

Session 7: Irresistible grace and effectual calling**Biblereading and opening prayer**

Romans 8:28-39

1. Introducing "effectual calling"**(a) Today's question:**

Does the Bible teach that a person can successfully resist the work of saving grace in him? Does the Bible say that we can reject the inner call of God?

Why would we want to say that anyway? We might...

- If we think complete human freedom is the most important thing in the universe.
- If we think that "love" requires total freedom of choice. "If God really loved us, he wouldn't force us to do something against our will."
- If we (wrongly) think the alternative (Biblical and Calvinist) position makes us robots or compels us to do something against our wills.

(b) Some distinctions:

When we talk about "calling" what do we actually mean?

We're NOT talking about:

- naming: e.g. "they called him Fred"
- calling to a station in life: e.g. "God has called me to be an accountant."

Neither of those uses of "call" have to do with the application of salvation.

What then about the call to salvation? When the Bible speaks of "call" in connection with the saving work of God, it does so in two different ways:

Firstly, it talks about **external preaching** (external call or invitation, *vocatio externa*). This occurs in two ways. (i) Common grace – which can be resisted, and indeed is universally resisted. This is the *vocatio realis* (call from things in creation, natural revelation; see Romans 1:18ff). (ii) The verbal call in the preaching of the gospel. This is the *vocatio verbalis*, which also can be resisted (Matt 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen"), as when a preacher addresses a crowd with the gospel but not everyone responds by exercising faith in Jesus.

Secondly, the Bible talks of the **internal call** (the *vocatio interna*). Herein lies the application of saving grace. We'll see that this call cannot be resisted. Or to put it another way: God's saving grace is irresistible. It cannot be thwarted. (This is the "I" of TULIP).

We're going to spend the rest of our time trying to understand what this means, how the Bible teaches it, and why it matters.

(c) A definition of "effectual calling"

"By the regenerating work of his Spirit, God the Father irresistibly summons, normally in conjunction with the church's proclamation of the gospel, the elect sinner into fellowship with, and into the kingdom of, his Son Jesus Christ. His call is rendered effectual by the quickening work of the Spirit of God the Father and God the Son in the hearts of the elect." Robert Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, p718.

That's a long and wordy definition! But have a look at it for a moment:

- Effectual calling is connected to regeneration: which is something we're going to think about next week.
- It's the irresistible summons of the Father, to fellowship with Christ.
- It's usually achieved through the means of the proclamation of the Gospel
 - o It's as the Gospel is preached that God works inside people to call them to himself. That's the way God likes to do things. That's his chosen means.
 - o "Usually" that's the case. But with elect infants dying in infancy & elect people who are mentally unable to understand the Gospel, God does it differently.
- God's call is rendered effectual (ie. it actually "works") because of the work of the Holy Spirit.
- This call is an enacting of predestination. The elect sinner was "chosen in Christ before the creation of the world". He was in Christ when Christ died for him. BECAUSE of that, God then calls him to salvation in His own good time.

(d) A key text – Romans 8:28-30 and the *ordo salutis*

Romans 8:28-30, "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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Paul's point is this: if you love God, that is you've been called by God into relationship with him, THEN you can be sure that God works for your good in ALL THINGS.

Why? Because God is committed to you from eternity past to eternity future. If called by God to salvation, then the whole package of salvation is yours. For example: You can't be predestined and not experience the rest. Rather, there's a "golden chain" of salvation from eternity past to eternity future and the Christian is given it all!

Foreknown → Predestined → Called → Justified → Glorified

Let me say a brief word about the **order of application** – the way in which God applies salvation to his people. Salvation is a wonderful "series of acts and processes." (John Murray). There is an ordering to it. We can glimpse a part of this order (sometimes called in Latin the *ordo salutis*) in passages like Romans 8:29-30. We can observe from this and other texts:

- Predestination
- Irresistible grace and effectual calling
- Regeneration
- Conversion (repentance and faith)
- Justification
- Adoption
- Sanctification
- Glorification

In this order there...

- is a chronological aspect: predestination happens at the beginning – obviously! And glorification happens at the end.
- But all the bits that come in the middle are hard to distinguish chronologically. Basically, they happen pretty much simultaneously when someone is converted. However, we can distinguish a logical order, even if not a chronological order. (Though we've not got time to go into that logic right now.)

