

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 5: THE SPIRIT AND THE APPLICATION OF REDEMPTION

Lesson 11

Effectual Calling

The Spirit Who Makes the Dead Alive

The Irresistible Grace That Awakens the Soul

Key Texts: John 6:37, 44, 65; Ephesians 2:1–5; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:9; Romans 8:30

“No One Can Come to Me Unless the Father Who Sent Me Draws Him”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

With Lesson 11 we cross into Unit 5 — the most personally and pastorally immediate unit in the entire series. The first four units have established who the Spirit is (Unit 2), what He has done in the Old Testament (Unit 3), what He has done in the life of Christ (Unit 4), and the pneumatological history that runs from creation through Pentecost. All of this has been preparation for the question that presses closest upon the individual believer: what does the Spirit do in me? How does the redemption that Christ accomplished become the redemption that the Spirit applies to the particular human being sitting in a particular pew in a particular town?

The theological framework that has governed Reformed soteriology's answer to this question for five centuries is the *ordo salutis* — the order of salvation. Not a chronological sequence of events that the believer experiences in discrete stages, but a logical order that the Spirit follows in applying Christ's redemption to the soul: effectual calling, regeneration, conversion (faith and repentance), justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Each link in this chain has its own distinct nature, its own scriptural grounding, and its own pastoral significance. And every link is the Spirit's work: the Spirit calls, regenerates, illumines to faith, applies the judicial decree of justification, witnesses to adoption, sanctifies progressively, and will ultimately complete the work at glorification. The *ordo salutis* is, from first to last, a pneumatological narrative.

Lesson 11 begins the *ordo* with effectual calling — the first pneumatological act in the logical sequence by which the spiritually dead sinner is brought to saving faith in Christ. Effectual calling is, in one sense, the most foundational of all the pneumatological acts in the application of redemption: without it, nothing else follows. Without the Spirit's sovereign, inward work of calling, the sinner remains in the darkness of spiritual death, unable to come to Christ, unable to believe the gospel, unable to respond to the most faithful and most urgent preaching of the Word. Effectual calling is the act by which the Spirit breaches the wall of spiritual death and makes the dead sinner alive to the gospel call. It is not the most dramatic pneumatological act from a human experiential perspective — the experience of effectual calling is often indistinguishable, in its phenomenology, from an ordinary human decision. But it is the most foundational: nothing in the Christian life precedes it, and everything in the Christian life follows from it.

The doctrine of effectual calling is also one of the most contested in all of Pneumatology and Soteriology. It is the point at which the Reformed tradition's insistence on divine sovereignty in salvation engages most directly with the Arminian tradition's insistence on human free will and cooperative grace. Getting this doctrine right — not merely correct in its formal propositions but understood in its full biblical depth and pastoral richness — is essential for a healthy Christian life, a faithful ministry, and a properly grounded assurance of salvation. This lesson will establish the doctrine from Scripture, distinguish it from the Arminian alternative, and draw

out its pastoral significance with the care that one of the most practically important doctrines in the entire Christian faith deserves.

I. The Ordo Salutis: The Logical Framework of Salvation

The Spirit's Sequential Work in Applying Christ's Redemption

The ordo salutis — Latin for “order of salvation” — is the systematic theology tradition’s attempt to articulate the logical sequence in which the benefits of Christ’s redemption are applied to the individual sinner by the Holy Spirit. The most compact scriptural expression of the ordo is Paul’s golden chain of Romans 8:29–30: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (NASB 1995). The chain runs from the eternal decree of predestination (foreknowing and predestining) through the temporal acts of calling and justification to the final eschatological act of glorification, and it is unbroken: everyone foreknown is predestined, everyone predestined is called, everyone called is justified, everyone justified is glorified. No link fails; no one falls out of the chain.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter X, Of Effectual Calling) provides the most complete systematic articulation of effectual calling within the broader ordo: “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 an 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.” Every element of this definition repays careful attention: the divine determination (“All those whom God hath predestinated”), the divine agency (“He is pleased”), the divine instruments (“Word and Spirit”), the starting condition (“out of that state of sin and death”), the means (enlightening, removing the heart of stone, renewing the will), and the paradox of sovereign grace and genuine freedom (“yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing”).

It is important to clarify what the ordo salutis is and what it is not. It is not a temporal sequence in which the believer experiences discrete spiritual events in chronological order, necessarily aware of each stage. It is a logical order — a sequence of theological causes and effects, each one presupposing and producing the next, even when the experiential sequence is compressed, overlapping, or difficult to distinguish. Regeneration, for instance, logically precedes faith in the Reformed understanding (you must be spiritually alive before you can exercise spiritual faith), but in the believer’s experience, these are not separated by time; they occur as a single event. The ordo is the theologian’s map of a territory that the convert may traverse in a moment; it is the anatomy of a salvation that the soul experiences as a single act of divine grace.

