

The Apostle's Witness: the True Light

Dear Friends,

How do you resolve the tension between the Biblical passages that teach election, God's eternal choice of a special people for His glory, and those passages that at first glance appear to support the idea of universal salvation, or at least the potential for universal salvation? A very few within the broad umbrella of professed Christianity advocate universal salvation, interpreting the election passages as applicable only to discipleship here in time. The most common effort to reconcile the two aspects of Scripture is perhaps the Arminian view of salvation. In this view God loves all of humanity, Jesus died for all of humanity, and God really "wishes" the salvation of all humanity. If God is God and, according to Scripture is quite capable of doing what He "wishes" to do, how do advocates of this theological system explain the obvious fact of Scripture that all of humanity—in fact a very small portion of humanity according to their own teachings—will ever be saved? This school of religious thought explains the discrepancy by their emphasis on man's role in salvation. God did "his share," and the final outcome is up to you. It was reported that someone questioned Martin Luther's emphasis on God's grace with the question, "But what is man's part in salvation?" to which Luther replied, "Man does the sinning, and God does the saving." When John wrote that the true Light that came into the world "lighteth every man," what did he intend to teach? We may rightly say that the Incarnation shines the light of God's moral character brighter onto the landscape of human ethics than any other single event in human history, but is this what John had in mind in this passage? A major issue in the first generation of the New Testament era had to do with the question of background, including both race and culture, and salvation. Does God save Jews one way and Gentiles another way? Does He save Gentiles at all other than Gentiles who convert to Judaism? Must a person become a Jewish proselyte before he can become a legitimate Christian? Are Jews inherently "more Christian" than Gentiles? These questions surface often in the New Testament documents. Given the generally accepted fact that John wrote his writings late in the first century (as opposed to the other New Testament letters that were written near the middle of the first century), John would have known all about these questions at the time that he wrote his letters. One question should be asked when investigating any of the apparent universal passages. Does the universal term intend to identify all humans individually and without exception, or does it intend to include all kinds of humanity without exception? If we interpret the term as inclusive of every individual belonging to the human race, we must explain the multitude of inconsistencies that such an interpretation imposes upon the New Testament. If we interpret the term as referring to all kinds of people, various races, cultures, social standing, etc., what are the implications? One interpretation faces rather strong and wilting contradiction when compared with the broad teachings of the New Testament. The other harmonizes rather smoothly and comfortably. May we glean our beliefs from Scripture rather than imposing our preconceptions onto Scripture, Joe Holder

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There was a man sent from God, whose name was John The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. ([Joh 1:6-9](#))

In this study we shall examine the closing sentence of our study verses, "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." Throughout the New Testament various expressions appear that many folks interpret as a universal expression. In many cases, if the universal interpretation were true, universal salvation would be inevitable. Without exception all of humanity

would be saved. However the clear teachings of Scripture regarding the real existence of hell and eternal punishment for the wicked refutes the notion of universal salvation. How then do we interpret the apparent universal passages so as to respect the contextual teaching of the passage as well as harmonize them with the clear teaching that all of humanity will not be saved? Many Christians sadly gloss over Biblical passages without seriously applying their minds to the passage. There is a vast distinction between casual and devotional reading and study of the Bible. For example, even the most basic of New Testament Greek dictionaries contain eight distinct definitions for the word typically translated in our English Bibles as "world." Despite amazing and obvious contradictions, in order to foster their preferred notion, many Bible students will restrict the word to one or two meanings. When Caesar Augustus issued a decree that all the world should be taxed, are we to seriously presume that his tax edict included all of humanity that lived on Planet Earth at the time, much less all of humanity that ever lived or ever would live? What world fell under Augustus' domain? Over what world did he exercise rule? Similar inherent restrictions appear in almost every passage where these universal terms appear. We commonly use such terms as the "political world," the "religious world" and other similar terms. How do we use the word world in these sentences? We refer to a logical unit of existence or activity. Most often the New Testament uses the word in precisely the same manner. This sentence has been called the Quaker's text because of their principle teaching that every human being is born with a unique inner light that enables them to relate to God. Based on the Quaker teaching regarding "inner light," they hold that a person may access this "light" by meditation. The construction of the sentence that lends itself to this view is that the true Light enlightens every person who is born, every person who "cometh into the world." In this context John is emphasizing the Incarnation, God coming into the world in the form of a man, the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The alternate interpretation of the passage, strongly supported by linguistic syntax and by similar passages, especially in John's writings, is this. "The true Light comes into the world; He lights every man." Given the intense focus that John places on the Incarnation in this context, this interpretation seems most likely. Either interpretation must be viewed and applied so as to harmonize with other passages in Scripture. Does every person who is born into the family of man come into the world with a unique "inner light" that he may readily access by meditation?