[On the ordering of the application of redemption see this extract from John Murray's excellent book, *Redemption accomplished and applied*, available online at

http://www.reformationfiles.com/files/displaytext.php?file=murray_application.html]

Let's hit our main subject for this session. You can see we are dipping into that golden chain, and several other of those topics we'll look at over the next three sessions.

2. Explaining God's "effectual call"

(a) The nature of the call: it is a powerful summons that achieves what God wants

Bible words that are used in every-day life often get distorted. That's the case with the word "call." We're to think of it as a "summons" - "the action by which God makes his people the partakers of redemption is that of summons."¹

A court summons doesn't necessarily get us physically into court. Whether you turn up or not depends your own strength or will. And whether the summons was accompanied by a large policeman.

God's summons is different. It has built in effectiveness. It cannot fail to achieve its purpose. When the call is given to a person, that person receives the blessings of salvation.

Notice: **God's call must be effectual because we are dead in sin.** God's summons MUST be intrinsically efficacious since the man being summoned is dead in his trespasses and sins and cannot do anything to advance his salvation.

And wonderfully, that is the case! Because **the will of God cannot fail.** When God plans something, that thing happens. Just listen to these verses:

- Eph 1:11, "... him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,
- Isaiah 55:10-11, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."
- Also James 4:15, Ps 33:14-15, Prov 21:1.

God's will cannot fail. So when he issues a salvation-call to the heart of a person it will work. And that's just what we see in the Scriptures. **God's call works.** Thus, God "calls" Christians into...

- Fellowship with Christ – 1 Cor 1:9
- Out of darkness and into his marvellous light – 1 Peter 2:9
- Into his kingdom and glory – 1 Thess 2:12, 2 Thess 2:14, 1 Peter 5:10
- The final marriage supper of the lamb – Rev 19:9
- To eternal life – 1 Timothy 6:12

That is a powerful summons – if it does all that! And we see the power of God's summons in one other way. **God's call cannot be revoked.** Once called, a person cannot be "de-called". They cannot fall out of the fellowship to which God has called them. Thus Romans 11:29, "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

(b) The author of the call: Not us... but God the Holy Trinity

- **God – not us**

Firstly, note that the author of the call is GOD. It is not us. We do not call ourselves, any more than we predestine ourselves or justify ourselves or adopt ourselves. Salvation is God's sovereign work...

- at the moment of its design in eternity past.
- at the time of its objective accomplishment, as Christ dies and rises.
- and it's His sovereign work in application.

Some bible texts: Romans 8:29 – see above – GOD does it all. We see the same in 1 Corinthians 1:9, "God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."

What of us? With respect to God's call we are "altogether passive." (Westminster Confession, chapter X). Completely passive until God does a work in us that enables us to respond to his call.²

¹ John Murray, *Redemption accomplished and applied*, p91.

- **God the Father**

It's God the Father who planned salvation.

It's God the Father who is the agent behind election.

And God the Father is in charge of "calling" his chosen people to salvation.

For example: 1 Cor 1:9, above – here "God" is God the Father who's calling people into fellowship with His Son. And numerous other places too.

- **In Christ**

The saving call of God the Father is never apart from Christ. God never thinks about His chosen people apart from "in Christ."

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..."

- so: the grace that called us is grace given us "in Christ Jesus."

- **Through the Holy Spirit & through the Gospel**

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

- Paul's talking about the Thessalonian Christians and their salvation. How did it come about? The work of the Spirit and faith.

- Verse 14, he called you to this salvation "through our gospel".

² John Murray writes that effectual "calling is a sovereign act of God alone and we must not define it in terms of the response which is elicited in the heart and mind and will of the person called." *Redemption accomplished and applied*, p93.

