

The keen eye of Capt. Peter "Highrolls" Osterhus, USAF Fighter Pilot, strikes the theological bull's eye. *He locates a target in his sights ... and seeing no danger ... he takes the shot!* Here are some direct hits - observations & insights from 30,000 feet.

Eternity, Peter Osterhus, 2003

This essay is intended to prove that the eternal destination of every person on this earth was already known by God from all eternity, due to His eternal nature and omniscience. By eternal destiny I mean whether or not all persons, past present and future, are to ultimately spend eternity with God. Secondly, no person's final destination, relative to God's eternal omniscience, can be changed by us or any other person. What God already knows to be true, from His ability to see all of time at once (eternal omniscience), no one can change. We are used by God to help bring about the personal salvation of individuals, which is obviously a very real change, but it is a change God has known about from before the foundation of the world. So while for the individual in time it is a magnificent transformation from death to life, it is not a change or deviation from the path God has foreknown. Our inability to fully understand this bit of reality does not negate it. My hope is through a study of the scriptures we can understand these truths more clearly and thereby bring about some (very real) changes in our thinking relative to our personal growth, evangelizing, and finally, the atonement of Christ.

As Christians we are members of the Royal Priesthood and ambassadors of God with a clear mission to grow in Christ and proclaim the simple yet powerful Gospel to all. Yet our obedient presentation of the Gospel, and God's gracious and miraculous saving of each person in time, does not change what God already knew to be true from before the foundation of the world. I do not suggest any person knows the ultimate fate of other individuals; the knowledge of who and why is known only to God Himself. We are not commanded to know, pick or choose, but to love all and proclaim the Good News to all. Using scripture, logic and reason, I will support my supposition and the resultant need for a change in the way we think on these matters.

The irony of my saying nothing can change what God has already seen in time, and my desire to see Christians change their minds on this topic, is not lost on me! However, these two truths are not mutually exclusive as many would have us believe, resulting in either a fatalistic attitude on the one hand, or a constant uncertainty and wringing of the hands on the other. God speaks to us very plainly about both topics; we must renew, or change our minds (Rom. 12:2) and thereby our actions via the Word of God, and we must also understand and believe God is Eternal, Sovereign (Psalm 24:1, Eph. 1:11b, Job 42:2), and Omniscient (Matt. 10:30). Both are true my friend!

This may be the first step in someone's understanding that the world is not governed by chance, human beings, or even Satan, (notwithstanding his temporary status as prince of this world) but that all things in this world, including salvation, are under God's control, through either His permissive will (Job 1:12, Matt. 10:29) or His sovereign will (Pvb 16:33, 21:1). God is not surprised, does not play catch up, or spend time putting out fires created by Satan and sinful humanity. He knew all things from before the foundation of the world, before time began, from beginning to end. We can arrive at this conclusion easily from our knowledge of God as an Eternal being, one who existed before time, and of course created time itself, along with the entire universe and its contents. I am assuming the reader believes in God as the

creator of all things (John 1:3, Eph 3:9b Col 1:16, 17). This idea or knowledge of eternity and God's relationship to it will be the first area of discussion, and then the logical steps or conclusions we can make from that knowledge.

How can we know about eternity if it is God's pervue and not our own (indeed He not only exists in eternity, He is eternal in nature)?

The scriptures say God is eternal.

In Genesis 21:33 Abraham calls upon the eternal God; "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God."

In Deut. 33:27 we see "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

In other verses:

Psalm 93:2. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.

Jeremiah 10:10. But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.

Rom 16:26. But now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him.

1 Tim 1:17. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

The scriptures also say God put the desire for eternity in our hearts.

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Eccl 3:11. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

God has said we can have eternal life here on the earth, if we trust in Christ. This is more a statement of the change in the quality of life, however, and the reality of being indwelled by Christ who is eternal life.

John 17:3. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

John 6:40. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 17:2. For you granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those you have given Him.

John 10:28. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand.

We also look forward to eternity after our body has been renewed; a "future" time and place.
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2 Cor 5:1. Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

John 14:2-4 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going."

Romans 8:30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (This is our state in heaven, with a new body and no sin)

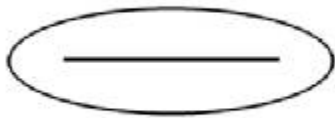
Revelation 21:1-3 *The New Jerusalem*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

Even though we can't exactly put our finger on it, we know a little about eternity from these scriptures and others. God has chosen to tell us He is eternal, has put a desire for eternity in our hearts, has given us eternal life here and now and promised the consummation of eternal life with Him in heaven. Therefore it is not presumptuous of us, I don't believe, to use this knowledge in our quest for understanding of other biblical topics! Not knowing or being able to presently experience the reality of eternity as God does should not keep us from using the knowledge of eternity we have from scripture as a factor in our discussions.

