

# THE DEITY OF GOD

PART FIVE

## THE RELATIVE AND THE ABSOLUTE

ONE of our great difficulties in understanding Scripture comes about through our unwillingness or inability to distinguish between the relative and the absolute<sup>(1)</sup>. Because of this, we come up against seeming contradictions, and the general tendency is to accept the relative rather than the absolute. Both are true, but in different circumstances, and it is necessary that we should take these differing circumstances into account.

For example, let us note that the Scriptures speak of Abel, Lot, Zechariah, Joseph (husband of Mary) and Joseph of Arimathea (and others) as being *just or righteous*—the word is the same in the Greek—yet Paul is emphatic in declaring that “Not one is just, not even one” for “All sinned and are wanting of the glory of God” (Rom.3:10,23). How can both of these conditions be true? The answer is that the first is relative while the second is absolute.

The righteousness of each of the men we have mentioned is being judged against a particular set of circumstances operative at the time he lived. The righteousness of Abel, for instance, is in connection with the oblation which he made to God, and is in contrast to the unrighteousness of Cain in respect to his offering. Lot was righteous in respect to his witness to God in Sodom, and to his keeping aloof from the general wickedness prevailing in the city. Zechariah was without blame in the manner in which he conducted his priestly office, as distinct from the generally corrupt priesthood of his day, of which Ananias and Caiaphas were later examples. But none of these righteous men was completely without sin in his life, for when Paul contemplates the whole of humanity against the background of the absolute righteousness of God, he makes no exceptions, but finds them all wanting. “Not one is just, not even one . . . all sinned and are wanting of the glory of God.”

### THE WORD OF THE CROSS

It is the apostle Paul who consistently proclaims the absolute; the other writers of Scripture generally confine themselves to the relative. This is because it is Paul alone who speaks of the *Word of the Cross* (1 Cor.1:18), and until this truth is proclaimed, the absolute cannot even be revealed, let alone understood. Indeed, it is not until after his preaching of the Cross that Paul can even mention the purpose of God, which has a culmination that is gloriously absolute, for the end of God's purpose is that He may be “All in all.”

It is generally accepted that the Corinthian letters, and also Galatians, were written before Romans. In Corinthians, the word of the cross is declared to be, to us who are being saved, “the power of God,” and this links up with Romans 1:16, where Paul proclaims an evangel which is “God's power for salvation.” In this evangel, “a righteousness of God is being revealed,” and this righteousness is so absolute that it makes all humanity unrighteous. “All sinned and are wanting of the glory of God.” From this, it follows immediately that no one can justify or save himself; in Paul's evangel the righteousness to which all believers attain is not acquired through works, but by faith alone. It is “a righteousness of God through Jesus Christ's faith, for all, and on all who are believing” (Rom.3:22), and bestowed upon them “gratuitously” (that is, without any cause in themselves that would enable them to lay claim to it). Works are completely excluded, for Paul reckons “a man to be justified by faith apart from works of law.” Indeed, he declares that “by works of law, no flesh at all shall be justified in His (God's) sight, for through law is the recognition of sin” (Rom.3:19-28).

In the writings of James, on the contrary, justification is by works. In the relative context of the kingdom

evangel this is perfectly true. James writes to those who are still under the law (and have, therefore, not yet come to the cross of Christ), for he says, "For anyone who should be keeping the whole law, yet should be tripping in one thing, has become liable for all" (Jas.2:10). But Paul writes to those who are "free from the law" (Gal.3:21-25). It is the very liability of humanity to trip that makes it impossible for a law to be given which can vivify, and which can produce that absolute righteousness which satisfies God. The fault is not in the law, for "the law, indeed, is holy, and the precept holy and just and good" (Rom.7:12), but in the inability of humanity to keep it. Therefore, the promise has to be "out of Jesus Christ's faith," for He alone could keep the law. Now God is able to manifest, *apart from law*, a righteousness of His own through Jesus Christ's faith, and to bestow it freely upon all who believe.

The law can only produce a relative righteousness, for no one can keep the law to perfection. Those who strive to do so may be described as "just," in contrast to their fellows who do not endeavor to keep it. They may even be described as "becoming blameless," as Paul so pictured himself in Philippians 3:6, yet elsewhere he designates himself as "a calumniator and a persecutor and an outrager" and "the foremost of sinners" (1 Tim.1:13-15). The righteousness which is in law is actually one of the things which he deems to be forfeit because of Christ. This is the distinction between the relative and the absolute.

We may perhaps illustrate this by reference to sunspots. These are really masses of brilliant flame, but against the absolute brilliance of the sun itself, they appear as dark spots on the sun's surface—hence the name that is given to them. Against any other background, they would appear as luminaries, not spots. And so it is when the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is in Paul's evangel. Much that appeared before to be righteous, now assumes a different complexion when seen against the glory of God's own righteousness.

