

WCF 10: OF EFFECTUAL CALLING

Reformed theologians frequently speak about the *ordo salutis*, or the logical order of God's work, in the salvation of a soul. The Reformed *ordo salutis* is radically different from that of an Arminian. Although good theologians disagree sometimes in minor details, a common Reformed order is: election, predestination, external call, regeneration, internal (or effectual) call, conversion: repentance and faith, justification in time, sanctification, initial glorification, resurrection and final glorification. Our Confession follows this order, by using a slightly different terminology. In particular, the Confession speaks of regeneration as being an essential part of effectual calling rather than separately. We may think of effectual calling as an inwardly perceived command of God which requires a response on our part; and regeneration as what God does in our heart to enable us to respond to the command.

On the Nature of the Effectual Call

10.1 All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call,¹ by His Word and Spirit,² out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ;³ enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God;⁴ taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh;⁵ renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good;⁶ and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ;⁷ yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.⁸

¹Rom 8:30; 11:7; Eph 1:10–11; ²2 Thes 2:13–14; 2 Cor 3:3, 6; ³Rom 8:2; Eph 2:1–5; 2 Tim 1:9–10; ⁴Acts 26:18; 1 Cor 2:10, 12; Eph 1:17–18; ⁵Ezk 36:26; ⁶Ezk 11:19; Phil 2:13; Deut 30:6; Ezk 36:27; ⁷Eph 1:19; Jn 6:44–45; ⁸Song 1:4; Ps 110:3; Jn 6:37; Rom 6:16–18.

- a. There is such a thing as an effectual or internal call which differs from the external call. This is clear from Scripture. The internal call is taught in passages such as Romans 8:30, “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.” All who are called effectually will be justified. Not so for the external call, which for all intends and purchase is the audible call unto repentance and faith of preaching. Thus the Lord teaches: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Mt 22:14). Commenting on this verse, Calvin states: “...there are two species of calling—for there is a universal call, by which God through the external preaching of the Word, invites all men alike, even those whom He designs the call to be a savor of death [cf. 2 Cor 2:16], and the ground of a severer condemnation. The other kind of call is special, which He deigns for the most part to give to the believers alone, while by the inward illumination of His Spirit He causes the preached Word to dwell in their hearts” (*ICR* 3.24.8).
- b. The effectual call is given to all the elect and only to the elect. Those who are effectually called will be saved. Since God has from eternity definitely and unchangeably determined who should be saved and the means to their salvation (*WCF* 3.3–5), it is clear that only the elect will be effectually called. Thus the Scripture declares that our effectual calling is based on our election: “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; cf. 2 Thes 2:13–14). Thus the Scripture affirms that those who are elect will be called, and will be justified and eventually glorified (Rom 8:30).
- c. The timing of the effectual call is under the direction and sovereign will and pleasure of God. Thus our Confession speaks of the “*appointed and accepted time*.” In the Parable of the Vineyard (Mt 20:1–16), some are called early, some at the third hour, some at the sixth, some at the ninth and the rest at the eleventh hour. We may also add that there is also a difference in the manner in which the Lord calls. Some are sweetly and gently drawn to the Saviour over a period of time, so that they can scarcely say when with confidence when the change in heart began (e.g., many children who were catechised from young). Others experienced dramatic conversion under powerful preaching (e.g., Saul of Tarsus; those under the ministry of Whitefield). Still others underwent a time of terror and burden of guilt under the Law before they find relief in the Gospel (e.g., Bunyan and many under the ministry of Edwards).
- d. The effectual call is effected by the Word and Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always the efficient agent in the effectual call: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ... I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ... The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest

the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:3, 5, 8). But the Holy Spirit always employs the Word as the instrument or means of calling: “For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake” (1 Th 1:5). The Word and the Spirit always operate together so that the power of the preaching is not derived from the piety or eloquence of the preacher. Thus Paul testifies to the Corinthians: “And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor 2:4). In the same way, apart from extraneous circumstances (e.g., see § 3), the Holy Spirit does not call or regenerate a person apart from the Word. Using the Law, the Spirit convinces the sinner of his guilt and the utter insufficiency of his own works of righteousness as the ground of acceptance before God. Using the Gospel, the Spirit enlightens the mind of the sinner in the knowledge of Christ—His perfect righteousness, the fulness of His grace, His ability to save and His willingness to receive all who truly come to Him. At the same time, the Holy Spirit also takes away his heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh so that he is now able to embrace and trust Christ (Eph 2:8), and indeed find Him to be irresistible.

