

Effectual Calling

As Richard Phillips reminds us,

One of the most important insights of Reformed theology is the unity of the works of the Trinity. Calvinists believe that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are united in the work of redeeming lost mankind. We do not believe that they act *against* one another or even *on* one another, but *with* one another in our salvation.

This emphasis on the unity of the Trinity in salvation may be seen in the doctrines of grace as organized by the TULIP acrostic. The doctrines of grace start with a problem: T – man’s *total depravity*. The answer to this problem is brought about by the unified work of the Trinity. It begins with *unconditional election*, which is focused on the Father’s sovereign purpose in predestination. Salvation is then accomplished by the atoning work of Jesus on the cross, which, according to *limited atonement*, was offered for those elected by the Father. This salvation is then sovereignly applied to those same elect individuals by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, which is the point of *irresistible grace*.

Therefore, just as unconditional election describes the grace of the Father, and limited atonement describes the grace of the Son, irresistible grace presents the grace of the Holy Spirit.¹

This “tri-perspective” understanding of “salvation” is seen in Ephesians 1:

- In 1:4, the Father elects a people for His Son
- In 1:7, the Son provides atonement for the elect
- In 1:13, the Spirit applies the Son’s atonement to the elect

Thus, our salvation was determined by God the Father before the ages began, accomplished by God the Son 2000 years ago on the cross, and applied by God

¹ Richard Phillips, *What’s So Great About the Doctrines of Grace?* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008), 69-70.

the Holy Spirit when we were effectively regenerated, and then subsequently united to the Messiah by faith.

Effectual Calling is *not* Regeneration

Many classical theologians equated “calling” with “regeneration.”² However, both logically and Scripturally, though these two phenomenon are *inseparably linked*, they are yet distinct.

Perhaps the best place to start in helping us see this is in **Genesis 1**, where God, in the original creation, effectually called the heavens and earth into existence by His powerful word.³

- The world is “generated” by Yahweh’s powerful Word; that is, God’s Word is the means by which the creation is brought forth.⁴

Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostle Paul says that our “re-generation” or “re-creation” is the result of the same effective call of God by His powerful, life-creating Word.⁵

- 2 Cor. 4:4 – “For the God who said, ‘Out of darkness let light shine’ – He has shone in our hearts to give the light of the glory of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Just as the original creation was in a state of darkness and disorder,⁶ so Paul says that before God effectually called and regenerated us, we too had a veil of darkness over our minds and hearts (4:3).

² For example, see the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

³ The NET Bible, commenting on this verse, says, “By speaking [“God said”], God brings the world into existence. The efficacious nature of the word of the LORD is a prominent theme in this chapter.”

⁴ The Hebrew word Moses uses for “created” is בָּרָא (bara’). According to Waltke, the word is used only of God’s activity and is a purely theological term. It carries the concept of “initiating something new” and the creation of “new” things. In many passages it means to “bring into existence,” that is, to create out of nothing. Again, Waltke says, “The limitation of the word to divine activity indicates that the area of meaning delineated by the root falls outside of human ability. Since the word never occurs with the object of the material, and since the primary emphasis of the word is on the newness of the created object, the word lends itself well to the concept of creation *ex nihilo*.” See בָּרָא, in *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*.

⁵ In a very real sense, we can say that saving faith is likewise created by God *ex nihilo*. Since saving faith is not resident in the ‘natural’ person, it must be an ‘alien’ gift given to him or her by the creative, life-giving Word of God (see esp. Rom. 10:17).

But, says Paul, God shone into the “formless wasteland”⁷ of our hearts in a sovereign act of re-creation.

HOW did He accomplish this?

- By His powerful word, He called light out of darkness, order out of chaos, and, as Ephesians 2:1-5 teaches, life out of death.
- Paul also says this in Romans 4:17: “The God in whom [Abraham] believed gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”
 - As the context of Romans 4 makes abundantly clear, this effectual call requires God’s life-and-faith-producing word/promise.⁸

Though “call” is used in many different ways in the Scriptures, when we are thinking through soteriology (‘the doctrine of salvation’), we are dealing with what theologians call “effectual calling”, that is God’s irresistible calling of the elect into “fellowship with Christ” (1 Cor. 1:9).

This is important to note, because many get confused when they read passages like Matthew 22:14, where Jesus says, “many are called, but few are chosen.”

- Here, Jesus is not referring to a saving, effectual, irresistible “call” unto salvation, but rather a general invitation to all people to put their faith in Christ.⁹

But for Paul, when explaining how salvation works, “call” has a salvific certainty to it:

- In Rom. 1:6-7 “the set apart ones” are equated with those who “are called.”

⁶ In Gen. 1:2, Moses says that the earth was “without form and void” (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ, *bōhū v’ tōhū*). This is an interesting phrase in the Hebrew and carries the idea of chaos and emptiness that needs to be overcome and filled by a divine act of sovereign power.

