ON SANCTIFICATION

Let Go and Let God: The Altar Call in the Passive Voice

A five-word slogan that sounds like grace, borrowed from the Higher Life movement and carried into both the sanctuary and the church basement. It is right about the problem and wrong about the cure.

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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You have heard it in a hospital corridor, said quietly by someone who did not know what else to say. You have heard it in a church basement at seven in the evening, over bad coffee, from a man with twenty years of sobriety and a genuine desire to help you. You have seen it in cursive on a coffee mug, over a sunset, in a Facebook comment under a post about someone's dying mother.

Let go and let God.

It is five words long. It is easy to remember. It sounds like the humblest thing a Christian could possibly say, because it appears to take every scrap of credit out of your hands and put it in the hands of God. And it has comforted a great many people who were, at that moment, entirely out of other options.

I want to take it seriously enough to argue with it.

Where it actually comes from

Most people who say it assume it is in the Bible somewhere. It is not. It is not a paraphrase of a verse, either. It is a slogan with a traceable address, and the address is more interesting than you would guess.

The wording itself is hard to pin to a single author — devotional slogans rarely have birth certificates. But the theology behind it has a well-documented lineage, and it begins in the 1870s, in a movement that called itself the Higher Life.

In 1875 Hannah Whitall Smith published *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, one of the most widely read devotional books in the English-speaking world. That same year, in the Lake District of England, the first Keswick Convention gathered. Both taught a version of the same thing: that beyond conversion there lay a second, deeper experience available to the believer, a crisis of full surrender, after which the Christian life would stop being a grinding struggle and start being a rest. Stop striving. Yield. Consecrate yourself entirely. Then Christ lives the life through you, and victory follows.

Behind Keswick stood older water — the quietism of Madame Guyon and Fénelon, with its counsel of passivity and self-annihilation before God, and the Wesleyan holiness tradition with its expectation of a second work of grace. Downstream of Keswick came Charles Trumbull and the Victorious Life conferences, Andrew Murray's devotional writing, and eventually Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life*. The vocabulary is consistent across all of them: surrender, yieldedness, letting go, resting, ceasing from your own efforts.

Now here is the part that ought to interest anyone who has spent time in both a sanctuary and a church basement.

In the 1920s and 30s, an American Lutheran minister named Frank Buchman ran a movement that came to be called the Oxford Group. Buchman's spirituality was Higher Life spirituality: absolute surrender, guidance, the decisive act of yielding your whole self. The Oxford Group is the immediate parent of Alcoholics Anonymous. Ebby Thacher carried its message to Bill Wilson, and its fingerprints are all over the Steps — most obviously the third, where one makes a decision to turn one's will and one's life over to the care of God.

So the phrase reaches you from two directions at once, and both of them run back to the same spring. Whether you first heard it from an evangelist or from a sponsor, you were hearing the Higher Life movement of 1875.

That is not, by itself, an argument against it. Age and pedigree do not settle truth. But it does mean that when you say *let go and let God* to a suffering person, you are not quoting Scripture to them. You are handing them a nineteenth-century theory of sanctification, and you owe it to them to know whether the theory is sound.

Why it feels like grace

Before I take it apart, I want to say plainly what is right about it, because a great many people reach for this phrase out of a true instinct, and I do not want to trample the instinct while I am correcting the words.

People say *let go and let God* because they have been crushed by trying.

They have made the promises. They have set the alarm earlier for devotions. They have poured it out, blocked the number, deleted the app, taken the ninety meetings in ninety days. They have wept at an altar and meant it. And then they have watched themselves do the thing again, and the failure of all that sincere effort has driven them to a conclusion they could not have reached any other way: *I am not going to be the hero of this story.*

That is a true conclusion. It is, in fact, the beginning of everything. When somebody stumbles onto it and can only stammer it out as *let go and let God*, they are reaching for monergism — for the doctrine that God alone works salvation — without having been given the words for it. I would rather have a person with that instinct and no vocabulary than a person with the vocabulary and no instinct.

So the problem with the slogan is not that it aims too low. It aims at exactly the right target. It just misses.

The hinge that gives it away

Read the sentence again as a sentence. It has two verbs, and the first one is yours.

Let go, and then God will act.