- e. In the effectual call, no violence is offered to the will. This is most beautifully explained by Robert Shaw:

While the Spirit effectually draws sinners to Christ, He deals with them in a way agreeable to their rational nature, “so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” The liberty of the will is not invaded, for that would destroy its very nature; but its obstinacy is overcome, its perverseness taken away, and the whole soul powerfully, yet sweetly, attracted to the Saviour. The compliance of the soul is voluntary, while the energy of the Spirit is efficient and almighty: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” (Psalm 110:3).

The implication is that a believer is not dragged in kicking and screaming (remember C.S. Lewis); neither is the door into the kingdom of God locked. It is always open, but sinners will not enter because they hate God and prefer Satan. The effectual call is irresistible because it involves a radical, permanent change in the entire moral nature of the subject, enlightening his mind, sanctifying his affection, renewing his will and giving new direction to his actions. This change is what causes the soul to step into the kingdom of God. Regeneration precedes faith.

- f. The elect, as all others, may actively resist the common operation of the Holy Spirit, but in the effectual call, the operations of the Holy Spirit is irresistible. In the Arminian scheme, the Holy Spirit only woos the sinner, giving him sufficient grace to be able to comply with the call of the Gospel and no further. The ultimate success of the Spirit’s work therefore is dependant on the sinner’s free will. This is a doctrine that is contrary to Scripture which affirms: “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” (Rom 9:16).

It is true that there are common operations of the Spirit which are extended to all men in a greater or lesser degree, which do not involve any change in principle or disposition of the soul, but only in heightening the conscience, increasing the natural emotions of the heart in view of sin, duty and self-interest. This is sometimes called ‘conviction,’ in Puritan language. Such influence are spoken of in the Scripture and are resistible: “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come” (Heb 6:4–5; cf. Mt 7:22; 13:20). Those who come under conviction of sin, do not necessarily proceed on to regeneration. We may say that the common operations of the Holy Spirit acts upon, but not in, the heart of the unbeliever.

10.2 This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man;¹ who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit,² he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.³

¹2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:4–5; Eph 2:4–5, 8–9; Rom 9:11; ²1 Cor 2:14; Rom 8:7; Eph 2:5; ³Jn 6:37; Ezk 36:27; Jn 5:25.

In addition to the propositions already made in the first paragraph, we must also be clear of two additional verities regarding the effectual call:

- a. Firstly, the effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone (2 Tim 1:9), rather than from anything at all foreseen in man. God does not give his elect the blessing of the effectual call in response to

anything that he (the elect) does, nor on the basis or anything that God foresees he would do. All the positive response of the elect (repentance, faith and good works, etc) flows from the effectual call, which God graciously and freely bestow. Therefore, for all intents and purposes, it is impossible to see whom God would give the effectual call, and it is wrong to ask God to reward someone with the effectual call on the basis of his good works.

- b. For in the second place, in the effectual calling, the sinner is altogether passive until he is quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Before regeneration or effectual calling, a sinner may do many things which may be reckoned as activities of seeking salvation. He comes to church, he talks to believers, he listens to sermons, he reads the Bible, and he sometimes pray. He may even feel conviction of sin, and turn away from the grosser sins in his life. But none of these activities are meritorious or righteous in the eye of God. The Scripture teaches us that even such a person is dead in trespasses and sin. Indeed, although, experience teaches us that God normally regenerates those who are seeking, none of these activities contribute to the effectual calling of the sinner, which is entirely by grace. After a sinner is regenerate, the Holy Spirit begins to convert or sanctify him. The child of God, in conversion, has the responsibility of making use of the means of grace. Thus, he is in a sense, no longer entirely passive. Nevertheless, the sinner acts as he is acted upon by God, for as Paul insists: “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil 2:13).

On the Effectual Call of those Incapable of being Outwardly Called

10.3 Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ through the Spirit,¹ who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth.² So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.³

¹Lk 18:15–16; Acts 2:38–39; Jn 3:3, 5; 1 Jn 5:12; Rom 8:9; ²Jn 3:8; ³1 Jn 5:12; Acts 4:12.