II. Effectual Calling Defined

The Spirit's Sovereign Inward Work That Makes the Outward Call Effective

A. The External Call and Its Insufficiency

Effectual calling is properly understood only in contrast with the external or general call that precedes it. The external call is the proclamation of the gospel to sinners through the preaching of the Word — the invitation extended to all who hear it to repent, believe, and come to Christ. This call is genuine: the invitation is real, the offer is sincere, the terms are clear, and those who hear it are genuinely invited to respond. God does not issue a hypocritical or insincere call when He commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). The external call is the form in which the Spirit makes the gospel accessible to human beings, and it carries the full weight of divine authority.

But the external call, by itself, is insufficient to produce saving faith. The Scriptures are unambiguous on this point: the natural person cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God; they are foolishness to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14). The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so (Romans 8:7). No one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). The heart of the unregenerate sinner is, as Jeremiah diagnosed and Ezekiel promised to replace, a heart of stone — hard, unresponsive, incapable of freely and gladly receiving the gospel invitation. The external call reaches the ear; it cannot, by itself, reach the heart. It can describe the terms of salvation with complete accuracy and urgent beauty; it cannot produce the spiritual sight, the spiritual hearing, and the spiritual willingness that saving response requires.

This is why many are called but few are chosen (Matthew 22:14). The many who are called receive the external call — the gospel proclamation reaches them. The few who are chosen receive both the external call and the Spirit's effectual, internal call that makes the external call operative in their hearts. The distinction is not between a sincere and an insincere invitation; it is between an invitation that reaches the ear and an invitation that, by the Spirit's sovereign and creative work, reaches and transforms the heart.

B. Effectual Calling Defined

Effectual calling is the Holy Spirit's sovereign, inward work by which He takes the outward proclamation of the gospel and makes it effective — not merely audible or intellectually understandable, but spiritually operative — in the heart of the elect sinner. It is the Spirit's personal, creative, life-giving act of making the dead sinner alive to the gospel call so that he responds to it freely, gladly, and genuinely as the expression of his own renewed desire. It is, in short, the pneumatological mechanism of sovereign grace: the act by which the Spirit ensures that those whom the Father has given to the Son (John 6:37) do in fact come to the Son.

Second Timothy 1:9 provides perhaps the most compact definition in the New Testament: God “has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (NASB 1995). Three elements of this definition are pneumatologically decisive. First, the calling is holy — it is

God's own calling, originating in His holiness and producing holiness in those who are called. Second, it is not according to our works — it does not depend on anything in the called person, including any prior spiritual merit, preparedness, or receptiveness. Third, it is according to His own purpose and grace granted in Christ from all eternity — the call in time is the execution of a purpose formed in eternity, and the ground of the call is grace, not human achievement.

III. Jesus' Teaching on Effectual Calling

John 6:37, 44, 65 — The Father's Drawing and the Son's Keeping

The most concentrated and most exegetically demanding passage on effectual calling in the New Testament is Jesus' Bread of Life Discourse in John 6. Three verses in this chapter, taken together, provide the foundational Christological and pneumatological case for the Reformed doctrine of effectual calling.

John 6:37: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (NASB 1995). The verse establishes a perfect correspondence between divine giving and human coming: all that the Father gives to the Son will come — without remainder, without exception, without failure. The divine giving precedes and grounds the human coming; it does not condition it. This is not a prediction about who will choose to come based on the Father's foreknowledge of their free choices; it is a declaration of divine sovereignty in salvation. The Father's giving guarantees the coming; the coming is certain because the giving is certain. And the Son's reception of all who come is equally guaranteed: He will certainly not cast out any who come — a double negative in Greek (*ou mē ekvbalō exo*) of the strongest possible force.

John 6:44: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (NASB 1995). The universal negative "no one can come" establishes the complete inability of the unregenerate sinner to come to Christ by his own unaided will and understanding. The spiritual blindness and bondage of fallen human nature is so comprehensive that coming to Christ is not merely difficult or unlikely without the Spirit's work; it is impossible. The verb "draws" (*helkō*) — used elsewhere in John's Gospel of the literal drawing of a fishing net (21:6, 11) and of Jesus' drawing all people to Himself through the cross (12:32) — conveys sovereign, effectual drawing: the kind of drawing that actually brings the drawn person to the destination, not a drawing that merely makes coming possible while leaving the result uncertain.

John 6:65: "And He was saying, 'For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.'" The verse repeats and intensifies the universal inability of verse 44, adding the language of divine granting: coming to Christ is something "granted" (*dedomenōn*, given, bestowed as a gift) by the Father. This is not a capacity latent in human nature that requires only appropriate conditions to be activated; it is a gift given by the sovereign grace of God to those whom the Father chooses to give it. The incapacity to come to Christ is not merely the absence of information or opportunity; it is a fundamental disability of fallen human nature that only the Father's sovereign gift can overcome.

The consistency of John 6:37, 44, and 65 is striking. In each verse, the coming to Christ that constitutes saving faith is grounded not in the sinner's will or decision but in the Father's sovereign act: giving, drawing, granting. The sinner's coming is genuine, free, and real — Jesus does not deny this. But it is the fruit of the Father's giving, drawing, and granting, not its cause. The Reformed doctrine of effectual calling is simply the systematic articulation of what Jesus plainly teaches in John 6.

