

In a Nutshell

John 3:1-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

John 3:16 was the first Bible verse I memorized as a child. In Sunday School, I learned that it's a simple formula for faith, a handy evangelism tool, and a perfect summary of the good news. Over the years, I've seen the verse displayed on billboards, T-shirts, coffee mugs, and cross-stitch samplers. I've heard it described as Christianity 101.

And so it is. When we read about Jesus's nighttime encounter with Nicodemus, John 3:16 jumps out of the long dialogue for its efficiency and pithiness. In just twenty-seven words, the verse describes a loving God, a cherished world, a self-giving Son, a universal invitation, a deliverance from death, and a promise of eternal life. Christianity in a nutshell, right?

Maybe not. The problem is not the verse itself, but what the church so often does with it. In our well-intentioned efforts to make the gospel message accessible, we reduce salvation to a soundbite, forgetting that when Jesus originally speaks these words to Nicodemus—a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, one of the more erudite men of his day—his listener finds Jesus's words incomprehensible.

"How can these things be?" Nicodemus asks in astonishment when Jesus speaks to him in the obscure and metaphorical language of birth, flesh, water, and spirit. Jesus, unfazed by the Pharisee's confusion, refuses to simplify his explanation. If he intends to "save" Nicodemus quickly and easily that night, he fails. What the seeker experiences is not salvation; it's bewilderment.

If Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus is representative of God's preferred "evangelism style," then I have to wonder: What does my more formulaic approach to Christianity leave out? Am I so invested in keeping

faith efficient and palatable that I minimize its weirdness? Its otherness? Its offensiveness?

Jesus has no problem leaving Nicodemus confused and muddled. He's in no hurry to get the Pharisee to sign on a dotted line. The Spirit "blows where it chooses," Jesus says (John 3:8). The Spirit cannot be caged or contained. Which means the journey of faith and the workings of salvation can't be caged or contained, either. When we speak of God's kingdom, we are in a realm of mystery. It's okay to be surprised. It's okay to be stricken.

What Jesus offers Nicodemus is not a tune-up; it's a *brand new life*. A down to the foundations beginning. What newborn enters the world without birth pangs, shock, disorientation, or pain? Downright bewilderment isn't the exception in a birth story; it's the rule. If we don't find Christianity at least a little bit confusing, then perhaps it's not Christianity we're practicing.

As I sit with Nicodemus's baffled reaction to Jesus, I wonder what my glib reading of John 3:16 prevents me from seeing about God, Christ, faith, sin, and salvation. Do I lean too hard on the importance of individual belief and forget the stunning truth that God loves and longs for all of creation to experience new life? Do I treat Jesus's words as a litmus test, using it not to communicate God's all-encompassing compassion and mercy, but to threaten unbelievers with God's judgment? Do I allow my interpretation to flatten and distort the meaning of "belief," reducing its nuance and complexity to mere intellectual assent? What does it mean, after all, to say, "I believe in Jesus?" Why is "belief," of all things, so important to God?

Growing up, I was taught that being a Christian means affirming the right truths. To accept Jesus into my heart, to be "born again," was to agree to a set of doctrines about who Jesus is and what he accomplished through his death and resurrection. To enter into orthodox faith was to believe that certain theological statements about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the human condition, the Bible, and the church, were true. When we spoke of "growing in the faith," what we meant was that we were honing our doctrinal commitments. To be a mature Christian was to have one's theological ducks in a row.

This honing, moreover, was a serious business. As a teenager, I watched congregations split up over the legitimacy of infant baptism over "believer's" baptism. I knew Christians who considered speaking in tongues a firewall for authentic faith. I heard pastors fight over whether the communion table should be open to all or restricted to baptized members only.

For the earnest people involved, these questions were neither silly nor peripheral; they cut to the heart of what it means to be Christian. Getting the theological particulars right was paramount. After all, what else could faith entail?

I fear that I fall into the same trap when I speak glibly of John 3:16 as “Christianity in a nutshell.” The verse sounds so gorgeously precise, so deceptively simple. But does all of Christianity really come down to my accepting certain propositions about Jesus as factual?

For me, this way of believing, this way of defining faith as an intellectual assent to precisely codified doctrines, has fallen apart. Not because I can’t assent, but because my assenting, in and of itself, hasn’t fostered the relationship I desire to have with God. If anything, my intellectual assent has functioned as a smokescreen. A distraction. A substitute.

In her 2013 book, *Christianity after Religion*, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word “believe” comes from *belieben*, the German word for love.¹ To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To deem something precious and invaluable. To give my heart over to it without reservation.

This is true in the ancient languages of the Bible, as well. When the writers of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament wrote of faithfulness, they were not advocating intellectual assent. They were making a case for trust, fidelity, dependence, and love. To believe in God was to place their *loving confidence* in God. To entrust their hearts, minds, and bodies into God’s hands.

I can’t think of any significant human relationship in which doctrine matters more than love. Why should my relationship with God be any different?

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? To hold onto him? To trust him with my life? For Nicodemus, it means starting anew, letting go of all he thinks he understands about the life of faith. It means becoming a newborn: vulnerable, hungry, and ready to receive reality in a fresh way. It means coming out of the shadows and risking the light. None of this can be reduced to an altar call or a litmus test.

In other words, the work of trusting Jesus is mind-bending, soul-altering work. It is hard, it takes time, and it involves setbacks, fears, and disappointments. No wonder Nicodemus walks away baffled that night. Jesus is calling him to so much more than a rote recitation of the sinner’s prayer; he is calling him to fall in love and stay in love. Why is belief important to God? Because *love* is important to God. To believe is to be-love.

“Christianity in a nutshell” sounds catchy, but in the end, I don’t think it exists. Yes, John 3:16 is a beautiful passage of Scripture, and we are right to recite it, memorize it, and cherish it. But the way of faith it points to is as vast and mysterious as all the workings of a human heart reaching

1. Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 116.

out for God's. That's why we can trust it; its challenge corresponds to reality. No love as rich, demanding, costly, and free as God's love for us can ever be reduced to a formula.

s
3:16
e, so
y ac-
intel-
cause
d the
ssent
Butler
the
ve is
heart
n the
ness,
e for
their
into
trine
any
trust
to of
ng a
y. It
n be
ter-
ap-
s is
r; he
od?
don't
are
nts
ing