

God's "Calling": Effectual or Not?

A Biblical investigation by Robert H. Thune

What is the "calling" of God? The words *call*, *called*, and *calling* are used over 700 times in the Old and New Testaments, according to the New Bible Dictionary. The Greek words translated *call* include *kaleo* and its derivatives *parakaleo*, *epikaleo*, and *kletos*, along with *legein* and *phonein*. Despite such a variety of words, there is no clear difference in their theological meanings; all these words are used in a variety of contexts to refer to different things. A survey of an exhaustive commentary shows the following basic uses:

- To call to or address someone – Acts 10:18: *And calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there.*
- To summon – Matt 15:32: *Jesus called his disciples to Him...*
- To call something by a particular name – Matt 5:9: *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*
- To call on God or on the name of God – Acts 22:16: *Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.*
- God's call which results in salvation – Rom 8:30: *These whom he predestined, He also called...*
- Believers are referred to as "the called" – Jude 1:1: *Jude... to those who are the called, beloved in God the Father...*

It is the last two uses which are theologically significant. The question to be answered in this essay is: when God calls someone to salvation, can that person resist?

Traditional Reformed theology teaches that God's calling is *effectual* – that is, it always achieves its effect, which is to bring lost people to salvation. Is this what Scripture teaches? Or is the call of God a general and universal call which goes out to everyone and which results in salvation only when humans respond to it?

Called and Saved vs. Called and Unserved

First, let us state what is unmistakable in the Bible. We know from texts like Romans 8:29-30 and 1 Peter 2:9 that there is a call of God which *definitely* results in salvation. Romans 8:29-30 says: "*Those whom God foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son... and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.*" So there is a group of people – believers, God's elect – who have been called, and are justified, and will be glorified. None of them will be lost along the way. We may represent this "chain of salvation" graphically:

Foreknown by God → predestined → called → justified → glorified

This passage seems clear enough. But some theologians posit a second group of people, not spoken of in this passage, who are called but do not respond. They are subject to the *very same* call of God and have equal opportunity to be justified, but *choose* not to trust in Christ. In this point of view, the functional element in salvation is not the call of God, but the response of human beings to that call. This is certainly a feasible position. But we must ask: is there Biblical evidence for it? The idea makes sense theologically, but if it is not supported by the plain teaching of Scripture, we must reject such a proposition.

This essay will address the question by investigating the Biblical uses of the word "calling." If study of Scripture reveals a general "call" of God that is resisted by humans, we may conclude that the call of God

is not always effectual. On the other hand, if such evidence cannot be found in Scripture, we must conclude that God's calling is always effectual, and that to be "called" by God is to be called irresistibly to salvation.

Let us first define our terms. Most theologians agree that the Bible speaks two types of "calls:" an external call and an internal call. The external call is the proclamation of the gospel, which is to be universal – the gospel is to be offered to everyone on the face of the earth as mandated in the Great Commission. Everyone is to be "called" to salvation, to submission to Christ. The internal call, however, is the special work of the Holy Spirit within the heart. It is the internal moving of God which makes a depraved sinner able to respond to the external call. We must keep these two types of calling distinct as we investigate the Scriptures. Evangelicals across the confessional spectrum agree that the *external* call is to be offered to everyone on the earth; the question we are addressing is whether the *internal* call – one given by God, not by men – is universal as well.

The Bible's Own Distinction Between "Called" and "All"

The theological distinction between external and internal calling is based on the Bible's own distinction between "the called" and everyone else who hears the gospel. The "called" of God – those who experience the internal call of the Holy Spirit to salvation – are seen as a *subset* of everyone who hears the gospel. Consider, for instance, the following verses:

- Acts 2:39: "*The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.*"
- 1 Cor 1:23-24: "*But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*"
- Heb 9:15: "*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.*"

According to these verses, the gospel is proclaimed to all, but is effective for salvation only in those who are called effectually by God.

