

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 24: The Holy Spirit: effectual calling

The works of the Spirit are general (world), corporate (church) and individual (elect). The first saving work of God upon an elect sinner is summoning that sinner to Himself. This is referred to as "effectual calling."¹

Calling is the efficacious summons on the part of God the Father, in accordance with and in pursuance of his eternal purpose in Christ Jesus, addressed to sinners dead in trespasses and sins, a call that ushers them into fellowship with Christ and into the possession of the salvation of which he is the embodiment; a call immutable in its character by reason of the purpose from which it proceeds and the bond it effects—John Murray [*Collected Writings*, vol.2, 165]

Q. 67. *What is effectual calling?* A. Effectual calling is the work of God's almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his Word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein—Larger Catechism

I. Effectual calling

A. Five general facts about effectual calling

1. *Effectual calling was shadowed in the returning remnant.* The returned remnant of Jews from Babylonian captivity, shadowed the returning of sinners from the "far country" of this world to God's favor and grace. [1] They were brought back by God's power. "I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds" (Jer.23:3). "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn.10:16). [2] They were brought out of captivity and darkness. "But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase" (Jer.23:3). "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1Pet.2:9). [3] They were brought back to God. "Even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentles? As He says also in Hosea: I will call them My people who were not My people, and her beloved who was not beloved" (Rom.9:24-25; Hos.2:23).

(1) Isa.52:7-12 [2Cor.6:17]; Jer.24:4-7; Jer.29:10-14; Jer.32:36-41; Ezek.34:11-16

2. *Effectual calling is inward and irresistible.* The Scripture speaks of an outward and inward call. [1] The outward call.² This outward call is universal. "The gospel invitation extends a general

¹ The external call or proclamation of the Gospel, meets with no success because of the willful sinfulness of man, although, in itself, it has all the elements which should secure its acceptance. God knowing that this is true, not only of all mankind in general, but even of the elect whom he purposes to save in Christ, gives to these such influences of the Spirit as will lead to their acceptance of the call. This is called Effectual Calling—J.P. Boyce [*Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 367-368]

² Concerning this calling a distinction is made between an *external* and an *internal* call. They both proceed from God, occur by means of this Word, pertain to the same matters, and are presented equally to all. Both calls are addressed to human beings who by nature are the same. They are, however, distinguishable. The one functions externally only by means of the Word, to which also the Holy Spirit does join Himself in His common operation, resulting in common

outward call to salvation to all who hear the message" (Steele). Through His word God summons all who hear to repent and return to Him. "Wisdom calls aloud outside; she raises her voice in the open squares" (Prov.1:20). This general call is sincere and universal, but always resisted and refused. "I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded" (Prov.1:24). "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51). [2] The inward call. This comes in conjunction with the outward call, through the word of God. The Spirit accompanies the word with regenerating power.³ This ensures the sinner complies with the summons. "None will ever be drawn to Christ, savingly, by mere preaching; no, not by the most faithful and Scriptural preaching: there must first be the supernatural operations of the Spirit to open the sinner's heart to receive the message" (Pink). The Spirit opens the ears of the heart to hear and obey the summons. "The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). "It is the same Word that is heard in the external call, that is made effective in the heart in the internal calling. Through the powerful application of the Holy Spirit the external call passes right into the internal" (Berkhof).⁴ Thus the church takes her name from her *calling* (klesis), as she is *the called-out ones* (ekklesia), Christians are described as "those who are called" (1Cor.1:2), "the called" (Rom.1:6), and "holy brethren, parkers of the heavenly calling" (Heb.3:1).

