

Effectual Calling and Conversion:

Can I Resist the Holy Spirit?

The Reformed doctrine of *irresistible* grace, also known as *efficacious grace*, states that God regenerates and converts the elect through what is known as the *effectual call*. Effectual call is the inward call of the Holy Spirit that moves and invites the sinner to receive Christ at the same time the sinner is regenerated and renewed inwardly so as to love the Lord and willingly believe the gospel. This is to be distinguished from the outward call of the gospel, which is issued to all people indiscriminately through the preaching of the gospel, witnessing, the administration of the sacraments and other proclamations of God's Word.

Nevertheless, the inward call often accompanies and works through the means of the outward call. While other traditions teach that this inward leading of the Holy Spirit may be accepted or rejected, Reformed theology insists that God's inward call is always *effectual*; that is, it never fails to save those who are so called.

The Bible speaks of God's effectual call in many places, but perhaps the passage distinguishing it most clearly from the outward call is Romans 8:29-30. There Paul indicates that the group of those who are called is identical to that of those who are predestined, justified and ultimately glorified. Clearly, this call is issued *only* to those who are saved—as well as to *all* those who are saved (cf. Ro 1:7; Jude 1; Rev 17:14).

Effectual calling is necessary because of humanity's fallen state. In our sin and spiritual deadness, we are completely unable to respond positively to the outward call of the gospel; we cannot rightly comprehend God and his message of salvation (1Co2:12-14). and we hate God and his commandments (Ro 8:5-8). No fallen person naturally possesses the moral ability to receive Christ; only those to whom this ability has been given by God may trust in the gospel and be converted (Dt 30:6; Mt 11:25-27; 13:10-16; Jn 6:44,63-65; Ac 16:14).

In response to our inability, God has chosen to transform the

hearts of the elect through his effectual calling, implanting within them new moral ability and new desires so that they unfailingly come to God when called (in 6:44-45; 10:1-5). It is God who initiates this process by regenerating our spirits and renewing our hearts (Dt 30:6; Jn 1:12-13; 3:5-8; Ac 16:14; Php 2:12-13; see theological article "Regeneration and New Birth" at in 3). He converts us by granting us saving faith as the unfailing means of our salvation (Ac 13:48; 1Co 1:22-31; Eph 2:8-9; Php 1:29; 1Jn 5:20).

God does not always issue an effectual call to the elect the first time they hear the gospel; one may be elect and still initially reject the gospel for many years. When this happens, the elect behave just as all other fallen people, necessarily rejecting the gospel because they hate God and lack the moral ability to obey him. Oftentimes, Christians wrongly assume that this means the Holy Spirit's inward, effectual call can be resisted. It is certainly true that the outward call, such as that issued by preaching and witnessing, can be effectively resisted (Ac 13:45-46,49-51; 14:1-4). In fact, the outward call is always resisted unless it is accompanied by the inward, effectual call. But the Holy Spirit's inward call always results in conversion.

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