



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 48 (July 2009)

Quietism or Pietism?

Philippians 2:12–13

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT WE HUMANS often tend to be creatures of extremes? One example of this in biblical matters is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Another example, of course, is the doctrine of election and its many related topics. One extreme is Arminianism (if not Semi-Pelagianism or even full-blown Pelagianism), which all see man's will as either unfallen, or at least not *totally* marred, by the fall and therefore cooperating with God in salvation. The other extreme is the equally unbiblical Hyper-Calvinism, which insists that the process is so much "of God" that Christians shouldn't even evangelize.

This month's TOTT addresses still another example and the Scripture texts used to support each. The two extremes are *Quietism* and *Pietism*. The debate is actually an old one, dating back centuries. How exactly do we live the Christian life? Is it by God's power or our effort? Is it by *passive* trust in God or by *active* obedience to God? Or is it rather a combination of both? Let's first look at each of these and then try to find the balance in Scripture.

Quietism

The most famous axiom in Quietism, one that sums it up nicely, is, "Let go and let God." Another is, "I can't; God can." Also dubbed the "deeper life," or "higher life," movement, Quietism teaches that Christian living is simply a passive submission to God, who will live life totally for us. Popularized by the old Quakers, other advocates included the Keswicks and the extremely troubling Charles Finney. The most famous teacher of all was Quaker Hannah Whitall Smith, whose book, *The Chris-*

tian's Secret of a Happy Life, has become one of the main treatises on this teaching. In it she writes:

To state it in brief, I would just say that man's part is to trust and God's part is to work. . . . Plainly the believer can do nothing but trust; while the Lord, in whom he trusts, actually does the work intrusted to Him. . . . We do not do anything, but He does it. . . . clay is put into the potter's hands, and then lies passive there, submitting itself to all the turnings and overturnings of the potter's hands upon it. There is really nothing else to be said about the clay's part. . . . What can be said about man's part in this great work but that he must continually surrender himself and continually trust? But when we come to God's side of the question, what is there that may not be said as to the manifold and wonderful ways in which He accomplishes the work intrusted to Him? It is here that the growing comes in. The lump of clay would never grow into a beautiful vessel if it stayed in the clay-pit for thousands of years. But once put into the hands of a skilful potter, and, under his fashioning, it grows rapidly into a vessel to his honor. And so the soul, abandoned to the working of the Heavenly Potter, is changed rapidly from glory to glory into the image of the Lord by His Spirit.¹

Now, while God is indeed the Potter and we are the clay (Rom. 9:21)—although that image actually refers specifically to election, not sanctification—and while Galatians 2:20—another favorite verse of the quietist—declares "yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," Quietism takes it to the extreme. It maintains that the Christian is to

put forth no effort whatsoever in holy living, that God does it all. For the quietist, in fact, it is futile and even unspiritual to fight against sin or discipline oneself to produce good works because it “gets in God’s way.”

As is true of Smith’s book, a simple Internet “Google” search on “let go and let God” (with the quotation marks) exposes a serious deficiency of this teaching. A random reading of a few dozen of the 159,000 hits I received, for example, quickly demonstrated that such teaching is based mostly on anecdotes and feelings. One finds a lot of personal experience, poetry, and just downright mysticism, but Scripture exposition is virtually nonexistent.

The simple fact is that the Christian life is not *solely* about “letting go and letting God.” It is not a life in which *only* God is working. Paul wrote, for example, “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Paul had not put himself in neutral and was not casually living the Christian life. Rather he was “pressing” toward the heavenly goal. While the Christian life is certainly a life of *dependency*, it is not a life of *passivity*.

“Press” is *diōkō*, to chase, to pursue eagerly, to try to obtain. It’s also in the present tense, showing continuous action. The Greeks used this word to speak of a hunter earnestly pursuing his prey, an attacker pursuing the enemy, and an athlete endeavoring to reach the finish line. Using the same word, Paul also wrote that we are to “fight the good fight of faith” and “follow [*diōkō*] after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness” (1 Tim. 6:11–12). All this obviously indicates significant effort.

