

Effectual Calling and Trinitarian Balance

When the Trust published the second volume of his *Collected Writings* in 1977, John Murray's views on effectual calling sparked off animated debate in Reformed circles at that time. He challenged the formulation found in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* that defines effectual calling as 'the work of God's Spirit' (Q.31), preferring instead to see it as 'the act of God the Father' (p.166). The new generation of 'Precisionists' who were revelling in the rediscovery of Reformation and Puritan literature in those days were eager for the argument and lapped up this latest insight in the desire to sharpen their thinking.

There is no doubting the fact that Professor Murray was right to raise his query of the Westminster formularies, but with hindsight one cannot but wonder if, in correcting one theological imbalance, he actually created another. The danger in the precision involved in any attempt to systematise theological truth is that we can so focus on particular detail that we 'cannot see the wood for the trees!'

It is no bad thing in our theological perambulations, therefore, to stroll around the forest as a whole from time to time to remind ourselves of the beauty and balance of the trees in their totality and not just in their individual detail. That is what I want us to do as we revisit this great biblical doctrine that lies so close to the heart of genuine Christian experience. As we do so, we will very quickly discover that although there are indeed particular facets of this teaching that relate to both the Father and the Spirit, we can only appreciate both its full weight and practical impact when we grasp it in Trinitarian balance. This begins to crystallise as we analyse what Scripture says about calling under five different headings.

Roots

Arguably the most significant contribution John Murray made to the whole discussion of calling, was to underline firmly where its roots lie: firmly in God's eternal decree. God the Father – the great initiator and architect of salvation – is the ultimate source of the call that brings salvation.

Why does that need to be said? Because God the Father is so often misperceived in the mind of his people. Many are inclined to think of him as being reluctant to save. They see the Son not merely as the One who had to shed his blood in order to redeem his people, but also as the One who has to persuade his Father to accept them. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The Father who reveals himself in Scripture is the God who is, yes, sovereign, just and holy; but he is also loving, wise and gracious. Every facet of his character is woven in to all that is involved in his unfolding purpose. Therefore God the Father is in no sense detached or disengaged from the salvation of his people at any stage of its planning, procurement or application.

An even deeper strand of significance in all this is the fact that the idea of ‘call’ that is uniquely linked to God – especially in the Old Testament – has connotations of irresistible authority. So when he ‘calls’ to Adam and Eve in the garden (Ge 3.9), they cannot but respond to his voice and answer at his command. This carries through into many other examples of that same force at work in the spoken words of God and leads in New Testament language to the people of God’s being described as ‘called’ again and again (Ro 1.6-7; 1Co 1.2; Ga 1.6; Eph 4.1,4; Php 3.14-15; Col 3.15; 2Th 1.11).

When we discover that the roots of our being called into the privileges and joys of salvation are traced back to the irresistible purpose of our heavenly Father, it fills our hearts with loving adoration and with the settled assurance that his sovereign purpose cannot be thwarted.

Means

How does a call that is planned in by God in heaven before time began translate into our personal experience in life? Well, the men of the Westminster Assembly put their finger on it when they said it was by ‘the work of God’s Spirit.’ He provides the live interface between what God the Father has planned, God the Son has accomplished and those to whom salvation is applied. Hence when Lydia hears the call of God through the gospel in Philippi for the first time, she is converted because ‘the Lord opened her heart’ (Ac 16.14). How did that happen? – By the regenerating work of his Spirit.

However, even that simple statement forces us to back up and make a number of clarifying comments as to the means God uses to effect his call in the salvation of men and women.

In the first place, we need to be clear that the Spirit does not do his work in isolation, not merely from the Father, but equally of the Son. It is the call of God *in the voice of Jesus* that the Spirit uses to call his chosen ones to new birth, faith and repentance. All too often in what is written about calling – not least in light of the debate we have mentioned – theologians have managed to overlook the role of Jesus in the call of his people. Yet he is the one who calls his people by his gospel (Jn 10.27). Peter brings this home in a way that is reminiscent of the day that he himself was called by Jesus on the shores of Galilee when he speaks of ‘him who called us by his own glory and goodness’ (2Pe 1.3).

There is nothing more thrilling than to be able to say with the hymn-writer, ‘I heard the voice of Jesus say, “Come unto me and rest...”’ It is the loving, gracious summons of a sovereign, merciful Saviour that draws us, by his Spirit, irresistibly into his arms!