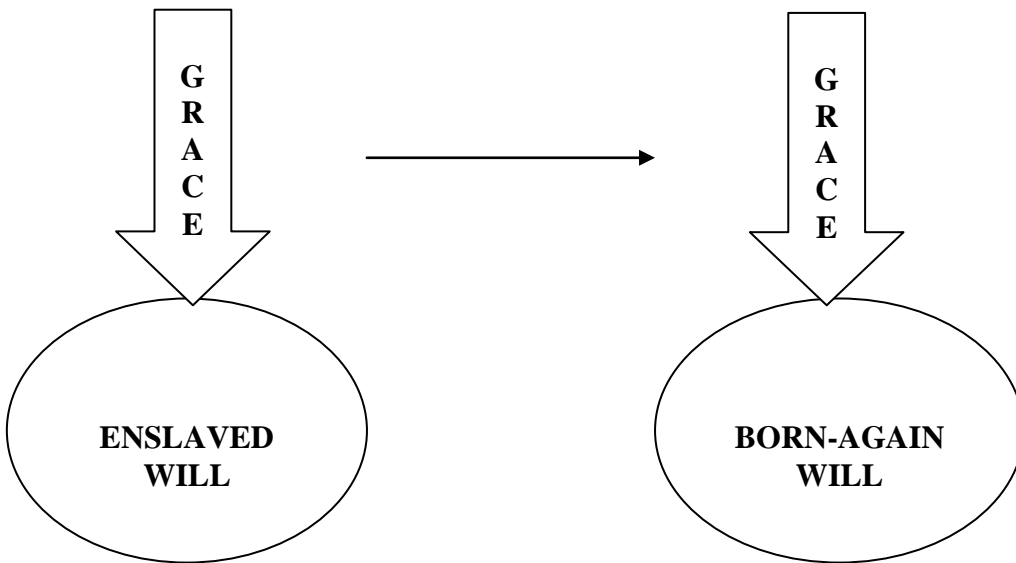
3. Question: Does God over-ride the human will? Answer: No, God transforms the human will

Why might we ask this question? We're talking about an "effective call" – a call that doesn't have rejection as an option. We're talking about what's sometimes called "irresistible grace" – God's saving kindness that cannot be rejected. If God's calling and God's grace work like that in salvation, then are we being coerced? Forced into salvation?

This is sometimes how Calvinist doctrine is caricatured: someone being dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God. But that's not what the Bible teaches at all. The key point is this:

**** God transforms the human will ****

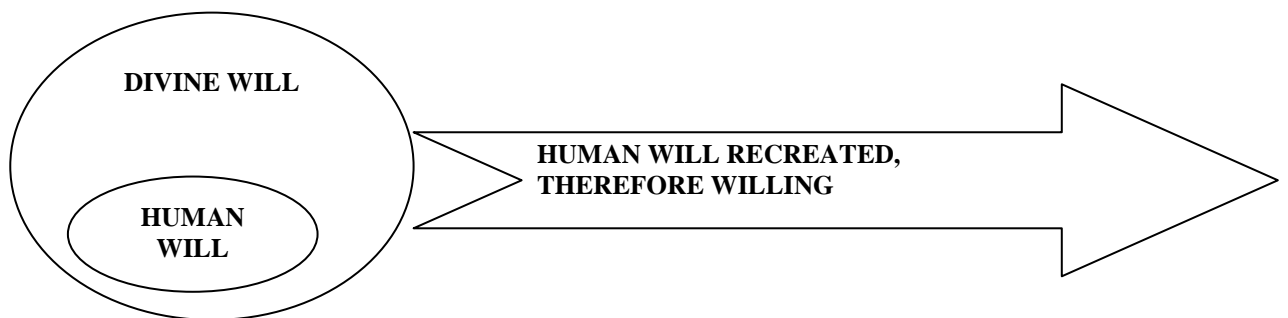
(a) Saving grace penetrates will and regenerates it



Our "wills" are our choosing and desiring faculty: the bit of us that thinks "I like the look of that – I'll choose it."

Outside of Christ our wills are bound in slavery to sin. But God's powerful grace penetrates that will and recreates us. Makes us re-generate. Or "born again". (We'll think much more about regeneration next week.) God's irresistible grace changes the human will. That's important.

(b) Through the Spirit's ongoing work, the regenerate person chooses to believe



The "born-again" will is enabled by God to believe - to see the goodness of the gospel... to choose Christ... to repent and believe.

That's the work of the HS in us. But it's the work of the Spirit that enables us to willingly do something: choose Christ. And the born-again person – carried along by the Spirit – will keep on believing and trusting and following Christ.