God is eternal; he sees things from eternity, from an eternal perspective, correct? He sees all of time from the beginning to the end, from before the foundation of the world to the end and beyond into the "future" of eternity. Here is an important point: just because we don't understand how He does this, doesn't negate that He does in fact do it. Our incomplete understanding does not diminish the truth of God's eternal omniscience. How else would prophecy be possible? Stop and think about this for a moment, because the difference between God's viewpoint and ours is an eternal difference! We know eternity exists, that He lives in it, and that we will eventually be in eternity when we get to heaven. However, we don't have the physical, mental or spiritual ability at this time to see things like time from His eternal perspective. However, the more we grow in Christ, the more "eternal insights" we will comprehend from His Word. At this point some will say it is a mystery for the most part and should be left alone (Eccl. 3:11b). While we will never fully understand as God does, I say let's use what knowledge we have, what God has given us, to help us understand Him better. I will not make up doctrines or pretend to know things which are clearly a mystery, but I must recognize and use even those doctrines in the Word which may be more difficult to understand if we are to know God more fully.

That being said, let me show you how I envision this ability of God's to see all of time at once. This is just a simple picture which incompletely portrays a biblical truth. The line represents time, beginning to end, and the space around it, within the circle, God's vantage point from eternity.



It is not a perfect representation by any means, but a useful tool to help understand God's awesome ability to see all things in time from start to finish. As we look at the diagram we can see that God has a full view of every moment of time, every second of every day from before the dawn of creation past the end of the world. Notice also that it can't get away from Him or ahead of Him or out of His reach; He encompasses it totally.

This is a good "time" to remember that God created time, He didn't stumble upon it. He knows how time works, how fast it goes, how slow, whether it really can bend or be changed by space travel or black holes or superman flying around the world backwards at the speed of light! Just the fact that He can see it all means He knows if we will ever discover any of those things. TIME DOESN'T CHANGE FOR GOD, BECAUSE IN ETERNITY THERE IS NO PAST OR FUTURE; THAT IS A CONCEPT BORN IN TIME! OUCH! How incredible it is that God is in eternity just looking down at the whole of time, seeing the past, present and future as now!

Our future, or the end of time as God sees it, is not constantly in flux due to changes, events, or possibilities in the past made by men. That is using our perspective and applying it to God! By definition, being in eternity means the terms and restrictions of time do not apply to God. God is at this moment seeing the end of time, and it is not continuously being revised before His eyes as billions of decisions are being made and world events unfold prior to the end relative to us. God has seen the end of His creation which is time, and has in fact decreed what that end should be! How else could God prophesy and be correct 100% of the time? We cannot change what God has already seen to be true. We must, however, change our understanding of God and allow Him to be who He is, and do what He does.

God does not have future and past, He has NOW. That is one reason He calls Himself the great "I AM." John 8:58 is the perfect example of people not understanding that God lives both inside and outside of time. The apostles are saying Jesus is not yet fifty, so how could He possibly have seen Abraham?? Jesus doesn't just say He was around during Abraham's lifetime, which would be amazing enough. He uses two tenses in one sentence, confuses the grammar and makes an unheard of claim: "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." He not only makes the claim of Deity here, but to reside outside the constraints of time. He was around back then, He is here speaking to them now, and He was around before Abraham, and all the while He looks at it as present tense! All of past and future time is present tense to God: He is the great, "I AM"!

How do we look at time? To us the future is a range of possibilities most of which we cannot control. We can determine to live our lives for Christ, but we don't really know how successful we will be, or how long we will live to accomplish His works. This is not wrong or bad; it is just the way God made us, and He deals with us in full knowledge of our limitations in time. God created time and He created us to be perfectly suited for life within time, but He also put a spark of desire for eternity within us and has fed that desire with the riches of His Word.

How does all this relate to salvation? The key is God being able to see all of time at once, so all of our hopes, dreams, maybes, and possibilities are all set in stone for God. That doesn't mean for a moment we should give them up; God created hope in things not yet seen, and says it is an admirable and wonderful virtue! (1 Cor. 13: 12, Rom. 8: 23b-25) But isn't it amazing that He sees my hope of tomorrow right NOW, along with every other day of mine. God sees the future of every individual from His eternally omniscient perspective as right NOW, and therefore, the eternal destination of every individual is already known to God, and events "in time" cannot cause a deviation from the known path and end of any individual.

Events in time can only be exactly as God has already seen them; any change we attempt is only what He has already seen anyway. It can be a maddening thing to us because of our

inability to understand eternity! The obvious course of action therefore, is to dwell on the comforts afforded by this knowledge, rather than the truly unanswerable questions. If we use what doctrines of eternity God has given us, and avoid endless speculations about matters we are not privy to (nor suited for), we will grow in Christ and be more stable in our walk with Him. We should trust that God has seen the future, has sanctioned it (His permissive will), controls much of it (His sovereign will), and has seen the eternal destiny of all mankind. Although we will not ever fully understand God's eternal perspective until we see Him, enter eternity, and become like Christ with a sinless resurrection body, it is and always will be the final reality. Be encouraged to believe God's Word by faith and grow in Christ!

