

Study One

THE MEANING OF GOD'S CALL

INTRODUCTION

Christian Basics is a series of studies on the truths that are essential for our relationship with the living God, ourselves, and others. The studies are centred around the theme of God's call to man, and show not only how man is called from darkness to light, but how he is to live thereafter within the terms of that call, and how he may grow in an appreciation of its riches.

NEW TESTAMENT USE OF 'CALL'

Several Greek words are translated 'call' in the NT but predominantly the word 'kaleo' and words derived from it. 'Kaleo' means, to summon, or invite. Examples of the former meaning (Matt. 20:8; 25:14; Acts 4:18; I Peter 2:9) show the person summoning to have authority. The latter meaning (as in Matt. 22:3, 9; Luke 14:8f.,16; Rev. 19:9) indicates that the person inviting has something to share and has the right to share it as he wishes. (It is also used of naming places and persons, which implies the right of the person to do so.) However the true meaning of God's call is discovered by reference to who extends the call, the intention of the call, and its effectiveness in bringing about what is purposed.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CALL

The God who calls is the one who summoned the earth into being (Isa. 48:13; Amos 5:8; 9:6) and named—or called—its various parts by their respective names. (Genesis 1) In calling creation into being he stated the purpose for each constituent part, and in particular, placed man in the creation to share consciously in bringing about that purpose (Isa. 42:5–7).

Not only at creation, but throughout history, God continues to bring about his wishes by calling persons to do his will (Isa. 41: 8–10) or bringing various events to pass. (II Kings 8:1; Psalm 105:16) He is insistent that having declared a matter, none can prevent the event taking place (Isa. 43:11–13; 44:21–23). This insistence by God remains even though Israel is rebellious and unco-operative at the time of the call (Isa. 48:6–13; 50:1–3). God continues to meet man at each stage of his rebellion, or pilgrimage, with further calls. These may give rise to judgements, chastenings, or new acts of mercy, all of which reveal the nature of the Caller and bring the objectives nearer to their goal. The judgements against Israel are not the last word. (Isa. 45:22–25; 55:10f.; cf. Jer. 7:13–15, 27–29; 35:17)

If the call is to a group or nation as in the case of Israel, the call is effective for that nation, but those within the nation who persist in rebellion, perish (Isa. 22:12–14; 65:8–16; 66:4; 18–24). Paul takes this up in the NT showing that the true Israel is only the Israel of faith (Rom. 9:6–13) and that in fact, many who were only physically of Israel had perished (Rom. 9:27f.; Acts 3:23).

However, he affirmed that nationally, Israel's stumbling would be temporary (Rom. 11:11f.), that all Israel would be finally saved (11:25f.) that is, the true Israel of faith, because the gifts and call of God are irrevocable (11:29).

Jesus had already taught that Israel's rejection of the call (invitation) into the kingdom would lead to outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 22:1–14). However, the kingdom would not suffer, because others would be found to enter. So Gentiles are called into the kingdom, the Israelites grafted back in (I Thess. 2:12), and all who are so called are blessed (Rev. 19:9).

In this way, it can be seen how many are called, but few chosen (Matt. 22:14). The invitation, in being given nationally to Israel, included many for whom the call would not become effective because they would not believe, but the call to the nation would not fail.

Where individuals are called, as in the case of Moses (Exod. 3:4; 19:3), Bezaleel (Exod. 35:30), Samuel (I Sam. 3:4), Cyrus (Isa. 45:1–4), the suffering servant (Isa. 49:1–7), they are shown fulfilling the purpose for which they are called. The same obtains in the NT where the good shepherd calls his own sheep by name and they follow (John 10:3f.), and where Jesus calls or renames Simon as Peter, who accordingly becomes a leader among the apostles (Matt. 16:18). Paul was called to be, and became an apostle (Rom. 1:1). The same is true of all God's chosen people, they are called and are justified (Rom. 8:28–30); the promise of the gospel is for everyone whom the Lord calls to himself (Acts 2:39). Numerous other references show those who are called actually enjoying the blessings of salvation (Rom. 1:7; 8:28f.; I Corin. 1:2, 24; Jude 1; Rev. 17:14).