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me” | “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” | “No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father”

John 6:37, 44, 65, NASB 1995

IV. The Dead-to-Alive Analogy

Ephesians 2:1–5 — The Spirit's Call Is Creative, Not Cooperative

A. The Condition from Which Effectual Calling Rescues

The most powerful and most precise scriptural description of the condition from which effectual calling rescues the sinner is Ephesians 2:1–5. Paul's account of the unregenerate human condition is unsparing in its comprehensiveness: “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:1–5, NASB 1995).

The pneumatological significance of the passage is concentrated in the word “dead.” Not weak, not sick, not confused, not misinformed — dead. The unregenerate sinner is spiritually dead: unresponsive to spiritual reality, incapable of spiritual perception, unable to exercise spiritual faith, no more capable of contributing to his own spiritual resurrection than Lazarus in the tomb was capable of contributing to his own physical resurrection. The analogy is not casual; it is the Pauline equivalent of Jesus' Lazarus narrative — the most vivid possible illustration of the absolute necessity of divine creative initiative in salvation. Lazarus did not cooperate with his resurrection; he could not, for he was dead. The sinner does not cooperate with his effectual calling; he cannot, for he is spiritually dead. The Spirit's work in effectual calling is not assistance to a struggling spiritual life; it is the creation of spiritual life where none existed.

The transformation Paul describes is equally unambiguous: “even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.” The divine initiative is emphatic: God, being rich in mercy, even when we were dead, made us alive. The human condition is death; the divine response is life-giving. The preposition “together with Christ” (*suzōopoieō*, literally “made alive together with”) establishes the pneumatological basis of effectual calling in union with Christ: the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead (Romans 8:11) is the same Spirit who raises the sinner from spiritual death in union with Christ's resurrection. Effectual calling is the

application of resurrection life to the spiritually dead sinner through the Spirit's creative, life-giving work.

B. The Lazarus Analogy and Its Pneumatological Logic

The Lazarus narrative of John 11 is not explicitly a text about effectual calling — it is the account of a physical miracle of resurrection. But it has been consistently employed in the Reformed tradition as the most vivid illustration of the pneumatological logic of effectual calling, and with good reason. When Jesus stands before the sealed tomb in Bethany and cries out “Lazarus, come forth!” (John 11:43), several things are simultaneously true. First, the command is genuinely addressed to a real person with a real name. Second, the person addressed is completely dead and entirely incapable of responding to any command on the basis of his own resources. Third, the command is effectual: it does not merely offer Lazarus the possibility of coming forth while leaving the result uncertain; it is the creative word of the Son of God that creates the very life by which Lazarus hears and obeys. Fourth, Lazarus comes forth freely, genuinely, in his own person — there is no external coercion, no mechanical constraint. His coming forth is his own act, but it is his own act made possible entirely and exclusively by the life-giving power of the One who called him.

This is precisely the logic of effectual calling. The Spirit calls the dead sinner, not by offering the possibility of spiritual life to a sinner who then decides whether to accept it, but by the creative, life-giving word of God that creates the very spiritual life by which the sinner hears and responds. The sinner comes freely — he is not coerced; his coming is a genuine expression of his newly created desire. But his freedom is not the source of the coming; the Spirit's creative act is. The Westminster Confession's formulation captures the paradox perfectly: “yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” The freedom is real; the grace that produces the freedom is sovereign. Both are true; neither cancels the other.

V. Irresistible Grace and the Renewal of the Will

What the Spirit Does to the Will in Effectual Calling

A. The Misunderstanding That Must Be Corrected

The term “irresistible grace” — the fourth point of the traditional Reformed summary of soteriology known as the Five Points of Calvinism or TULIP — is one of the most frequently misunderstood and most rhetorically exploited terms in the theological vocabulary of salvation. It is almost universally caricatured by its opponents as the claim that God forces reluctant, unwilling sinners to believe against their will, overriding their freedom and treating them as spiritual automatons rather than as genuine moral agents. This caricature is so far from what the Reformed tradition actually teaches that it constitutes a strawman of the most basic kind — and one that must be corrected at the outset before any constructive pneumatological argument can proceed.

Irresistible grace does not mean that the elect sinner believes in Christ against his will. It means that the Spirit's effectual calling changes the sinner's will so that he freely and gladly comes to

Christ as the expression of his deepest desire. The Spirit does not override the will; He renews it. He does not coerce the sinner into an unwilling compliance; He transforms the sinner into a willing believer. The irresistibility of effectual calling is not the irresistibility of compulsion — which would compromise the reality of the sinner’s faith and the genuineness of his repentance. It is the irresistibility of sovereign love — the kind of love that overcomes the sinner’s resistance not by crushing it but by transforming it, not by forcing the will but by renewing the will, not by making the sinner believe against his nature but by changing his nature so that believing becomes his deepest desire.