The order is not decorative. It is the whole architecture. The releasing comes first, and the divine working is the second thing, contingent on the first. Which means that in the very act of assigning everything to God, the phrase has quietly assigned the decisive move to you. It has not removed the human contribution to salvation and sanctification. It has relocated it — from doing to not-doing, from effort to the cessation of effort — and then congratulated itself on its own humility.

That is synergism wearing borrowed clothes. It looks like grace because the verb is passive. But a passive verb with your name on the subject line is still a work.

And now notice what kind of work it is.

If a preacher tells you to walk an aisle, at least the aisle is real. You either walked it or you did not; you can put a date on it. That was always the cruelty of the anxious bench, but it was at least a cruelty with edges. *Let go and let God* removes the edges. It asks you to perform an interior act with no external referent — and then, when the thing you were praying about does not change, it leaves you exactly one diagnosis available:

You must not have really let go.

This is why I call it the altar call in the passive voice. It is the same machinery. The same demand for a decisive inward transaction, the same location of assurance inside your own experience, the same endless self-examination to determine whether the transaction took. The only difference is that the question has been made unfalsifiable. The altar call at least emptied the bench at the end of the service. This one never does. You can always surrender more. You can always suspect you held something back. There is no floor.

I have watched this destroy people. Not metaphorically. I have watched a person conclude, after years of fighting, that the reason nothing had changed was that their surrender was defective — that somewhere in a heart they could not fully see, they were still gripping. And the counsel offered to them was to go back and let go harder.

That is a law disguised as a promise, and it is one of the worst laws ever devised, because you cannot obey it and you cannot verify it.

The verses it leans on, read in context

Whenever a slogan is not in Scripture, it tends to adopt a few verses and wear them like a badge. It is worth checking the badge.

"Stand still and see the salvation of the LORD" (Exodus 14:13). Israel is trapped at the sea with Egypt at their backs. Moses tells them to stand firm and watch God fight. It is one of the great texts of divine monergism, and I would not take a syllable of it back.

But read to verse 15. God's response to Moses is essentially: *Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to go forward.* And then Israel walks — on foot, between walls of water, all night, with children and livestock and everything they own. The salvation is entirely God's. The walking is entirely theirs. God's own commentary on *stand still* is *move*.

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). This one is honest enough to be uncomfortable, because the Hebrew verb behind "be still" (*harpû*) really does carry the sense of dropping something, letting the hands go slack, desisting. The slogan is closer to this verse than to any other.

But look who is being addressed. The psalm has just described God breaking the bow and shattering the spear and burning the chariots. The nations are in an uproar. "Be still" is not a whisper to an anxious believer at 3 a.m.; it is an order to raging armies to put their weapons down and recognize who actually runs the world. It is a word of God's sovereignty over history, not a technique for interior passivity. Comfort flows from it, certainly — but the comfort is in the fact announced, not in the stillness achieved.

"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zechariah 4:6). Perfect proof text, until you ask who is standing there. It is Zerubbabel, in the middle of a construction project. And three verses later the LORD says that Zerubbabel's hands laid the foundation of this house and Zerubbabel's hands will finish it. The verse used to counsel people to stop working is addressed to a man who is told, in the same breath, that he will complete the building.

"Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). True, absolutely, and no Lutheran should want to soften it. But abiding in the vine is not inertia. Read what surrounds it — keeping his word, bearing fruit, loving one another, laying down your life for your friends. The branch does not manufacture sap. The branch also is not asleep.

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you" (Philippians 2:12-13). This is the text that quietism has never been able to digest, because it puts both halves in one sentence and refuses to let go of either. Work — *because* God works. Not: relax, because God works. Not: work, and then God works. Paul does the same

thing to himself in 1 Corinthians 15:10: he worked harder than all of them, though it was not him but the grace of God.

Scripture simply does not know the dichotomy the slogan depends on. It never asks you to choose between God's working and your working. It grounds the second in the first.

What the Confessions already said

Here is where I think the slogan collapses entirely, and it is a Lutheran point.

Let go and let God assumes that letting go is something you are capable of.

It has to assume that. The whole sentence depends on it. And that assumption is precisely what our confession denies.

