

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Calling

“For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” — 1 Corinthians 1:22-23

Introduction

AN OVERVIEW OF SALVATION		
Its Arrangement	Its Accomplishment	Its Application
Before Time	An Historical Event (the cross)	Relative Time
Election	Atonement	Calling, etc.

The concept of “calling” comes at the beginning of the study of how God’s plan and accomplishment of redemption is *applied* in time and space to those He has chosen to save. This *application* of redemption includes many aspects—some occurring instantaneously, as one-time events at the beginning of the believer’s experience of salvation; others occurring as part of a process taking place through the rest of the believer’s earthly life; and some occurring as distinct events in the future. They are all intertwined and inseparable, as links in an unbreakable chain. Yet they are not interchangeable. Each deserves its own definition and attention. As John Murray states,

When we think of the application of redemption we must not think of it as one simple and indivisible act. It comprises a series of acts and processes. To mention some, we have calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification. These are all distinct, and none of these can be defined in terms of the other. Each has its own distinct meaning, function, and purpose in the action and grace of God. (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 82)

A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. The Universal Call. A *non-verbal* call given through all that God has made, summoning human beings everywhere to give glory to God for His work as Creator and Sustainer of life.

Key idea:
A summons given without words, to all people in all places and times, to give glory to God.

It is the witness to God inherent in everything He has made. It is a summons that is not based on propositions but on experience; it is a summons that is not based on words but on things. Its purpose is to *declare* the greatness and goodness of God to all people and to *call* them to worship Him. However, it does not contain the message of salvation, nor does it call sinners to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is also resisted and suppressed because of the hardness of sinful men.

- Psalm 19:1-4a; Acts 14:17; Romans 1:20-21

2. The Gospel Call. A *verbal* call given in direct response to the plight of sinful man. It is the call offered through the preaching of the gospel, which is why theologians sometimes call it the “external call.” In the words of Matthew Barrett, it is “a public offering of redemption and salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and an invitation and command to repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life” (*Forty Questions about Salvation*, 114).

Key idea:
A summons given through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to believe in Him as Lord and Savior and repent of one’s sins.

- Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 10:13-14, 17; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; etc.

a) Its presentation. The gospel call is both an *invitation* and a *demand*. Ultimately, it is not an offer merely for the unbeliever to consider and judge. It is the presentation of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who has rightful demands upon all sinners, and is their only hope.

- *Invitation:* Isaiah 55:1; Matthew 11:28-30. *Demand:* Matthew 4:17; Acts 17:30-31.

- b) **Its contents.** The gospel is comprised of three essential elements: (1) the presentation of the facts of the gospel and the way of salvation, centering on Jesus Christ and what He achieved on the cross; (2) the summons to come to Christ in faith and repentance; and (3) the promise of forgiveness and life to all who do come to Christ in sincere faith (Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 70).
- c) **Its limitation.** The gospel call is different from the universal call because it reveals the name, nature, and works of the one given to men as Savior (Acts 4:12). But the gospel call—like the universal call—can still be rejected. In and of itself it does not have the power to penetrate the resistance of man’s sin-hardened soul.
 - Isaiah 65:12; Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:51-53; 17:32-33

3. The Effectual Call. A *special working* of the Holy Spirit whereby He makes the hardened sinner *willing* to believe the facts and promises of the gospel. Anthony Hoekema defines it as “the gospel call made effective to salvation in the hearts and lives of God’s people” (*Saved by Grace*, 86). Bruce Ware defines it as “God’s inward and ultimately persuasive summons to repent of sin and to turn to Christ for salvation” (“Effectual Calling and Grace,” 211). Similarly, John Frame writes, “In effectual calling, God acts on us first, before we offer him any response. He acts sovereignly, calling us into fellowship with his Son. This calling is the ultimate source in time of all the blessings of salvation” (*Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, 185). It is the “voice” of God working internally, calling something—a willing soul—into existence in the spiritually-dead sinner.

Key idea:
The miraculous activity of the Holy Spirit whereby he makes the sinner willing to believe the gospel message.

Whereas Christians typically do not disagree on the existence and purpose of the universal call and the gospel call, they do disagree over the existence and purpose of the effectual call. However, the concept of the effectual call is necessary to address an extremely important issue: *how does a sinner appropriate the gospel call?*

- How is a sinner—one who is *incapable of pleasing God* in his sinful condition—*able to please God* by receiving the gospel call all on his own?
- Moreover, what explains why some *do believe* the gospel call and others *reject* it? Is it because those who believed are inherently *better* than those who reject it?

Ultimately, the effectual call is not a concept invented by theologians. It is addressed clearly by Scripture.

THE GOSPEL CALL AND THE EFFECTUAL CALL IN MATTHEW 11:25-30	
Effectual Call	Matthew 11:25-27 – “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from <i>the</i> wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, <u>and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.</u> ”
Gospel Call	Matthew 11:28-30 – “ <u>Come to Me</u> , all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

- **Romans 8:28-30** – “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”
 - Note the *progression*: Foreknowledge → Predestination → Calling → Justification → etc.
 - Note also that the objects of these actions are the same throughout the process, from beginning to end; none are lost along the way.
- Note the use of “called” in 1 Corinthians 1:9, 22-23; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; etc.
- Note also the concept of “drawing” or “hearing Christ’s voice” in John 6:44; 10:16, 27; etc.

