

Today, we are resuming our study of systematic theology by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. In our last theology session, which was Session 144, we presented the order of salvation, or *ordo salutis*, as given by John Murray. He lists the elements in the following order: effectual call, regeneration, repentance and faith, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. We then started to examine the effectual call, by which God's elect are brought into his kingdom.

Today I want to say a few more things about the effectual call and use them as a segue into our discussion of regeneration. We noted in Session 144 that the effectual call and regeneration are intimately linked and that in the past some theologians have treated them as being synonymous, or have thought of regeneration as a part of the effectual call.

And, while we want to be as precise in our theology as we can be, I don't think there is any benefit in getting too hung up on the exact terminology that is used. We just want to be careful to define what we mean by the terms we use and, more importantly, to present the clear biblical teaching on the subject.

I personally have a hard time seeing how you can fully separate effectual calling and regeneration since the power that makes the call effectual *is* God's power to regenerate us. In fact, in Session 144 I deliberately avoided talking about a difference between what the Westminster Shorter Catechism said and what John Murray said.

One of the questions we looked at from the Catechism was Question 31, and the answer given there is, "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 does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel." Notice that the answer began by saying that "Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit".

Whereas, in the following discussion we presented biblical support for Murray's view that "God the Father [] is the specific agent in the effectual call".¹ For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:9 we read, "God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."² That verse clearly distinguishes God from his Son, meaning that, as is often the case in the New Testament, God refers to the Father. And then the verse explicitly says that it is the Father who calls his people into fellowship.

And so we have a difference in the sense that the Catechism says the effectual call is a work of the Holy Spirit, while Murray says that the Father is the specific agent in calling his people. We presented Murray's view because it agrees with the Bible, as the verses we examined bear out. Wayne Grudem also agrees with this view and provides further scriptural support in his

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 89

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Systematic Theology.³ One reason I think it is important to be clear that the Father calls us is to oppose the unbiblical idea that the Father is a distant, angry God who doesn't want to save anyone but somehow gets convinced by the pleadings of his Son, who is thought of as being more merciful and loving. Which is, unfortunately, a trap into which some of modern evangelicalism falls. And that's why this issue is important. We must always remember that there is only one God, who exists in three persons, and that God is unchangeable. The common idea that God is somehow different in the Old and New Testaments is completely unbiblical.

But we must also remember that God *is* triune and the different persons of the godhead are clearly presented to us in the Bible as having different roles in salvation. We honor God and worship him correctly when we believe, pray and worship with these biblical distinctions properly kept in mind. So, that leaves us with the question of how to resolve this difference between the Catechism and Murray and Grudem.

Let me make two important points before we deal with this difference though. First, it isn't absolutely necessary for us to resolve the difference. Neither the Catechism nor Murray nor Grudem are inspired; only the Bible is the inspired Word of God. So if theologians disagree with each other our duty is simply to determine who is correctly interpreting the Bible. We don't need to find a way to reconcile them. And then, secondly, this is far from an essential issue in the faith.

But, with that said, in my mind I resolve the issue by realizing that the call is made effectual by regeneration, which is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. And so both Murray and the Catechism are right, they are just using slightly different definitions of the phrase effectual calling.

The fact that regeneration, or new birth, is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit is seen explicitly in Jesus' statements to Nicodemus. We read in John 3:5-6, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." According to this statement by Jesus, it is the Holy Spirit that gives new birth, in other words, that regenerates believers.

Therefore, the biblical answer, which is the one that matters, is that the Father is the specific agent in calling, as Murray said, and the Holy Spirit is the primary agent in regeneration, which we will see later Murray also says. Therefore, when Murray criticizes the Catechism for not saying the Father is the agent in the effectual call, he has a point, although I think a minor one.⁴ The Catechism does not separate the effectual call from regeneration as Murray and most modern theologians do. And, I should add, that the Bible itself never uses the phrase "effectual call", it simply speaks about a call.

As we noted in Session 144, some theologians have considered regeneration to be a part of the effectual call, or have considered the two to be essentially synonymous. And that is the case with

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 692

⁴ He does not explicitly criticize it in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, but he does on pg. 165 of his *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977

the Westminster standards, by which I mean the Westminster Confession, the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism all together. The Confession doesn't have a separate chapter on regeneration, that topic is covered by the chapter on the effectual call.⁵

I would say the biblical testimony supports the idea that the Father is the specific agent in the call, and the Holy Spirit is the primary, but not sole, agent in regeneration, which is what makes the call effectual. I should mention that the Father is also presented as being active in regeneration, but I will hold off on saying more about that until later, the primary agent is clearly the Holy Spirit.

We always want to be careful to not go too far and make distinctions that are not made in the Bible itself. The bottom line is that the same sermon can be given to two people and for one of them it is only the general call and does not lead to salvation, while for the other it is accompanied by the Spirit's regenerating work and leads to conversion and salvation. In that case we could say that it was the effectual call. The difference is found in whether or not God works in the heart of the person who hears the gospel.

We need to remember what Paul said. He wrote to the church in Corinth about preaching the Word of God in Troas and said that through his preaching God was spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. Then, in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 he wrote, "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."

