

Biblical Keyword - Calling

The previous article was about the conviction of sin. What does follow it? Calling. In the table below this keyword has been made bold. What is calling? How does it practically look like? That is important to know.

Keyword	Timeline	Description
conviction	Process	Knowing his sinful heart and lifestyle
calling	Moment	Words of Scripture or the sermon speak
regeneration	Moment	Receiving of new spiritual life
faith	Moment/Process	Trusting in Jesus as the only Savior of sin
justification	Moment	Acquitted from sin before God and right to eternal life
conversion	Process	Turn from sin and turn to God
sanctification	Process	Process of renewing of a man
glorification	Process	Man is made sinless and perfectly glorifying God

Calling in Daily Life

The term “calling” seems to be complicated. That is certainly true when we make in theology a distinction between internal and external calling. What does belong to the one? What to the other? But is it truly difficult? What do we hear in the term calling? The word “call.” That we will understand. How many times are we called? Quite often. Think about parents who want to eat. Mother calls the children with a loud voice, “Boys, are you coming for dinner? Do you call daddy?” Some time later the whole family sits around the table. They are eating. What to think of someone dying? The doctor says, “Call the whole family, because it only lasts for a few hours.” The whole family needs to come as soon as possible, otherwise it is too late. However, the manner of calling is different. No voice that shouts. Only an urgent phone call, “John, you have to come immediately! Father is dying!” It does not need much encouragement. John directly steps into his car. At full speed he drives to the house of his parents. He is just on time to say goodbye to his father. A final example has to do with the office. One feels called to become elder or minister. Does he hear an external voice? No. He feels an internal urge to do this labor. Often times a Bible text speaks very clearly to him about the matter. What are the similarities in these examples? One is *urged to come or to do something*. What is the difference? The direct urgency of that message. When one is dying, the person has to act immediately. If that does not happen, he might be too late. However, when a child does not come for dinner, it has other consequences. Maybe he gets punishment or receives no food, but there is no one that dies. When called for an office, one must surely know that he is called by God. What is another distinction? The manner of calling. In the first example it happens with a shout or loud voice. The second has an urgent phone call. The last one happens by the Scripture speaking.

Biblical meaning of Calling

What about calling in conversion? In this we do also use the word call. The apostle Paul writes, “Whom he [God] did predestinate [that is elect], them he also *called*” (Rom. 8:30). What is this calling? In its original language, the Bible uses it in various meanings. Sometimes it is to give someone a name (Matt. 1:21). Other times that a king commands his subjects to come (Matt. 2:7). It could be an invitation, like for a wedding (Matt. 22:4). Or to call people to follow a certain leader (Matt. 4:21-22). When we combine all these meanings, we could say: calling in the Bible is that *someone is addressed or urged to come*. In calling in conversion, one is addressed. He is urged to come.

A Call to Everyone

What about the Biblical call towards us? All of us are called. When does that happen? At two kinds of moments. God speaks to us when we hear a sermon. He calls us via the minister. How could it then be that God Himself speaks? Let me give an example for clarity. The country Gloria is in the midst of a famine. The king just received a huge shipping with parcels of food from an ally. The next day the king sends his heralds. They call with a loud voice, “The king calls you to come tomorrow to the palace. There you can pickup a free parcel of food.” What do you think? Do his subjects doubt whether the king speaks to them? Of course these heralds have to be sent by the king. But by these heralds, the king himself speaks to the citizens. That is also the case with the preaching. God sends in men an official manner to call sinful humans. Via them the LORD calls the listeners.