### **THE WILL AND PURPOSE OF GOD**

In the letters of Paul, the absolute is consistently being proclaimed, for in them we are introduced to a God Who is seen to be "operating all in accord with the counsel of His will" (Eph.1:11). Can *anything* be more absolute than this? Though in other parts of Scripture, men may appear to have a free choice (for example, Joshua is recorded as saying, "Choose you this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" Joshua 24:15), here in this scripture it is made clear that every choice that men may appear to have is, in reality, subservient to the absolute will of God. And it is in this context that God can speak of a "purpose of the eons"—that is, a purpose which spans the whole of the eons—for such a purpose, to be effective, presupposes the absoluteness of the will of God. Nothing is ever allowed to thwart Him, even for an instant. This makes God's purpose itself absolute, and so Paul is able to refer to it with the definite article, "the purpose of the eons," "*the* purpose of the One Who is operating all in accord with the counsel of His will."

Let us then briefly see how Paul presses home the absolute. In the matter of salvation, for example, whereas the teaching in other parts of Scripture is that "He that shall endure to the consummation, the same shall be saved," with Paul the teaching is, "God wills that *all mankind* be saved, and come into a realization of the truth" and "We rely on the living God, Who is the Saviour of *all mankind*" (1 Tim.2:4 and 4:10).

James makes works a requisite of salvation (James 2:14-26), yet Paul speaks of salvation as being entirely "in grace," and not out of us at all "not of works lest anyone should be boasting." In Paul's evangel, we contribute nothing to our salvation, but find ourselves to be entirely God's achievement (Eph.2:8-10).

In other matters, Paul is equally emphatic. If we want an absolute expression of subjection, we find it in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, where Paul goes to some pains to point out that, in the final analysis, only God Himself may be excluded from those who are to be made subject to His Son. This of necessity, includes the Adversary, who in other parts of Scripture is given some measure of control and influence. It also far exceeds the relative dominion given to man in Genesis 1:28-31 and Psalm 8:4-8. Even when this is enlarged in Hebrews 2:5-8, we still do not see all subject to Him.

Again, if we want an absolute expression of vivification, we find it in 1 Corinthians 15:22. For even as, in Adam, all are dying, thus also, in Christ, shall all be vivified. In other parts of Scripture, vivification is relative. "For even as the Father is rousing the dead and vivifying, thus the Son also is vivifying *whom He will*" (John 5:21). In Revelation 20:6 it is only those who have part in the former resurrection, and whose names, consequently, are written in the scroll of life, on whom the second death has no jurisdiction.

### THE DEITY AND THE "ALL"

The tendency, mentioned earlier, to accept the relative rather than the absolute, often means that we fail to give full value to the absolute when we come up against it. Nowhere has this been more frequently demonstrated than in the text quoted in the last paragraph (1 Cor. 15:22). The words of Scripture have been twisted in the minds of many sincere believers to read, "For even as, in Adam, all are dying, thus also shall *all in Christ* be vivified." This would limit vivification to the believers of today. No, the "all" in the second half of the comparison is just as comprehensive as the "all" in the first part. In Adam ALL are dying; in Christ ALL will be vivified. Unless this is the true meaning, Christ's sacrifice becomes, in part, unavailing.

Others, while accepting the all-embracing nature of the word "all," have questioned the true meaning of the word "vivify" (or "make alive" in the King James Version). They have qualified it to mean "rouse from the dead," with the possibility of dying again, as Lazarus was roused. But in the context of the whole passage from verse 20 to verse 28, which begins with the rousing of Christ from the dead and ends with God being All in all, and includes within it the final destruction of death itself, such a restriction of meaning of the word "vivify" is not admissible. The basis of comparison is Christ's own rousing from the dead. We know that He dies no more, hence neither do those who are vivified in Him.

A similar reluctance to give full value to the absolute is seen in the common interpretation of the passage in 1 Timothy 2:4, "God wills that all mankind be saved." In the minds of many, the overriding will of God is reduced to a wish or a desire, in part dependent upon the wills of mankind, the thought being that "God will have all men to be saved, if they will only let Him." How far short is this from the truth of Scripture, and how detracting from the conception of the deity of God, Whom Paul declares to be "The Saviour of all mankind, *especially* of those who believe!" Many would make Him the Saviour *only* of those who believe.

People who think in this way, would also, of necessity, put a restriction on the absolute expression of reconciliation as found in Colossians 1:20, where no being in the whole universe is excluded. God is making peace with all, both in heaven and earth, through the blood of Christ's cross.

