

GETTING THE GOSPEL IN FOCUS

A Paper
Presented to



Grace Research Room

by
Jonathan Perreault
November, 2024

Getting the Gospel in Focus

If you read the articles on one Free Grace organization's website, you might come away thinking that the Apostle John went around just quoting John 3:16 to everyone. But we know that would not be accurate when reading *the whole counsel of God's Word*. What do I mean? Well, in 1 Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul clearly tells us the gospel he preached (see vv. 3-4, or more specifically vv. 3-5), and what's more, Paul says in verse 11 that this same gospel message was preached by all the apostles! Paul tells the Corinthians, "This is what we preach and this is what you believed." Paul is saying, this message that I just delivered to you in great detail (1 Cor 15:3-5), namely "the gospel," this is what we preach! Paul doesn't tell them John 3:16, is my point. I don't want to take anything away from John 3:16, and I'm not saying we shouldn't use it. Indeed, we most definitely should use John 3:16, but use it *within the framework of the gospel*.

First within the framework of its immediate context (John chapter 3), then within the framework of the Gospel of John, and then within the framework of the whole counsel of God's Word. I'm making the point that we shouldn't focus on Bible verses out of context; we shouldn't build an entire doctrine of salvation on one or two Bible verses ripped out of context. And why not? Because first of all, Jesus preached *more than* John 3:16 to Nicodemus. Read John chapter 3. Among other things, Jesus told Nicodemus about the new birth. Jesus said, "You must be born again." How is a person born again? What does the New Testament say about it? How are we born again? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:15 that we are born again "through the gospel"! So there again it goes back to the gospel that Paul has delivered to us in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. So we need to take into consideration the whole counsel of God's Word, not just proof-text Bible verses out of context.

Don't misunderstand, John 3:16 is very important to use! But to isolate it apart from the whole counsel of God's Word is not only poor Bible interpretation, it is mishandling the Scriptures. A group of Free Grace adherents claim to be especially "focused"; that's the mantra they use now. They've labeled themselves "Focused Free Grace". Well, that's sort of what they're doing actually, because they've focused in so closely on their favorite proof-texts (taken out of context) that they're "missing the forest for the trees"! John 3:16 was not the only thing Jesus shared with Nicodemus. By focusing in so closely on one particular Bible verse to the exclusion of others, they miss the surrounding context and the big picture: which is John chapter 3 (not just John 3:16). I describe this as "missing the forest for the trees."

This is a big problem and a prime example of what NOT to do, but sadly that's exactly what this particular group *is* doing in terms of their presentation of (or at least their definition of) what they call "the saving message". Their "saving message" is a text without a context. And as someone has famously said, "A text without a context is a pretext for error." So let that be a word of warning about "Focused Free Grace," that it's not focused! Or if it is, it's not properly focused; it's misfocused. It's "missing the forest for the trees." To say it positively: we need to share the gospel *clearly and completely*.

Something else to notice in regards to their "saving message" that's a warning sign, is that they're not even consistent according to their own beliefs. They say, "The Gospel of John," "The Gospel of John". Okay, let's look at the Gospel of John! In the Gospel of John we find much more than John 3:16; an entire chapter 3, right? And then expanding still farther to the Gospel of John in its entirety (not just one verse but the entire Gospel of John), we see something else very interesting, that Paul's gospel is clearly set forth in John's Gospel: Christ's *death, burial, resurrection*, and *manifestation* after his resurrection (see John chapters 20-21, cf. Acts 13:28-32;

1 Cor 15:3-5). The appearances of Jesus after His resurrection are actually highlighted by the Apostle John three times and form the climax of his book! (See John 20:19-21:14). The purpose statement of John's Gospel (John 20:30-31) is set in this context. In other words, John's Gospel is written from a resurrection perspective and with the end in view. This is completely consistent with the Apostle Paul's declaration of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 and consistent with what the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:11, that all the apostles preached the same gospel message: *"that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve"* (1 Cor. 15:3-5). Are you preaching this Good News? (Notice I said "Good News". It's not just good theology, it's Good News!) Are you preaching the *Good News* that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised, and was seen? The apostles preached it. In fact, according to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:11, all the apostles preached it! So if you're not preaching it then you're not preaching the apostolic gospel.

The "Focused Free Grace" crowd wants to focus exclusively on the Gospel of John (actually only on their favorite proof-texts in the Gospel of John). But what *gospel* did the apostle John preach? This is where it is very important to take into consideration what we know (or should know) from other passages in the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:11), because what we find is that the Apostle John didn't just preach John 3:16, as important as it is. He preached the gospel recorded in 1 Corinthians 15. And that is *the same gospel* that is narrated in the Gospel of John! Are you preaching it? If not, you can start today. *"Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, today is the day of salvation"* (2 Cor 6:2b). D. L. Moody wisely said, "The closer we stay to the apostles' way of presenting the gospel, the more success we will have."