Even more graphically, in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 Paul pictures the Christian life by comparing it with the Isthmian games, which were actually held in Corinth, so his readers immediately understood what he was saying. Contestants in the games had to prove rigorous training for ten months and spent the last month of training in Corinth itself, where they underwent supervised workouts in the gymnasium and athletic fields every day.

The Christian, therefore, is not a *spectator* at “the games,” but rather a *participant*. He isn’t to sit on the sidelines eating popcorn watching the Holy Spirit do all the work. The Christian life is a life of commitment, discipline, and struggle. We’re in a no holds barred war. That is why Paul wrote that the Christian is to put on the spiritual armor of God to prepare for battle (Eph. 6:12–20; cf. 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7). No general fights the war by himself for his men; he leads and guides them as they fight. So, while Quietism flows from the purest of motives, it is not based upon sound biblical exposition and “comparing Scripture with Scripture.”²

Pietism

Like the other side of a coin, Pietism could not be more opposite to Quietism. Pietism is a life of all out effort, giving 100 percent exertion during every waking moment. It

is the life of self-discipline, strict obedience, study, and service. The key to the pietist is found in verses such as, “Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1), and, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (Jas. 2:17).

Reacting against the dead orthodoxy of many Protestant churches, Pietism arose in Germany late in the 17th Century. Credited as the “Father of Pietism,” Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) became convinced (and rightly so) of the need for moral and religious reform within German Lutheranism and so wrote *Pia desideria* (*Pious Wishes*) in 1675. Various strains of Pietism developed over the years in other countries, and the movement dramatically effected several groups, such as the Mennonites, as well as John Wesley and therefore Methodism and the Holiness movement.

Like Quietism, Pietism has several praiseworthy aspects, but its inherent danger is the extreme that it usually goes to, namely, legalism. What frequently occurs is that certain practices are arbitrarily chosen as being unholy. Historically, for example, pietists dogmatically declared that card playing, the theater, “worldly” literature, certain kinds of dress, and other practices were unholy. Such teaching still exists today among some groups. The Amish took this so far, of course, that electricity, automobiles, and other modern conveniences and dress are “not plain” and therefore forbidden.

Now, we do not criticize the motives here. On the contrary. To be a Christian clearly implies and demands a changed life—each of us is a “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17). But to create our own list of things that are either spiritual or unspiritual, when Scripture simply does not address those things, is a form of legalism. Sadly, byproducts of Pietism are self-righteousness, pride, inconsistency, and even hypocrisy. All this results because spiritual *living* is divorced from spiritual *power*, self-effort replaces Spirit control, and personal *preference* trumps divine *precept*.

Finding the Balance

Warren Wiersbe offers this practical illustration of these “competing” views:

What quarterback would say to his team, “OK, men, just let go and let the coach do it all!” On the other hand, no quarterback would say, “Listen to me and forget what the coach says!” Both extremes are wrong.³

It is in our text, therefore, that we discover Paul’s answer to this dilemma: **Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.**

At first reading, that doesn't look like a resolution to the problem at all. In fact, it strikes us as a staggering contradiction! Paul first commands that *we* are to work and then says that is *God* doing the work. First he's a pietist and then a quietist! How does that help the issue? That is precisely why these verses have often been a battleground.

Significantly, however, note that Paul does not go on and try to rationally harmonize the two extremes. Why? Because no one can. He simply states that both are true. Let's examine the wonderful paradox of this verse, which is, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it, "one of the most perfect summaries of the Christian life to be found anywhere,"⁴ and then see how they work together.

Recognizing Our Effort

Our effort in Christian living is stated in the words **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling**. As most commentators point out, the first thing to note here is that the verse does not say to work *for* salvation, but to work *out* salvation. Salvation does not come by works, rather works (obedience) are the evidence of salvation.