That does not happen independently of God. It's not even us cooperating with God, if by cooperation we think "doing something out of our own ability." Rather, we will to trust Christ according to the will of God.

An important aside: this is why we call on people to repent and believe – because changed wills *can* repent and believe. And because preaching the Gospel and calling people to repent and believe is the way God has chosen to call people to himself.

(Here is a big contrast with Arminianism, which we talked about last week. According to Arminianism the human will is the difference between belief and unbelief. In the one who chooses Christ, the human will cooperates with God from itself and can resist at any point.)

Let's take questions at this point...

4. Applications:

Two Applications to think about:

- Sovereignty of God in salvation: it's HIS work all the way down the line.
- God's grace changing me: how wonderful that He changes our desires and wills.

5. Summary

"Effectual calling" is actually a sixteenth century English phrase that became the title of chapter X of the 1647 Westminster Confession. The chapter begins like this and gives a good summary:

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

And here's a helpful summary from J.I. Packer:

"Original sin renders all human beings naturally dead (unresponsive) to God, but in effectual calling God quickens the dead. As the outward call of God to faith in Christ is communicated through the reading, preaching, and explaining of the contents of the Bible, the Holy Spirit enlightens and renews the heart of elect sinners so that they understand the gospel and embrace it as truth from God, and God in Christ becomes to them an object of desire and affection. Being now regenerate and able by the use of their freed will to choose God and the good, they turn away from their former pattern of living to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to start a new life with him." (J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p153).

6. Homework

For reflection:

- Read, pray and worship in the light of some Bible texts we've looked at today.
- Read Charles Wesley's hymn below and think about its words.

Next session: regeneration, repentance and faith - please read John 3:1-15

1 AND can it be, that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

2 'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine!
'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,
Let angel-minds inquire no more.

3 He left his Father's throne above,
(So free, so infinite his grace!)
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For, O my God, it found out me!

4 Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

5 No condemnation now I dread,
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

SOME BIBLE TEXTS ON GOD'S CALLING:

Universal / external call or invitation:

^{ESV} **Matthew 22:14** For many are called, but few are chosen."

Particular internal effective call:

Romans 1:6 And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Romans 4:17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." 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.

Romans 8:28-30 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. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 9:24 even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

Romans 11:29 for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.

1 Corinthians 1:9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

1 Corinthians 1:24-26 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. ²⁶ Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

1 Corinthians 7:18-21 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. ²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so.

Galatians 1:15 But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased

Ephesians 4:1-4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called--

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴ He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:10 Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,

From J.I. Packer, Concise Theology

On EFFECTUAL CALLING:

“Effectual calling” is a sixteenth century English phrase that became the title of chapter X of the 1647 Westminster Confession. The chapter begins thus:

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

Eff Calling = “the many-sided reality of Christian conversion, involving illumination, regeneration, faith, and repentance.”

It is a sov work of God, ie. “effectively” – performed by the HS.

Corresponds to Paul’s use of - “call” = “bring to faith”

- “called” = “converted”

This effective call is contrasted with a merely external and ineffective invitation, such as found in Matt 22:14 (ESV): “For many are called, but few are chosen”.

We find effectual calling in many texts – see above:

[p153] “Original sin renders all human beings naturally dead (unresponsive) to God, but in effectual calling God quickens the dead. As the outward call of God to faith in Christ is communicated through the reading, preaching, and explaining of the contents of the Bible, the Holy Spirit enlightens and renews the heart of elect sinners so that they understand the gospel and embrace it as truth from God, and God in Christ becomes to them an object of desire and affection. Being now regenerate and able by the use of their freed will to choose God and the good, they turn away from their former pattern of living to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to start a new life with him.”

From John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied – on Effectual Calling

There IS a universal “call”, eg. Matt 22:14 and some OT texts. BUT: when used re: salvation, the terms for calling are almost uniformly applied not to the universal call but to the EFFECTUAL call.

- esp. Rom 8:30 – gives the meaning to “call.”

