



## How do we Stand in the Will of God?

*Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis. (Colossians 4:12–13)*

We occasionally speak or think of being "in the will of God" or of praying for others to be so. What does it mean for someone to be "in the will of God"? In the words of our study passage, what does it mean for someone to "...stand perfect and complete in all the will of God"? How does one reach or attain that posture? Does God "irresistibly and effectually" orchestrate or decree our daily behavior into "...all the will of God"? Or must we—and others—"...labour fervently...in prayers..." as well as in other actions, no doubt guided and assisted by the Holy Spirit, to reach that state of Christian conduct?

We believe that our new birth, our eternal salvation is indeed "irresistibly and effectually" wrought by the Holy Spirit, so that all the work necessary to bring it about is performed by the Holy Spirit and not by any form or degree of cooperative effort on our part to complete what God initiates? For example, popular southern California preacher John MacArthur teaches that we must exercise active faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to effect our new birth, and continue in it's active practice to affirm that we are "really born again," his "lordship salvation" controversial, backdoor, salvation by works teaching. MacArthur often uses the analogy of the chair to illustrate his belief. You are tired and want to sit down. You see a comfortable empty chair in the room. Knowingly or not, you evaluate whether that chair will hold your weight and will comfortably give you the rest you desire. If you decide that it is sufficient, you trust it. You sit down in it. You will never enjoy the benefit of the chair unless you have faith in its ability and sit down in it. So, according to MacArthur's teaching, is the new birth.<sup>1</sup> The unregenerate person must become aware of Jesus and of His ability through the gospel, must then believe in Him and in His ability through the gospel, and, finally, must actually rely on Him, "Sit down in the chair," or the new birth can never occur. Thus, according to this belief, the actual new birth event is the result of what the sinner does, not of what Jesus or the Holy Spirit does. If the sinner does not rely in faith on Jesus, he cannot—and will not—be born again. This view is common to most contemporary Andrew Fuller low-Calvinist or partial Calvinist beliefs that are often presented as historical Calvinism.

While I do not view myself in every point as a historical Calvinist, I do believe that the five points of belief often associated with this belief state a cohesive Biblical truth that refutes many errors regarding the Biblical nature and character of God's saving grace. My objections to MacArthur's "Sit down in the chair" new birth idea are multiple. At the least, MacArthur's view either wholly denies or compromises the Bible doctrine of total depravity (The unregenerate, partially depraved sinner must exercise faith to accomplish the new birth). It clearly rejects particular redemption, a view often affirmed by graduates of MacArthur's Grace Seminary. And it compromises the direct work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth, making "effectual calling" partially contingent on the sinner's response to the gospel. First, the unregenerate sinner is not depicted in Scripture as tired and in search of a comfortable chair. Scripture describes this person as being "...dead in trespasses and sins." (Ephesians 2:1) Thus the Biblical state of the unregenerate person is far more profound and helpless than the analogy of a tired person looking for a restful chair. The unregenerate person doesn't need a comfortable chair. He needs a Savior who is capable of raising the dead. And, given the New Testament inspired analogy of being dead in trespasses and sins, he needs a Savior who can accomplish all of his salvation, for the dead man can't even see, much less consciously sit down in a chair. Jesus affirms this foundational truth in John 5:24-25.

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. (John 5:24-25)*

Notice two major points that Jesus makes so simply and clearly in these two verses.

1. The hearing believer is not in the process of becoming born again. The hearing believer has already been born again, has already passed from death to life.
2. Passed from death to life; how did this passage occur? The dead heard the voice, the unique, personal voice (not merely the words repeated by a preacher) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That voice

<sup>1</sup> Living in southern California, I have listened to MacArthur's radio sermons for longer than he has been popular. More than once I have heard him use this specific analogy to explain his belief in the way the new birth occurs.

is life-imparting. That voice, not the dead sinner's opinion of the chair, caused the dead person to live. Is Jesus' voice capable of such powerful results? Well, His voice created the whole universe! (John 1:1-3)

