

EFFECTUAL CALLING

by

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From Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Basic Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971).

God calls every normal human being. He does this through the *vocatio realis--realis* because this general call comes not through words but through *res* (things), namely, nature, history (of individuals and nations), and conscience.¹

However great and important the influence of this *vocatio realis* is, no one can ever come to a saving knowledge of the triune God through this general, external call. Through the *vocatio realis* man is rendered without excuse² if he does not worship and obey him whose majesty, eternal power, and divinity speak to all through his mighty works in nature, in history, and in human life and conscience. But the *vocatio realis* does not proclaim the good tidings of great joy³ for all who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as the divine Savior.

For the salvation of sinners, there is an urgent need for much more than the *vocatio realis* can offer. And now it is the glory of the Christian faith that it unequivocally proclaims that Almighty God, who through the *vocatio realis* has called and is continually calling all to a realization of his divine majesty and omnipotence, through his Word calls sinners to repentance and to salvation. This calling to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord, through the authoritative Word of God is designated the *vocatio verbalis*. This external calling through the Gospel is to be proclaimed to all nations⁴ as an earnest invitation and urgent summons that everyone should repent and believe in him who is the all-sufficient Savior. But to have practical effect in the life of man, the *vocatio verbalis* must, as it were, break through into the mind, will and heart--the innermost being--of man. For this, the "effectual calling," *vocatio efficax*, is needed.

DEFINITION

The effectual calling must be clearly differentiated not only from the *vocatio realis* but also from the *vocatio verbalis*. God as the Lord of nature, of man, and of history most decidedly can and does use the *vocatio realis* and in a very special sense the *vocatio verbalis* in the life of men. The proclamation of the Gospel is used by him as a glorious means to bring us to a true faith in and

1 Cf. Rom. 1:20; 2:14, 15; Job 37:14; 38:1-42:6; Ps. 8:2, 4; 19:1-4; 46:11; 104.

2 Rom. 1:20.

3 Luke 2:10.

4 Matt. 28:19; 24:14; Mark 16:15.

knowledge of the triune God. The *vocatio verbalis* is, however, in itself not sufficient to achieve this. It cannot bring the spiritually dead to true life in communion with God. For the lost sinner to become the reborn child of God, the effectual calling is needed, that calling of the living, sovereign, and almighty God which makes us partakers of the life eternal which Jesus Christ has earned for us.

By effectual calling we thus understand that mysterious, divine, and humanly inexplicable act of God through the Holy Spirit, which brings us into living fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord.

EXPOSITION

Scripture and practical experience leave no doubt about the fact that of the many to whom the Gospel is proclaimed, only a small minority accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior. Our Lord himself said, "Many are called but few are chosen."⁵ Scripture teaches that all mankind is guilty before the holy, righteous God, and that we are totally incapable of saving ourselves. Unredeemed man is spiritually blind and dead and unable to regenerate or truly to convert himself. In this sense, the teaching of the Bible is the most pessimistic and realistic teaching in the world. Fallen, sinning man *is* spiritually lost and completely incompetent to save himself. How, then, can we, who are in ourselves helplessly lost sinners, ever be united to Christ in saving communion?

The New Testament leaves no doubt regarding the reply to this question. It clearly and consistently teaches us that through the sovereign and omnipotent power and grace of God we are effectually called to become the inheritors of the salvation wrought by God through Jesus Christ. Thus, for instance, Paul writes the following: ". . . the power of God; who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace."⁶ Compare also I Peter 1:3. And in I Corinthians 1:26-30, Paul emphatically dismisses any idea that Christians themselves deserved to become the children of God. He writes: "For behold your calling, brethren, how that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called* . . . that no flesh should glory before God."

From these and other New Testament declarations, it is clear that by "calling" in these cases is meant not merely an invitation but that mysterious, glorious, and efficacious act of God through the Holy Spirit which brings man into true, dynamic fellowship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is rightly called "a heavenly calling"⁷--God is the all-sufficient cause, origin, and executor of the calling. How God accomplishes this is beyond human comprehension, and why he acts thus only in the case of some to whom the *vocatio verbalis* comes is not within the limited sphere of human understanding. "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."⁸

In the Gospels "call" is often used merely in the sense of "invite." But in the Epistles the word is most used in the sense of "summoning, commanding" and at the same time "effecting, causing to be, prevailing." To call (καλεῖν) in the Epistles means in substance "to appoint one to salvation."

5 Matt. 22:14.

6 II Tim. 1:9.

7 Heb. 3:1.

8 John 3:8.

When considering the teaching of the Word of God regarding the effectual calling of sinners by the power and grace of God, we are in a field where we stand with awe before the mystery of the eternal love, holiness, grace, and wisdom of God. We cannot precisely define or describe the work of the Creator which makes possible the existence of life even in the mere physical sphere. How much less can we explain or express in human words the wonder of that effectual calling of God, through which he in his omnipotent grace and love makes us partakers of his eternal salvation in Jesus Christ! It is futile and even misplaced to try to analyze or describe this divine act. We must confess our total inability to understand this great, divine mystery. But as a tree is known by its fruit, we can also learn much regarding the divine act of God through which he calls lost and helpless sinners effectually to true life by looking at the fruits of this divine calling.