The fact that God knows each person's destiny before they are born helps us understand why some never receive Christ, even though they had every advantage and opportunity, while others seemingly bound for hell on the fast track, are intercepted by the Gospel at the most inopportune time and arrested in their tracks by Grace. An understanding of this does not require a belief in predestination, nor does it advocate that God saves according to those He foreknew. This paper is not intended to address those issues. Irrespective of how you believe a person gets saved (within limits), the fact that God knows about it beforehand is indisputable. Because this is true, a Christian, pastor or otherwise, has to look "realistically" (God's viewpoint) at the group of people before him and know that there are no chances or maybes or possibilities of salvation relative to the group, only absolutes. I must proclaim the Gospel to all, but all will not be saved; the glorious other side of that coin being the knowledge some will be saved! Our view is full of possibilities and desires (again, this is normal), but we must add to it God's viewpoint which sees every particular person and whether they will accept Christ and be saved.

As God sees each man, one person will definitely accept Christ at an exact point in time, while this one here will never do so no matter how much you plead and pray! This view from God's perspective allows us to rest in the knowledge that God is in control!; after all, it is He Who saves through the power of the Gospel (Rom. 1:16). We are not in the world to save people; we are here to fellowship with God through His Word and give Him Glory (which includes proclaiming the Gospel).

If we are walking in the Spirit, we are "resting" in Christ, in the work of God on behalf of ourselves and others. Can we have peace and rest in Christ if we feel guilty for someone not getting saved? Of course not! We would be guilty all the time for those around us who are currently rejecting Christ! This knowledge increases our understanding of the purpose, power and procedures, if you will, of evangelism and "widens" our view of our walk with God. Our purpose in evangelism is first and foremost a response of obedience and love to God, by "going out into all the world" to spread the Good News, praying for the lost and desiring people everywhere to get saved, but it is never to actually do the saving (or be responsible for those who reject Christ)! The power of salvation is always and only the Gospel, the living Word, and the procedure, simply put, is the Son paying, the Father drawing, the saint proclaiming, the Holy Spirit saving and the sinner believing. If we are walking with God in obedience, rest and peace will come, not guilt, whether or not a person gets saved. Please do not confuse passion and love for the lost with guilt; we should always have the one, and never the other!

So this widened view reminds me that more is at work than me telling someone about Christ and them receiving or rejecting Him. God already knows the outcome and it is He who saves and not us through our presentation. I certainly need to offer Christ from the scriptures, but it is not my voice, my approach, my method, my passion, my skill with words, my sweet smile or good looks that gets someone saved! It is not even my huge church with a myriad of programs to choose from, my stellar evangelistic team, or my high priced education. It is only the gospel itself which is the power of God for salvation, and the Holy Spirit who saves

people. We are tools in the hand of God, bringing the Word to people and praying God saves them. Let's not confuse our work of proclaiming and our passion for all to be saved with God's work of actually saving people. Our burden to proclaim is light; the burden to save is too great and belongs only to God, Who has the power and authority to do it.

Understanding that God already knows if someone will accept Christ or not, and that He alone saves, takes undue pressure off the one offering the seeds of the Gospel. Actually, it is sin for us to feel like failures if we don't produce enough converts from the last revival in the church! We should realize that failure is disobedience to God's command to walk in the Spirit (which includes evangelizing those around us). This allows us to rest in Christ, produces growth in our spiritual lives and keeps us from arrogantly believing it is our responsibility to save souls!

God forbid we should feel responsible when a lost soul rejects Christ! God alone saves and He knew from before the foundation of the world whether a man would be saved. Are we to feel guilty for not changing the unchangeable? Are we responsible for another man's personal decision? Should we feel a failure when we have not produced converts to Christ after obediently proclaiming the Gospel? God forbid!!!!

We should feel remorse and sadness when sinners reject Christ (not for rejecting us), but never guilt or a sense of responsibility. We have sinned if God sends us to someone and we fail to present Christ as Savior, true, but we are never responsible for (or even able to accomplish) the results when the Gospel is given. It is a great joy to understand (and perform) our part in God's salvation of men correctly, realizing what God has commanded us to do, and that He has known these things since all eternity. My confidence in God is vastly increased and my walk is stabilized as I act according to the Word of God. Maybe we should redirect some of our time and money spent on buildings and programs and put the effort into studying the Word, witnessing and giving to the poor. Imagine how God would use obedient Christians walking in the Spirit, presenting Christ when and where God leads them and leaving the results to the all powerful, all knowing God of Salvation!

The last result I will address is perhaps the most difficult for some; the extent of the atonement of Christ. I know it is most common to address this issue from other angles, but I felt this particular knowledge of eternity, the understanding of God's ability to see all the saved from before the foundation of the world, is one that may be less offensive for some (if at all) and less apt to be arguable. Maybe it just appeals to the simple fact of God's omniscience, on which all would agree, and then applies equally simple and direct logic to the question. I hope that no one objects to our God given faculty of reasoning and logic, as long as it is tempered by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

Here then is the question: If God knew from before the foundation of the world all who would be saved (Eph. 1:4a), and indeed Christ was slain from before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8, He knew man would fall and require salvation to restore fellowship), why would Christ increase His suffering on the cross by atoning for the sins of those whom He was certain would not be saved?