“For such reasons as these there is good warrant for the conclusion that the application of redemption begins with the sovereign and efficacious summons by which the people of God are ushered into the fellowship of Christ and union with him to the end that they may become partakers of all the grace and virtue which reside in him as a Redeemer, Savior, and Lord.”
—Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 98

A COMPARISON OF THE GOSPEL CALL AND THE EFFECTUAL CALL	
Gospel Call	Effectual Call
External	Internal
Preaching of the Word	Work of the Spirit
Resistible	Irresistible
All who hear gospel preaching	Only the elect
Ineffectual by itself	Effectual when accompanied by the gospel

B. Essential Characteristics

1. The effectual call is necessitated by total depravity. The need for the effectual call is not created by a deficiency with the gospel message. The need is created by the hardness of the sinner.

- Romans 3:9-19; 8:6-8; 1 Corinthians 2:14

As Hoekema states,

If our condition by nature is as described in the passages just quoted it is obvious that we cannot in our own strength accept the gospel call. To ask people who are by nature spiritually dead, hostile to God, unable to understand the things of God’s Spirit, and unable to submit to God’s law, to respond favorably to his invitation to repent of sin and believe in Christ is like asking a totally deaf woman to answer your question or a totally blind man to read a not you have written. (*Saved by Grace*, 82)

2. The effectual call is dependent upon the gospel call. The Holy Spirit works with and through the preaching of the gospel, not apart from it.

- Romans 10:13-14, 17

Matthew Barrett rightly notes that “We cannot divorce the gospel call from the effectual call, although it is important to distinguish between the two” (*Forty Questions about Salvation*, 115).

3. The effectual call is a sovereign work of God. It is a work dependent upon His choice alone.

- Acts 16:14; Galatians 1:15-16; Romans 8:29-30

We do not call ourselves. As sinners, we do not make ourselves receptive to the gospel. We do not soften our own hearts. As John Murray states,

This fact should make us keenly aware how dependent we are upon the sovereign grace of God in the application of redemption. . . . We may not like this doctrine. But, if so, it is because we are averse to the grace of God and wish to arrogate to ourselves the prerogative that belongs to God. (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 92-93)

4. The effectual call is always effectual. What distinguishes this call from the gospel call is that it is a call that cannot be resisted. Therefore, theologians sometimes call this “irresistible grace.” But this should not be taken to mean that God makes the sinner receive the gospel *against his will*, like force-feeding a person on a hunger strike! Rather, it is “irresistible” or “effectual” in that God so graciously works in the sinner to make him *willing to believe*. The sinner thus responds to the gospel out of joy, compelled by his own need, and assured of no other alternative. The Holy Spirit ensures that those whom God has elected will come to him *willingly*.

Bruce Ware describes it as follows:

When Calvinists refer to irresistible grace, they mean to say that the Holy Spirit is able, when he so chooses, to overcome all human resistance and so cause his gracious work to be utterly effective and ultimately irresistible. In soteriology, the doctrine of irresistible grace refers to the Spirit's work to overcome all sin-induced resistance and rebellion, opening blind eyes and enlivening hardened hearts so that sinners understand and embrace the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ (Acts 16:14; 2 Cor 4:4-6; 2 Tim 2:24-25). Such is the grace by which we are saved. (Ware, "Effectual Calling and Grace," 211)

5. The effectual call has a specific purpose. It is not a call to antinomianism. It is not a call to selfish hedonism. It is an effectual call to divine purposes. Note those purposes in the following texts:

- 1 Corinthians 1:9; Galatians 5:13; Colossians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 1 Timothy 6:12; 1 Peter 2:20-21

When redemption is applied to the believer, it does not merely result in changes of status (judicial or forensic changes). It results in transformation. As Hoekema states, "The effectual call, therefore, summons us to a distinctive kind of life, a life that is different, that separates us morally and spiritually from this present evil world" (*Saved by Grace*, 87).

D. Practical Implications

- 1. The gospel must be preached to all.** The effectual call does not operate apart from the preaching of the gospel.
- 2. The effectual call is what gives hope in evangelism and missions.** If we believe what the Bible teaches about depravity, yet reject the concept of a miraculous, effectual calling, we could not expect anyone to be saved.
- 3. If you experienced this effectual call, contemplate what you were called to.**
- 4. The effectual call gives all the glory to God.** The reason why a person believes the gospel is not due to his inherent goodness, nor to the particular effectiveness of the preacher. It is due to God's activity alone.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: John 6:44

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 533-35, 554-565.
- Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, chapters 5-6, pages 68-92
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, chapter 11, pages 91-98.

Homework:

- In your own words, define and distinguish the three "calls"—the universal call, the gospel call, the effectual call. What is the purpose of each?
- Read through John 6:35-65 several times. What does Jesus here teach about man in his sinful state? Does the hardness of man's sin make Jesus' mission ineffective? Explain.
- How does this study on "calling" motivate us to evangelism and missions? How would you respond to the person who says that belief in "effectual calling" kills enthusiasm for evangelism?
- Are there any people from whom you should *withhold* the gospel? Does God save apart from hearing the gospel? Provide biblical proof.
- Since God initiates the process of redemption's application to us, and since it is initiated purely by his grace, what confidence does that give you that he will complete the process?
- Sing through "How Sweet and Awful Is the Place" (*Hymns of Grace* #350) several times.

Hymns: "And Can it Be" (*Hymns of Grace* #180); "How Sweet and Awful Is the Place" (*Hymns of Grace* #350)

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: November 13 – "Regeneration"