In context, it's not 100% clear who even said the words; was it Jesus or are they an editorial comment by John?

So what background information do you need to understand the verse?

Well, you need to know something about who God is and his character. If he loved the world so much, why did he have to give his Son?

We need to know something about the Son and his relationship to God. A full-blooded understanding of the Trinity probably isn't essential, but you need some sort of background.

The "giving" of the Son only makes sense if you fill out the details of his crucifixion and resurrection and these, in turn, need to be understood in the light of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Again, a detailed understanding of Exodus and Leviticus probably isn't needed, but the idea of sacrifice is so foreign in the UK today, that you can't assume that people will understand it.

The promise of eternal life needs to be understood in its Biblical context. The idea of life that just goes on forever without stopping isn't particularly attractive and people need to understand that the gospel offers more than this.

In former generations, when people were more biblically literate than they are today, it might have made sense to quote John 3:16 in isolation, you can't make that assumption these days. I'll just close with a few thoughts?

- As Christians, we quickly grow to take a huge amount of background understanding of our faith for granted. We don't realise that others don't share these assumptions, but we need to learn to spell them out.
- This means understanding where people are coming from. If you are not listening to people and to our culture, you will find it hard to explain your faith to people.
- God can and does bring people to himself very quickly, but in our society, it is normal to expect conversion to be a slow process.
- We need to learn to tell the Bible story as a whole. Jesus' life, death and resurrection mark the climax a narrative that stretches from creation to eternity and those key events only make sense as a part of that big story.
- You should feel free to ignore any of these points as appropriate, but know why you are doing so.

Yes, I know that I've blogged on this theme before, but after 13 years of regular blogging, it's getting hard to find new stuff!