

Where do you start with this passage from the Gospel of John. It is one of the most oft quoted biblical passages. The two phrases we hear most frequently are “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” and “those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” It is with good reason that they are often quoted, I think the passage as a whole is most helpful as we continue grapple with what it means to be a Christian. However, before we look at what some of the key words or signifiers are, let me talk about what a signifier might be.

Who knows what signifiers are – that is right they are like signs that point to something, words, phrases even images are like signs that point to something, like a road sign. A road sign does not describe your destination, it just points you in the right direction. So words or phrases, even images are like signs that point to something. They never can fully describe that something, they can never capture the full meaning or give us a complete understanding of the object or concept to which they are pointing. Let me give you an example. If I verbalise a signifier, such as “chair”, the word “chair”. Now when I said “chair” did you bring the image of a chair to mind? Do you all have a picture of a chair in your mind? If I was to ask you to describe that image, I am sure each of you will describe something different. So in a way each of you has a different understanding of what a chair might be. Now let us take that a little further. If I wanted to convey to you every detail, if I wanted to describe everything there is to know, about the chair I have in mind, so that your knowledge about the chair is complete, do you think I could do that? Let’s try that. Better still, imagine if I went to the outer reaches of the universe and met an alien, how would I describe this chair. (Select a chair to describe). So you see it is impossible to communicate everything there is to know about this chair. It is impossible to convey the full meaning of the word or signifier “chair”.

The biblical writers had the same problem. How to communicate or describe everything there is to know about God, about love, about life. Of course God, love and life are all signifiers, which we try to pack with meaning. The biblical writers did their best the pack meaning into God. Love and life by using other signifiers or words that were familiar to and had meaning for their audience. They used, words, phrases or images, which in a way, pointed to concepts such as God, love and life and, which, allowed their audiences to grasp something of the meaning the writers were trying to convey. Let us now pull some of the key signifiers out of today’s passage. Let’s look briefly at God, love, the world and eternal life. Of course God is one of those signifiers like chair, when I mention the signifier God I am sure each of us brings a different image to mind. So in order to help us understand something of God the word love is used. In order to help us understand something of what love is the bible contains many signifiers which help give some meaning to the word. During All Age Time We heard a number of phrases which point to the God of love; “my cup overflows with God’s love” (Psalm 23:5), “God’s love is higher” (Psalm 108:4), “the steadfast love of God is from everlasting to everlasting.” Then, of course there is the Gift of Love chapter in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. The writer of the epistle to the Ephesians prays “that you may have the power to comprehend, what is the breadth and length and

height and depth, and to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. The letter writer admits we can know something of the love of God, but we will never fully understand. However the bible does pack some meaning into the signifier love which in turn adds to our understanding of God. Another word that we pack with meaning, and helps us in our understanding of God, is “world”, or “cosmos” as it appears in the Greek. For the audience at the time the signifier cosmos pointed to the created order, the earth, the universe, the inhabitants of the earth and humanity. Therefore indicating that God pervades everything, God is in us and around us. So meaning we pack into the signifier cosmos also points to God and adds to our understanding our understanding of God. Just as an aside, whenever we read God does something, an imperative is issued to us to go and do likewise. If God so loved the cosmos, then we too are to love the cosmos.

Finally lets us look at the phrase eternal life. We need to unpack the meaning that has been given to this signifier. The Greek word for eternal is used to translate the Hebrew *olam*. The Hebrew concept is not a question of an eternity conceived of abstract and infinite terms, but in terms of one’s life and praise in relation to God. For the Hebrews, the content of God’s eternal promises is never an abstract unchangeability, but a mutual relationship with human beings. A dynamic relationship. Therefore the meaning implied by English words eternal or everlasting needs to be unpacked and repacked. According to Psalm 21: 4,6 God grants the king length of days for ever and ever and bestows on him blessings for ever. Nehemiah in consoling his king said, “May the king live for ever!” In each case the blessing is not eternal life, but a long and full life. The Hebrew *olam* is, not only, used to help describe God’s promises, but also God: God is an eternal light, God’s word is eternal, God’s faithfulness and loving kindness are everlasting. However, as noted above, the English words eternal and everlasting have been somewhat misleading, in other words they have pointed us in the wrong direction. In the Hebrew mind, *olam* indicates things will last for an unspecified length of time, the word is often used for the distant past or the distant future as a time that is difficult to know or perceive. In other words *olam* points to what is at or beyond the horizon, a very distant time. So if we repack the signifier eternal, it is indicative of a life that is lived in a loving relationship with the cosmos and the God of that cosmos for an unspecified length of time –an abundant life lived in the light of God.

“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” and “those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” So eternal life describes a condition in which we live. We live in a relationship with God, embraced by and filled with God’s love, we will never fully understand what that means, and our relationship with God will change and evolve over time. But we as we walk in the way of Jesus we will continue to discover what eternal or abundant life, a life lived in the light of God means. We God becomes more and more real and present to us, this will continue for an unspecified time somewhere beyond the horizon. I believe we can rest assured that God is with us. It is impossible to pack the signifier or word chair with full meaning, but the chair is here, it is real. It is impossible to pack the signifier or word God with full meaning, but God is here, God is real. Just as the chair is here, so too is God.