My Arminian friends say that Christ died for all people and each one of their sins, even though He knew that most of the people He died for would never accept Him as Saviour (and therefore spend eternity separated from God for their sins). My question to them is why??? Why would Christ increase (double or triple) His suffering on the cross, taking on the extra sin which He hated, knowing full well the utter futility of His actions?

Do we so lightly triple the very real and terrible pain, suffering and separation Christ endured on the cross in order to make God seem fair to us? Does God command and Christ undertake futile acts; does He give up His Son for nothing?!

We are not here to discuss all the pertinent verses, which others have done so well, but to address the issue from the stated position, and then ask the simple and logical question that arises from the scenario. God has seen all things from eternity, including personal salvation; Christ was slain from before the foundation of the world and God has seen the end of time including all who are saved and reside with Him in Heaven. God obviously does not make mistakes, play catch-up or deal with "possibilities" in His world. God's plan was set and the end in sight from before time started. Since this is true, if we take the view of unlimited Atonement, we must say God deliberately engaged in a futile act! Futile because Christ died to save those who were destined to be eternally lost, to save all of mankind, the majority of which were not saved! If we take a test in school, or a task at work and achieve only a 20 – 30 % success rate, we have failed miserably.

God's standards are perfection (a prophet must be right 100% of the time), and yet proponents of unlimited atonement say He deliberately engaged in a planned activity, possibly the most important one of all time, and achieved a "success" rate of only 30%??? Does that sound like an Almighty, Sovereign God to you? Have the negative decisions of roughly 70% of humanity thwarted the will of the Creator of the universe (if in fact Christ died for every man) and made Him look foolish and weak in the face of the powers and principalities (Elect Angels, Satan and his demons)?

One of the most common arguments for unlimited Atonement is that God provided the possibility for everyone to get saved, because He loved us all and it is up to each man to believe. Besides being "fair" it fits what many verses "seem" to say, and allows for our understanding of the possibility of every person to get saved. However, the scriptures say that not everyone will get saved, only those who call on the name of the Lord.

The point I am making is all the "anyones" or "whosoever" that call on the Lord have already been seen in eternity by God, and therefore He did not have to die for those whom He knew would refuse Him, in order to provide them the possibility of getting saved; He had already seen the end of time and there was no salvation for some, no possibility, it was already over in God's eyes. Isn't this a most compelling reason for God not to subject His Son to unneeded, unfruitful, and unnecessary pain, agony and humiliation?

Let me add a point here that is coincident with the view of a definite atonement. Not only did the atonement definitely accomplish that which it set out to (atone for all the sins of the ones who would believe in Christ), it definitely paid for an exact number of sins. Since God knows all things and therefore all the sins of those who would believe, He bore those sins only and fully on the cross. Each moment of my life, good or bad, is important to God and known by Him. When I sin, it is a recorded event in time, a work of the flesh outside of Christ, and "added" to the list of previous sins in my life He paid for (all our sins were future when Christ died for us).

This is the quantitative nature of sin and its payment in Christ, and it is vitally important because the next problem the Arminian runs into is people going to Hell when their sins have already been paid for, i.e. double jeopardy - people in hell paying for sins Christ already paid for on the Cross.

Their answer can be only one of two things; either sin is qualitative in nature only, or the most common, that unbelief is not a sin. What they will say is, all the sins are paid for, and now all that is left is whether to believe or not, which is up to the individual. Since when is unbelief not a sin??! On the contrary, it is the unpardonable sin by definition; think about it, how can God forgive, and grant entrance into heaven, people who commit the sin of not believing in Him? And how can it not be a sin, that which is the main cause of condemnation? (John 3:18)

If the one thing that God says I must do to get to heaven is rejected, how do I get to heaven? There is nothing left. God cannot say, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" and then turn around and say, if you don't believe you will be saved anyway because I paid for all your sins!! God forbid! So because the Arminian believes all sin has been paid for, he has to say that unbelief is not a sin, which is absolutely ridiculous and contrary to God's Word and logic itself. This leaves him with very few choices, (only one of which is good); unbelief is not a sin, double jeopardy exists, universal salvation is true, or, in the back of their minds the nagging knowledge that what they believe is not scriptural, logical or true. Rejecting the possibility of being wrong about something they feel so passionately about, most fall back on the "it's a mystery" idea, hold vaguely to the belief Christ died for all, and either ignore or attack the opposing (truthful) position.