The whole passage of Colossians 1, verses 15 to 20, is full of expressions that are absolute, both in the field of creation and in the field of reconciliation. Notice how frequently the word *all* occurs, and how, in three cases, it is expanded to make it quite clear that nothing is to be left out. In our quotation of the scripture, we have put the word "all" in capitals, to bring it out, and have shown the three expansions in italics.

"Who is the Image of the invisible God, Firstborn of every creature, for in Him is ALL created, *that in the heavens and that on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, or lordships, or sovereignties, or authorities, ALL is Created through Him and for Him, and He is before ALL, and ALL has its cohesion in Him.*

"And He is the Head of the body, the ecclesia, Who is Sovereign, Firstborn from among the dead, that in ALL He may be becoming first, *for in Him the entire complement delights to dwell, and through Him to reconcile ALL to Him (making peace through the blood of His cross), through Him, whether those on the earth or those in the heavens.*"

A parallel scripture, but with a vital difference, is Romans 11:36, "Seeing that out of Him and through Him and for Him is ALL: to Him be the glory for the eons! Amen!"

The vital difference between this passage and the one in Colossians lies in the phrase “out of Him.” The scripture in Romans refers to God Himself; the one in Colossians refers to the Son of His love. All is out of God, and through Him and for Him; all is through Christ and for Him. Such is the oneness between God and His Son that the “through” and the “for” can be attributed to both; but by the nature of the case, the “out of” must refer to the Father only.

In this passage in Romans, the word “all” is used only once, but it is an absolute expression. Whatever is out of God is “for Him” at the ultimate, and is “through Him” during the intervening period. Nothing gets lost on the way, but is safely brought through all the disruptive factors of the eons until it finds its place in that most absolute of all scriptural expressions, “That God may be ALL in ALL.”

Dare we here limit the completeness of the first ALL? Can we limit the comprehensiveness of the second ALL? If we seek to limit either, we cast doubts on the other.

### **THE WORD OF GOD COMPLETED**

Wherever we turn in Paul’s writings, we find them full of absolutes. That is because he was the one appointed to complete the Word of God (Col.1:25). We note a few more:

“Nothing, consequently, is now condemnation to those in Christ Jesus” (Rom.8:1).

“Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who blesses us with EVERY spiritual blessing among the celestials, in Christ” (Eph.1:3).

“... and subjects ALL under HIS feet, and gives Him, as Head over ALL, to the ecclesia which is His body, the complement by which ALL in ALL is being completed” (Eph.1:22,23).

“Wherefore, also, God highly exalts Him, and graces Him with the name that is above EVERY name, that in the name of Jesus EVERY knee should be bowing, celestial and terrestrial and subterranean, and EVERY tongue should be acclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord, for the glory of God, the Father” (Phil.2:9-11).

Let us conclude this particular article by looking again at Romans 8, from verse 28, “Now we are aware that God is working ALL together for the good of those who are loving God,” who are here defined as those who are called according to His purpose. Actually their calling is the middle stage of their spiritual experience, as outlined in these verses. Before they were called, they were foreknown and predesignated, and after their calling they are justified and glorified. Where, in any of these stages, do any fall away? Where is there any room for failure when God is working ALL together for their good? Any suggestion of this kind immediately casts doubt on the foreknowledge of God, and on His ability to carry through to the end what He has designated beforehand in accord with His purpose.

“How shall He not, together with Him, also be graciously granting US ALL?” (Rom.8:32).

“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor messengers, nor sovereignties, nor the present, nor what is impending, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, *nor any other creation*, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord” (Rom.8:38,39).

What a glorious absolute this is! When asking the question, in verse 35, “What shall be separating us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?” Paul lists seven things which are grievous in themselves, but are the common lot of many in humanity. He deals with them quickly by saying that “in ALL these we are more than conquering through Him Who loves us.” They are all the outcome of man’s own inhumanity to man, and we are granted the strength to deal with these through our faith in God, Who gives us so many evidences of His love for us.

But then Paul goes on to list a series of nine other things which are outside of humanity's control, and then, just in case anything in the wide universe has been omitted, he adds a tenth, "*nor any other creation,*" and gives us an assurance that not one of these, nor all combined, "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

Paul can only say this because the power of the Deity is absolute, and because God is ever true to Himself. Let our appreciation of the deity of God enhance this assurance in our hearts.

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(1) The dictionary defines *absolute* as "unconditional and unlimited" and *relative* as "having relation to something else." For the purposes of this study, we may regard *absolute* as that which is in accord with, or depends solely upon, the Deity, and in which no other factors may intrude. Thus the deity of God will be stressed in every mention of the absolute.

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