

# The Effectual Call: Irresistible Grace and God's Sovereign Calling

*How does God bring sinners to saving faith without violating their will?*

*... the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you. (Ephesians 1:18)*

Without Christ, fallen man persists in his delusion of autonomy, dancing on Satan's string like a puppet, powerless to will or do anything to promote his salvation. He is dead in sin, likes it that way, and resents efforts to change him. His delusion runs so deep he may even imagine God is pleased with him.

Yet God extends a universal offer of mercy to all mankind through His commands to repent. The assumption behind this command is that God will accept the repentant sinner. Christ ordained the gospel to be preached to all nations without regard to race, social status, or economic condition. His gracious invitation still stands:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*  
*Matthew 11:28*

A study of saving faith, however, shows it to be a product of divine grace, not the product of man's free will. An internal miracle must occur in a sinner for conversion to take place. This essay discusses the content of that miracle, how it works, and on whom. Let's look at Romans 8:30.

*And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*

## **The nature of the effectual call**

- The call is based on predestination. It differs from the general call to mankind to repent because it is for the few, not the many.
- This call invariably results in justification, which in turn leads us to heaven, *glorified*.
- This call is irresistible and efficacious. Otherwise, only some of those who are justified would be glorified.
- Faith is included in this call because faith is necessary for justification.
- This call must be involved with an internal transformation of the sinner, making faith possible.
- God alone is the cause. ... *He predestinated...He called...He justified...He glorified.*
- This call must be a special grace from God, different from His general benevolence toward mankind as a whole.

## **The meaning of “Draw” in John 6**

This call is a sovereign act of God by which He saves the elect. Theologians call this doctrine by various names: "Irresistible Grace," "Special Grace," or most often, "Effectual Call." For brevity's sake, we will use the term “the call” throughout the essay, especially since this is the word most commonly used in the New Testament to describe the idea. Sometimes a different word is used, however. The apostle John used the word "draw" to express the same concept:

*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. (Jesus went on to say), This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. John 6:44, 65*

From these verses, we deduce the following:

- No one can generate saving faith from his autonomous will. Coming to Christ means faith in Him.
- The Father produces saving faith by an act called “drawing.” This drawing is called a “*gift*” in verse 65. It is therefore not a reward for something man accomplishes.
- The infallible result of this drawing is salvation. This is clear from the phrase *...raise him up at the last day.*
- No one can successfully resist this drawing because all those so drawn will be saved.

## **Internal transformation for the sinner**

This “drawing” is therefore a sovereign work of God, resulting in an infallible salvation. Does this mean God forces people against their will? No. The Holy Spirit changes the internal nature of a sinner by enlightening the mind, revealing sin to be so ugly and Christ to be so desirable that nothing could prevent that person from coming to Christ freely and willingly. This in no way imposes on man's will or violates his freedom

## **A key distinction: Universal call compared to effectual call**

Christ commanded the gospel to be preached to all nations. (Matthew 28:19) The apostles preached to Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul went around, testifying to Jews and also to Greeks, about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 20:21) The New Testament makes it clear the gospel is for everybody.

How do we square this with texts about a work of God for some only? Many assume the difference is because some choose to believe while others do not. Since saving faith itself is a work of grace, this assumption would involve circular reasoning. Theologians call God's universal offer of mercy to all the Universal Call because everyone in a crowd hears the same gospel message. The offer of mercy to the repentant is valid for all, and they are responsible for the way they respond to it.

With some, however, God penetrates the message deeper than the ears and uses it to save them. So we have two calls in one message: a call to all and a call to some. Theologians distinguish these two operations by calling them either *universal call* versus *effectual call*, *general grace* versus *special grace*, or, *external call* versus *internal call*.

### **Election and predestination**

A study of the term "call" throughout the New Testament reveals a close association between election and predestination.

*...that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls.*

*Romans 9:11*

Paul, in speaking about Jacob and Esau, shows the irresistibility of this call by linking it with His purposes in election. *...that God's purpose...* The term "purpose" in Scripture, when referring to God's plans in history, usually indicates an irresistible and unchangeable decree. This decree is different from His commands to people, which He allows them to break. In the verse above, we see how God's call in election is according to one of these sovereign and irresistible purposes with which we "stand."

The connection between the call and election in the verse above also illustrates the interplay between God's decrees and the means by which He implements them. God is sovereign but works through things and people to accomplish His purposes. This verse illustrates again that God's purpose in eternity was to save His elect. He brought this to pass by a divine action the Bible labels "call." Curiously, the reverse is true of the universal call, even though it is the same message. He allows the non-elect to resist His offer of mercy if they want to. They always want to. Paul connects God's eternal purposes with grace and the call in 2 Timothy 1:9.

*who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,*

One of the clearest passages on the relationship between election and effectual call is 1 Corinthians 1:22-29. This text mentions three classes of people: Jews, Gentiles, and a third group, Jews and Greeks together, labeled *those who are called*.

The first group, the Jews, reject Christ because they want to see the gospel proven by miracles. God's Word is not enough for them. The second group, the Greeks, reject Christ because He does not fit into their philosophical systems. God's wisdom is not good enough for them. *For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom.* (Verse 22) The third group is individuals taken out of the first two groups despite their initial rejection. These are those whom God has called because He chose them.

*For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:26).*

Paul preached to both groups. Each responded according to their cultural bias and sinful perceptions. This is the *universal* call. The ones who responded did so because they were chosen for that. God ignored their bias and perceptions, drawing them anyway. This is the *effectual* call.

### **The call is irrevocable**

*As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Romans 11:28-29*

Paul's use of the term "irrevocable" also puts effectual call squarely in the category of immutable purposes. This call therefore depends on God's sovereign will and not on man's ability to respond.

### **Eternal life for the called**

*For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. Hebrews 9:15*

*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. Acts 2:39*

### **Effectual call and sanctification**

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). See also Jude 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9.*

### **A call to holiness**

*...but just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; 1 Peter 1:15*

### **Summary**

Irresistible grace, called by theologians the effectual call, is a sovereign work of God. He draws the elect to himself by the Word and the Spirit, changes them internally, enables them to perceive their need of Christ, and grants them the ability to trust in Christ to be saved. God does not violate their will or freedom but works so they come willingly and freely. From this essay we learned:

- God uses the same gospel message in both the universal call and the effectual call. The first is a genuine offer of mercy to all mankind, the second a special work of grace.
- The effectual call is based on election and predestination.
- The call is irrevocable. This means it falls under the category of God's eternal will and purposes, which cannot be thwarted by human will.
- Our ultimate sanctification and preservation are based on the call.
- This call is also a call to holiness.

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