B. The Scriptural Case for the Will’s Renewal

The scriptural case for the Spirit’s renewal of the will in effectual calling is concentrated in Ezekiel 36:26–27 — the great New Covenant promise already examined in Lesson 8 — and in its New Testament fulfillment in the soteriology of the Pauline letters. “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes.” The critical verb is “cause” (Hebrew: *’āsāh*, will do/cause/make): God does not merely enable covenant obedience; He causes it. He does not merely make obedience possible for those who choose it; He puts His Spirit within His people and the result is that they walk in His statutes. The will is not bypassed; it is transformed and directed. The obedience is genuine; but the cause of the obedience is the Spirit’s sovereign, indwelling work.

Philippians 2:12–13 presents the same paradox in the New Testament context of sanctification, but the logic is identical for effectual calling: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (NASB 1995). The human activity (“work out your salvation”) is commanded and real; the divine activity that grounds and produces it (“it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work”) is sovereign and prior. God works in the will and in the working — His sovereign activity is not competitive with genuine human agency but its enabling cause. The Westminster Confession’s formulation “yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace” is the precise articulation of this Philippians 2:12–13 paradox in the context of effectual calling.

VI. Effectual Calling and the Arminian Alternative

The Decisive Theological Contrast and Its Implications

The Arminian alternative to the Reformed doctrine of effectual calling is generally described as the doctrine of prevenient grace: the teaching that the Spirit’s grace is given universally and equally to all human beings, enabling every person to respond to the gospel if they choose, while leaving the final determination of salvation to the free choice of each individual. On this view, the Spirit does not effectually call the elect but rather restores to all fallen human beings a sufficient measure of spiritual capacity — sufficient to choose Christ or to refuse Him. Salvation is ultimately determined by the human will, which the Spirit has enabled but does not control.

The Arminian doctrine has genuine pastoral and evangelical appeal: it seems to honor human dignity, to safeguard the sincerity of God's universal gospel offer, and to provide a coherent account of why some believe and others do not (they chose differently). But it faces insurmountable exegetical obstacles from precisely the texts on which this lesson has been grounded. John 6:44 says no one can come unless the Father draws him — not “no one will come without prevenient grace enabling them to come” but “no one can come.” The inability is absolute, not relative. John 6:37 says all that the Father gives will come — not “will have the opportunity to come if they choose” but will come, certainly and without remainder. Ephesians 2:1 says sinners are dead — not weakened but dead; not needing assistance but needing resurrection.

The deeper theological problem with the Arminian doctrine is that it makes the ultimate determination of salvation dependent on the human will rather than the divine will. If two sinners receive equal prevenient grace and one believes while the other does not, then the one who believes is the determinative cause of his own salvation — his faith, not God's grace, is the decisive factor. This shifts the glory of salvation from God to man, however inadvertently. It makes salvation — in its final and decisive moment — a human achievement rather than a divine gift. And it contradicts Paul's explicit argument in Ephesians 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” If faith is ultimately the sinner's own decision in response to universally available enabling grace, then “no one may boast” is simply not true: the believer can boast that he made the right choice when others did not.

VII. The Pastoral Significance: Your Conversion Was Not Your Achievement

The Comfort, the Humility, and the Assurance That Flow from Effectual Calling

The doctrine of effectual calling is not merely a doctrinal puzzle for systematic theologians to solve; it is a wellspring of pastoral comfort, genuine humility, and well-grounded assurance for every believer who understands it. Three practical implications deserve careful and sustained attention.

First, assurance. If your conversion was the decisive work of the Holy Spirit and not ultimately the decisive act of your own will, then the permanence of your salvation does not depend on the permanence of your will. The sinner who converted himself can un-convert himself; but the sinner who was effectually called by the Spirit cannot un-call himself. “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29, NASB 1995). The calling that the Spirit issues is as permanent as the purpose that grounds it: He who called you with a holy calling according to His own purpose and grace will not un-call you when you sin, when you struggle, when your faith wavers, or when the circumstances of your life become hostile to spiritual vitality. The golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 does not break: those whom He called, He also justified; those whom He justified, He also glorified. The chain runs from predestination to glorification without a single broken link, because every link is the Spirit's work, not ours.

Second, humility. If your conversion was the Spirit's work rather than your achievement, then you have no grounds for spiritual pride or for looking down on those who have not yet come to faith. They are in the condition from which you were rescued by the Spirit's sovereign grace — not by your superior spiritual discernment, your greater intellectual honesty, your better moral disposition, or your more receptive heart. You believed because the Spirit effectually called you; they have not yet believed because the Spirit has not yet effectually called them. The same condition of spiritual death that they are in was your condition before the Spirit breathed life into you. "For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7, NASB 1995). Every grace you possess, including the faith by which you believed, was received — received as a gift from the Spirit who called you, not earned as an achievement that distinguishes you from the unconverted.