The gospel invitation extends a call to salvation to every one who hears its message. It invites all men without distinction to drink freely of the water of life and live. It promises salvation to all who repent and believe. But this outward general call, extended to the elect and non-elect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and are under its power. They are of themselves unable and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and to turn to Christ for mercy. Consequently, the unregenerate will not respond to the gospel call to repentance and faith. No amount of external threatenings or promises will cause blind, deaf, dead, rebellious sinners to bow before Christ as Lord and to look to Him alone for salvation.; Such an act of faith and submission is contrary to the lost man's nature—David Steele [*The Five Points of Calvinism*, 48]

illumination and historical faith. The other, however, penetrates the very heart of man, powerfully illuminating it with wondrous light, revealing spiritual mysteries to man in their essential form, and powerfully inclines the will to embrace those mysteries in Christ, and to the obedience of faith—Wilhelmus a Brake; [*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol.2,193-194]

³ The relation of regeneration and calling has been debated. "(1) Logically, the external call in the preaching of the Word generally precedes or coincides with the operation of the Holy Spirit, by which the new life is produced in the soul of man. (2) Then by a creative word God generates the new life, changing the inner disposition of the soul, illuminating the mind, rousing the feelings, and renewing the will. In this act of God the ear is implanted that enables man to hear the call of God to the salvation of his soul. *This is regeneration in the most restricted sense of the word.* In it man is entirely passive. (3) Having received the spiritual ear, the call of God in the gospel is now heard by the sinner, and is brought home effectively to the heart. The desire to resist has been changed to a desire to obey, and the sinner yields to the persuasive influence of the Word through the operation of the Holy Spirit. *This is the effectual calling through the instrumentality of the word of preaching, effectively applied by the Spirit of God.* (4) This effectual calling, finally, secures, through the truth as a means, the first holy exercises of the new disposition that is born in the soul. The new life begins to manifest itself: the implanted life issues in the new birth. *This is the completion of the work of regeneration in the broader sense of the word, and the point at which it turns into conversion*—Louis Berkhof [*Systematic Theology*, 471]

⁴ The internal call overcomes all resistance. By nature all people, both the reprobate and the elect, resist the external call of God, by the enmity that is in them. But no one is able to resist the internal call. It overcomes all enmity by the exceeding greatness of His power. If it were not irresistible, no sinner would be saved. By the inward call the weapons of enmity are laid at the King's feet. Manasseh acknowledges that the LORD is God; Zacchaeus comes out of the tree and receives Jesus in his house; Saul asks, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?'; and whosoever we may be, if God calls us internally by His Word and Spirit, we shall come, flying to the Lord's windows—G.H. Kersten [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.2, 374]

(1) Lk.14:15-24; Jn.10:1-5, 16; 1Cor.1:18-25; 1Thess.1:2-7; 2Thess.2:13-14

3. *Effectual calling results from the electing love of God.* The elect are "called according to His purpose" (Rom.8:28). "The efficacious operation of the Spirit presupposes God's sovereign love to individuals, or a personal election. Considered from the true point of view, the electing purpose of God implies that the Spirit's saving efficacy has a special destination, and that it will reach its proper objects" (Smeaton). God's people are "the called, chosen, and faithful" (Rev.17:14), that is, they are *called* because they are *chosen*, and they are *faithful* because they are *called*. "It is God the Father who justifies and adopts. He also sanctifies. But we neglect something precious when we forget that it is God the Father who initiates salvation in actual possession by the call of his sovereign grace" (Murray).

There are many verses in the NT which indicate that the source of our invitation to become Christians lies in the Father. This has more practical relevance than we might ordinarily notice. It implies that the Father lovingly invites us to himself. If we grasp this, we will be delivered from a deep-seated suspicion of God which continues to haunt many Christians. Sometimes in the past the gospel has been presented in such a way as to give a distorted view of God, as though the Father consented unwillingly and rather grudgingly to the salvation of men, only because of the insistent demands of his loving Son. But verses like Romans 1:6-7; 8:28, 1Corinthians 1:2, 24; Hebrews 9:15; Jude 1, all indicate that God as the Father of Jesus Christ, is the Great Inviter. He loves us, calls us, saves us just as surely as does our Lord Jesus Christ. Many youngsters know what it is to have their father call them from play, and to trudge home, et, late and dirty, to his impending wrath! We, by contrast, are summoned by God the Father not to receive a blow but his open-armed embrace—Sinclair Ferguson [*The Christian Life*, 34]

