



FAITH AND EFFORT • Kenneth Prior

We know that God is working in us to make us holy. What are we supposed to do? What part do we people play in the sanctifying process? Traditionally, the church has answered with two voices. One says we are involved by faith, the other by effort. The first says we surrender; the second says we strive. These two polar emphases are respectively denoted by the terms “quietism” and “pietism.”

Quietism

Quietism, a rather mystical view, was originally popular among the Quakers, but it has been adopted by some of the forms of perfectionism noted in chapter eight. The work of sanctification, says the quietist, involves no effort on our part. Indeed, our striving and effort can even hinder our sanctification. Our part is simply to surrender ourselves to God and to let him give us victory over sin. The surrender usually comes at a crucial point subsequent to conversion, although the believer must maintain it as a daily attitude. While we are in this attitude of surrender, we live victoriously. We fall into sin only when we cease to trust him completely. Words like yield, surrender, and abandonment recur frequently, as does the catchy saying, “Let go, and let God.” Two lines of a hymn express it simply:

Holiness by faith in Jesus,
Not by effort of my own.

These lines clearly imply that the Christian has to choose between faith and effort, and the way of holiness is to choose faith.

This teaching has led to some extreme conclusions. For example, Galatians 2:20—especially the phrase, “Not I, but Christ”—is taken out of its context to suggest that a Christian’s personality is to be virtually obliterated and replaced by Christ’s. Expressions like “yield yourselves” (Rom 8:13) are taken to recommend a state of passive surrender to God in which we need ourselves offer no resistance to temptation; we should simply leave it to God to give us the victory. Some have even claimed that Christians in this state of yieldedness do not experience temptation because God defeats it before they can! Some writers have devoted a remarkable amount of space to explaining what they mean by “surrender” and other words in their terminology. If these words represent biblical concepts, one would expect a little more attention given to them in the Bible itself.

A Major Objection

Quite apart from such extremes, the whole theory embraces a major difficulty which has never really been answered. Who is at fault when a Christian sins? (The supporters of this view usually admit that there is such a possibility.) Whose fault is the failure? It is hardly the Christian’s fault because when he or she surrenders to God, God then assumes responsibility. Yet we shrink from any suggestion that the fault may lie with God himself. One answer is that Christians sin only because they have ceased to trust, because they have left the position of self-surrender, by which they had placed themselves completely in the hands of God. But this does not answer the difficulty at all, for ceasing to trust in God is in itself a sin. We are still left with the question, “Whose fault is it that the Christian has ceased to trust?” How can Christians who have handed their lives over to God ever sin again?



Faced with tough objections, quietists draw heavily on analogy for help—not the best hermeneutical principle. Pearsall Smith chooses the biblical analogy of the potter and the clay, but her use of it goes far beyond what we find in Jeremiah. She begins,

“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 entrusted to Him? It is here that the growing comes in. The lump of clay could never grow into a beautiful vessel if it stayed in the clay-pit for thousands of years; but when it is put into the hands of a skilful potter it grows rapidly, under his fashioning, into the vessel he intends it to be. And in the same way the soul, abandoned to the working of the Heavenly Potter, is made into a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master’s use.”

Why then do things go wrong? Here is how Pearsall Smith accounts for the failure of a lady who had “lost all her blessing”: “She had understood her part of trusting to begin with, but, not understanding the Divine process of accomplishing that for which she had trusted, she took herself out of the hands of the Heavenly Potter, and the vessel was marred on the wheel.” One moment a Christian is like a piece of malleable clay, soft and without any will of its own, and the next moment like a piece of clay that decides to jump out of the potter’s hand. Some clay!

Much as we realize the inadequacies of the quietist point of view, we must have some sympathy with its genuine attempt to stress that salvation is of the Lord. It has tried to show that people are as incapable of sanctifying themselves as they are of justifying themselves. And it has rightly recognized that what God has done for us in Christ for our sanctification is as sufficient as any other aspect of His salvation. “I can’t, Christ can,” they will say. With these premises we must agree. But the quietist viewpoint moves from here to the untenable conclusion that all Christians can do is passively let God do everything. While they allow Him, the work of sanctification will proceed and they will live the victorious Christian life. Everything depends on Christians maintaining a state of surrender to Christ and abiding in Him. Here the whole theory fails in what it set out to do; sanctification depends not on God at all, but on people and their maintaining of surrender; not on the potter, but on the clay.

A second drawback to this teaching is that it produces a uniformity of personality. As Lloyd-Jones has pointed out, “If we are to do nothing but just give in and not exert ourselves and our powers, obviously we shall all conform to a certain type and to a certain pattern—the difference between Peter and Paul and John and James will vanish. And Calvin and Luther and Bunyan and Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield will become identical in the common absence of certain things from their lives.”

The Place of Effort

To pit faith against effort is a false antithesis, one never made in Scripture. Of course faith is necessary in sanctification. The depth of our faith bears directly on the extent of our growth (see chapter nine). But this does not preclude effort. People who are being renewed by the Holy Spirit are not in a state of passive surrender. They are actively engaged in mortifying the flesh and in putting on the new creation (see chapter fourteen). The Christian life is described as a race (Heb 12:1), and as a fight (Eph 6:10-18; 1 Tim 6:12); both analogies definitely imply effort on the part of the Christian. We have to be careful to apply ourselves to good deeds (Tit 3:8).