That, of course, raises another issues that needs to be clarified: why, when so many hear the gospel, do so few seem to respond? Jesus himself points towards the answer to that question when he says, ‘Many are called, but few are chosen’ (Mt 22.14). In saying that he is indicating a difference between what has been classically described as the general and the particular call of the gospel. There is a gospel invitation that is catholic and promiscuous: the divine Sower scattering the seed of his Word indiscriminately throughout the world. But, as the well-known parable reminds us, not all who hear will

actually respond. By contrast, however, there is that other facet of gospel proclamation that is bound up with the hidden, but powerful workings of God's grace.

With these three thoughts in mind – the role of the Spirit, the voice of the Son in the gospel and God's prerogative to use his Word in different ways in different lives – we are encouraged to act as Christ's ambassadors and know his mighty strength will be displayed through our fragile weakness (2Co 5.20).

Character

If these are the things that lie behind God's call, to what kind of life does he actually call us? The New Testament is replete with answers to that question. God calls us into a kaleidoscope world of new experience and an existence transformed in every way: we are called, literally, 'out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1Pe 2.9). Thankfully that mind-boggling thought is teased out into its many colourful threads by other passages.

It is supremely a calling into relationship: we are called 'into the fellowship of his Son' (1Co 1.9). It is only in the conscious context of our union and communion with Christ that the many other qualities and characteristics begin to develop.

These many other traits are spelled out for us elsewhere in terms of a call 'into his own kingdom and glory' (1Th 2.12), to sainthood (1Co 1.2), to peace (Col 3.15), freedom (Ga 5.13), hope (Eph 1.18) and holiness (1Th 4.7). This rich combination of qualities are all by nature highly visible and must inevitably mark 'the called ones' out as belonging distinctively to the Christ who called them (Ro 1.6), since he uniquely displays the same attributes.

There is, however, another aspect of the character of calling that is just as Christ-like, but which it is all too easy to forget. That is, we are called in him to patient endurance and suffering (1Pe 2.20-21; 3.9). Far from being the 'downside' of Christian calling, the apostles remind us that it is a joy and privilege to be called to share in the sufferings of our Saviour. Not least because our conduct through them points the world more clearly to him and his offer of true life. It is important to remember that this is not part of the small-print of the gospel, but right up there in its initial summons: 'If anyone would come after me,' said Jesus, 'he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mk 8.34).

Destiny

The end-point, not merely of this teaching, but of divine calling itself is eternal life (1Ti 6.12). That which has its origin in the pre-eternal will of God before a single atom came into being, has its ultimate fulfilment in the glory of the world to come.

We speak of 'high calling' in purely human terms in relation to those who are summoned to positions of great privilege, responsibility and honour. We speak of certain professions in vocational terms and those who have pursued them – even after retirement – retaining something of an aura of respect that lingers on. None of these, however, can compare to the high calling of the Christian life. The highest calling this world could ever offer must end in dust and death; the calling that is ours in Christ ends in life eternal. That is why

repeatedly, both in the Old and New Testaments, God calls his people to fix their horizons for living, not on things that are seen, but on the unseen promised realities of the glory to come. That sense of destiny is guaranteed to transform everything in how we approach our few short years on earth.

Impact

Where does all this lead? If we really grasp the scope and balance of this single doctrine, it is bound to make a radical difference in a number of key areas of our Christian life and ministry.

It will add an extra dimension to our worship. Everything we learn about God – every detail that he reveals in the dynamics of salvation – can only fill us with ever-deeper wonder at the greatness of our salvation. As we see the symphonic workings of Father, Son and Spirit as they call a new spiritual family into existence out of a ruined race, we ourselves, as that family on earth, are stirred into a symphony of praise that befits such triune grace.

It will also enthuse us for the work of proclaiming, not only Christ's work, but also his call to sinners to seek him and be saved. Quite rightly we will not trust our own wisdom, words or eloquence; but we will be fired by the knowledge that Christ's words faithfully proclaimed will prove to be his chosen method of calling the lost to himself (1Co 1.21). In an age in which the church's confidence in outreach is being increasingly transferred away from the Word proclaimed, we will always remember that he works primarily through his heralds. And so we proclaim him and plead passionately on his behalf for every listener to be reconciled to God through him.

Finally, this monumental doctrine will comfort and strengthen us in the life of faith. Even though we are so often tempted to doubt and fear because our troubles are many and our faith seems weak, we will remember that our very faith – by which we rest on Christ's perfect work – has in itself a dimension that is not of our own making. It is a faith that has been divinely drawn out of us by the Father's sovereign decree, at the sound of his Son's voice, through the workings of the Spirit's power. Understood in its Trinitarian balance, therefore, here is truth to bless our souls!

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