These statements by Paul make clear what the difference is between the general call and the effectual call. It is the power of God that makes the call efficacious in some and not in others.

We also need to realize that God's effectual call cannot be ignored. As the name "effectual" clearly states, we cannot refuse this call. Just as no one can accept God's offer of salvation unless he causes the person to be born again, so also no one whom God has chosen to save can possibly reject this call. Jesus himself said, as we read in John 6:44, that "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."

We have spoken about this verse several times before and pointed out that the Greek word translated as "draws" is ἐλκύω (helkuō), which could also be rendered as drag. In fact, the same word is used in Acts 16:9 where we read that Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace, and it is used in Acts 21:30 where we read about Paul being dragged from the temple, and again

⁵ Note: The effectual call and regeneration are separate topics in Murray's book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Later in his career however, he changed his mind about whether or not the topic of the call should be defined in any way by the response it elicits from the believer. See his Chapters on *The Call* and *Regeneration* in Vol. Two of his *Collected Writings*, especially footnote 2 on pg. 167. On page 172 of his *Collected Writings*, in the chapter on regeneration, which represents his older view, he wrote, "God's call is an efficacious summons and therefore carries with it, carries as it were in its bosom, the grace that ensures the requisite response on the part of the subject." It is unclear to me exactly how this grace is related to regeneration itself, they do not appear to be synonymous. So, perhaps, it is this grace that in Murray's view makes the call efficacious and yet distinguished from regeneration itself? I'm not sure.

in John 21:11 where we read that Peter dragged a fishing net ashore. Therefore, John 6:44 argues persuasively that when God draws people, he does so in such a way that their response is certain.

And the way that he does that is through new birth, or regeneration. When we are born again, our nature is changed. In that new nature we are enabled to see the wretchedness of our sin and the loveliness of Christ. We are able to appreciate the graciousness of God's offer of salvation and, as a result, we freely make the choice to repent and believe. So, it would not be biblical to say that God forces us to repent and believe, we do that willingly. But he *does* change our nature in such a way that it absolutely guarantees we will freely respond to his call with repentance and faith. That is why the call is effectual.

We could say that God does not force us to do something we don't want to do, but he does change us in such a way that we want to do what he wants us to do. Or we could say that he does not force us, which by definition implies doing something against our will, but rather, he changes our fundamental nature so that our will is different and we willingly do what he desires.

In Romans 4:17 Paul wrote about Abraham and said, "He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." God takes sinners, who are dead in their transgressions and sins as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1 and makes them alive in Jesus Christ. He calls things that are not as though they are. He gives us new hearts as we read in Ezekiel 36:26. We've gone over this before so I don't want to repeat too much, but the point is that we must, as Jesus told Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 Verses 3 and 5, be born again in order to be saved. And more to the point in our present discussion, once we have been born again, we are absolutely certain to respond favorably to God's call to repent and believe.

And this call is a command, not just an offer. In Acts 17:30 we read that "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." And John wrote, in 1 John 3:23 that this is God's command, "to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." But, in our natural state we cannot obey God's commands to repent and believe. Paul wrote in Romans 8:7 that "the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."

Nevertheless, the effectual call comes with power and is guaranteed to *enable* us to obey by repenting and believing. And this is God's purpose as we read in Romans 8:28-30. In Verse 28 we are told, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." And then Verses 29-30 go on to tell us what that purpose is. We read, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

What a glorious and gracious purpose! God's purpose is nothing less than the complete salvation of his people. He has predestined a certain group of people from eternity past to be called, justified and glorified in his sight.

And to be glorified, as we will see in a later session, means that we will be made perfectly sinless and will be given an imperishable body fit for living in heaven with God and each other for all eternity.

The effectual call also has specific content. While God can certainly work in people's lives in many different ways to draw them to Christ, at some point the gospel must be presented to them and the normal way for that to happen is for another human being to present it.

Paul tells us this explicitly in Romans 10:13-14, where we read that "'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

There is specific information that must be known for a person to be saved. Wayne Grudem does a good job of discussing this fact and he lists three elements that must be present in the gospel call: first, an explanation of the facts concerning salvation, second, an invitation to personally respond to these facts in repentance and faith, and third, God's promise of forgiveness and eternal life.⁶

With regard to the facts concerning salvation, Grudem first says that all people have sinned. And Paul tells us this clearly in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". Second, we must tell people that the penalty we owe because of our sin is eternal death. Romans 6:23 says that "the wages of sin is death", and in Matthew 25:46 Christ told us that the unsaved "will go away to eternal punishment". These two points together comprise the bad news that we are all sinners deserving God's wrath.

The third point Grudem mentions is the good news that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins. In Romans 5:8 Paul wrote that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This is absolutely incomprehensible love, especially when you consider that Christ died for people who were his enemies.

And then, after presenting these basic facts, Grudem's second element is obviously necessary. We must call on people to personally repent of their sins and place their trust in Jesus Christ and his atoning sacrifice. And his third element must also be there; we must tell people of God's promise that if they will repent and believe they will be saved from eternal hell and will instead go to heaven based on the merits of Christ.

I can't imagine a better promise than that. And with that, we are out of time for today. So, let me remind you that you can email your questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to answer you.

⁶ Grudem, *op. cit.*, pp 694-695