Many sincere believers in our time embrace a MacArthur-like view of the new birth, but continue to claim a belief in all of the five historical points of the doctrines of grace. At my last review, MacArthur seems to struggle intensely with the idea of particular redemption, that Jesus died specifically for the elect. While he and many of those close to him will generally refer to themselves as “Calvinists,” they in fact struggle with at least this point, if not more, in the five-point acronym of the doctrines of grace.<sup>2</sup>

Variations to this partial-grace teaching will occasionally surface. For example, I recently heard a sermon in which the preacher stated his belief that God requires faith in Jesus as a condition or requirement for the new birth, but then the preacher added his personal belief that, since God “effectually and irresistibly” decrees that all the elect shall “at least believe in Jesus,” those who believe in the more historical doctrine of the immediate, direct, work of the Holy Spirit in the new birth should not be bothered by this synergistic, part-man, part-God view, because salvation is still “all of God,” and God still “gets all the glory.”

If God “effectually and irresistibly” decrees our faith and obedience that are, according to this hybrid, God-man synergy, necessary for the new birth, how much more of our faith and obedience does He “effectually and irresistibly” cause? Advocates of this view will occasionally quote Philippians 2:13, alleging that this verse defends their view that every act of our faith and obedience are directly, effectually, and irresistibly caused by God. They typically either ignore or under-emphasize Verse 12 in this context, a verse that states the exhortation for the Philippians to “...work out...” their own salvation with fear and trembling. On many occasions I have faced significant challenges to my discipleship. In every instance I have been clearly aware of the Lord's presence and influence, but I cannot say—nor can advocates of this view say, I suggest—that they or I have always followed that guiding influence. I have not always and at all times worked out my own salvation with fear and trembling. However, when I stood back up on my feet and dusted myself off, I found myself looking directly at this lesson and its requirement for me to start over and again “work out” my own salvation. Math or science teachers should clearly understand the teaching of this lesson. For five years I taught accounting and business classes at a local Christian university. Routinely I assigned my students homework problems that required them to apply what I taught them to the problem in order to compute the right answer. I required them to “work out” the solution to the problem and to arrive at the correct answer for an acceptable grade. I did not “effectually and irresistibly” work out the problems that I assigned to my students, though I always tried to provide assistance when requested. Some of them worked diligently on the problems; some of them “coasted” and did as little as they thought they could do for a passing grade. Like some of my students, some of God's children try to “fake it” in their Christian life. They like the idea of blessings and of obedience, but they dislike the sweat and labor necessary to attain that goal. Paul requires our investment to apply his teachings to our personal lives so as to “...work out...” the correct application of New Testament truth to our personal situation. Paul states the purpose of God's inner working in us, “...to will and to do...” He does not state in this passage that God “effectually and irresistibly” works out what he requires us to work out with fear and trembling. The Judgment Seat of Christ shall manifest the varying degrees of “working out” that God's children attained in this life, their “course grade” in the teaching analogy. If all of our “working out” of our own salvation was the result of God's effectual work, every child of God would live a perfect, sinless life, for God never does anything half-heartedly.

In our study passage for this week, Paul praises Epaphras for his “...*always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.*” Paul chose a word to describe Epaphras' labors that depicts intense and focused effort. Epaphras did not seek casual, half-hearted Christianity, either in his own life or in the life of the Colossians whom he so dearly loved. If Paul and Epaphras had believed according to the “effectual and irresistible” beliefs outlined above, their “...always labouring fervently...” would exemplify profound unbelief in God's effectual work. Not so, Paul sets Epaphras forth as a godly example, not as a disappointing case of unbelief.

