

Good news that doesn't fit on a sign (John 3:14-21)

What has always interested me about the John 3:16 signs is the singular focus.

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At just about every major sports game, someone will be holding a John 3:16 sign. The verse reads. There's a whole backstory about why this particular Bible verse has become so popular at sporting events that's worth looking into if you are interested.

What has always interested me about these signs is the singular focus. The camera always seems to pan to one of the signs at least once during a big game. Probably no other Bible verse has had as much air time on television as this one verse from John. Frankly, if I had to choose a Bible verse to send out on the airwaves every single game for decades, this wouldn't be the one.

A few years ago billboards went up quoting another Bible verse, one that most of us like to pretend isn't in the Bible. It said: "Slaves be obedient to your masters" (Eph. 6:5).

The Bible does say that. A letter written by Paul to another culture at another time has that line, and I wish it didn't. And a few years ago an American atheist group put that verse up on billboards so that people would read it and understand why, in their eyes, religion and belief in God are wrong. And honestly, that's pretty compelling, if that's all you know about the Bible.

I believe people are free to believe as they want, and I'm not preaching against atheists here, because honestly some of the most moral people I know are atheists. What I am preaching against is taking one verse, pulling it out of context, slapping it on a billboard, and saying it speaks for all of Christianity. Because it clearly doesn't. It's lazy reasoning that wouldn't pass muster in a first-year logic paper.

But we can't condemn it too harshly. Because we Christians sometimes do the same thing. We find a few verses that support whatever it is we support, or condemn whatever it is we condemn, and we latch onto them. We live in the black or white instead of living in the nuances.

We've created a culture in which people believe that you can either accept every verse of the Bible on its own and without debate or you have to throw the whole thing out. There used to be this bumper sticker: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." And it used to make my blood pressure rise every time I'd see it. Because the Bible says a lot of things, some of them contradictory, and we have to wrestle with that.

The good news is that there's a lot of room in the valley between "God so loved the world" and "slaves be obedient to your masters." But it takes a lot of work to live there. It's not easy. It's nuanced. It's sometimes uncertain and tenuous.

We live in a soundbite culture. The message has to fit the billboard, or the T-shirt, or the five-second preview of the news. But the thing about slogans and soundbites is we grow weary of them. We don't believe them for very long, especially if they don't generate real action. And the people who hear them finally grow disillusioned and move on to something else.

It's the same with faith. I find it interesting that we are getting more and more evidence that the largest group of new nonbelievers are former Christian fundamentalists. People who once lived in a world that couldn't tolerate nuance when it came to faith are now leaving that world and going to one that cannot tolerate nuance when it comes to doubt.

That makes some sense, because fundamentalism is fundamentalism, regardless of what you believe in. And if all you've ever learned is that the only way to have faith is to believe a list of things without question, then when you leave of course you think there is no place for you other than in a culture of disbelief.

And so, live the chapter, not just the verse. And live the book, not just the chapter. And live beyond the book, and for a God who so loved the world that God wants us to love back with our heart, and soul, and mind. I'm not sure how you squeeze that all onto a sign at a football game; it probably wouldn't fit.