Third, evangelistic urgency. The doctrine of effectual calling might seem, at first hearing, to undermine the urgency of evangelism: if God will effectually call the elect, why bother preaching? This objection fundamentally misunderstands both the nature of effectual calling and the means by which the Spirit ordinarily exercises it. Romans 10:14–15 makes the connection between preaching and calling explicit: "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" The Spirit's effectual calling ordinarily operates through and not apart from the preaching of the Word. The external call is the vehicle of the internal call; the preacher's proclamation is the instrument the Spirit uses to effect the regenerating, faith-producing work of effectual calling in the hearts of the elect. This means that the preacher who labors faithfully and urgently in the proclamation of the gospel is not laboring in competition with divine sovereignty; he is participating in it. He is the human instrument through whom the sovereign Spirit chooses to call the elect. The doctrine of effectual calling is not a reason to slack in evangelism; it is the most profound encouragement to persistent, unashamed, urgent gospel proclamation that the Christian minister possesses. It means that the gospel preached in the power of the Spirit will accomplish exactly what God intends it to accomplish, that no one whom God has determined to call will slip through the net of faithful proclamation, and that the discouragements of slow response or apparent failure cannot ultimately prevent the Spirit's effectual work.

*"All that the Father gives Me will come to Me,
and the one who comes to Me
I will certainly not cast out."*

John 6:37, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Ordo Salutis	Latin: “order of salvation.” The systematic theology tradition’s articulation of the logical sequence in which the benefits of Christ’s redemption are applied to the individual sinner by the Holy Spirit. The Reformed ordo typically includes: effectual calling, regeneration, conversion (faith and repentance), justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. The ordo is a logical rather than strictly chronological sequence — it describes the theological relationships of cause and effect between the acts of grace rather than the experiential sequence in which believers consciously pass through distinct stages. Every act in the ordo is the Spirit’s work.
Effectual Calling	The Holy Spirit’s sovereign, inward work by which He takes the outward proclamation of the gospel and makes it effective in the heart of the elect sinner — not merely audible or intellectually understandable, but spiritually operative, creating the very faith and repentance by which the sinner responds. Effectual calling is distinguished from the general (external) call of gospel proclamation that reaches all hearers: the external call is necessary but not sufficient for saving faith; the effectual (internal) call is both necessary and sufficient, since what the Spirit calls He infallibly brings to faith. The Westminster Confession (Chapter X) defines effectual calling as God’s work “by His Word and Spirit” by which He enlightens minds, removes hearts of stone, renews wills, and draws sinners freely to Christ.
External Call	The general gospel proclamation addressed to all who hear it, inviting them to repent, believe, and come to Christ. The external call is genuine, sincere, and carries the full authority of God’s command and invitation. However, it is insufficient by itself to produce saving faith, because the unregenerate sinner is spiritually dead and unable to respond positively to any spiritual invitation on the basis of his own resources (1 Corinthians 2:14; Romans 8:7). The external call is the necessary vehicle of the Spirit’s effectual internal call: the Spirit ordinarily works through the preaching of the Word to effect the inward calling of the elect.
Prevenient Grace	The Arminian doctrine that the Holy Spirit gives grace universally and equally to all fallen human beings, restoring sufficient spiritual capacity to enable every person to respond to the gospel if they choose. On this view, the Spirit’s grace precedes (Latin: <i>praevenire</i> , to come before) and enables human response, but the final determination of salvation is left to the individual’s free will. The Reformed critique is that prevenient grace is exegetically unwarranted (Scripture describes the problem as death, not weakness), makes salvation ultimately dependent on human choice rather than divine grace, and contradicts the guarantee of John 6:37–44 and the divine-passive language of Ephesians 2:1–5.

Term	Definition
Irresistible Grace	The fourth point of the traditional Reformed soteriology (sometimes expressed in the TULIP acronym as “I”), affirming that the Spirit’s effectual calling cannot ultimately be defeated by the sinner’s natural resistance. Irresistible grace does not mean that God coerces reluctant sinners to believe against their will; it means that the Spirit’s work in effectual calling overcomes the sinner’s resistance by transforming the will, renewing the heart, and creating the very desire to come to Christ. The irresistibility is the irresistibility of sovereign love that overcomes resistance not by crushing it but by transforming it — so that the called sinner comes most freely, being made willing by grace.
Helkō	Greek: to draw, to drag. The verb used in John 6:44 (“the Father who draws him”) and John 12:32 (“I will draw all people to Myself”). In John 21:6 and 11, it is used of the literal drawing of a fishing net — not merely attracting but actually bringing to its destination. The Reformed reading of John 6:44 takes <i>helkō</i> as effectual drawing: the Father’s drawing of the elect to the Son is not the drawing of persuasion or invitation alone but the sovereign, effectual drawing that infallibly brings the drawn person to Christ. The Arminian reading interprets <i>helkō</i> as “woo” or “attract,” leaving the result to human choice.
Spiritual Death	The condition of the unregenerate sinner as described in Ephesians 2:1 (“dead in your trespasses and sins”) and related passages (Colossians 2:13; John 5:24; Romans 5:12–17). Spiritual death is not merely moral weakness, intellectual confusion, or a tendency toward sin; it is the complete absence of spiritual life — the inability to perceive, desire, or respond to spiritual reality on the basis of one’s own resources (1 Corinthians 2:14). The analogy to physical death is deliberate and precise: as physically dead persons cannot respond to physical stimuli, spiritually dead persons cannot respond to spiritual stimuli without the Spirit’s creative, life-giving intervention. Effectual calling is the Spirit’s act of raising the spiritually dead.
Creative Call	The characterization of the Spirit’s effectual calling as a creative rather than a cooperative act — analogous to God’s fiat of creation (speaking existence into being from nothing) rather than to a human skill or capacity being activated by appropriate conditions. The creative call creates the very faith by which the sinner responds; it does not presuppose a latent spiritual capacity that needs only to be awakened. The Lazarus analogy (John 11:43–44) illustrates the creative call: Jesus’ command does not merely open the possibility of Lazarus coming forth; it creates the life by which Lazarus is able to hear and obey. Similarly, the Spirit’s effectual calling creates the spiritual life by which the dead sinner hears the gospel and comes to Christ.
Suzōopoieō	Greek: to make alive together, to co-vivify. The compound verb used in Ephesians 2:5 (“made us alive together with Christ”) and Colossians 2:13 (“made you alive together with Him”) to describe the Spirit’s act of spiritual resurrection in union with Christ’s physical resurrection. The “together with

