

## Man's Greatest Challenge (Part 1)

### **The Foundation of Belief**

**Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

**Given 24-Sep-05; Tape #739**

Just yesterday, my sister, Virginia, sent me a transcript of a speech by novelist Michael Crichton. You may know him from his books. His latest is, "A State of Fear." He also wrote "The Great Train Robbery," "The Andromeda Strain," "Time Line," "Congo," "Sphere," and "Jurassic Park," to name a few.

He delivered this speech to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco two years ago, September 15, 2003. I had been considering this subject as a sermon topic for quite some time. Its arrival from Virginia was very timely. My thanks to her for that.

But Michael Crichton said,

I have been asked talk about what I consider the important challenge facing mankind, and I have a fundamental answer. The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda. Perceiving the truth has always been a challenge to mankind, but in the information age, or as I think of it, the dis-information age, it takes on a special urgency, and importance.

We must daily decide whether the threats we face are real, whether the solutions we are offered will do any good, whether the problems we are told exist are in fact real problems, or just non-problems. Every one of us has a sense of the world, and we all know that this sense is in part given to us by what other people in society tell us, in part generated by our emotional state which we project outward, and in part by our genuine perception of reality.

In short, our struggle to determine what is true is the struggle to decide which of our perceptions are genuine, and which are false because they are handed down, or sold to us, or generated by our own hopes and fears.

I have been pondering this subject, and actually preaching about it for several years now. And the reason for this, and why I have been thinking so much about this, and why I have been preaching about it, is because I am inundated daily with a flood of information.

I receive about 50 emails each day. And, many of them are forwards from other people. All of these emails express ideas, stories, arguments, news, and information of all kinds. And I am forced to determine (quickly, or else lose most of my day) what is worthwhile, and what is not; what is real news, and is really bias; what is fact and what is fiction, and what is objective and

what is partisan, and therefore highly subjective.

It is very wearying to go through it all. And what makes it more wearying is that it happens every day, and if you do not keep up with it, it just takes your time. You hate to just delete it all, because there just might be something in there that is important.

But, it might be something totally useless and wastes your time. And so, you have to over a period of years have some sort of mechanism for determining what is worth your time—what is worth reading.

Now, those who look into these types of things estimate that humanities knowledge doubles every 14 months! And, this rate increases every year. We have such a capacity for generating new information. And not only generating it, but promoting it by pushing it out the door and letting other people see it. The internet helps a great deal with that.

It has been predicted that by the year 2020, only 14 years or so away, it will double every 72 days! That is just a bit over two months time.

Now, it is humanly impossible to keep up with the information we produce now. What is it going to be like in the future when we are doubling our knowledge a little over every two months? Doubling our knowledge! Can you imagine?

Let us say that you start with two little bits of information. And you start doing the arithmetic about doubling those things.

Mr. Armstrong used to do the illustration of doubling a man's penny every day for a month. It does not seem like much until you get somewhere near day 25. By the end of the month, you are in the millions of dollars (I think).

And that is what is happening with knowledge. Just one little bit of information, and it is doubled, and *that* is doubled, and *that* is doubled until suddenly, now, it is just unthinkable even in computer terms.

Think of how many terabytes of information are comprised in humanity's knowledge! We cannot keep up with it. Our brains just do not have the capacity.

So, it is becoming ever more vital for us to be able to make sound judgments about the knowledge that constantly bombards us.

Now this is important to us because of a principle that is found in Romans 10, verse 17. This is a memory scripture. I just want the first part of it:

Romans 10:17 ...faith *comes* by hearing,...

We do not need the remainder of the verse. That pertains to our own spiritual knowledge.

But, faith comes by hearing. And, if we take it in its general sense, it is the principle. In modern terms, we would say, "What we believe is based on what we observe—hear, read, gather, investigate, and what we ultimately decide. And, this works outside of religion.

If a person is exposed to and hears good music, he will believe that good music is formed a

certain way. And that kind is the *only* good music. And this will, then, dictate his ideas of what comprises good music for the remainder of his life.

This happens in any thing. What one observes, hears, sees, or thinks about will ultimately dictate what he believes.

So, our beliefs flow from what we collect with our five senses and process in our minds. So, we collect it, and then we process it. And from this comes belief. Thus, properly processing information turns out to be an absolutely vital part of Christian living. We have got to learn to process the information that we have received in a proper way.

