

# Effectual Calling

by

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Peter writes, ‘give diligence to make your calling and election sure’. Why? Only the elect get to heaven, the rest end up in hell. But who are the elect? How can a person know if he is in the elect? Interestingly Peter links calling with election and puts calling first. The two in his mind are unbreakably linked and it is by recognizing that we have been ‘called’ that we can know with certainty that we were elected in eternity past. So the vital question now is, Have we been ‘called’? What is this calling?

## **Two kinds of call**

There are two kinds of call in Scripture. First there is a general call which is addressed to all: ‘Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man’ (*Prov.* 8:4). Christ, who is wisdom personified, addresses all mankind demanding repentance, faith and holiness. Jesus states, ‘Many are called, but few are chosen’ (*Matt.* 22:14). This speaks of a call much wider than the elect. It is addressed to many, to millions across the world and in every age. It is the call of the gospel, Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. The prophet Isaiah transmits it: ‘Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else’ (*Isa.* 45:22). John ends the book of Revelation with it: ‘The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely’ (*Rev.* 22:17). The Holy Spirit says to all, Come and drink of salvation. This first call is the universal call of the gospel from God through men to every human being to come for salvation.

The second call is addressed only to the elect and only at the point of conversion. To begin with they too hear only the common call, but then a time comes when that call becomes the effectual call. It is effective and comes with such power that it cannot be resisted. All who are effectually called are saved. Paul refers to it when he writes: ‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified’ (*Rom.* 8:29-30). All whom

God foreloved, whom he loved before they were created, he predestinated to be like Jesus. And all whom he predestinated he called, and all whom he called he justified, and all whom he justified he will certainly glorify. He actually uses the past tense for that which is future to emphasize how certain it is. The chain from electing love to heaven is unbreakable. All who are in the elect are called in this way and only them. Peter also writes of this effectual call in his first Epistle when he encourages Christians, ‘that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 *Pet.* 2:9).

### **Narrower and broader effectual call**

Theologians draw a distinction between effectual call in the narrower and in the broader sense. Strictly speaking the effectual call comes from God the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit and is limited to the beginning of the application of redemption to the soul. This powerful call starts the process. Jesus said: ‘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* 5:25). The immediate response to the call is regeneration, the new birth, the spiritual resurrection of the soul which was dead in trespasses and sins.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism however gives a broader definition of effectual calling, grouping together all that is involved in conversion: ‘Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel’. The proof text given is the following: ‘Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began’ (2 *Tim.* 1:9). ‘Calling’ refers to the change which took place not according to our works but by his mighty grace. Another passage also uses calling in this broader sense: ‘For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called . . . But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption’ (1 *Cor.* 1:26, 30). A calling which can be seen involves the response as well as the actual calling. So when Peter speaks of calling along

with election he is referring to the whole change of conversion which is the evidence which proves that one has been elected.

In this article I would like to look at the Catechism definition of effectual calling as I believe it will help us to understand how God usually works in the souls of those who are converted. Theology might sometimes give the impression that conversion takes place in an instant, with no preparatory work or process, so that a person is at one moment dead in trespasses and sins and then the next moment born again, justified, adopted and sanctified. Heaven suddenly seizes the individual and transforms them. However Scripture, as well as our own experience, tells us that there is a process. Ezekiel's valley of dead bones illustrates what takes place. The bones are gathered, the sinews and flesh grow upon the bones, bodies are prepared though still lifeless, then the point comes when the spirit of life enters and they stand up.

### 1. Effectual calling is a work of God's Spirit

Much modern evangelical Christianity is the product of man's work alone. Following an address, or some words of witness, or the reading of a tract or book, a person is challenged to become a Christian. If the individual expresses an interest, however little, he is asked to repeat the 'sinner's prayer'. Typically that might be in the Billy Graham format:

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Saviour. In Your Name. Amen'.

The Campus Crusade version is as follows:

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Saviour and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be'.

Having prayed, the person is now told that he is a Christian. They are encouraged to read the Bible, pray regularly, attend church and not doubt that they are saved. This is something a man can do in his own strength and with his own power of will. Churches and evangelists can persuade thousands to

do it simply by worldly means and persuasion. Evangelical churches are full of such. Many fall away but many keep on going in their own strength hoping that they are guaranteed heaven when they die. They are hypocrites who know nothing of the saving grace of God in their lives. The Bible makes plain that the unconverted are dead in sins (*Eph. 2:1*). God alone can raise the dead. There are no examples in Scripture of evangelizing using the ‘sinner’s prayer’. Jesus said, ‘Ye must be born again’ (*John 3:7*) and that new birth is explained as being ‘born of the Spirit’ (v. 6). God has to come into a person’s life: ‘For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God’ (*Eph. 2:8*). God must give the gift of faith. The mere reciting of a prayer changes no one. It is a work of God’s Spirit.