In the previous two sections, we saw that the Holy Spirit normally works by means of the Word preached or read. This means that a sinner should first experience the outward call, and then only the inward or effectual call. But what about the case of infants dying in infancy and adults who are mentally incapable of being called by the Word, or those who are unable to hear or understand the Gospel.

The Westminster divines have provided, perhaps the most judicious and biblically defensible answer: those who are elect will be “regenerated and saved by Christ, though the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth.” By this answer, the divines recognise: (1) That all men, including insensible infants, deserve damnation for imputed guilt; (2) God’s election is not conditioned on the physical ability or length of life of the individual; (3) God can regenerate without the means if He chooses to; and (4) There is no scriptural warrant to believe that all infants dying in infancy will be saved.

It is true that the Westminster position does not afford much comfort for grieving parents, which is why many theologians choose to believe on very flimsy ground that all infants dying in infancy will be saved. Indeed, when Spurgeon edited the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, which is based on the WCF, for his church to use, he actually dropped the word 'elect' while retaining the rest of the wordings in this section. This edition of the BCF is currently subscribed to by many Reformed Baptist Churches especially in the UK. But what comfort can be derived from a statement that has little scriptural support?

Neither should the parents of a child who dies in infancy derive comfort that their child is baptised and therefore must be regenerate. Any comfort must only be sought in the fact that God is merciful and that all He does is right. A bereaved mother may indeed pray at the grave side:

Lord, in Thy name I have brought forth a child. And from Thy hand I have received it. I have consecrated it to Thee, in order that it should be a child for Thy covenant. And now Thou hast taken the child away from me. In that same faith wherein I consecrated him to Thee, I leave him with Thee, without being filled with anxious doubts concerning the salvation and election of this child, but knowing that Thou, according to Thy good pleasure, which by faith to me is always good, dost save Thy children out of my seed (Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 166).

On those who are not Effectually Called

10.4 Others not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word,¹ and may have some common operations of the Spirit,² yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved:³ much less can men not professing the Christian religion be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they

never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the laws of that religion they do profess;⁴ and to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.⁵

¹Mt 22:14; ²Mt 7:22; 13:20–21; Heb 6:4–5; ³Jn 6:64–66; 8:24; ⁴Acts 4:12; Jn 14:6; Eph 2:12; Jn 4:22; 17:3; ⁵2 Jn 9–11; 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:6–8.

- After asking the question of salvation of those incapable of faith, the divines now turn to two other questions: (1) Is it possible for those who come under the ministry of the Word and experience some of the common operations of the Spirit, to be not elected? (2) What about those who have never heard the Gospel? Can they be saved?
- The answer for the first question is ‘Yes,’ it is possible for a person to be part of a church, involved actively in the life of the church and experiencing the common operations of the spirit—of conviction under the preaching of the Law and joy under the preaching of the Gospel,—to be nevertheless not elected. Such a person does not come truly to Christ and may even profess faith hypocritically. Such a person cannot be saved. But it must be noted that the responsibility of unbelief lies not in God, but in the unbeliever. This is why Dr Gerstner preaches that the deepest part of hell is reserved for the sinner who walks to it through the isles of the church. This is why every Christian has a responsibility to examine himself to see whether he is in the faith (2 Cor 13:5). No discriminatory preaching—on the marks of regeneration—can hurt the elect, though their trust in their own righteousness can be shaken. Thus we must not be presumptuous of our faith if we possess none of the marks of faith and are living in wilful sins. Indeed, if this be the case, we ought rather to doubt our salvation and come to Christ afresh, pleading forgiveness and faith in Him.
- The answer to the second question is ‘No,’ it is not possible for a person who have never heard of the Gospel, or who have a different religion to be saved—even if they live in all sincerity according to the dictates of their conscience or according to rules of their religion. *First* of all, all men are guilty in Adam. *Secondly*, all men are born with a corrupt nature so that no matter how well they may heed their conscience and live according to the light of nature, they are living in sin. *Thirdly*, although God has given general revelation of Himself so that all man “are without excuse,” yet without special revelation it is impossible to come unto salvation (*WCF* 1.1). *Fourthly*, Christ has declared: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6). This is why Peter asserts: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Thus, Paul was emphatic about the necessity of preaching if anyone were to be saved: “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:13–14). **Ω**