So, today I want to consider mankind's greatest challenge, as Michael Crichton put it: distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda. How prepared are we as Christians to process the flood of information that we receive every day. Are we approaching this task from God's perspective? What kind of lens do we peer at the world through? Are we really thinking these matters through? Or, are we just because of one reason or another, making snap or emotional judgments, because we do not have the time, or too busy, or because whatever the excuse is.

Are we really thinking about these things?

I would like to begin in John 18 because this question has perplexed the great and near great throughout human history.

If you know your chapters, John 18 is the Trial of Jesus Christ. And, it ends with Christ before Pilate.

John 18:33 Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?"

This was a very straight forward question. He wanted to know (straight from the horse's mouth as it were) the answer to this question, because he felt it was the vital question.

John 18:34 Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?"

It is like, "*Do you really want to know this? Or, are you doing this because you are being played?*"

John 18:35 Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew?..."

As if to say, "*Do you think I am on their side? I am a Roman. My job in this is to find out the truth*"

John 18:35 ...Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?"

*"Why have they done this? What brings you to my judgment hall? It must have been something that was so bad to accuse you of this"*

John 18:36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

So, what He does by this answer is to tell Pilate, *"Yes. But, you do not need to worry about my kingdom, because it is not an earthly kingdom."*

John 18:37 Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say *rightly* that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice."

This is what I was getting to.

John 18:38 Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all.

Now, it is really difficult—maybe impossible—to know what Pilate meant by, "What is truth?" You can come up with all kinds of ways in which he could have said this.

But, he was a worldly wise Roman official. And from what we know of his life, I can assume that he said it rhetorically. He did not really want an answer. He said it wearily because there really was not any answer to it. He may have pursued it, but he had gotten tired and frustrated by the attempt.

He really did not know what truth was, and had concluded over a lifetime that ultimate, or authoritative truth does not exist.

Now, if you think about Pilate, and what he was—the governor of Judea (He had been a governor elsewhere; he had done other jobs within the Roman Empire)—he was a worldly wise Roman government official. He had seen war. He had seen other kinds of strife. He had seen the bickering among peoples.

And I am sure that by this time, as he was approaching his old age, he was beginning to be pretty tired of things. And during this time in which he was in Judea, he had been constantly vexed by the Jews, because, not only were there the little inter-Nicene spats between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the scribes, and whatnot, but there were also zealots out there trying to overthrow the Roman government, and Samaritans who played into all of this; and there were just basic problems too.

He had tried to bring water into Jerusalem through an aqueduct, and he used temple funds from

the treasury to pay for it. And, the Jews, therefore, were all over him, and threatened to contact Caesar about it, defiling their temple by stealing from their treasury. And he was pretty much holding on to his last little string for his job. And, one step either way would be either victory or defeat.

And so, after all these years of seeing these things happening and all the squabbles and futile decisions he had to make, trying to separate warring factions, he had come to the conclusion, I am sure, that there really was not any truth.

And especially in religion. Because, in Judea, this was the thing that confronted him all the time. There was the religion of the Pharisees, then the Sadducees, then the Samaritans; there was the religion of the Galileans which was different. It was much more conservative than maybe any of them.

And then there were Pagans—the Romans were Pagans. And there were the desert tribes, and whatnot. And he had come to see in all of this that there was no way that any of these people could ever agree on what they believed.

And so, you see all this mélange of belief, and you say, "There is no absolute truth!" There is no way to make heads or tails of any of this, and to come up with real principles out of it. He could not see it.

And so, his response to the Jews, "I find no fault in Him." In other words, he was telling them, *"Guys! This is a religious dispute! This is an argument over faith. This does not have anything to do with the Roman Empire, or any criminal matters. He has done nothing that I can charge Him with. There is nothing that I can prove against Him. Let Him go"*

So, here it was, a rather ironic thing he said. The last thing that he had heard was, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My Voice." And then, the next thing that Pilate said was, "What is truth?"

Pilate could not recognize truth staring him in the face in the Person of Jesus Christ. This is not the only time that this statement or at least the principle appears in the Bible. We will read the first six verses because God accuses Israel of the exact same types of things. He indicts Israel for having really no interest in truth.