We have seen that God does not deal in possibilities, and that His viewpoint from eternity and ours from time both exist together, without canceling each other out. The rub is that God's eternal view is the ultimate reality and dictates the way He acts, because God could not deny what is true or what His omniscience reveals. Some feel this cancels our viewpoint in time (mutual exclusivity), but in reality His view actually enhances our limited view. It widens our horizons, gives us rest in Christ and encourages us to grow in our understanding of the eternal and omniscient God Whom we serve.

The verses which seem to speak of universal atonement are primarily meant for use in evangelism. Since I cannot pick and choose, and am told to proclaim the good news to all, what better way, and verses to use, except 'everyone who believes will be saved', or 'all who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved', and 'no one who calls on the name of the Lord shall be ashamed'? Who thinks it proper evangelism to ask a person if he has been known by God from before the foundation of the world, and if he will eventually be a believer, so they should believe right now? For the Calvinist to say, "Are you one of the elect? If so, you should believe now", or the Arminian to say, "Did God foresee your choice to believe?", if so, you should accept Him now", is ridiculous; the unbeliever would never understand it. No, we say, "we are all sinners in need of salvation, and if anyone believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, they will be saved."

These verses are not the primary ones on which to build a doctrine of salvation, but ones that show how to evangelize. Notice the "wills" and "shalls" - there are no maybes! So they are certain, too, but we always focus on the universality of the statement, which is OK because it is also true! ANYONE who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!!! But the bedrock doctrine behind those verses is that God saves, and those who call on Him are ones whom God has foreknown from the foundation of the world would be saved. We don't evangelize with the basic doctrine, we use the verses that proclaim the good news, (If you believe in your heart Jesus is Lord, and God raised Him from the dead, you WILL be saved!) then when they get saved and into Bible class, they learn the basic doctrines that got them there in the first place.

There are only three ways to respond to this argument as a whole:

1. Attack! And defend the Arminian position at all costs (truth and growth in Christ is the real cost).
2. Ignore it altogether and continue as if never having read this.
3. Recognize there is truth to the position as a whole and begin to make some (very real) changes in the way we think of God, evangelism and the atonement of Christ.

Give God the glory and thank Him for His saving grace, which we do not deserve! For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God! Amen.

Godly Perspectives, Peter Osterhus, 2002

GODLY PERSPECTIVES?

Consider our human/spiritual biases, good and bad, and how they affect our search for the truth of God in the Scripture. Our biases are made up of many things: our physical makeup, mental capacity, education, upbringing, the times in which we live, when we get saved, how mature we are in Christ, and for each particular moment, if we are walking in the Spirit. Does the Holy Spirit override our biases to teach us, or does he use some of them, too? Why are there so many viewpoints of Scripture? Can we tell who's right and wrong? Is there room for differing views in the truth of God, such as seeing things from a different angle? Is there an objective, absolute truth about God we can attain to? What if some of these "differing views" are in direct opposition to each other? Are there any standards to guide our search for truth in God's Word?

The Foundation

So many questions and variables! The answers to many of these questions are found by an overall reliance on the Word as a literal foundation of truth, and the rest from a more detailed examination of certain Scriptures. There has to be a starting point for any discussion, and I will use the Scripture as the basis and foundation for truth. John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." 2 Tim 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." 1 Cor. 2:14-16 says, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God ... nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things ... But we have the Mind of Christ." In short, the Bible is God's Word to man, the only source of truth for us; it is able to change us, but one must be a believer walking in the Spirit to understand it. God exists as described in the original writings of the old and new Testaments. Jesus Christ is His Son, our Savior and also God, along with the Holy Spirit. The Word of God is inerrant in its original form, and the Holy Spirit always supports, clarifies, and teaches the Word of God to believers and those God is preparing for salvation. Though it may seem obvious, I want to assert that we can know the truth about God from His Word. 1 John 5:13.

I know many denominations, churches, and people argue these points, but I believe they are foundational in our understanding of God and His Word, and so they are also my support and starting point in this work. If we call the human mind the supreme arbiter and creator of truth, then we have no hope of a resolution to the matter, for there are as many opinions of the nature of God and His Word as people on this earth. The aim of the believer in fellowship should be to discover the truths of God, not create them. Our biases in many respects are who we are, but I hope to keep the negative ones at bay, and to ask God to use the positive ones to help me illuminate His Word instead of obscure and change it.

God First

My human reasoning must be subject to the Word and the Holy Spirit, and guided by it (not obliterated by it). What this means is simply a person must be saved, must have a personal relationship with the Creator of the Word, in order to begin to understand it. The most brilliant professor of religious studies at Harvard cannot "understand" the Gospel or Scripture as a whole if he is not saved. Human intelligence does not equal spiritual understanding, even of