Work out translates a single Greek word, *katergazomai*, to work out, accomplish, or carry out a task until it is finished. Greek authority Kenneth Wuest well illustrates:

We say, "The student worked out a problem in arithmetic." That is, he carried the problem to its ultimate conclusion. This is the way it is used here. The Philippians are exhorted to carry their salvation to its ultimate conclusion, namely, Christlikeness.⁵

Intensifying this basic idea is the fact that the verb is in the present tense, indicating continuous action, and the imperative mood, indicating a command. We could therefore expand the translation to read "continually keep on carrying out the task of completing your salvation until it's finished." Again, this is not working *for* but working *out* salvation. It is a command to diligent effort in obedient living that results from conversion and God's empowering as He works in us, which, as we will see in our next section, is the very point Paul goes on to add in verse 13.

Paul elsewhere repeatedly makes the point of our effort in Christian living. In addition to the verses cited earlier, he wrote to the Corinthians, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). He commanded the Ephesians to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called" (Eph. 4:1) and goes on to list the attributes of such a calling (vs. 2-3). For the Colossians he even provided a list of negative traits to avoid and positive ones to cultivate as they labored (Col. 3:5-17).

What does Paul then mean when he adds that this labor is with **fear and trembling**? While the "let go and let God" mentality would have us sit back, kick off our shoes, and forget about our cares, Paul says something quite the

contrary. Puritan Charles Bridges perfectly defines the "fear of the Lord" when he writes: "It is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law. His wrath is so bitter, and His love so sweet; that hence springs an earnest desire to please Him, and—because of the danger of coming short from his own weakness and temptations—a holy watchfulness and *fear*, 'that he might not sin against Him.'"⁶

The phrase **fear and trembling** appears, for example in Ephesians 6:5, describing how the slave (or employee) is to obey his master. This attitude is not cowering in fear, but rather a respect for another's position and authority. Deeper, however, is the thought of our fear of neglecting our responsibility and in so doing disobeying the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 2:3, Paul writes that he came to the Corinthians in **fear and trembling**. This was a fear of failing both the Corinthians and the Lord. Likewise, then, to **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling** means we labor with the attitude that we do not want to fail our Lord.

Realizing God's Empowering

So, does all the labor Paul speaks of flow from self-effort? Do we in our own strength and will power just grit our teeth and "keep on keepin' on"? No, for Paul goes on to add, **For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure**.

Worketh is the Greek, *energeō* (English "energy" and "energize") and means "to be at work, to effect something." It's extremely significant, as one Greek authority tells us, that the noun *energeia*, "energy, active power, operation" "in the [Septuagint] (as in the NT) is used almost exclusively for the work of divine or demonic powers."⁷ In Ephesians 1:19, for example, it's God's power that is "working" (*energeia*) in us, while in 2:2, Satan is said to be working (*energeō*).

Another authority agrees, adding that this usage is predominant in the entire word group: "Only in Philippians 2:13 does the active *energein* [present active participle of *energeō*] refer to human activity,"⁸ but we note that even then it's *still* God Who is working. So why is it that we can work, why is it that we have the strength to labor and be victorious? Because God first is at work. Let us briefly note four principles.

First, the *Person* of the work again is God, not us. "The divine activity is literally an in-working (*ho energeōn*)," writes pastor and commentator Robert Gromacki. "The literal translation of this participle is 'the one who energizes.' God's inner work deals with character, and man's outer work manifests his conduct."⁹ *Second*, the *place* of the work is found in the words **in you**. God is at work in every aspect of our being. *Third*, the *purpose* of all this work is both to **will** and **do** what He purposes. Here is God's sovereignty in action. *Fourth*, the *point* of

this work, the ultimate reason for it all, is God's **good pleasure**. As Paul declares in Ephesians 1, *everything*—election, predestination, redemption, sealing, and all else—is “to the praise of the glory of His grace.”