Not only do we need to work to apply God's truth-teachings to the problems of our lives, we often need the assistance and prayers of our brothers and sisters, their “fervent” labors and prayers, that we may attain our potential, to “...*stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.*” In the New Testament, the word “perfect” does not typically refer to moral perfection, but to maturity. The idea is one of adult, mature Christianity, not immature, on-again-off-again, or selective “I'll choose the part I like” half-hearted Christianity. In this lesson “complete” suggests a full measure, a life so immersed in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ that there is no space left for competitive ideas or activities. This teaching does not require that you resign your career and take up the hermit's

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2 In the last three months I attended Grace Seminary's advance degree graduation ceremony in which MacArthur chaired the proceedings and spoke. One of his staff specifically referred to the Grace Seminary in this ceremony as “Calvinist.” Yet in his closing prayer MacArthur specifically prayed for the eighty five graduates to be empowered to lead many to the new birth by their preaching. Personal conversations with two recent graduates from Grace Seminary affirm that the dominant teaching of the institution continues to advocate MacArthur's “chair analogy” of the new birth, as well as the idea that Jesus died provisionally or potentially for all humanity, though effectually for the elect, the idea first proposed by Andrew Fuller near the end of the eighteenth century. This belief appears specifically in Fuller's “duty-faith” teaching, and it specifically contradicts earlier Baptist teaching; for example the historical Baptist teaching of John Gill.

life. It rather requires that you apply the principles of your faith actively and consistently to every aspect of your life. On the job, in the family, where ever you find your life's activities, you apply your Christian convictions to every situation and to every relationship. You are a “doer” and not merely a “hearer” of the word.

Rather than an automatic or robotic response, Paul and Epaphras understood the dynamics of Christian service.

Epaphras' fervent agonizing in prayer (cf. Luke 22:44) reflects his understanding that God would provide illumination and continued growth in proportion as people requested these of Him (James 4:2).<sup>3</sup>

Notice the following reference to both Paul's and Epaphras' fervent interest in the Colossians' active, consistent, and mature discipleship.

It is not least in significance that their ambition in both cases was not merely for individuals to be converted, but that they should stand firmly, “mature” (in the context of the letter that will mean also not being distracted by what the local Jews counted important in worship), that there should be an emotional depth and balance to their faith (“fully assured”), and that it should express itself in daily conduct where doing the will of God was the primary objective and yardstick<sup>4</sup>

In this context, what is “...all the will of God”? Paul's first Thessalonian letter identifies God's will for His obedient and faithful children, a similar context to our study passage. Notice how specific and clear the points appear.

*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7)*

We should add to these basic moral/ethical behaviors a mature and faithful knowledge of—and avoidance of—the significant gnostic errors that Paul has outlined throughout the Colossian letter. The inclusiveness of the term, “all the will of God,” requires faithfulness both in what we believe and in how we live. I find myself at times both amused and frustrated by the question, “Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that true worshippers must worship God in spirit and in truth. Can you worship God in spirit, but without truth?” ***The question ignores the passage.*** Jesus specifically stated that “true worshippers” must worship God in both spirit and in truth, not in one or the other as a convenient compromise. (John 4:23-24) The issue here defined is “true worship,” not the possibility of any form or degree of worship. True worship of God requires both spirit and truth, the precise words of Jesus. Is it possible for a child of God to worship God in some lesser way or form? I believe Paul's response to the philosophers on Mars Hill answers this question, “For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.” (Acts 17:23) Paul stated, and Luke recorded by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that these Epicurean and Stoic Greek philosophers in fact worshipped God, albeit in ignorance. While this truth may be nearly impossible for modern Christians to accept, it was comfortably believed by early Christians. I highly recommend your reading of Justin Martyr's *First Apology* in which Justin affirms the precise point that Paul here makes, affirming that many (not all) of the ancient Greek philosophers were “pre-Christian Christians.”

While this truth forms an integral part of New Testament teaching, we need to emphasize Paul's and Epaphras' example in fervent, labored prayers for God's children to grow maturely and fully into all the will of God, both in what they believe and in how they live. How hard are we praying? I find little joy or comfort in observing anyone who worships God ignorantly. It is my passionate prayer and desire that those who know and preach the gospel do so with such power from God and with such conviction in their own hearts that those who presently worship God in ignorance will be so enlightened and convicted that they will repent and devote their lives to worshipping God as Jesus described to the Samaritan woman, in both “...spirit and in truth.”

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
16434 Woodruff  
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor

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3 Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, Col 4:12 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

4 James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 281 (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996).