CALLED AND CHOSEN (Elect)

The Greek word translated 'chosen' or 'elect' is virtually a synonym of 'called' (see 'Vocabulary of the Bible' Ed J.J. Von Allmen p48). They have the same derivation and are frequently used together (Rom. 8:28–30; 9:11; I Corin. 1:26f.; Gal. 1:15; I Peter 2:9f.; II Peter 1:10; Jude 1; Rev. 17:14). When Jesus says that many are called but few chosen (Matt 22:14) he is in effect saying that there is both a broadness and a narrow-ness in the call of God. Each person is genuinely invited into the kingdom and is responsible therefore, for their response. But there is a call within that call, and these latter are recognised by their positive response to the call.

CHOICE AND FOREKNOWLEDGE

The election, and therefore also the calling of God, are according to the foreknowledge of God (Rom. 8:29; I Peter 1:2; RSV uses 'destined'). In Biblical terms, this foreknowledge is always a personal and intimate knowledge and carries with it a certainty of fulfilment (Ps. 139:1–6; 13–18; Jer. 1:5; Acts 2:23; Rom. 3:25f.; 11:2; I Peter 1:20). When Jesus called Judas, it was in the knowledge that he was a devil (John 6:64–71), who would betray him, and by whom the Scripture would be fulfilled (John 13:18). When Esau and Jacob were born, it was according to God's prior knowledge and election

(Rom. 9:10–13). This understanding of God’s foreknowledge makes it impossible to maintain that God’s call and election are only true in a general sense. Where it is clear that God has called a person, it is that person who receives what was promised.

EFFECTIVE CALLING

The calls which God gives to man, whether corporately or personally, reveal not only the sovereignty of God, but also his patience and mercy. He brings his creation to its ultimate calling, not by irresistible manipulation or brute force, but by love and suffering (Isa. 51:4–6; 54:5–8; Hosea 2:14–23). So when the Good Shepherd comes, who calls his own and they follow, he also lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:3f., 11). In the same manner, Paul endures all things for the sake of the elect (II Tim. 2:10). The Son of man draws all men to himself when he is ‘lifted up’ (John 12:32f., with 24f.). The Father chooses and destines men in love to be his sons, making his will known to them in all wisdom and insight (Eph. 1:3–10), so that they love because he first loved them. (I John 4:19). In Ephesians 1 — 2 God’s sovereignty does not manipulate or force, but demolishes all hindrances to the harmony of all things.

RESPONSE OF MAN

Each part of creation when called into being is given its function, as is man. There is always a response required, and in one sense, the call always receives the response that was intended. Pharaoh was called to let Israel go, not because he would do so, but so God could reveal the greatness of his power (Rom. 9:17). Isaiah was told to proclaim ‘Hear and hear, but do not understand . . .’ (Isa. 6:9) and Jesus told his parables with the same end in view (Matt. 13:10–15). The law was given not because men would do it and live, but to reveal the nature and strength of sin (Rom. 7:7–14). So God’s calls are never ineffective but draw the creation on to its intended goal.

However, the saving intention of God’s call is revealed when it receives the response indicated. (See Romans 9 — 11 where the call of God shows all history to be under the mercy of God.) Paul knew the Thessalonians were chosen by God because they received the word in the face of opposition (I Thess. 1:5f.). People in Pisidian Antioch revealed their ordination to eternal life by believing (Acts 13:48). Christians are to be zealous to confirm their call and election (II Peter 1:10) by adding virtue etc. to their faith. That is, they do not become called, or more strongly called by the addition of works, but the freedom to add works to their faith confirms the fact of their call. So it is always God who takes the initiative, but the response of man is always an integral part of the call becoming effective.

So man needs constantly to remind himself of the significance of the call addressed to him, and from whom it comes. The call is referred to as a holy call (II Tim. 1:9; I Peter 1:15), a heavenly call (Heb. 3:1), or a call from above—or upward call Phil 3:14). In the same way, Jesus affirmed the OT Scripture, that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from God.

In fact man cannot come to God, or please God, other than by responding to the call of God (Acts 2:39). If these opportunities are ignored, they cannot be recalled at will. (Isa. 55:6–7).

CONCLUSION

One writer has said that the call is God's way of encountering man. He is the one who calls (Rom. 9:11; Gal. 5:8), constantly taking the initiative (II Tim. 1:9). Even where man calls on God, God has answered before man called (Isa. 65:24; Joel 2:32). So the response of man is preceded by the call of God, in fact, dependent on that call but man's response is entirely necessary to its fulfilment.

Subsequent studies will look closely at specific calls which God addresses to man.

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