

Is Christ Our Absolute?

By Michael Clark and George Davis

One of the saddest indictments against the church in these last days is its failure to remain unified in Christ. Because of this disunity and constant bickering between the ranks of Christendom, much of the world believes that Jesus and His teachings are a joke. A Christian missionary once asked Mahatma Gandhi why he was not a Christian. His answer was very revealing, "I would believe in your Christ if it was not for you Christians."

As you have sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me. And the glory which you gave me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them, as you have loved me. (John 17:18-23 KJ2000)

Christian denominations and sects have fought and even killed one another for years to establish their doctrines as being absolute and necessary for all who would believe in God; adult vs. infant baptism, sprinkling vs. emersion, altar call vs. sacramental salvation, priestly vs. pastoral authority, sola scriptura vs. papal infallibility, and so on. Let's call these beliefs "ethics." You obey them and you are thought to be "ethical." You go against them and you are accused of being "unethical." Today there are over 200,000 sects and denominations and each one of them demands obedience to their doctrines, beliefs and hierarchal structure if you are to be worthy of fellowship with them. Many of them believe that all people outside their group are "lost and going to hell." One person's assessment of all this was, "Everyone must be going to hell then. Though you might be judged righteous by one group, you are judged a sinner by 199,000 others. If we put our faith in consensus, we must admit that we are all wrong by the very definition of the word."

So the thinking person, the one who does not blindly follow the crowd, looks at this and wonders if having the right doctrine and system of belief is really an absolute. If it were so, wouldn't there be over 200,000 contradicting "absolutes" that are not--by their lack

of a common consensus--an absolute at all? Like it or not, absolute implies unity or oneness.

The religions of men demand supremacy and control over the lives of their adherents, yet all the while they confess that there is only one God. How can it be both ways? Absolutism belongs to only One and is not subject to the opinions of the crowd or the demands of a select group of hierarchal leaders.

In the scriptures we read that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. What was this one act of faith on the part of Abraham what put him in such favor with the Creator of all things? He obeyed Him and took his promised son up Mount Moriah and meant to kill the child as an offering to the One who gave Isaac to him. He knew that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. If He only gives and is subject to our wills in what He can take away, then He is not Lord and we are mere religious pagans. If we have hedged ourselves in with a set of rules that keeps us safe from such an "arbitrary" God like the One Abraham knew, are we really His followers?

Often we have heard things like, "If God is love then why do babies die and why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?" "God would not do this..." Or, "God will do that..." Religious zealots and atheists alike put themselves in the place of our sovereign God and presume to limit Him by the thoughts of their finite minds, hoping to gain a consensus from their fellow man. They seem to believe that if they believe in something hard enough and get enough people to agree with them, their thoughts about God will somehow be true and they will have succeeded in making a god after their own image.

So what is our absolute? If it is not group consensus, what is it? Do we who adhere to all the rules and regulations of our religion, or really hold to the One Absolute? That same Absolute that might demand of us (and He does) something that He considers higher than the doctrines of men or mere ethics? What could that one thing be? It takes on as many forms as there are people who still lack that one thing (see Luke 18:18-23). It is called laying down your life and obediently walking in the Spirit.

Jesus fired a shot across the bow of religion when He told Nicodemus, "[Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.](#)" (John 3:7-8 NKJV).

Most of us have a set of rules we think of as "God's will" for our lives. They become our tradition. As it was with the Hebrews of 2000 years ago, so it is today. God said something to a man thousands of years ago and other men have taken it upon themselves to explain, add to and codify those words until they have no semblance to the original intimate conversation between that original man and the One who was his Absolute. In fact, this compounded and contorted record of the conversation has now become the substitute for all men so that they don't have to believe God in a personal way or obey His personal voice whatsoever. They have a kind of proxy faith. In short, faith is no longer demanded of the one who is called a member of the faithful, just adherence to the accepted norm.

Holding to the morays of the crowd seems to be the safest way to exist. If you are a good follower you will get strokes from leaders and the admiration of the "faithful," but to obey an Absolute other than the one they hold is dangerous. Jesus, Paul, Stephen and millions of other believers found that out. Jesus obeyed the voice of His Father and ignored the regulations and traditions of the mob when they conflicted (and they conflicted most of the time). He healed on the Sabbath. Sacrilege they cried! He ate with unwashed hands. He was defiled! He dined with sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors. "He's a winebibber . . . a gluttonous man . . . a friend of sinners!" they cried. Who accused Him? The Father? No, for it was He whom Jesus was obeying while doing these things. Did His disciples accuse Him? They often were confused by His actions so that they were at the point of doing so. Speaking of the religious leaders they asked, "Lord! Don't you know that you have offended them?"