Term	Definition
	Christ” element establishes the pneumatological basis of effectual calling in union with Christ: the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead (Romans 8:11) raises the sinner from spiritual death in the same act of sovereign, creative power. Effectual calling is the application of Christ’s resurrection life to the spiritually dead sinner through the Spirit’s uniting work.
Golden Chain	The traditional designation for the unbroken logical sequence of Romans 8:29–30: foreknowing → predestining → calling → justifying → glorifying. The chain is “golden” because it is precious (it encompasses the entire scope of divine sovereignty in salvation) and because it is unbreakable (every person who is foreknown is predestined; every predestined person is called; every called person is justified; every justified person is glorified). The golden chain’s unbroken character is the scriptural ground of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and of the believer’s assurance: what God begins in the call, He completes in the glory.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that effectual calling is the Spirit's sovereign, inward, creative work — not God's response to human spiritual initiative, not the activation of a latent human spiritual capacity, but the divine creation of spiritual life where none existed. This conviction must be held with sufficient clarity that it governs the language we use about conversion. When we say "I came to faith" or "I decided to follow Christ," these statements are true at the level of human experience and genuine creaturely agency. But they are the surface description of what is more fundamentally described as "I was effectually called by the Spirit" — the Spirit created the faith by which I came to Christ, the Spirit created the repentance by which I turned from sin, and the Spirit created the desire that made my coming free and genuine. The human activity is real; the divine causation is ultimate.

We must also believe that the irresistibility of effectual calling is not the coercion of an unwilling sinner but the transformation of a willing-but-misdirected will into a newly directed will that freely and gladly comes to Christ. This precision matters enormously for the way we present the gospel and for the way we understand the nature of saving faith. Saving faith is not a compliance produced by divine pressure; it is the genuine, free, heartfelt response of a soul whose heart has been renewed by the Spirit. When Paul speaks of the Thessalonian believers who "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9), the turning is their genuine act. What they do not know — what they could not know from the inside of the experience — is that the Spirit's effectual calling was the sovereign cause of the turning that was genuinely theirs.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The pastoral implication of effectual calling for the believer's own soul is a settled and well-grounded assurance that is not dependent on the performance of the will. If your conversion was the Spirit's work, then its permanence is guaranteed by the faithfulness of the Spirit rather than by the consistency of your willpower. You may fluctuate; He does not. You may waver; He does not. You may struggle with doubts, failures, and seasons of spiritual dryness — but none of these disqualify you from the effectual call that the Spirit has issued, because the call was never conditioned on your spiritual performance. "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). Rest in this. Not as a license for spiritual carelessness — the Spirit's effectual call always produces genuine sanctification, not presumptuous indulgence — but as a foundation for the kind of settled, peaceful, rooted assurance that Jesus intended when He said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27–28, NASB 1995).

Desire, above all, the evangelistic urgency that the doctrine of effectual calling produces rather than the evangelistic paralysis that its caricature suggests. The Spirit who effectually calls the