Hosea 4:1-6 Hear the word of the LORD, You children of Israel, For the LORD *brings* a charge against the inhabitants of the land: "There is no truth or mercy Or knowledge of God in the land. *By* swearing and lying, Killing and stealing and committing adultery, They break all restraint, With bloodshed upon bloodshed. Therefore the land will mourn; And everyone who dwells there will waste away With the beasts of the field And the birds of the air; Even the fish of the sea will be taken away. Now let no man contend, or rebuke another; For your people *are* like those who contend with the priest. Therefore you shall stumble in the day; The prophet also shall stumble with you in the night; And I will destroy your mother. My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being

priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

This is quite an indictment!

"Okay!" God says, "*You are not going to listen to the truth that I give you, then I am going to let you suffer for it! I am going to treat you the same way that you have treated Me, and we will see just what will happen!*"

And then, He tells them what is going to happen! Their society will degenerate, everything will break down, they are going to suffer all these terrible things, and waste away; they will not be able to eat; nature will desert them as it says there in verse 3; and He is going to let their children die, their most precious things in life.

All this because they rejected the knowledge of God. And, that is basically the foundation, here, of everything that is going on. You see, it is mentioned in verse 1 that there is no truth or mercy, or knowledge of God in the land, but you find out that the real thing is in verse 6: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." That is the basic cause. They had pretty much rejected everything that God had taught them was true.

And, as we know from history, the land—prophesied here, and also in Leviticus 18: 24-28—vomited them out. This was said right before the Assyrians came and invaded the land, and set their cities on fire, and took them captive.

But it also has an end time fulfillment. And if we think that we know who Israel is today, you can see some of these same things happening.

The problem is human. It is not just Israelite. The problem is human wide, world wide.

The particular problem with Israel is that they should have known better. God had revealed Himself to them over all the ages from Abraham onward.

But, as we see, if we will go to Romans 1, Paul shows us that this is not just Israelite, but a problem of all mankind.

We have an indictment of Israel in the Old Testament, but here in the New Testament, in Romans 1, we have an indictment of all mankind:

Romans 1:18-19 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them.

That is very clear!

Romans 1:24-25 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served

the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 1:28 And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;

Maybe I should also include verse 21:

Romans 1:21-23 ...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

Paul says simply, here, that it is not a matter of being unable to determine what is true, but that humanity has turned its back on the knowledge of God, even though it screams at them from every quarter.

The knowledge of God is out there, whether creation, or the Bible, or the preachers who teach the truth, or the examples of the people who believe the truth. The knowledge of God is available.

But, humanity turns its back on it. Men, as we saw in verse 18, deliberately suppress it. They (verse 21) ungratefully reject it. Or (in verse 23) they change it to suit themselves. Or (verse 28) they purposefully forget it. And (in verse 25) they believe lies to boot!

Even though it is there for the understanding, humanity finds a way to ignore it, get rid of it, suppress it, or change it or just totally do something different. So, just like in Hosea 4, God allows them to go their own way, and reap the whirlwind. I mean this, also, literally!

So, in actuality then, Pilate's question, "What is truth?" was a cop-out! Like other men in history, and the vast majority today, he simply decided not to believe it. He turned a blind eye to the truth, even though it was staring him (literally) in the face. The One who has the truth was there. If he had asked Him a different question, He would have given him an answer! But, instead, he wearily said rhetorically (meaning I do not want an answer to this question), "What is truth?"

Now, if we go forward to II Corinthians 4, we will see that Satan carries a great deal of the blame for this. This is not just humanity's fault. Satan has a big part to play in all of this also. We will read the first 6 verses again:

II Corinthians 4:1-2 Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

This is just telling you that they are doing all things above board. And then, in God's sight, they are commending themselves to our conscience, meaning what we know to be right, and hoping for the best as God allows.

II Corinthians 4:3-6 But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts *to give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And as He said also in John 14:6:

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Jesus Christ embodies the truth that has been revealed unto us. So, it is almost as if humanity is blindfolded, stumbling about in a world full of truth, yet handicapped by Satan in determining the truth from the false.

And just like Pilate, you pick anybody out of the world, and if Jesus was standing right in front of them, and would say, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My Voice." They would say, "Huh?" And then, turn around and go about their business, just like Pilate did. That is basically what Pilate did!

Jesus said, "I am the Truth! Everybody who is of the truth, wants to know the truth, hears My Voice!" And Pilate said, "*I do not care! I have already come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as truth*" And so, he blinded himself on top of the blind binding that Satan the Devil had already put upon him.