## 2. Conviction of sin

The Spirit prepares people for conversion. He shows them their sin and guilt, impresses upon them the wrath of God against them, the hopelessness and misery of their situation and their need of salvation. Paul writes, ‘The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith’ (*Gal. 3:24*). It whips us out of every false refuge and shows us the uselessness of trusting in our good works, so that unless Christ has mercy upon us there is no hope. Paul gives insight into his own conversion in his letter to the Romans. He makes the fascinating statement, ‘For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me’ (*Rom. 7:9-11*). It is hard to imagine Paul being alive without the law. He stated elsewhere that touching the righteousness which is in the law, he was blameless (*Phil. 3:6*). He trusted in his good works and he was a strict Pharisee and very good living. But then the commandment came with the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, sin revived and his hope died. He writes: ‘I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead’ (*Rom. 7:7-8*). The law told him that coveting was a sin, so he tried to stop coveting but the harder he tried the more he found himself coveting. Keeping the law is impossible for fallen man and is no way of salvation for us though everyone to some extent tries it. Natural religion says that if you are a good person you will get to heaven. The Spirit convicts us

that we are hell-deserving sinners. If we want true conversions ministers must preach the law, seeking the aid of the Spirit to convict the sinner of his sin.

### **3. Enlightening of the mind in the knowledge of Christ**

Conviction of sin is good in itself but is not enough. Sometimes there is a measure of conviction of sin without conversion ensuing. This is called the common strivings of the Spirit and the classic biblical reference is in God's words, 'My Spirit shall not always strive with man' (*Gen. 6:3*). This is a work of the Spirit warning the sinner and so leaving him without excuse. Faith is not granted. Some go through a time of feeling emptiness, meaninglessness, sin, guilt and danger and are troubled. Then they harden their heart and go on in their sins as before. Thank God for conviction of sin but don't stop there or you will perish. Having shown the sinner his lostness and hopelessness, it is then the normal pattern for the Spirit to enlighten the mind in the knowledge of Christ. To the convicted sinner longing for deliverance the Spirit reveals Jesus Christ dying on the cross to save sinners. Many have a general knowledge of this but it is another thing to have the eyes of the soul opened to it. There is a sacrifice for sin, a Lamb of God who took away the sin of all those whom the Father gave him and rendered complete satisfaction to divine justice for them. He who was without form or comeliness now becomes the altogether lovely One, the chiefest among ten thousand to the convicted sinner. The cross begins to make sense. The Spirit opens the eyes to the door and the only door to salvation.

### **4. Renewing of the will**

Imagine a paralyzed person. He has just had an accident in the desert and no one is around. The sun is beating down. The hours are passing. His water bottle is within reach but he can't move. A mobile phone is in his pocket but he can't move to get it and call for help. He lies there hour after hour and night follows day and day night and his thirst is all consuming and his life is ebbing slowly away. That is a picture of us by nature and even after we have been convicted of our sinfulness and enlightened in the knowledge of Christ. We still need our will to be renewed. Adam had free will to choose good or evil. Since the Fall mankind is bent to evil and cannot will to take one move towards God and salvation. Paralyzed by our fallenness we need our will to be renewed by the mighty power of the Spirit. We are somewhat like an alcoholic who detests drink, longs to be rid of it, but is shaking and trembling

for alcohol and the bottle in front of him is irresistible. By nature we are addicted to sin and rebellion and we need the Deliverer to set our will free to choose the Saviour.

### 5. Persuading and Enabling to embrace Christ

Salvation is of God from beginning to end. The Spirit having convicted us of our sin and enlightened our mind in the knowledge of Christ and renewed our will, now persuades and enables us to receive Christ. ‘What must I do to be saved?’ asked the Philippian jailor, and he received clear direction: ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved’ (*Acts* 16:31). Nothing could be simpler than faith to the Christian, the person in whom the Spirit is operating, and yet nothing more difficult to the dead sinner. King Agrippa was ‘almost persuaded’ but that is not enough, and as far as we know he perished.

### 6. Freely offered

Some churches dispute the ‘free offer’ of the gospel. The Westminster Shorter Catechism is quite clear on the matter. We are to ‘embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel’. There was a dispute some years ago upon this issue in our own Church but thankfully there was a unanimous assertion of the ‘free offer’ as being biblical. This is a wonderful truth. Christ is to be freely offered in gospel preaching. Whosoever embraces him by faith will be saved. We put down no restrictions, but at the same time we know that none will embrace Christ but those whom the Spirit persuades and enables. Without this mighty work of God and his irresistible grace not one soul would be saved. But on the last day none will be able to say ‘there was no gospel for me’. It is freely offered to all. ‘How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?’ (*Heb.* 2:3).

Give diligence to make sure that you are in the elect. Give diligence to make sure that you are effectually called, because that will assure you that you are in the elect. In this way you will have a blessed and peaceful deathbed: ‘For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ (2 *Pet.* 1:11).

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