The other way God calls is via the Bible. When you read it, He speaks. Is that indeed true? Because some people do not feel it, and others not every moment. Yes, God always speaks, even when we do not feel it. Compare it with the example of a letter. Each citizen of the country gets it with a nice invitation. Do you need a feeling that the letter speaks to you personally to be sure that the government addressed you? No. Your feeling has nothing to do with the truth of the matter. It is only be a confirmation for yourself. The same is true when we read the Bible. God has written ‘a long letter.’ In a certain sense it is addressed to each reader. Of course there are things in this ‘letter’ that are applicable to God’s children only. Think about the promise of God’s fatherly care. That is only fitting to the true believers. On the other hand we have texts that are addressed to people that live in sin. However, when it is about the call to salvation, it is applicable to each reader. Even stronger. The LORD in the gospel offers the Lord Jesus to the hearer or reader. Is that not too free? No. That is what our forefathers believed too. They write, “That many refuse to come, being called by the ministry of the gospel ... is not the fault of the gospel. This is neither the fault of Christ, who *is offered* by the gospel, nor by God, who calls men by the gospel.”¹ Further, our Westminster friends speak of the “the grace offered and conveyed therein”² and “Jesus Christ, *freely offered* to us in the gospel.”³ What does this mean for preaching? There needs to be a free offer of grace. It is not up to the minister to determine whether this is the case. Sadly, we also hear in our reformed circles that there is sometimes only a conditional offer. It only comes to those who are convicted of their sins and misery. Or there is not even a call to faith and repentance at all. As one minister told me, “When I was under a certain preaching, the gospel and Jesus Christ was clearly preached. It was as if a table was prepared with all kinds of delicious foods. But it was not told for whom it was. Thus, who were permitted to eat.” That is not in accordance with the beliefs of our forefathers. They argue that the preaching should be accompanied with a command of faith and repentance.⁴

The Content of this Call

Next the question that arises is, what does the Lord say to each person? To come unto Him. We read this, for instance, in this verse, “*Come unto me* [Jesus], all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). It is certainly a command to come unto the Lord Jesus with our sinful heart. To fall at His feet with confession. He promises then eternal rest. That is also what the god-fearing translators of the Statenvertaling say in their annotations. To what are people called? “To faith and obedience of faith by effective calling.”⁵ But is this call sincere? Even more important, is it then applicable to all? Yes, it is sincere. It is addressed to each listener in church. Even more, it is not a non-binding call. It is not up to the listener to chose if he desires to come or not. But is that not too easy? We are not able to come out of ourselves, are we? Because this sounds almost Arminian. No. It is indeed true. Out of ourselves we can never come. That is only possible when God works in our heart. However, the command and invitation stays. That should corner us and let us call for that grace.

¹ Canons of Dort, Head III/IV paragraph 9.

² Westminster Larger Catechism, question 67.

³ Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 31.

⁴ Canons of Dort, Head II, paragraph 5, “ This promise, together *with the command to repent and believe*, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.”

⁵ Annotations on the Statenvertaling, Rom. 8:30.

Let me give an example. You will be tried by a judge for a certain crime. You received a letter from them. It contains an invitation to appear in court. It says, “Your case will be dealt with on Friday may 9, 2025. You have to come at 2:00pm to court and should take your charge with you.” How does this ‘invitation’ feel to you? Is it not binding? Certainly it is. Even though it is worded nicely, you have no choice to determine to come or not. If you would not, it will have consequences. That means disobedience. You can even more be punished for this. The same is the case with calling in the Bible. It is God’s *demand* to come. You may not ignore this. If you keep doing this, it will have serious consequences. Ultimately eternal punishment. That is not only due to sin, but even more due to disobedience. Let us go back to the example. The invitation of court gives you also a right to come. If the porter would ask you why you come, you can show him the letter. He has to let you in. Let us draw a spiritual application. Is this spiritually true too? In essence it is. With the call, God gives also the ‘right’ to come. You may come. It is permitted to come. But can this truly be the case? A sinner cannot come to the Lord Jesus with an entitlement to grace, can he? No. From ourselves we have lost all rights. We deserve punishment. We only have a right to eternal death. However, the right to come is not with us. It comes from God’s side. If God says this, we may come. This is also what Thomas Boston, a god-fearing minister, teaches, “If you believe that appointment of the Father, and the Son’s offer; you must needs believe this: for if they be real ... they certainly convey to you *a right to Christ*, his righteousness and salvation; so that, in virtue of them, these must be yours, to be warrantably claimed and used by you, as your own, for the purposes of salvation.”⁶ He does not say that each hearer will be saved. But that all have the right to come to God with the promise ‘to claim’ salvation. This is even the case when one feels many doubts and shortcomings. You may ask, is this idea reformed? We find the answer in the Canons of Dort, “But as many as are called by the gospel, are called *sincerely*. For God shows in the Bible sincerely and truly what pleases Him. That is, that those who are called come to Him. He promises sincerely to all that come, and believe, rest for their souls and eternal life.”⁷ That is said very clearly. In other words, God finds it positive when someone comes to Him. He is happy with it. It is even more, God urges His servants that they “compel the hearers to come” (Luke 14:23). The Lord Jesus says it even clearer in the gospel of John. Everyone should come unto Him. He invites them, “him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). John Bunyan writes about this text in his book *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*. He addresses a number of objections and refutes them, “But I am a great sinner, sayest thou. ‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ. But I am an old sinner, sayest thou. ‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ. But I am a hard-hearted sinner, sayest thou. ‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ. ... But I have sinned against mercy, sayest thou. ‘I will in no wise cast out,’ says Christ.”⁸ He mentions some other doubts and objections, but every time Bunyan responds that there have to be no hindrances in coming to Christ. This text applies to all sinners. Whether you have sinned too much, or are backslidden after having received grace. Whether you doubt if you feel true sorrow or not. The texts demonstrates that everyone may come. What a freedom we find in the call of the gospel. You and I may come with all our sorrow, shortcomings, feelings with a lack of knowledge of sin, tears that are dried up, and our hardened heart. The only way is to come to Jesus Christ. In theology we say that this call is the “external call.” It comes from outside. In the ears or eyes of the hearer or reader.