the most simple and basic principles. Satan is the most intelligent being on the face of this earth, outside God Himself, and although he has been with God and seen His glory in heaven, he does not comprehend the spiritual truths of the scripture. He does not believe it, or trust it to be true. He trusts only himself, like many people do. This can be hard to understand, so let's think of it in the same vein as the old saying, "To know me is to love me." "Knowing" and "understanding" have to be connected to loving, believing and trusting. The unsaved could (and do) study the Bible, take a test on it and pass! But does that mean they "know" God and trust Him as Savior? No! They don't "understand" or trust and believe the simple truths about being a sinner and in need of mercy, the need for salvation, the incredible free gift that eternal life is, and that God would choose to love them based on His own good pleasure, not on something they have done or will do in the future. The "understanding" of Scripture must first be based on believing that God loves His creation and sinners lost in their way, that He is God and we are not, that we need Him in order to live! Satan certainly does not believe this. Being a believer, trusting Jesus Christ as our personal Savior from sin, is essential to knowing and understanding God and His Word. From that position of need for life itself, how can we then assert our own sinful minds and judgments over and above the very Word of God and the Holy Spirit that God just used to save us? Blasphemy! And yet, that is what many people do and believe, that the Word of God is man's document, full of error and myths, readily changed by men down through the centuries and subject only and fully to the superior minds of this day and age. As believers, God must be first and foremost in all things, and most importantly in His Word and the study of it. We must subject ourselves and our minds to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in order to understand it and be transformed by it.

Not Man's Creation

God is absolute, and His Word holds absolute truths about Him, which God says we can learn. This takes the final reality of truth and its consequences out of human hands and places it firmly in the hands of God. So we strive to understand something not created by ourselves, but by God Himself, remembering He is outside or apart from us relative to the origination of scripture. Scripture was not created by man; man was only the tool God used to put it in written form. We are not trying to understand what Paul the apostle said, but what God said through Paul. Our striving cannot change God's Word, although it will lead others to a better (or worse) understanding of it. We are reaching to obtain something not in the sphere of our own creation, manipulation or execution. God is sovereign over his Word. It is absolute, and He has given it to us, alive and able to change lives through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

God spoke His inviolate Word to man who wrote it down perfectly under the total influence of the Holy Spirit. 2 Tim 3:16a, 1 Pet 1:21b. He commands us to hear it, study and teach it, to spread it to others, and to use it to communicate effectively with Himself. This is all done ultimately to glorify God Himself, something that puts us in our place - God didn't give us His Word to glorify us; we are not the center of attention, which causes consternation to many. He is God and not we ourselves - we strive to understand Him and be more like Him and help others to do the same, not for our glory but for His. Of course, He gives us many and great benefits along the way and in the future of eternity with Him, but they are (or should be) of secondary importance to His glory.

Sadly I realize these assumptions leave out a great number of Christians today, who don't believe one or more of them. However, if we don't take the testimony of Scripture about itself, but insert our own rules and testimony, we are right back to the place the world maintains in secular matters; each one has an opinion, and so the battle begins to see whose opinion reigns supreme. The world creates the truth by might, by right, by vote, by lies, or money. As believers we want to discover the truth, by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Walk with Me

Now, what about all these biases I mentioned, variables that affect the way we perceive God and His Word? We've taken the Word at face value and dealt with that variable, but what about ourselves? We must admit to ourselves (and God) we are biased and sinful, and ask Him to change our point of view to a Godly one. This does not mean a complete change of personality (not a bad idea for some of us), but a gradual change in perspectives and holiness through sanctification; becoming more and more like Christ every day. This of course, is our daily walk. Col. 1:10 says, "That you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

To start the walk we must be saved, and to continue the walk we must maintain fellowship through obedience, and regain fellowship when we sin, through use of 1 John 1:9 - we must confess (name) our sins, (agree with God they are sins), and He will be faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. When we were unsaved, unbelief (sin) kept us out of God's family; after salvation comes and we are in God's family, the effect of sin is to take and keep us out of fellowship with our Father, and any spiritual growth we could obtain. This is why continual confession is so important; it keeps us in fellowship with Dad! Once in fellowship, study with prayer must take place on a regular basis in order to change our sinful personality, biases, thoughts and habits. Rom. 12:1-2 says, "I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God ... and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Call it what you like, but we must have our minds changed by God's Word and the teaching of the Holy Spirit, or we will not continue to discover the heights and depths and width and breadth of God's truth, never have a Godly viewpoint, and never agree with each other on any of the Scripture. To be transformed we must be in fellowship with God on a regular basis, have a spiritual momentum of sorts, building truth upon truth, doctrine upon doctrine, and then live out what we have learned each and every day.

We cannot go to church once a week, be out of fellowship the rest of the week and call that spiritual growth. If we sin we must bounce back quickly through confession or we will be living to ourselves, in ignorance of His truths, believing Satan's lie that we are "doing OK." If we can let God's Word and the Holy Spirit help us evaluate our walk, we can get an idea whether our perspective is Godly or selfish (Satan's and the world's views). Studying the Word, researching respected teachers comments, learning from our pastor, meditating on the questions we have and the truth we understand, praying, and working out (walking out) moment by moment what God has shown us will reveal where we are (and where we are going) in our walk with God. 2 Tim 2:15 says "Be diligent to present yourself approved of God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth." We must avail ourselves of spiritual food - of the Scripture: you must eat the food to grow; you must study the Word to understand it and mature spiritually. If we don't go to the well to drink, we will be thirsty. How often do you eat food? How often do you study the Scripture? Can you stay healthy if you don't eat regularly and correctly (correctly is important)? Can you grow strong and mature in the Lord if you eat/study the Word only sparingly, and then only "junk" food? As believers, we must have a regular diet of the Word of God, learning His doctrines, precepts and principles. It is possible to know, love and trust God in the way He intended - to know about His absolutely perfect nature and attributes, His grace, love and forgiveness, His purposes for now and the future.