elect does so through the preaching of the Word. You are the instrument through which the Spirit may choose to issue His effectual call to someone you know. Your faithful, clear, urgent proclamation of the gospel is not a futile supplement to divine sovereignty; it is the ordained means of divine sovereignty's expression. Pray for those in your life who have not yet come to faith with the confidence that comes from knowing that the Spirit who effectually called you can effectually call them — and with the urgency that comes from not knowing when or whether He will do so through your witness.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read John 6:35–65 in its entirety as the foundational Christological and pneumatological text on effectual calling. Note Jesus' consistent pattern: the Father's giving (v. 37), drawing (v. 44), and granting (v. 65) always ground and guarantee the coming to Christ. Note also the murmuring of the crowds (v. 41) and the falling away of the disciples (v. 66) as the narrative illustrations of what happens when only the external call is received without the Spirit's effectual inward work. What does the context reveal about the audience Jesus is addressing, and why does He say what He says about effectual calling in precisely this context?
- Study Romans 8:28–30 as the golden chain of salvation, paying special attention to the verb tenses and the grammatical structure of the sequence. Note that in verse 30, Paul uses past tenses throughout — “called,” “justified,” “glorified” — even for glorification, which has not yet occurred. What does the use of the past tense for glorification suggest about the certainty of the chain's completion? How does the golden chain's structure provide the biblical basis for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and for the believer's personal assurance?
- Memorize Ephesians 2:4–5: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” Meditate on the three contrasting pairs in the verse: God's mercy vs. our sin; God's love vs. our death; divine life-giving vs. our spiritual deadness. Let the memorization of this verse produce in you the “but God” gratitude that the verse intends: not “I responded to the gospel” as the ultimate explanation of your conversion, but “But God... made me alive.”
- Examine your own conversion narrative in the light of this lesson. Not the phenomenology — what it felt like, what circumstances surrounded it — but the theology: was the ultimate cause of your conversion God's sovereign work in effectual calling, or your own unaided decision to believe? What difference does the answer to this question make for your assurance, your humility before those who have not yet believed, and your confidence in the power of the gospel you proclaim?
- Pray for five specific people in your life who have not yet come to faith, using the language and the logic of this lesson. Pray for them not as individuals who simply need the right argument or the right opportunity but as spiritually dead persons who need the Spirit's effectual, life-giving call. Pray for their effectual calling with the confidence that the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and who effectually called you can

effectually call them — and with the urgency that their spiritual death and the Spirit's sovereignty over the timing of His calling together demand.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. How do you typically narrate your own conversion story? Is the language primarily about what you did (decided, chose, responded, came forward) or about what God did (called, drew, opened my eyes, gave me faith)? What does your typical conversion language reveal about your practical soteriology — your working understanding of who was the primary agent in your coming to faith?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read John 6:35–44 carefully. In verses 35–40, Jesus describes the relationship between coming to Him (human activity) and being given to Him by the Father (divine activity). In verse 37, He says “all that the Father gives Me will come to Me” — note the certainty of the “will come.” In verse 44, He says “no one can come” without the Father’s drawing. Map the relationship between these two statements: the “will come” of verse 37 and the “cannot come without drawing” of verse 44. How do they function together to establish both divine sovereignty and human inability? Is the coming to Christ in verse 37 the same act as the coming to Christ in verse 44?
3. Read Ephesians 2:1–9. Verses 1–3 describe the human condition; verse 4 introduces the divine intervention (“But God”); verses 5–6 describe the divine act; verses 8–9 provide the theological summary. What specific characteristics of the human condition described in verses 1–3 make human initiative in salvation impossible? What is the significance of the placement of “but God” at verse 4 — what does the contrastive conjunction signal about the relationship between human condition and divine action? How does verse 8–9’s “not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” apply to both the grace and the faith mentioned in verse 8?
4. Read 2 Timothy 1:8–9. Paul describes God as the one “who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace.” Identify every element that Paul attributes to God in this description and every element that is excluded from the human side. What does “not according to our works” cover — does it refer only to moral merits, or does it also include the “work” of choosing, deciding, or responding to the gospel? How does the phrase “granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” affect your understanding of when effectual calling was determined?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 2:14 and Romans 8:7–8. What specific inability does Paul describe in each text? In 1 Corinthians 2:14, the natural person “does not accept” the things of the Spirit and “cannot understand” them. In Romans 8:7, the mind set on the flesh “does

not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so.” How do these descriptions of the unregenerate person’s inability support the doctrine of effectual calling’s necessity? What would it mean for the gospel offer to be genuinely extended to people who are in this condition?

6. Read Romans 8:28–30 — the golden chain. Note the six verbs in the chain (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified) and their subjects and objects. Who does the acting in each case? Is there any point in the chain where human action determines whether the chain continues? What is the significance of Paul’s using the past tense for “glorified” even though it has not yet occurred? What does this imply about the certainty of the chain’s completion?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that John 6:44’s “draws” (*helkō*) indicates effectual drawing that actually brings the drawn person to Christ, not merely an attractive or persuasive drawing that makes coming possible. The Arminian reading takes *helkō* as “woo” or “attract.” Which reading is more consistent with the word’s other uses in John’s Gospel (21:6, 11 — drawing a fish net; 12:32 — drawing all people to Himself through the cross)? What contextual factors in John 6 support or weigh against each reading?
8. The lesson distinguishes irresistible grace (the will transformed and directed) from coercive grace (the will overridden and forced). Is this distinction coherent? Can a will that has been transformed by the Spirit still be called “free” in any meaningful sense? What is the relevant philosophical framework for thinking about the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom — compatibilism vs. libertarian free will — and which framework does the Reformed doctrine of effectual calling presuppose?
9. The lesson argues that the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace makes salvation “ultimately dependent on human choice” and therefore makes the believer’s faith (in the last analysis) a human achievement rather than a divine gift. The Arminian would respond that prevenient grace is itself entirely God’s gift, so salvation remains by grace even if the final determination is by human will. Evaluate this response: does the Arminian answer successfully preserve the grace-only character of salvation, or does it leave some residual ground for human boasting?
10. The lesson argues that effectual calling produces “evangelistic urgency” because the Spirit effectually calls through the preaching of the Word. The common objection is that the doctrine of election and effectual calling undermines evangelism (if God has already determined who will be saved, why bother preaching?). How do Romans 10:14–17 and the example of Paul’s missionary labors (1 Corinthians 9:19–23; 2 Timothy 2:10) address this objection? Is the objection based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human means?