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light....
([Eph 5:8](#))

Notice that Paul did not merely say that the Ephesians at one time lived in darkness; he forcefully says that they were darkness personified. In such a state of pervasive and personal darkness we cannot claim that such a person possesses "inner light." How do we view "lighteth every man" in this verse? Does John claim that Jesus' coming into the world as God Incarnate literally enlightens every human being? First of all, how universal can-or should-we make the word "world"? If we attempt to view it as referring to literally every human being past, present, and future, the true "universal" interpretation of the word, how do we explain the lightening impact that the Incarnation made on humans who were born, lived, and died prior to the Incarnation? Thus we must immediately eliminate past humanity from the term. It immediately ceases to be a true universal term. Then if we apply the implications of [Eph 5:18](#) and other similar passages to the text, we must stop short of a universal enlightenment, even for humans born during and after the Incarnation. In terms of spiritual and moral light there are human beings who simply manifest no such light in their life. I would readily acknowledge-in fact affirm-that the Incarnation manifests God's moral character so dramatically that all of subsequent humanity is left without excuse for their moral decadence. However, when faced with the obvious question, "Would humanity have been any less excusable for their lack of morality had the Incarnation not occurred?" I must conclude that they would be equally inexcusable apart from the Incarnation. In [Ro 1:18-23](#) Paul affirms two major themes. First, God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all sin. This divine wrath against sin did not begin with the Incarnation. It has existed and it has been readily visible from

the beginning, Paul's precise point in this passage. Secondly, in this context Paul affirms the existence of divine wrath against sin based on the creation, not based on the Incarnation. How then should we interpret "every man" in this verse? In the electronic edition of Strong's dictionary of New Testament Greek words the following note appears: Additional Information: ... "the whole world has gone after him" Did all the world go after Christ? "then went all Judea, and were baptized of him in Jordan." Was all Judea, or all Jerusalem, baptized in Jordan? "Ye are of God, little children", and the whole world lieth in the wicked one". Does the whole world there mean everybody? The words "world" and "all" are used in some seven or eight senses in Scripture, and it is very rarely the "all" means all persons, taken individually. The words are generally used to signify that Christ has redeemed some of all sorts-some Jews, some Gentiles, some rich, some poor, and has not restricted His redemption to either Jew or Gentile ...-C.H. Spurgeon from a sermon on Particular Redemption." Spurgeon's point is obvious. We may rightly interpret this word so as to refer to all kinds of humanity (Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, etc.). Does this principle find support in the New Testament? We occasionally hear the term, or perhaps use it ourselves, "the universal priesthood of the believer." What do we mean by the term? We indicate by this term that every believer, regardless of race, culture, or societal class, has the privilege of priesthood with God. He/She may go directly to God in prayer without the necessity to seek an intermediate advocate. In New Testament spiritual administration God does not appoint a unique class of priests, such as the Levites under the Old Testament. Some will interpret the sentence to mean that the Incarnation potentially makes light available to all of humanity. However, this interpretation simply falls short of the basic language of the verse. The verse does not present potential but fact. Without straining the passage or creating tension between it and other passages, we may safely conclude that God Incarnate, the true Light that came into His creation as Mary's son-and God's unique-and one and-only-one-of-a-kind-Son-enlightens all kinds of people. Notice the cultural, racial, and societal breadth of John's description of the saved who shall inhabit heaven at the end.

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.... (Re 5:9)

We may clearly and safely conclude that all of those who shall participate in this eternal joy of redemption were "lighted" by the Light of life, and shall for eternity enjoy basking in that Light. Based on Paul's exhortation in [Eph 5:8](#), I urge each of us to "...walk as children of the light." Live up to your light. Act like a child of God, a child of Light. Manifest by your daily words and deeds that you are truly living in the Light of the life that God has given you in Christ.

Elder Joe Holder