The devil is an enemy to be resisted (James 4:7). Paul finds it necessary to pummel his body and subdue it lest he be disqualified (1 Cor 9:27). Quietists call up the strong appeal of the “rest of faith” in Hebrews 3 and 4, and, of course, God intends us to know His rest increasingly in our lives; but notice the paradox: “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest” (Heb 4:11).

If all a Christian needs to do is simply remain passive like a piece of clay in a potter’s hands, then it is hard to see the reason for the practical teachings in the New Testament. If we are supposed just to let Christ “live out His life in us,” why are there such injunctions as, “Look carefully, then, how you walk” (Eph 5:15)? And what about Paul’s description of his own life: “I press on toward the goal” (Phil 3:14)? Remember that the verb here is a word used of



an athlete straining every nerve to win. The New Testament motivates us to greater effort toward holiness. “Since we have these promises, beloved,” writes the apostle, “let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2 Cor 7:1). No, there are no short cuts to victory in the New Testament, no secret formulas to be discovered. Rather, we need to submit to the whole range of teaching in the Word of God if we are to make progress in sanctification. Holiness does not come in a moment, but as the hymn expresses it, we must “take time to be holy.”

Pietism

The word pietism is not as self-descriptive as quietism in explaining its view of sanctification. The name comes from the movement in eighteenth-century Germany which protested the dead orthodoxy of the Lutheran church at the time. It encouraged much that was good, such as the growth of Bible study groups. Primarily, it called for a practical Christianity, emphasizing the uselessness of belief which does not lead to good works. The word pietism represents for theologians an emphasis on diligence in practical Christianity, and an insistence on self-discipline and spiritual exercises.

Discernible in pietism is a danger every bit as harmful as that in unbalanced quietism. With an overemphasis on effort a Christian could easily forget that it is God who sanctifies and that we must rest trusting on God and all His promises. Pietists are inevitably trapped by the result of their efforts. If they fail, they may well suffer despair, while if they succeed, they may succumb to self-congratulation instead of glorifying God. God has indeed given us everything in Christ, but this does not mean that after His initial saving He leaves people to purify themselves. When we are told to work out our own salvation, we are immediately assured that God works in us (Phil 2:12,13); the word “works” is in the present tense. Stressing the importance of practical Christianity, we declare with James, “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). But at the same time, “Without faith it is impossible to please him” (Heb 11:6).

Maintaining the Balance

We have juxtaposed here two sets of complementary truths, and we err in neglecting either side. The balance is carefully maintained in Scripture. For example, in 2 Peter 1:3,4 the apostle emphasizes all that God has done for us to guarantee our sanctification: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.”

However, it does not end there. Peter goes on to list virtues over which the Christian must show diligence. He says in verses 5-9,

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind, and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.”

Verse 10 tells one result of such diligence: the Christian makes his or her “calling and election sure” (KJV).

How can sanctification still be the work of God when the Christian has to be so active in the pursuit of it? Surely the answer comes in words we have already quoted: “God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:13). Christians are active because God stimulates us to effort and diligence, and He impresses on our conscience the encouragements and warnings of Scripture. So people who truly believe the gospel with all its provisions for our need and who look to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” will be challenged to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1,2). The paradox is one we continually face in the Christian life. We must continue with effort, but effort based on confidence in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.



Incentives

We saw in chapter two that the holiness of God is the great stimulus to Christian holy living. The command, “You shall be holy” is enforced by the sublime truth “I am holy.” We find comparable incentives linking practice to doctrine in the Epistles. The reader gazes in chapters 1-3 of Ephesians at the great panorama of Christian truth and all the blessing of the gospel that belong to us in Christ. The remaining three chapters deal with practical matters based on those doctrines. Ephesians 4:1, as the connecting verse between the two portions of the book, calls us to right living: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

So faith and effort are intrinsically linked in Scripture in promoting holiness through incentives. It is not that secret formulas, or easy short cuts bypassing effort, are whispered into our ears, but rather that incentives stir us to endeavor in every part of our Christian lives.

And the incentive that stands above all others for the Christian is the very life of Christ. We are to follow His example. When Paul describes to the Philippians the characteristics that should mark their corporate life, he naturally thinks of Christ on His way to the cross. Christ was willing to be humiliated, and He remains for us an example of the lowliness of mind we should display toward each other (Phil 2:5-8). Peter also looks to Christ’s example to show how a Christian should react when he or she is unjustly treated (1 Pet 2:18-25).

Incentives depend for their constraining or compelling power on the extent to which they are believed. The stronger the faith by which they are held, the stronger their compulsion on a Christian’s life. For example, the stronger our faith in the humiliated Christ, the more we are compelled to act in humility toward one another. The deeper our faith in the Christ who crossed all kinds of barriers to love outcasts, the more we are strengthened to do the same. Effort that issues from such faith reinforces that faith. So when a Christian grows, his or her faith also grows. “We have the same spirit of faith,” Paul writes, “as he had who wrote, ‘I believed, and so I spoke’” (2 Cor 4:13). Notice again the title of this chapter. It is not “Faith or Effort?” but “Faith and Effort”—inseparably.

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