Jesus went against the accepted absolute, the universal consensus of what was considered right and good by men. If He had not, He would have been disobedient to the One that is good, God Himself. He would have failed His mission as that Spotless Lamb of God to be offered up for the sins of men. He could have been perfectly obedient to that other "absolute," the universal consensus of Judaism, and received their honor, but in the end lost everything.

Yes, to be a person who walks by faith is a risky thing. You are perceived as dangerous to the leadership of man's organizations, because they cannot control you any longer. Then you are suspect to the crowd because you are not obeying their leader. If you follow the wind of the Spirit, who knows what you might do next? What's

worse, you might succeed in infecting another one of the "faithful" with your perceived "rebellious" ways.

Make no mistake, it always boils down to mob-consensus verses the Absolute. Jesus was killed by a factious mob that had never before been unified. There ground of unity was the betrayal and death of the Anointed One. Surely some were saying, "Isn't it wonderful how we are all finally ecumenically coming together?" While others sang, "We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord!" The truth is that Jesus was killed by orthodoxy. Barbara Brown wrote:

Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God's will from their own. Temple police are always a bad sign. When chaplains start wearing guns and hanging out at the sheriff's office, watch out. Someone is about to have no king but Caesar. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *A Deadly Mix*)

Seeing this, it was Søren Kierkegaard's habit to say, "The crowd is error." He further warned, "When truth conquers with the help of 10,000 yelling men, even supposing that what is victorious is true, a far greater untruth is inculcated by virtue of the manner of their victory." It is a false hope and a false security that looks to the crowd. Jesus never looked to men for guidance and approval. In fact He often shunned the adoring crowds because he knew what was really in their hearts (see John 2:24-25).

Kierkegaard also observed:

Those who speak to the crowd, coveting its approval, those who deferentially bow and scrape before it must be regarded as being worse than prostitutes.

Are we proposing that all men should cast off all restraint? Absolutely not! That is what a mob does. This is pure hedonism. So what are we saying? We are saying if you are to walk in pure faith like the faith of Jesus, Abraham, Paul, Stephen and others who were sent out by God according to His purposes, you come under a greater Restraint than that of the ruling hierarchy and the consensus of the crowd. You no longer first consider what going against them will cost you and then back away from following the voice of God. You no longer care which side of your piece of bread the butter is on.

You become a person of real faith instead of a mere religious person holding to the safe way, obeying the traditions of men.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote in *Provocations*,

But faith's paradox is precisely this, that the single individual is higher than the universal [the crowd], that the individual determines his relationship to the universal through his relation to the Absolute (i.e. God), not his relation to the Absolute through his relation to the universal. That is, to live by faith means that one has an absolute duty to God and to God alone. In this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the Absolute – the God who commands. This duty alone is absolute and for this reason the ethical, for the person of faith, is relegated to the relative. In fear and trembling, this is faith's paradox – the suspension of the ethical.

Any way we look at it, Abraham's story contains a suspension of the ethical. He has, as the single individual, become higher than the universal. This is the paradox of faith that cannot be explained.

So is all lost if we walk by faith. Is it all cost and no gain? Not at all, but the nature of what we count as gain changes. Paul spoke of this wonderful path we are called to because he knew not only the cost of following the true Absolute, but he knew the glory of walking by faith:

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11 NKJV)

Later, Paul was speaking of his encounter with the Church's Jewish leadership in Jerusalem and he evidently was not impressed. "But of these who seemed to be somebody, (whatsoever they were, it makes no matter to me: God accepts no man's

person:) for they who seemed to be somebody in conference added nothing to me" (Galatians 2:6 KJ2000).

Paul knew that to serve in the tabernacles of men and their religious systems was to deny God His place in his life and to deny faith itself. Thus the writer of Hebrews concludes:

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings; for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited their adherents. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come. (Hebrews 13:9-14 RSVA)

Going against the consensus is costly. To Timothy Paul wrote, "This you know, that all they who are in Asia are turned away from me; of whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Timothy 1:15 KJ2000). Eventually Paul lost everyone that was faithful to His ministry.

At my first defense no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. However the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:16-18 KJ2000)

This is the way of the cross, and the servant is not greater than his Master.

Behold, the hour comes, yea, is now come, that you shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world. (John 16:32-33 KJ2000)

God demands a choice if we are to be counted as His faithful and that choice is made daily as we walk by faith in Him alone. Again we quote Kierkegaard who seemed to have a handle on the difference between the consensus and truth, ". . .the larger the crowd, the more probable that that which it praises is folly, and the more improbable that it is truth; and the most improbable of all that it is any eternal truth" (*Purity of Heart*).