Additional Biblical Teaching

Conversely, the Bible teaches that to be saved is to be called by God. Throughout the New Testament, the saints are labeled "the called." In almost every one of Paul's writings, he refers to the Church as being called of God (Rom 1:6, 8:29-30; 1 Cor 1:2, 24; Gal 1:6; Eph 4:1-4; Col 3:15; 1 Th 2:12; 2 Th 2:14; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 1:9). God's special calling in salvation is referenced not only by Paul, but also by Peter (1 Pet 1:15, 2:9, 3:9, 5:10; 2 Pet 1:3, 1:10), Jude (Jude 1), John (Rev 17:14; John 10:3), and the writer of Hebrews (Heb 3:1; 9:15). There is no doubt that *no one is saved without first being called by God.*

In order to establish a "calling" of God which is not effectual and may be resisted by humans, we must find a use of the word "calling" in Scripture which meets *two criteria*: it must be a call *from* God (as opposed to someone "calling out" *to* God), and it must be directed to a larger group than just God's elect. From some basic commentary work and Bible study, it can be concluded that *no New Testament use of the word calling (in any of its Greek forms) conclusively meets these criteria.* Therefore, there is no Biblical evidence for a call to salvation which can be resisted. God's calling is effectual. When God calls someone to himself, that person will respond in faith. Salvation is a sovereign, gracious work of God from beginning to end.

Two Problem Passages

Two verses mandate further attention in this discussion. The first verse is Matthew 22:14, where Jesus concludes his parable of the wedding feast by saying, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” This verse seems to imply that it is possible to be called to salvation but not chosen (and therefore not saved).

Under further scrutiny, however, this interpretation proves to be faulty. In the parable, a certain group of people has been invited to a wedding feast, but refuses to come. The king sends a second invitation, but the invited guests again do not respond. The king finally instructs his servants to invite “anyone you find.” We know from the context that the “invited guests” are the Jews – God’s chosen people. Because of their unwillingness to respond to the Messiah, the kingdom is offered to “anyone you find” – including Gentiles, as predicted by the Old Testament prophets (cf. Isaiah 49:6). Jesus is essentially saying, “You Jews were called (externally) but did not respond; now the call will go out to the Gentiles.” In other words, “Many are called (externally), but few are chosen (called internally).” The “calling” in Matthew 22 which is resisted is the external call – the offer of the gospel – and not the unique, internal call of the Holy Spirit.

The second verse that mandates close attention is 2 Peter 1:10, where Peter urges the saints to “be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Why would Peter urge us to make our calling sure, unless God’s calling was resistible? If calling *guarantees* salvation, this command would seem to make no sense. However, Peter is not the only writer who takes this approach; both Hebrews and Revelation use similar exhortations, and Paul makes comparable statements in many of his letters (cf. Col. 1:22-23). The apparent conflict is easily explained when we recognize that Peter is writing to a broad spectrum of professing believers throughout the Roman world. He assumes that most of his readers are truly believers in Jesus. But as in any church, there will be some who are not. So he intends this verse as a blanket exhortation. Those who are saved will prove it by their perseverance.

It should be further noted that *even if the above interpretation is rejected*, 2 Peter 1:10 is *not sufficient to challenge the doctrine of effectual calling*. It does not speak of people who are called and do not respond. Instead, it encourages believers to *prove* their calling by their perseverance. A group who resists the call of God can be *posited* based on this verse, but not *established*. When examined in light of the rest of Scripture, the idea of a resistible call falls away.

Conclusion

In summary, Scripture teaches that God’s calling is effectual. The word “called” and its various forms are overwhelmingly used in the New Testament to refer to believers. Everyone who has believed has first been called by God. The Biblical writers specifically distinguish those who are called from larger groups such as “all” and “Jews and Gentiles.” Two unusual uses of the term “call,” when evaluated in context, do not speak of a resistible internal calling. *When the biblical uses of the term “calling” are examined thoroughly, there is no evidence for a general call of God that depends on human response for its efficacy.* God calls whom He wills to salvation, and all who are called will respond in faith.

For believers in Jesus, this doctrine is a radical summons to worship as we realize that God is the sovereign author of our salvation. For unbelievers, this doctrine should challenge self-reliance and inspire hope in God’s mercy. Jesus commands repentance and faith. If you sense your heart being softened toward Christ, you may be confident that God is already at work calling you to himself.