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Responsibility and Accountability



RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

*I will put My Spirit within you and
cause you to walk in My statutes,
and you will be careful to observe
My ordinances.*

Ezekiel 36:27

*So then, my beloved, just as you
have always obeyed, not as in
my presence only, but now much
more in my absence, work out your
salvation with fear and trembling;
for it is God who is at work in you,
both to will and to work for His
good pleasure.*

Philippians 2:12-13

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Whichever car dealership you visit, the cars all look similar. Some may be smaller than others, but each one has an engine, doors, tires, headlights, etc. They may have different manufacturers, but they are basically all alike. However, if you visit a Lamborghini dealership, there is a resounding difference. The Lamborghini is an entirely different vehicle. This brute would never be confused with an ordinary car!

Theological Differences

Like cars that are similar in appearance, understanding works in regard to sanctification can also seem very much the same. During the sixteenth-century upheaval in theological thinking, the understanding of the believer's works in sanctification took a different direction. The genesis of the opposing view resulted from the Roman Church's teaching that justification before God required faith plus keeping the sacraments. The Reformers concluded the Scriptures taught that justification was by faith alone, apart from any other effort. In reaction to the Reformers' claim of faith alone, the Roman Church alleged that this new teaching would allow believers to live

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anyway they wanted. Therefore the Roman Church concluded that faith alone was in fact the teaching of antinomianism (lawlessness).¹ In reaction, the Reformers defended their faith-alone teaching, clarifying that justification was indeed

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by faith alone, but that faith which justifies is not alone—works are required.² Responding to Rome's assertion, the Reformers stressed the requirement for a believer to validate his justification in the form of works as a proof of salvation.

To further negate Rome's accusation of antinomianism, the Reformers not only insisted that no meritorious works of man occur in justification but also that the works of sanctification confirming the possession of eternal life are like-

wise not the meritorious works of man; rather all works are God's works.³ This is the reason when explaining the cooperation between God and man in sanctification, most modern theologians of the Reformed tradition envision God alone doing the work. Addressing Philippians 2:13, one proponent explains,

How, then, shall we describe the relationship between God's working and our working? Should we say, as some have done, that sanctification is a work of God in which believers cooperate? This way of stating the doctrine, however, wrongly implies that God and we each do part of the work of sanctification.⁴

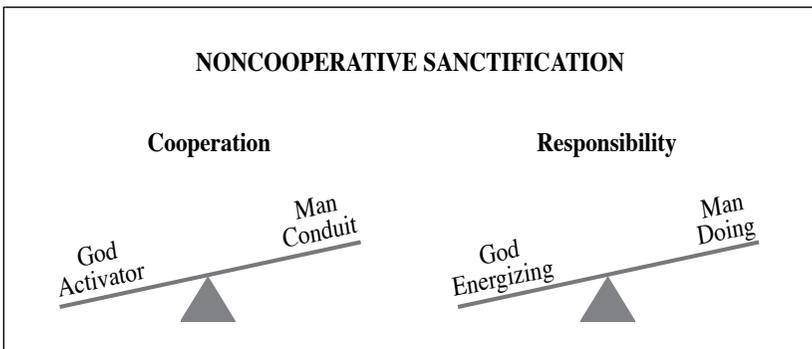
Concurring, another writes,

God's working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our

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working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works in us and we also work. But the relation is that *because* God works we work.⁵

This *because-He-works-we-work* position implies that there is no true cooperation between God and the believer but in fact God is the only worker in sanctification. God is *the cause* of the good works, and the believer is merely *the conduit* of God's energizing power, as shown in the following chart, *Noncooperative Sanctification*. Rather than believers being coworkers with God, God, the energizer, infuses believers with power.



How Is This Accomplished?