Reconciling the Enigma

While these two truths might be viewed as *rationaly contradictory*, they are *spiritually complementary*. As Kenneth Wuest well puts it: “In verse twelve, we have human responsibility, in verse thirteen, divine enablement, a perfect balance which must be kept if the Christian life is to be lived at its best. It is not a ‘let go and let God’ affair. It is a ‘take hold with God’ business.”

To put it another way, this is not a *passive deference* rather a *positive dependence*. It is a mutual cooperation of Holy Spirit power enabling the Christian to labor victoriously. I am always blessed when I read Lehman Strauss. He offers an illustration here that wonderfully pictures how these two principles complement each other:

When I visited the West Indies in 1956, I witnessed American aluminum manufactures removing millions of tons of bauxite from the hills of Jamaica. The rich ore was already there. God had worked it in by some catastrophic movement of nature or through some aging process. Man had only to operate and exploit in order to get the greatest worth out of that which already was his possession. As I watched I observed the process to be anything but simple and easy. It was a costly project. But be certain, the effort was sure to pay off in large dividends. Such, it seems to me, is the idea in the Holy Spirit's words, “work our your own salvation.” It is my possession by gift of divine grace, but as Guy H. King has said: “I am to mine what is already mine,” endeavoring to work out that precious nugget of humility.¹⁰

Neither is our text an isolated one. Paul wrote to the troubled Corinthian church: “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). He likewise wrote the Colossian believers: “Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily” (Col. 1:29). Even in Galatians 2:20, he makes it clear that it is *both*, “I live . . . yet not I.” In all these instances, believers are *striving* while God is *strengthening*.

In closing, Martyn Lloyd-Jones well sums up this issue when he writes:

. . . desires for a fuller and better and more perfect Christian life are not self-generated or self-produced. When you have a desire to do something

good, or a desire to pray, it is God who energizes it in your will, God working in us both to will and to do. He is the energy and power also in our breathing, in our ability to live this life. . . . The initiative is His from beginning to end. It is God who began [it], it is He who keeps it going, and it is He who is making it perfect.

And yet you and I are told to work it out, we are told to do something. Is this a contradiction? I suggest that it is not and we can put it like this. God carries on this work within us by placing these desires and powers in us. In other words, God is perfecting us, He is bringing His great purpose to pass in our Christian life, not by action upon us in a passive state or condition, but by controlling our will, our desires, our thoughts and aspiration, and everything. It is God who starts and He makes us do it. I do not say that God forces our will. Rather, God does something more gracious: He persuades our will, and gives us holy desires, so that we will those things, and our desire and ambition is to work it out because it is “God which worketh in us.”¹¹

Amen!

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

- ¹ *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (Revell, 1952), electronic edition, “Introduction” (italics in the original).
- ² This is the principle of *analogia scripturae*, “the analogy of Scripture,” that is, comparing Scripture with Scripture. This is further explained by *Scripturam ex Scriptura explicandam esse* (“Scripture is to be explained by Scripture”), which is also related to *Analogia Fide* (“Analogy of Faith,” i.e., Bible doctrine is to be interpreted in relation to the basic message of the Bible, which is the Gospel, the content of faith, or simply “The Faith” (cf. 1 Cor.2:13, 15:1-4).
- ³ *Bible Exposition Commentary*, electronic edition, on Philippians 3:14.
- ⁴ *The Life of Joy and Peace: An Exposition of Philippians* (Baker Books, 1999), p. 160.
- ⁵ *Wuest's Word Studies*, electronic edition on Philippians 3:12-13.
- ⁶ Charles Bridges, *Exposition of the Book of Proverbs* (Zondervan, 1959), pp. 3-4.
- ⁷ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975, 1986), Vol. 3, p. 1147.
- ⁸ Gerhard Kittel (editor), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. II, p. 653.
- ⁹ *Stand United in Joy: An Exposition of Philippians* (Kress Christian Publications, 2002), p. 106.
- ¹⁰ *Devotional Studies in Philippians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1959, 1970), p.121-122.
- ¹¹ *The Life of Joy and Peace*, pp. 169-170.