Sin broke the bond of fellowship between the sinner and God. But through the divine act of God we are "called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord."⁹ The effectual calling is thus that divine act by which the spiritual blindness of the unredeemed is removed, so that Jesus Christ is seen and embraced as the true Savior and Son of God. The intellect of man is freed from the bondage of sin and spiritual ignorance, which formed an impenetrable barrier between him and Jesus Christ, and with renewed heart and will the called Christian is united with the Savior in intimate fellowship. Before God called us, we wandered on our own way and revolted against Christ; but through his effectual calling we are enabled to obey willfully and gladly him who, as of old, still calls every Christian: "Follow Me!" Through the divine calling, which is not a mere invitation but an act of God that makes us listen to and obey Christ, we thus become true disciples of the Son of God. And so the broken fellowship between us and the triune God is gloriously restored. Through his calling we are effectually drawn truly and freely by faith to accept, to love, and to serve Christ as our personal Savior and Lord.

So intimate is the fellowship between those thus effectually called and God, that they are designated as people "beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ,"¹⁰ as "holy,"¹¹ "beloved of the Lord,"¹² "a holy nation, a people for God's own possession."¹³

This wonderful privilege of being so intimately united to God in his Son is in no sense our own doing or a right that we deserve. We do not achieve it ourselves. God bestows it. It is given to us unmerited through his grace, and solely because "God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord."¹⁴

Through the effectual calling God enlightens our minds to see and accept the truth of the Gospel,¹⁵ changes our defiled hearts so that we come to him with sincere repentance and conviction of sin, and gives to our erring, sinful wills a new and Godward direction. Through the effectual calling man is not dehumanized, but his whole personality is freed and energized to enable him to live a new, sanctified life. Old inabilities are abolished, and new abilities to love and serve God are given. The blinding effects of sin on our minds are removed, so that our intellect no longer leads us astray but is recreated to be a trustworthy instrument for

9 I Cor. 1:9; cf. I Cor. 1:23, 24.

10 Jude 1.

11 Heb. 3:1.

12 II Thess. 2:13.

13 I Pet. 2:9.

14 I Cor. 1:9.

15 Eph. 1:18.

apprehending truth¹⁶ and believing the Gospel.¹⁷ Thus, through the effectual calling our mind, heart, and will are regenerated to true holiness. And for this cause is Jesus Christ "the mediator of a new covenant, that . . . they that have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance."¹⁸

The purpose of God with this effectual calling is, however, not merely to enlighten, renovate, enrich, and eternally save the lives of believers, but is in highest instance meant to proclaim the glory of God in Christ. Or to say it in the words of Peter, "that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of the darkness into his marvelous light."¹⁹

We cannot know how or when God calls us in such an effectual way, nor can we exactly define the connection between the *vocatio verbalis* and this *vocatio efficax*, or the relationship between effectual calling and regeneration, but the New Testament leaves no doubt as to the fact that God is in no way, regarding the effectual calling, dependent on the merits, preparedness, or worthiness of man or of any human instrument. God "called us by his own glory and virtue."²⁰ The triune God himself is the sole cause of and instrument in this calling.

For this reason the effectual calling has such a rich and wonderful meaning for time and eternity and gives believers the necessary assurance for the future, for "faithful is he who calls you, who will also do it."²¹

The effectual calling of God is not an afterthought of the Almighty, but is grounded in his eternal purpose. Paul gives classic expression to this truth in his well-known words, "all things work together for good, even to them who are called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son . . . and whom he foreordained, them he also called, and whom he called, them he also justified . . ."²²

The salvation of believers is "not of works, but of him who calls . . . that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he also calls . . ."²³

That the effectual, irresistible calling of God, however, does not annul or abrogate the personal responsibility of believers is clearly and consistently taught by the Word of God. Thus, Paul writes to Timothy: "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto you were called . . ."²⁴ And Jesus said, "Enter ye in by the narrow gate."²⁵

Belief that the effectual calling is grounded in the eternal purpose of God is not a pagan fatalism nor does it cause moral laxity, spiritual pride, or religious apathy. On the contrary, as Paul says of himself: "Not that I have already obtained or am already made perfect; but I press on, if so be that I may apprehend that for which also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus. . . . I press on

16 Cf. I Cor. 1:23, 24.

17 II Thess. 2:14.

18 Heb. 9:15.

19 I Pet. 2:9, 10.

20 I Pet. 1:3.

21 I Thess. 5:24.

22 Rom. 8:28-30; cf. John 10:27-30.

23 Rom. 9:11, 23, 24.

24 I Tim. 6:12.

25 Matt. 7:13.

toward the goal unto the prize of the high [or upward] calling of God in Christ Jesus."²⁶

Because the calling of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit imparts such glorious gifts to the elect,²⁷ Christians are earnestly called upon "to walk worthy of the calling wherewith ye were called."²⁸

CONCLUSION

Thus Scripture teaches that the effectual calling is the sovereign, free, and irresistible act of God in Christ, through his Spirit, by which guilty, lost sinners without merit of their own are brought into living and saving fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord. It proclaims equally clearly our grave, inescapable, personal responsibility to cling in faith to and to obey him, who alone is the Author of our salvation.

We cannot explain the mystery of divine calling and human responsibility, but with Peter we rejoice that "the God of all grace, who called you . . . shall himself perfect, stablish, strengthen you."²⁹ And with Paul we "give thanks . . . for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, that God chose you from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth; whereunto he called you through our Gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁰

And they that are, through the effectual calling, united to Him, the Lord of lords and the King of kings, shall finally triumph because they are "with him, called and chosen and faithful."³¹

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28 Eph. 4:1; cf. II Pet. 10,11.

29 I Pet. 5:10, 11.

30 II Thess. 2:13, 14; cf. John 10:27-29.

31 Rev. 17:14.