Teachers and wolves

God has given us pastors and teachers to help us in this quest for the truth and growth in Christ (Eph. 4:11-12) as we walk in fellowship with Him. He also expects growth from study and ministry to bring unity in the faith (vs. 13), but many of the pastors and theologians we

learn from disagree among themselves! If they disagree, how can we possibly know the truth and agree, and who can we trust to teach us the truth? The best Christian minds and most humble servants (not to mention the rest of us) have disagreed over the centuries about much of the interpretation of scripture. Can we understand why this is, and must we accept the situation? Consider this verse in 1 John 4:6, "We are of God (Apostle John and his companions). He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." Since John's words here are Scripture, we know that God is speaking, and essentially saying, 'if you don't believe My Word as truth, but include all your unscriptural human biases and psychologies as truth, you have the spirit of error.' Do we, our pastor, and any teachers we learn from, acknowledge the Word of God as inerrant and the only source of truth, or do we/they rationalize it with human reasoning, relative truths and psychologies of our time?

The biases we talked about (sin included) often cause such typical human reasoning. The theologians have the same problems to deal with as the rest of us, and many times these biases manifest themselves in their teachings. Where most of us have to deal with apathy, a lack of study, and keeping God and His Word in our daily lives, most theologians deal with the Word, research, writing and ministry on a daily basis. One of the most common errors (sins) committed by a teacher is eisegesis, or reading into the scripture what they want it to say, instead of letting the scripture (God the Holy Spirit) speak for itself (Himself). This goes hand in hand with pride of authorship, and the ego saying, like we all do at times, "I am right!" At times every theologian, some more than others, will "crowbar the Scripture" into agreeing with a previously held opinion (which may even be true) to make it fit their own doctrinal view. This is simply putting human agendas ahead of God's Word, as we discussed earlier, and amounts to false teaching. Much of the errant teaching out there also comes from pastors or teachers who are gifted in one or two areas, but since they must teach all the Scripture, they erroneously think all their work must be original, and so don't make use of other gifted teachers who are experts in areas they are not. Of course there are some false teachers out there professing to be Christians, and others who are immature or out of fellowship. As believers, we are responsible for our own actions, for who we listen to, and comparing teaching to scripture and other trusted teachers.

Sheep in search of Sound Doctrine

Although Scripture does not contradict itself, there are many difficult verses, and great understanding, patience and humility (fruit of the Spirit) must accompany the Holy Spirit as truth is gleaned from the pages of the Bible. One of our greatest jobs in learning is to "test the spirit" of the teaching, and be like the Bereans were, by checking everything we read or hear, while walking in fellowship, to see if it is in line with the Word. There are many false teachers out there who we need to be aware of (or be wary of). Peter said they are wolves in sheep's clothing spreading heresies, and they will get their just deserts. In the meantime, they deceive many who listen blindly without studying on their own (2 Pet 2:1-3). Most of the problems and arguments today come from the common personal sin of the teachers or the student. 2 Tim 4:3 says, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves (false) teachers, and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." Our job is to avoid being one of those with "itching ears," and to watch for false, unsaved, or inexperienced teachers, and others who may be out of their area of expertise, committing eisegesis through ignorance or pride, or pretending to be a teacher when they are not. There are some great teachers of course, and it is the student's job to discriminate between the good and bad, through prayer and comparing them all against the Word of God.

Although one person (or church) will never have a complete knowledge of the Truth, there is too much false doctrine being taught (and believed) in our churches and communities today