We see that in Matthew 13 that we have a part to play in this as well. In the midst of these parables, here, the disciples ask Him:

Matthew 13:10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

And He gives an answer. And within this answer, He shows that they have also blinded themselves purposely—meaning the world has.

Matthew 13:11-15 He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but

to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: `Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed...

Not only a veil lies upon them, of not being able to understand, but they have made it worse by closing their own eyes,

Matthew 13:15 ...Lest they should see with *their* eyes and hear with *their* ears, Lest they should understand with *their* hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'

They do not want to be healed! They want to continue on in their own way no matter what happens!

Matthew 13:16-17 But blessed *are* your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous *men* desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*.

Now, like Adam and Eve, all men have personally rejected the revelation, sovereignty, and the truth of God; and they do this through sin.

There is not really such a thing as the fall of mankind. Adam and Eve fell. They made a personal decision to reject God. And, simply, all of mankind has followed suit.

We have all done it, and all continue to do it. And so, we all, like Adam and Eve, have been cut off from the truth, that tree of life, and the God who stands behind it, the Real Source of the truth.

But, I want you to recognize something here in Matthew 13, particularly in verse 11: It says, "...God has given it to us to know His mysteries..." And, verse 16, "Our ears and our eyes have been blessed so that we can hear and see."

See? There is something that comes in to intervene in this matter for us. It takes a special act of God to open the mind to understand the Truth.

And then, of course, Jesus goes on to explain the parable of the sower. And, the intimation is that God prepared the good soil. He made the soil fertile. It is not that we had something particularly wonderful about us, but that God did something special to make us receptive to His truth, and therefore, once we had the seed, we would take it and use it to produce fruit.

But, otherwise, it was just like taking Joe Blow off the street; it would have been bad soil. He would have been bad soil. But, God did something to take us Joe and Jane Blows off the street and give us something that would make us good soil for His seed.

So, God's choice had something to do with opening our eyes, and opening our ears. It was a blessing; something given from God.

Remember James 1:17:

James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

The sermon, I hope, goes into higher gear now. It has been slow up until now. I hope it stops being slow because there is something here that I think is really wonderful. I would like to start in John 6, verse 65.

This is not something that is new, but I think it is very amazing. And, it is amazing to think about, and talk through. Now, I could have gone to John 6:44, but I wanted this one instead.

John 6:65 And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."

Remember, this is the one that we do not go to quite as often. Usually we go to verse 44, "No one can come unto Me except the Father who send Me draws him." But here, He says it a bit differently. "No one can come unto Me unless it has been granted to him by the Father."

This tells me that there are two things that happen. First, God grants us permission to come to Christ. And then, He gives us the ability to come unto Him. "It has been granted..." That is the permission part.

And the other one: the Father draws the person. So, not only is there permission given, but then there is the giving of ability. Both must be given, as Jesus shows in Matthew 16. Let us go there. It might seem like an odd place to go, but it fits.

Matthew 16:13-17 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, [notice that word, "Blessed" again] for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

These men had been chosen specifically—particularly—especially—by Jesus Christ, but that was not enough! They also had to be given a revelation of the truth from the Father. It was not enough for them just to be going around with Jesus Christ for three and a half years! It was not enough to be his bosom companions. It was not enough to be personally, specifically chosen by Him Himself. There had to be another part in the process. They had to be given, blessed with, and granted ability through the revelation of God the Father.

What was the special knowledge that was revealed to them? (This is what I think is so amazing!) The particular, special knowledge was the true identity of Jesus Christ! Think about that. What set Peter, John, and all the rest of the disciples apart from the others in the crowds that were going about with Him? They knew who Jesus was! And they only knew that because God the Father had granted them that information.

If we would go back to John 6, we would find that many of the disciples were forsaking Jesus. And He asked them [the twelve], "Are you going to go away too?" What was their response? Let us go back there. What was Peter's response?

John 6:68-70 But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?"

Interesting response.

On the one hand He says, "I chose you for this very thing, that you would believe that I am Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. But, I know that one of you is going to betray Me, because he does not really understand who I am." But, what was the key, here? They knew who Jesus really was. Consider, and think about this in its historical milieu.

Jesus had made quite a name for Himself throughout Judea, and Samaria. His miracles and healings were public news, and they spread like wildfire throughout the whole area of Palestine.

All the Jews, it says—the whole country—knew these things. The Samaritans too. He had healed lepers, the blind, the lame; He had cast out demons with just a word. He stilled storms and walked on water. He fed thousands from a couple of loaves and a few fish—twice! He had resurrected people from the dead! And a few of them, not just one.