How does God accomplish this in the life of the believer? We are told, “The mode of the Spirit’s operation in sanctification is encompassed with mystery.”⁶ However, one commentator endeavors to explain this mysterious phenomenon in his discussion of Philippians 2:13: “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” He writes, “God, as the infinite Source of

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spiritual and moral energy for believers, causes them to work out their own salvation. ‘Causes them,’ yet without in any way destroying their own responsibility and self-activity.’⁷ God and God alone does the work in and through the believer. This commentator adds,

*God is the cause
of the good works,
and the believer
is merely the
conduit of God’s
energizing power.*

“Nowhere is the manner in which God operates within the heart of his child, enabling him to will and to work, more beautifully described than in Eph. 3:14-19.”⁸

The appeal, however, is to the very passage this author addressed in some detail in chapter 12. Ephesians 3:14-19 is not a panacea for the *God-causes-obedience* view. As previously discussed, that passage does not provide a definitive explanation of the *strengthening-with-power-through-the-Spirit* concept. In fact each interpreter must decide if the Ephesians 3 text addresses receiving the Spirit’s subsequent, *energizing* ministry or experiencing the indwelling Spirit’s *influencing* ministry already present in the believer. Obviously most have chosen to string together Ezekiel 36:27; Acts 1:8; Ephesians 3:16; and Philippians 2:13 for support of their mysterious-empowerment assumptions. However as previously discussed, New Testament believers are never given additional empowerment by the Spirit to walk obediently; rather, they already have been provided with the influencing resources (voluntary filling, leading, and teaching) of the Spirit so that they *may chose* to walk obediently.

Alleged Proof Text Clarified

Proponents of the *God-causes-obedience* position turn to Philippians 2:12-13 for support.

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So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

God-Causes-Obedience Position

Addressing that text, one writer indicates “*even though we work out our salvation* we are to know that it is actually God in us through His Holy Spirit who *does the working*.”⁹ He states that Ephesians 2:8-10 is a commentary on Philippians 2:12-13, saying,

These three verses [Eph. 2:8-10] are really Paul’s own commentary upon Philippians 2:12, 13, for they tell us that although God can never be satisfied with any good that comes out of man, He is satisfied and pleased with the good that is done by Christians through the *power* of Jesus Christ within them.”¹⁰

Further clarifying Ephesians 2:10, the same author writes, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto *good works* [that is, the result of God’s working], which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”¹¹ Aligning himself with this viewpoint, another writer correlates “cause you to walk” (Ezek. 36:27) with “God who is at work in you” (Phil 2:13). As previously discussed in chapter 10, he writes, “God does not merely command obedience, *he gives it*.”¹² Then, for support, he quotes, “‘I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes’ (Ezekiel 36:27; 11:20; see also Hebrews 13:20; Philippians 2:13).”¹³

Philippians 2:12-13 Clarified

Since Philippians 2:12-13 is a text that supposedly supports the

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God-causes-obedience view, the entire section of Philippians 2:12-16 should be considered. The preceding context (2:5-11) concerns the *obedient action* of Christ—“He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross” (v. 8). Using Christ as the ultimate illustration of obedience, Paul introduced the appeal to follow Christ in obedience with “so then” (v. 12). As shown, the text includes two commands: first, “*work out* your salvation” (v. 12) and second “*do* all things” (v. 14). The purpose of the latter command is to ensure that believers, embracing God’s Word, reveal the character of God in their walk before the lost world. Since Paul was addressing believers, the former command to “work out your salvation” obviously concerns present sanctification. Further the “working out” refers to the continuation of the obedient actions that they have previously demonstrated (v. 12). Paul commanded them to continue in their obedient walk. Even though the preceding context (2:5-11) and the immediate context (2:12-14) concern the believer’s responsibility of walking in obedience, the *God-causes-obedience* camp says verse 13 explains that it is actually God’s grace that causes an obedient walk, for it is in fact His working that produces obedience.¹⁴

Responsibility and Accountability

The God-causes-obedience camp believes that working out one’s salvation involves both the believer’s responsibility and the believer’s participation.¹⁵ However, the extent of the cooperative participation and the extent of responsibility are the issues. If God activates and causes obedient action through the believer, obviously the believer participates. To illustrate, pipes are used as conduits for the flow of water and are responsible for the irrigation of fields. The pump activates and energizes the flow through the pipes to produce the watering. Do the pipes participate? “Sort of.” Are the pipes responsible? “Sort of.” And do the pipes cooperate with the pump? While the God-causes-obedience camp states that “because the pump

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works the pipes work,” how responsible are the pipes for irrigation? How involved are the pipes in irrigation? More importantly, how responsible and how much participation is necessary by believers in present, progressive sanctification?