⁷ This is how the NAB renders תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ (*bōhū v’ tōhū*) in Gen. 1:2.

⁸ See the repetition of “promise” in 4:13, 14, 16, 20, 21.

⁹ This is why “word studies” can be dangerous in the hands of those who refuse to acknowledge things like clear context, or even how languages work (i.e. the same word can be used in a variety of ways in a variety of contexts).

- In 1 Cor. 1:2, those who “are sanctified in Christ Jesus” are those who “are called to be saints.”
- In Gal. 1:15, Paul’s being “called” is equated with God’s sovereign and saving revelation of Christ to him.

Perhaps the best passage that shows that “called” for Paul means “effectual salvation” is Romans 8:30. It will be helpful for us to cite the context to make sure we’re not ‘cherry picking’ or attempting fallacious word studies:

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for¹⁰ those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

It is clear from this passage that to “be called” applies only to the saving act of God for His elect, as evidenced by their subsequent love for God,¹¹ as well their definite justification and glorification.

In the words of John Murray, “Calling in this sense is a sovereign act of God and does not derive its definition from any activity on our part, such as faith or repentance or conversion. We cannot resist it.”¹²

As Frame reminds us,

Effectual calling helps us to deal with a paradox: Many people in the world are elect but nevertheless “dead in the trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

Although they are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world [Eph.

¹⁰ I would translate this “for” as “that is”. This is undoubtedly a Hebrew parallelism: “those who love God” (τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν) = “those who are called [by God]” (τοῖς κλητοῖς).

¹¹ See 1 John 5:1, where the Greek clearly shows that love for God is the evidence and fruit of regeneration (and not the other way around, which is the common ‘evangelical’ interpretation of the verse).

¹² John Murray, *Collected Works of John Murray, vol. 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976-82), 165.

1:4], they live as unbelievers, without any faith in Christ. This paradox is due to the historical character of redemption. God has sovereignly determined that election is the first step, not the final step, in the story of each believer's story with Jesus. Subsequent to election, God leads each of His people through a process by which they become intimately attached to Christ. Effectual calling is the first step in that historical process.¹³

Application:

1. As Phillips notes, this doctrine **glorifies** the saving work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴
 - 1 Pet. 1:23 – “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”
 - It is by effectually applying to our hearts the Scriptures that He brought into being that the Holy Spirit brings us to spiritual life.
2. This doctrine **guarantees** success in our evangelistic efforts.
 - Grudem: Effective calling is an act of God that *guarantees* a response, because Paul specifies in Romans 8:30 that all who were “called” were also “justified.”¹⁵
 - Note the link between Acts 13:48 and 49:
 - “And when the Gentiles heard this [Word], they began rejoicing and glorifying Word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the Word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.”
 - John 6:44 – “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.”
 - HOW does the Father “draw” the elect to the Son? By the Word!!

¹³ Frame, *ST*, 939.

¹⁴ Phillips, *What's So Great?*, 79.

¹⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 692-93.

- ➔ John 10:26-27 – “You do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”
- God’s effective calling comes *through* the human preaching of the gospel.
- ➔ “To this He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thes. 2:14).
- God’s effectual call and irresistible grace is great news not only for us, but also for others who have yet to come to Jesus. How can we really hope for hardened or uninterested sinners to trust in Jesus?¹⁶
 - Let us never forget that the effective calling of God is always effective.

3. This doctrine **guards** us from shenanigans in our evangelism.

Phillips: “Since this doctrine reminds us that salvation is a sovereign and supernatural work of God, it preserves us from deforming our ministries with man-made devices.”

- Cf. 1 Cor. 2:2-5
 - This is played out over and over in the book of Acts:
 - ➔ Acts 16:14 – “The Lord *opened [Lydia’s] heart* to give heed to what was said by Paul.”
- Rom. 10:17 – “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”
 - NET = “Consequently, faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.”
 - NLT – “So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.”

¹⁶ Phillips, *What’s So Great?*, 82.

- NIV – “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the message of Christ.”

Conclusion:

Effective calling is an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which He summons people to Himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith.¹⁷

Effectual calling is the necessary implication of unconditional election and limited atonement. If God has sovereignly predestined certain people to salvation, then it is necessary that those people actually be saved through faith in Christ.

Moreover, if Jesus died not merely to make salvation possible for everyone but actually to save His own people, then the salvation of the elect cannot be decided by the willingness of corrupt, unregenerate sinners to place their trust in Him.¹⁸

In our next study, we will look at the next “link” in the *ordo salutis* (“order of salvation”): regeneration.

¹⁷ Grudem, *ST*, 692.

¹⁸ Phillips, *What’s So Great?*, 75-76.