He gave ample signs of who He was. He even had conversations with people where He told them who He was—straight out that He was the Messiah.

Yet, the people still argued over all this. (Read John 7.) He went up to the Feast, and was doing all these things, and preaching the truth, and they said, "Who is this man? How does He know so much? This could not be Him, because we know He comes from some other place, not Galilee! And we know that He is supposed to do this, and that, and the other thing!"

They could not decide whether He was a prophet, or a crazy lunatic! They wondered if this could be the Christ—Hmmm. And, everything He said, and He did just shouted out that He was! But,

they were bewildered. They did not know.

But, these 11 did know. And the thing they knew was that Jesus Christ was the Son of the Living God; thus when the disciples said *that* directly to Him back there in Matthew 16, Jesus knew that God had opened their minds by His Spirit. It was not *in* them yet, but working *with* them, to come to this very fundamental truth—it was supernatural revelation that gave Peter the correct answer.

Had he asked anyone else, other than the 11, they would have given Him a different answer. And, they would not have been convicted of it, even if they had given the correct answer!

It might have been couched in, "*Well, we think you might be the Christ, but we are not sure.*" But, with Peter, it was, "*You are the Son of the Living God—the Christ!*"

The rest of the Jews were proof that Peter had not come to this conclusion on his own. God had removed the blindfold, and had given him the answer—the truth and reality of the situation.

John expands on this in his epistles. This is an amazing passage for what it reveals to us. And, it is kind of sad that they separated the chapters this way, because the last verse of chapter 3 goes with the first part of chapter 4. Notice this:

I John 3:24 Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

I John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God...

Now, this is very similar to what Jesus was doing with Peter—testing Peter's spirit in a way. And, if you think of it this way, you may get a better understanding of where I am going.

I John 4:1-2 ...because many false prophets [false preachers] have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit [Listen! This is the test!] that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God...

Wow! That is a dynamite statement!

Now, we have explained this in the past as John making an argument against Docetism. And I think that he was.

Now, Docetism is the belief (in simple terms) that Jesus was One Being, while Christ was another Being; and that Jesus was the human, while the Christ was the Spirit. And, that when Jesus was crucified, then, He was crucified as a fleshly being. But, before the death, the Christ part left Him, because it could not suffer that way. He was pure, and He was spirit. He could not face that ignominy.

So, basically what Docetism says, is that we have no Savior, because the Christ never suffered,

just Jesus the man. Therefore, the sacrifice, as it were, is worthless, because the Creator did not die.

And, John—the chief Apostle of the time, the one with the most experience left living, the one who had been with Jesus Christ—is of course telling the people there in the first century that this is absolutely not true. He gives them this nugget of truth as a means to test whether someone is telling the truth, or not.

And so, he says that the basic question is that every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.

I John 4:3 ...and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God...

And, he says this in the negative so we definitely understand.

I John 4:3 And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist...

Now, that is a mouthful too! If you do not believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, you have the spirit of antichrist! Plain, and simple.

I John 4:3 ...which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

I John 4:4-5 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak *as* of the world, and the world hears them.

Did you get that?

These false ministers are preaching lies, and people hear them because they believe the lies, because they have not had the blindfold taken off.

I John 4:6 We are of God. He who knows God hears us...

What did Jesus say to Pilate? Everyone who is of the truth hears My Voice. John is basically repeating that here.

I John 4:6 We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us [They are still blinded.] By this we know...

Remember, I gave a sermon a few years ago that these "We know" phrases are very important in the Epistle of John.

I John 4:6 ...By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

By what? How do we distinguish the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error? It is in verse 3. Do you believe that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh? That is the basic principle for telling truth from error. Now, to me, that is a "Whoa!" statement.

Acts 5:32 And we are His witnesses to these things, and *so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.*"

I am not going off on a tangent. There is a process here that we need to understand a bit (beginning in verse 24 of chapter 3 of I John): "He who keeps the commandments abides in Him, and He in him." So, there is a keeping of the commandments. God reveals His Truth to those who keep His Commandments, and He gives His Spirit to those who keep His Commandments—those who obey Him. And that spirit, as Paul says in I Corinthians 2, is what allows us to understand spiritual matters. Mr. Armstrong went through that time and time again in teaching us about the spirit in man, versus the Spirit of God, and how the two of them are linked together. Until that time, we are not all there.