which could be easily dispelled if people would follow the guidelines outlined in the Word. That, of course, assumes people want to learn the truth, not something that will tickle their itching ears and keep them happy. I do believe there is absolute truth in all of God's Word, and it is our job to seek it out, and the Holy Spirit's job to teach us. Does that mean the pure in heart will learn all there is to know about God and His Word? No, but with different areas of expertise from different teachers, the believer can search for the true "fruit" from each and get a better understanding of God's truth as a whole. This would allow a synergy of sorts, for every believer, as we study the Word and seek the truth of God for our lives, and promote overall growth of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16). Each believer needs truth to guide every aspect of his life, and if it can't be obtained from a single human teacher, (notwithstanding our own search of the Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) then why not look to others who have expertise in each area of concern? We should ask our pastor for suggestions on reading material on subjects he is teaching, and search the church library for books and topics that interest us. As we grow in Christ and have a solid foundation in the Word, we can branch out in our studies as we discern for ourselves the teachers that best explain each area of concern in the scripture. The knowledge and understanding resulting from a broader based education, from Godly theologians, will give us the tools necessary to fulfill our ministry, achieve a greater spiritual growth and help foster unity among Christians who love God and are earnestly seeking the truth about Him.. This is not intended to encourage people to forsake the pastor/teacher and sheep/student relationship, only to enhance it. Also, new Christians should be stabilized in a church that teaches the Word faithfully, and study from that base of operation. Call it outside reading in the class of Christ, if you will. We realize no one is sinless and able to know God perfectly, but we can grow in truth, be mature Christians who are not tossed about by every wind of doctrine, and bring others to Christ while teaching or ministering as God has provided for us in our particular gifts. Eph. 2:10 says, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." If mature Christians walking in the Spirit, performing the good works God prepared beforehand for them, cannot be a hugely positive factor in promoting unity in the faith, then the Scripture (Eph 4:13) is not true.

Differences

Remember the verses in 1 Cor. 12 and the discussion about each person being a different part of the body and having different gifts, but all from the same Spirit (of God)? This is where the understanding of differences comes in, and the knowledge that someone else will have expertise and gifts that we (and others) don't have. This is good! And we should not fight or be jealous about these differences we have. It is, therefore, imperative that we know what our gifts are, what our place in the body is, what our sphere of operation and influence is. Operating outside our gift, pretending to be a teacher, or as a teacher, teaching things we don't understand or haven't studied, or changing things which appear to contradict our beliefs so they fit our neat little package of systematic theology, is the source of most of our theological problems/debates today. If we could all humbly focus on our own gifts, present them to the community after our best effort in Christ, and study/use other experts for areas outside our sphere of knowledge and influence, it would go a long way toward unity in the body of Christ.

Battle

History is full of the battle for the truth of God's Word. Look at the fights and wars and atrocities committed by the church against itself and others over the centuries; most were outside of God's will as we understand it now, but Godly confrontation is scriptural and correct. Look at Christ in the temple, as He overturns the money changers tables or Paul as he confronts Peter over his hypocritical behavior with the Gentiles. Paul says if anyone (even an angel) teaches a different Gospel than the one he taught them, he should be anathema,

accused, or cut off! (Gal. 1:8, 9) But here is the key to this emotional and often damaging topic - in each of the instances of battle described, the one confronting another was in his own sphere of influence. Another way to say that is, they were all minding their own business! All the earth was in Christ's sphere of influence, but surely the temple in Jerusalem was a place under his mantle. Paul confronted Peter and his hypocrisy in front of everyone when he stopped eating with the Gentiles in Antioch. The church in Antioch was begun by Paul, he was the Apostle with authority there, and he was operating in his sphere of influence. When someone tries to teach my child lies, I confront them and teach my children the truth. My family is most certainly my sphere of influence. If a pastor has someone teaching lies in his congregation, it is his mandate to root out the false teaching and teacher, and refute it/him with the truth. It is not my job, however, to go to people outside my sphere in influence and force my beliefs on them. I am commanded to offer them the Gospel in the name of Christ, but never to force it on them, or persecute them because they hold different beliefs. Some disagree and say confrontation of any sort will only create disharmony, but the Word says a wise man will increase in learning when confronted with the truth; the truth sets us free and brings unity. Remember 2 Tim 3:16? If Godly confrontation is never allowed, then why is the Scripture profitable for reproof and correction? What more worthy subject matter can you imagine to defend? To arrive at the truth of God is eternal in value and should be strived after and guarded with ones life, because life itself is at stake! However, endless arguing on minor topics with people outside your sphere is definitely sin. Again, I want to stress, that personal, sinful attacks on people or organizations, verbal or physical, should never be employed. I may give my life for the truth, but I may not make you do so, or ruin yours in the process. In this Church Age, we should proclaim the truth in love, and defend ourselves as necessary.

And therefore ...

In conclusion, as believers, we can attain a much greater unity in Christ if we first trust His Word as true, as the final arbiter of truth. We must also recognize (and confess) our sin, our biases, and the gifts God has given each of us to minister with. Understanding our maturity level, whether we are walking with God, and then humbly seeking all avenues to further our knowledge of Christ and His Word, will surely propel us to our predestined ministry. If we walk in the Spirit, He will keep us from teaching or promoting doctrinal error, and we can recognize each other's gifts, learn from them and enjoy the diversity of the body of Christ as well. As ambassadors of Christ we should fulfill the great commission and bring new believers into a healthy, unified, growing body, who is Christ, the church. As always, we must be aware of false teachers and seek out those who rightly divide the Word of Truth, as we study and compare all teaching to the Word ourselves. If we love God and earnestly seek Him, He will reward us with fellowship and the truth about Himself; He is a Sovereign God and He has said it is so! Trust and obey, make God's Word at home in your heart, then live it and defend it as true, and give God the Glory!