Luther's answer in the Small Catechism, on the Third Article, is the sentence that ends this debate for me: I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him — but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

I cannot come to him. Not "I cannot come to him by working, but I can come to him by ceasing to work." Not "the doing is beyond me, but the yielding is within reach." The bound will is not bound at the level of effort and free at the level of surrender. It is bound. The Formula of Concord takes up this exact question at length in Article II and refuses every attempt to smuggle a decisive human contribution back into conversion, including the subtle ones — the assent, the non-resistance, the yielding. The whole point of the article is that there is no back door.

So when the slogan says *let go*, it hands a paralyzed man a command he cannot obey, and calls it good news.

And if you have ever tried to let go, you already know this by experience. You have knelt down and attempted to release something and felt your hands close again on the way up. That was not a defect in your technique. That was the doctrine of the bound will, demonstrated in your own body.

Where it does the most damage

I want to say this part carefully, because it touches people I care about a great deal.

The recovery room is where this slogan does its worst work, precisely because it is spoken there most often and most sincerely.

Say it to a person in their first year and here is what can happen. They stop fighting — not in the good sense of stopping self-reliance, but in the literal sense. They skip the meeting, because attendance started to feel like striving. They stop calling the sponsor, because dependence on a person felt like a failure to depend on God. In the worst cases, and I have seen this, they stop the medication, because taking it felt like not trusting.

Then they relapse. And the same theology that pushed them off the ledge is waiting at the bottom with an explanation: *you must not have surrendered.*

Please hear me. Nothing in this essay is an argument against your meeting, your sponsor, your doctor, or your prescription. Those are gifts. God governs the world through means, ordinarily and unspectacularly, and a pill bottle and a phone call at ten at night are not evidence of weak faith. Vocation is not the opposite of grace; it is one of the places grace does its work. Keep the meeting. Make the call. Take the medication.

What I am arguing against is the idea that your standing before God rises and falls with the quality of your surrender. That is the poison. And it is worth separating out from all the ordinary, practical, God-given help that gets thrown out with it.

What to say instead

I have never liked replacing one slogan with a better slogan, so I will not pretend I have five tidier words. What I have is a direction.

Let go and let God sends you inward. It makes you the auditor of your own heart, and the evidence you are looking for is the thoroughness of your own release. That search has no end, because the heart is deep and you cannot see the bottom of it. This is exactly why Lutherans talk so relentlessly about the means of grace, and why our confession insists that the Holy Spirit comes through the external Word and the sacraments — as instruments, not decorations. Not because we are formalists. Because assurance has to come from outside you or it is not assurance at all. It is just a mood you are monitoring.

So: you were baptized. That is not a technique. It is a fact with a date and witnesses, and it happened to you rather than being achieved by you. Luther's counsel against the devil was not *surrender harder*. It was *I am baptized* — a past-tense indicative you can throw at your own accusations. You may have felt nothing that day. It does not matter. Baptism does not run on your feelings any more than a deed to a house runs on how the owner feels about it.

You are absolved. Not "you have adequately let go, therefore forgiven," but forgiven, spoken to you by a man authorized to say it, out loud, in the second person.

And you are given the body and the cup — for you. Not for the surrendered. Not for those who finally got their hands open. *For you.* The words are addressed to people who came to the rail still holding things, because there has never been another kind of communicant.

Every one of these is outside you. That is the entire point. You do not have to determine whether your inner release was sufficient, because nothing rests on it.

You were never the one holding on

Here is the thing I would most want said to the person who has tried a hundred times to let go and cannot.

The slogan assumes you are holding on to God and need to release your grip so he can work. But that is not the picture Scripture gives.

Jesus says that his sheep are in his hand, and that no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. The security described there is not a mutual grip, where he holds you and you hold him and the weakest link is your fingers. If it were, every one of us would be gone by Thursday. The holding runs one direction.

Which means the counsel is not *let go*. The counsel is: you were never the one holding on in the first place. Your grip was never load-bearing. It was never what kept you, not on your best day, not in your first year, not at the moment you felt most sincere.

You are not holding on. You are being held.

That is not a technique you can fail at. That is a fact about you, established outside you, delivered to you in water and word and bread and the cup, standing entirely independent of how well you performed the release this morning.

Let go and let God asks you to do one more thing.

The gospel tells you it is already done.