And when the Spirit of God unites with our human spirit, then we can understand spiritual things, but, not until that time (not until God is working with us). He has to call us out of the world, impart His Truth, plus the ability to understand it through His Spirit.

The key to recognizing the Spirit of God in another person is he who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. Now, what does that mean in modern terms? This is the way that I have broken it down:

The key to knowing truth from error is to understand the true Nature of God. And, it starts with understanding that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. That is the basic truth that we have to understand. Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. And once that we get to that point, and we follow the logic of the Bible, we can then grasp the true nature of God.

Why is this important? Why is this so fundamental? The reason is that from the truth about God all doctrine flows! Without the proper foundation—"Who is God? What is He like?"—if we do not know that, if we do not have it correct, the whole superstructure above that is going to be wrong. It is going to be crooked.

If we do not get God's nature correct, it is almost impossible to get anything else correct either. It may be absolutely impossible to get anything else right. We have got to know what God is.

Now, of course, this is not all revealed at once. It is something that we continue to learn over many years. And that is why we must correct ourselves once we get deeper understanding of the nature of God. Because, once we really understand who God is, the doctrines follow naturally. They must. Otherwise, they are not doctrines of God.

Because, all of the doctrines are consonant [in harmony] with God's character. We must know God first. God is the ultimate bedrock of all doctrine.

And so, if we can get somebody's preaching down to his understanding of the nature of God, we

can have a pretty good idea of whether he is preaching the truth of God or not.

If a person does not understand God's character—the way He thinks, the way He plans, the way He acts—the doctrine will be wrong. Here is a very simple example: This world's Christians really do not know God's wisdom and mercy; they have absorbed from paganism, particularly Greek paganism, the horrible doctrine of an ever-burning Hell Fire.

Think about that... Would our God do that? From what we know about God's nature, is an ever-burning Hell in which sinners are tormented eternally, never to die, always to suffer—would our God do that? From what we know of God's mercy and His justice? Would He do that?

Absolutely not!

God is not a vengeful God in that sense. He is not a tormenting, torturing God. He says very clearly in His Word, "The soul that sins shall die." Find me a place in God's Word where it says, "The soul that sins shall be tormented forever and ever." It does not say that. It says that he dies.

And then He goes through and explains in the book of Revelation that there is a second death. It says in Hebrews 9:27

Hebrews 9:27 And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment...

Such a very simple concept. Man has one human life, and after this he will be judged. We are told, then, in Revelation, that after that we either are made immortal, eternal spirit beings, Sons of God; or we suffer the second death, which is total annihilation for all time. We do not get any more chances after that. If we are such unrepentant sinners, we do not have to suffer. It just ends. That is the most merciful thing both for those who commit the sin, and as well as for those who live on eternally after that.

And, God cleans up the universe, as a byproduct of it all. What about the doctrine of eternal security, "Once saved, always saved?"

It is the same thing. If we know the character of God, that doctrine is easily disproved. Why? It is very simple. God says that He will not be tempted. It is a simple way of putting the answer in a nutshell.

But do you know what the doctrine of eternal security does? It forces God to save people, whether they deserve it or not! How many people did God put to death in the wilderness because they forced Him to do something? "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Like I said, all of these things begin with the understanding that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

Now, once we get that understanding—put in here my dad's sermons on the Father / Son relationship. Once we know the position of Jesus Christ, that He was sent, that He became a man, and of course the understanding that we have of Him saying, "My Father is greater than I," then we know how things stand. And, that gets the ball rolling.

In addition, not only must we understand God's nature, we must also believe it! I mean really believe it! Intellectual agreement is not enough. Just having the right knowledge is not enough. Believe is an action verb—a word of action:

Psalm 111:10 ...A good understanding have all those who do *His commandments*...

Belief encapsulates our response to the truth of God. God's truth comes first, and then we either believe it, or not. And, belief, then, as I said, encapsulates our response to the knowledge of the truth. And, it is a truth that demands an active response. It demands it!

That active response is not just agreement, but obedience. Remember I said, Acts 5: 32, God gives His spirit to those who obey Him. Once we understand who God is, and whom He sent to be our Lord and Master, we are obligated to submit to God and to do everything that He commands.

Brian, in his sermonette, mentioned Abraham and Isaac. Think about this: What chapter was that? Genesis 22? The offering of Isaac upon the altar. How much doctrine is in the first 21 chapters of Genesis? There is some. Most of it is stories. And the doctrines come out of the stories. We have to interpolate them to be there.