Pumps and pipes are, of course, inanimate objects. They cannot make choices or decisions. The God-causes-obedience view believes no works are meritorious on the part of believers, even though the believer is somewhat of a participant and is somewhat responsible. However, responsibility logically requires accountability. Appropriate action is rewarded, while inappropriate action forfeits rewards. In fact, that is what Christ’s example illustrated in 2:5-11. He not only chose to lay aside heavenly privileges in the Incarnation (v. 7), but He also chose to die on the cross for us “by becoming obedient” (v. 8). As a result, He was “highly exalted” (v. 9). In this text (vv. 12-16), Paul commanded believers to choose to follow Christ’s example because they are responsible to conform to God’s Word. Also they will be held personally accountable at the Judgment Seat of Christ whether their works were good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10).

The responsibility to obey rests with each believer and each will be held accountable.

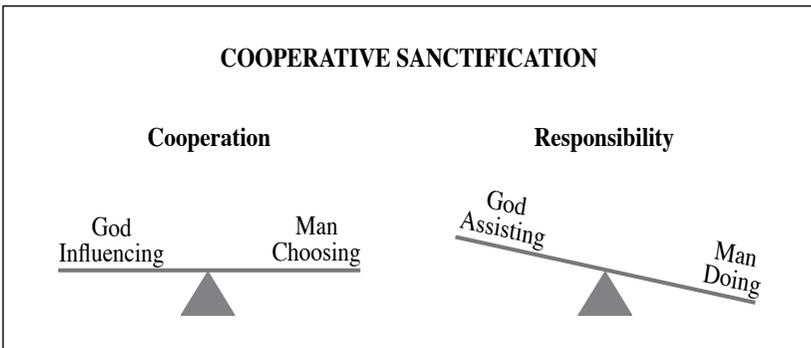
Paul instructed the Philippians to continue in obedience (v. 12), because God always, and without fail, continues to provide His influencing work (v. 13). The choice to obey is theirs and God’s resources are always available to assist them. The responsibility to obey rests with each believer and each will be held accountable. The God-causes-obedience view states, “We are to walk obediently because God works we work.” But the biblical view indicates, “We are to walk obediently; because God works we *can* work.” However, Reformed theology’s overreaction to the Roman Church’s meritorious cooperation by man with God has both produced the necessity

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for an infusion of God's energizing power to live the Christian life and has affected their interpretation of the passages that address the Christian life.

Comparisons Are Important

In their zeal to rectify the error of meritorious works producing salvation, the Reformers slipped into the erroneous concept of God's grace accomplishing the entire process of justification and sanctification. In this view the believer is merely a conduit through which God causes obedience. While certainly not agreeing with Rome's teaching of salvation by works, this author rejects the God-causes-obedience view of sanctification. The biblical concept of the believer's cooperation and responsibility differs radically from the God-causes-obedience view, as shown in the following chart, *Cooperative Sanctification*. Believers are coworkers with God, actually *choosing* and *doing* the work as the Spirit fills, leads, and teaches.



The Christian life involves each believer choosing to walk in accord with God's Word. Previously unable to respond to God (Eph. 2:1-3), God acted out of grace and the believer was made spiritually alive (vv. 4-9). He can now choose to reflect, in new

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behavior, his new position in Christ (v. 10). The choice is the believers. The Spirit, then, *is not* the energizer, causing and producing obedience. Rather, He *is* the guide and teacher, and if allowed by the believer, He assists in choices to prove the will of God in good works (Phil. 2:12-13; Rom. 12:2).

Even though the focus of this chapter has been on the required empowerment in the Christian life taught by the traditional amillennial view, let us not forget that the traditional premillennial view likewise requires an empowerment. In both views, God produces good works in and through the believer, and this perverts the biblical teaching regarding the believer's responsibility and accountability to God.

Either you are *responsible* for your behavior or God is!

Either you are *accountable* for your behavior or God is!

You must decide.

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Chapter 13, NOTES

1. R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 120-27.
2. *Ibid.*, 128.
3. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 62.
4. *Ibid.*, 71.
5. John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 148-49 (italics his).
6. *Ibid.*, 146.
7. William Hendriksen, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 123 (italics his).
8. *Ibid.*
9. James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 164 (italics added).
10. *Ibid.*, 166 (italics added).
11. *Ibid.*, (italics his).
12. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), 147 (italics added).
13. *Ibid.*
14. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 122-23.
15. Hoekema, *Five Views on Sanctification*, 71, 77.