THE AUTHOR:

1. God is the author.

- Eg. in 1 Cor 1:9, 2 Tim 1:8-9.
- [p89] “In this respect calling us an act of God’s grace and power just as regeneration, justification, and adoption are. We do not call ourselves, we do not set ourselves apart by sovereign volition any more than we regenerate, justify, or adopt ourselves. Calling is an act of God and of God alone.” ie. *utterly dependent upon the sovereign grace of God in the application of redemption. “[T]he pure sovereignty of God’s work of salvation is not suspended at the point of application any more than at the point of design and objective accomplishment.”*

2. It is God the Father who is specific agent in the effectual call.

- He is the person of the Trinity who planned salvation, and the specific agent of election.
- And he is not far removed from the effectuation and application of salvation – he is not far removed but comes into intimate relation to his people in application.
- Eg. in Rom 8:30, 1 Cor 1:9, Gal 1:15, Eph 1:17-18, 2 Tim 1:9.

ITS NATURE:

Biblical terms that are used commonly often lose their proper meaning. So too with “call”. To understand it properly we must use the word “**SUMMONS**”. [p91] “The action by which God makes his people the partakers of redemption is that of summons. And since it is God’s summons it is efficacious summons.”

- We think of “summons” as a court summons – which does not of itself empower us to appear in court. Our actual appearance depends on our strength and will. Or the force applied by the executive officers if we are compelled.
- It is wholly otherwise with God’s summons: it “is invested with the efficacy by which we are delivered to the destination intended – we are effectively ushered into the fellowship of Christ.” It cannot fail. God the things that be not as though they are (cf. Rom 4:17).

“Co-ordinate with this fact of efficacy is the truth of its *immutability*.

- Romans 11:29.
- Plus Romans 8:28-30, where the call finds its place in the centre of that unbreakable chain of events from divine foreknowledge to glorification. “This is just saying that the effectual call insures perseverance because it is grounded in the security of God’s purpose and grace.”

The call is also a **high, holy, and heavenly calling** – in its origin and in its destiny – “But it is probably the character of the calling that is particularly stressed. The life into which the people of God are ushered is one that separates them from the fellowship of this present evil world and imparts to them a character consonant with that consecration.” We belong to Jesus, and so are “called to be saints” (Rom 1:7

- Phil 3:14, 2 Tim 1:9, Heb 3:1.

THE PATTERN:

1. It is the pattern of determinate purpose.

When God calls men and women it is not haphazard, arbitrary or sudden. But from eternity.

2. It is eternal.

God has been preoccupied for eternity with the grace which is actually bestowed in time.

3. It is in Christ the pattern is devised.

2 Tim 1:9. Yes, the Father is agent in the effectual call. But remember too that the call is never apart from Christ. [p93] “The people of God are not contemplated even in the purpose of grace apart from Christ. (cf. Rom 8:29, Eph 1:4).

THE PRIORITY:

“[N]o great issue of theological or exegetical consequence would be at stake if regeneration were regarded as logically prior to calling. But there are reasons for thinking that calling is the first step in the application of redemption.”

1. “It is calling that is represented in Scripture as that act of God by which we are *actually* united to Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:9). And surely union with Christ is that which united us to the inwardly operative grace of God. Regeneration is the beginning of inwardly operative saving grace.”

2. “Calling is a sovereign act of God alone and we must not define it in terms of the response which is elicited in the heart and mind a will of the person called. When this is taken into account, it is more reasonable to construe regeneration as that which is wrought inwardly by God’s grace in order that we may yield to God’s call the appropriate and necessary response. In that case the new birth would come after the call and prior to the response on our part. It provides the link between the call and the response on the part of the person called.”

3. Romans 8:28-30 suggests this. Unlikely that Paul would begin talking about the application of redemption with an act of God which is not the first in order. After all, it is framed with predestination and with glorification.

4. All parts of the application of redemption stem from God’s eternal purpose. “But in the NT particular emphasis is placed upon the fact that calling is in accordance with this eternal purpose (cf. Rom 8:28-30; 2 Tim 1:9).” That the whole application process depends upon eternal purpose is shown by demonstrating that the *initial act* of application proceeds from the eternal purpose of grace.”

Therefore, conclude that “the application of redemption begins with the sovereign and efficacious summons by which the people of God are ushered into the fellowship of Christ and union with him to the end that they may become partakers of all the grace and virtue which reside in him as Redeemer, Saviour, and Lord.