Now, what was it that Abraham had that allowed him to do something like sacrifice Isaac? Did he know how Paul would use that in times to come in Romans 5 and 6? Did he understand the doctrine of sanctification? Did he even understand that he could even be born a son of God? I do not know. Those are pretty late concepts—New Testament type concepts. He may have had an inkling of it from the idea in Genesis 1: 26 that we are made after the God kind, "Let us make man in Our Image..." I do not know how much he actually knew about it, though.

But, what I am getting at here is that Abraham did not have the Bible with all these doctrines laid out for us to understand. What did he have that allowed him to say, "*Okay God, I will go kill my son*"? (I am sure that you are all screaming the answer at me!) He had a relationship with God. He understood God's nature—His character.

This was totally out of the blue to him. But, as Brian brought out that Abraham did not argue with God. He said, "*Yes Lord! Isaac! Pack some wood we are going!*" There was no hesitation because he knew God. He knew that God's character was not consonant with sacrificing someone on an altar like that. It was a type of what would happen with Jesus Christ. But, God would never demand one of us to do something like that.

God was not a God of child sacrifice, which He obviously condemns later on in the book. God would never ask man to do such a heinous thing, and then have him do it. He was testing Abraham's faith. He was testing Abraham's true understanding of God's nature. Of what he understood of what God is.

So, Abraham may have to learn some of the doctrines in the kingdom! I do not think it will take him long at all! Why? Because he knows God. You say, "Oh Yes! That makes sense!"

Of course, he has already made it, so those doctrines are not incumbent upon him to know

making it into the kingdom, because he lived them already. He lived the doctrines even though he may not have been able to formulate them into words. Because, he had a relationship with God—he knew God's nature—and stood for righteousness.

And, Jesus Christ later said very much the same thing, and as an example we are supposed to emulate a scripture my dad just read last time: "I come to do your will, O God."

That is what happens when we come to the knowledge of the truth, when we really understand God's nature, that is our response, "Of course, God! I will do anything that you ask because I know that you will never ask me to do anything that is outside of the bounds of your character."

Now, realizing God's nature and submitting to Him does not guarantee that we will know the truth about everything. That is true from the example of Abraham. But, it will provide the basis for learning it.

Do you know what this is call in the Bible? I will give you two scriptures. One is the first half of Psalm 111:10:

Psalm 111:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...

And then Proverbs 1:7 and repeated several times thereafter in Proverbs:

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...

Once we begin to adjust our thinking to account for God's primacy, and His involvement in everything, then we are well on our way to having the world view that can discern not only the true from the false, but also the essential from the trivial.

So, in other words, we will be able both to determine what is true, and to prioritize the information properly. I hope that this has helped to broaden our understanding of why Jesus defined eternal life as:

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

Knowing the nature of God, knowing what God is like, knowing His character, is the absolute foundation for everything spiritual. Without knowing God and His character, and His plan, and His mind, and His will—without an ongoing relationship with Him—there is no hope of knowing the answers to any of the big basic questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? What is going on? Where is life headed? Where is this world headed? What is my destiny? You cannot know these things without knowing God, because that is where it all begins.

I want to end here in I John 5: 20-21. This is another "We know..." statement: Listen to how he closes this book; notice this concluding "we know" statement, "Do you know this?"

I John 5:20 And we know that the Son of God has come and has given

us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God [apart from any false God] and eternal life.

And, notice what he says in verse 21:

I John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

Why are the first two commandments about idols? Because it is important! It is the foundation to keep God's commandments, you first have to know the true God. And, then everything follows logically thereafter.

So, the first step in overcoming man's greatest challenge, in distinguishing truth from error, is grasping the true nature of God. The Father sent Jesus Christ to live life as a man, and to do these things:

Reveal the Father

Preach the gospel—the message of truth

Be a perfect example for us to follow

Die for our sins

Make possible a relationship with the Father through the Spirit

Found His Church

Help us to attain eternal life in His kingdom as Mediator between God and man.

There are no doubt many other reasons why He came... And so John gives this advice, "Keep yourself from idols." Idolatry will put a huge crack in the foundation of the truth. Any kind of idolatry will cause the superstructure to crumble. And so, he ends this way:

"Know God, the true God—*that* is eternal life; and keep yourselves from idols."