(1) Rom.8:28-30; 1Cor.1:9; 2Tim.1:8-9

4. *Effectual calling relates to man as a rational being or creature.* "The Spirit of God operates through the preaching of the Word only in a morally persuasive way, making its persuasions effective, so that man listens to the voice of his God. This follows from the very nature of the Word, which addresses itself to the understanding and the will. It should be borne in mind, however, that this moral suasion does not yet constitute the whole of the internal call; there must be in addition to this a powerful operation of the Holy Spirit, applying the Word to the heart" (Berkhof). [1] Calling is an act not a process. "All the revelatory data would indicate that the call is an act not a process. Those called are called to be saints (Rom.1:7; 1Cor.1:2), and saintship in New Testament usage designates a status constituted. The call ushers into the fellowship of Christ (1Cor.1:9), a relationship once for all established. It is a call out of darkness into God's marvelous light (1Pet.2:9), into his own kingdom and glory (1Thess.2:12)" (Murray). [2] Calling is perceived as a gradual process. Although effectual calling is an act, it may be prefaced by the general work of the Spirit in convicting and awakening the soul.⁵ "The renewed heart is moved and melted when it contemplates the holy Savior having our

⁵ When God calls someone internally, this rarely occurs suddenly as appears to have been the case in the conversions of Zacchaeus, the murderer on the cross, and others. Albeit that for some the act whereby a sinner is translated into the kingdom of heaven and made alive – that is, being dead one moment and alive the next moment (there being no intermediate state) – the Lord generally uses some internal and external preparations, such as poverty, tragic occurrences, loss of property or loved ones, etc....this causes the person to become unsettled; he begins to contemplate repentance, the word of God takes hold, he is convinced of sin, and begins to perceive what eternal condemnation is. He also becomes acquainted with the Lord Jesus and with the blessedness of believers, and he desires to be in such a condition. He reads the word, prays, joins himself to the godly, escapes the gross pollutions of the world, etc. These matters are but common convictions which are experienced by the unconverted as well as the elect. Many such individuals turn back and depart

iniquities imputed to Him and bearing 'our sins in His own body on the tree.' The Spirit rakes in our foul hearts and makes us conscious of what a stench they are in the nostrils of an infinitely pure God. He brings to light and to sight the hidden and hideous things of darkness and convicts us of our vile and lost condition. He opens to our view the 'horrible pit' in which by nature we lie, and makes us to realize that we are fit for nothing but the everlasting burnings" (Pink).

Those whom God has predestined unto life, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone; and giving to them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace—
1689 [10:1]

(1) Ps.110:1-3; Jn.6:44-45

5. *Effectual calling results in the partaking of the gospel of God, and the responsibility to live from that gospel.* "In calling, the two terms *from which* and *to which* are to be considered. The term *from which* is the state of sin and condemnation in which we lie, darkness, and the world. The term *to which* is union with Christ, holiness, marvelous light, the kingdom of God, eternal glory in Christ, and eternal life" (Turretin). "Internal calling...calls man to a certain end: to the great goal to which the Holy Spirit is leading the elect, and, consequently also to the intermediate stages on the way to this final destiny. It is a calling to the fellowship of Jesus Christ (1Cor.1:9); to inherit blessing (1Pet.3:9); to liberty (Gal.5:13); to peace (1Cor.7:15); to holiness (1Thess.4:7); to one hope (Eph.4:4) to eternal life (1Tim.6:12); and to God's kingdom and glory (1Thess.2:12)" (Berkhof).

Q. 35: *What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?* A. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them—
Baptist Catechism

(1) Eph.4:1-3; Col.3:14-15; 1Pet.2:20-21

from the way upon which they first seemed to have entered. When the time arrives, however, the Lord will translate His elect into His kingdom by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. These preparatory circumstances mentioned do not proceed from man, but are God's common operations. They also are not a step toward regeneration, nor are they sufficient to transform man. Under such circumstances man is not capable by the exercise of His free will to transform himself, to believe, and to repent. The efficacious and almighty power of God must join itself to such circumstances in order for him to be converted. These preparatory circumstances are but means which God gives and uses to deal with man in a manner consistent with his humanity—Wilhelmus a Brakel [*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol.2, 210]