11. The lesson presents three pastoral implications of effectual calling: assurance (the call is irrevocable), humility (you have nothing you did not receive), and evangelistic urgency (you are the Spirit's instrument). Which of these three do you find most practically compelling, and why? Can you identify specific pastoral situations or personal spiritual struggles in which each of these implications would be particularly relevant?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes examining your conversion narrative in the light of the theology of effectual calling. Do this reflection honestly: what is the story of your coming to faith, and what is the ultimate explanation of it? If you find that your account has been primarily a story of your own decision and spiritual initiative, what does it mean to reframe it in terms of the Spirit's effectual work? Does the reframing feel like it diminishes the reality of your conversion, or does it deepen the gratitude you feel for it?
13. The lesson argues that assurance of salvation is grounded in the Spirit's irrevocable calling rather than in the consistency of the will. Do you currently experience your assurance of salvation as resting primarily on God's sovereign call or on your own spiritual performance? Where do doubts about your salvation most frequently originate, and what does the doctrine of effectual calling say to those specific doubts?
14. The lesson ends with the challenge to pray for five specific people with the specific language of effectual calling — as spiritually dead persons who need the Spirit's creative, life-giving work. Name those five people. What would it look like for your prayers for them to be shaped by the conviction that only the Spirit's sovereign, inward, effectual call can bring them from death to life — and that this sovereign work ordinarily operates through faithful human witness? How does this conviction change both the urgency of your prayers and the character of your witness?
15. The lesson distinguishes the external call (which all who hear the gospel receive) from the effectual call (which only the elect receive). As a preacher or a witness, you extend the external call in every proclamation of the gospel. What is the relationship between your responsibility to extend the external call faithfully and clearly, and the Spirit's sovereign work of making that call effectual in the hearts of the elect? How does the doctrine of effectual calling shape the way you preach or share the gospel — with what combination of urgency (every hearer needs to respond now), humility (I cannot produce the Spirit's work), and confidence (the Spirit's call will not fail)?

Prayer Focus

Open this first lesson of Unit 5 with a sustained reading of John 6:35–65 — the foundational Christological and pneumatological text on effectual calling. Read it aloud, slowly, as a community. After the reading, pause in silence and ask each person to reflect privately: “What brought me to faith in Christ?” Hold the question long enough that the theological answer — the Spirit’s effectual call — has time to displace or supplement whatever more proximate answers arise first (a sermon, a conversation, a moment of crisis, a Christian friend’s witness). The Spirit used those means; He is the cause behind the means.

Begin the corporate prayer with an extended act of gratitude for the Spirit’s effectual calling — and encourage each participant to pray as one who has been raised from the dead. Not “Thank You that I chose to believe” but “Thank You that You chose me, called me, drew me, gave me the very faith by which I came.” The Ephesians 2:4–5 “But God” is the hinge of the believer’s entire spiritual history: on one side of the hinge is the darkness of spiritual death; on the other side is the light of the divine life given by the Spirit’s effectual work. Let the prayer express the astonishment that the contrast between the two sides produces when it is fully felt.

Pray through the three pastoral implications of effectual calling identified in this lesson. First, assurance: pray for those in the community who struggle with assurance of salvation, whose doubts are primarily about whether their faith is genuine enough, their repentance deep enough, their spiritual life consistent enough to qualify them for the gospel’s promises. Ask the Spirit to ground their assurance not in their performance but in His irrevocable call — in the golden chain of Romans 8:29–30 that runs from predestination to glorification without a single broken link. Second, humility: confess together the ways in which the community has allowed the certainty of its own election to produce a subtle spiritual pride rather than the profound humility that the recognition of unearned, undeserved grace should produce. Third, evangelistic urgency: pray for the specific individuals in the community’s life who have not yet come to faith — naming them, asking the Spirit to exercise His effectual calling through the community’s witness, and asking for the courage and the faithfulness to be the instruments through whom He chooses to issue that call.

Close with the reading of the golden chain of Romans 8:28–30 as a declaration of divine faithfulness: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” Read it as a promise that the work the Spirit has begun He will complete — from the eternal decree through the temporal call to the eternal glory. Then close with the only appropriate response to such a declaration: the doxology of Romans 11:33–36, which this series has used as its series verse context: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”

*“But God, being rich in mercy,
because of His great love with which He loved us,
even when we were dead in our transgressions,
made us alive together with Christ.”*

Ephesians 2:4–5, NASB 1995

Key Texts: John 6:35–65; Ephesians 2:1–9; Romans 8:28–30; 2 Timothy 1:8–9; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Romans 8:7–8; Matthew 22:14; Romans 11:29; John 10:27–28; 1 Corinthians 4:7; Romans 10:14–17; Philippians 2:12–13; Ezekiel 36:26–27

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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