Internal Call

How is it that not each hearer will respond to this call? Humanly speaking, there are a number of reasons. One group has no interest. They do not see any benefit. Such are busy with cares of this world. In eternity they will regret that it is too late. Others have a certain interest. They love theology and study the Scriptures. However, for them it is like looking at a painting. It remains something objective. It is nice to gain knowledge about it, but more is not necessary. They stay away from Jesus without feeling their need, and they are traveling to an eternal abyss. Again others know something of

⁶ Thomas Boston, *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, The Faith of our Right to Christ, 192.

⁷ Canons of Dort, Head 3 and 4, paragraph 8. I have modernized this text for clarity. The original Dutch text you find here: <https://www.dordtse-leerregels.nl/hoofdstuk-3-en-4/paragraaf-8>

⁸ John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, 52.

their own heart, but they are doubters. They sincerely believe that they are sinners. They see Jesus Christ as one that is holy and righteous. Thus, they are afraid that they may not come as they are. Spurgeon says about them, “Some seem as if they had fallen in love with their doubts, and fears, and distresses. You cannot get them away from their terrors—they seem wedded to them.”⁹ They are too afraid to believe in the Lord Jesus. What if it is not real? But with all their doubts they stay away all their life from Jesus Christ and will be lost forever. Ultimately, the issue is this: They do not need the Lord Jesus as the *only* Savior. They reject God’s grace, how orthodox it might look like. This should not discourage us. Why? Because there are, gladly, hearers that take this call seriously. They are called internally.

What happens at an internal call? What is the reason that people truly hear? Do they do that of “themselves”? No. By nature, we all are dead in sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1). In and of ourselves, we cannot come. The Scripture is clear, “*No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him*” (John 6:44). Even more, from ourselves we do not want to come too. Is it then a lost case? No, certainly not! There will be people coming. How? When the Holy Spirit opens one’s heart. What does then happen? That person will listen differently. Truly listening to what the Lord says unto him. In his heart, he hears the voice of the Lord Jesus. We read in the Bible, “The dead [unconverted sinners] *shall hear* the voice of the Son of God [Jesus]: and they that hear shall live” (John 5:25). He now listens with his whole heart. It truly hits home and touches him. How do we know this? That is what we find with Lydia, a seller of purple. She lives in Thyatira and worshipped God. Every week she and others come to listen to a sermon. One day this entirely changes, “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God [that means she is outwardly pious], heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she *attended unto* the things which were spoken of Paul” (Acts 16:14). The word for “opened” is used in Scripture for the opening of ears (Mark 7:35), eyes (Luke 24:31), or even of the womb (Luke 2:23). Here it happens in a spiritual manner. Luke uses the word also for the men to Emmaus. Then the Lord Jesus opened the Scriptures and their mind (Luke 24:32 and 45). In this passage, the Lord opens the heart of Lydia. What happens when God opens her heart? Then she “attends unto” what Paul preaches. She is attentive. She hangs on every word of the preacher. She listens closely.¹⁰ She cannot tune out. What has Paul proclaimed? He reveals this in one of his letters: Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). Thus, Lydia has heard the voice of the Lord Jesus. How do we know? Jesus Himself says this in the gospel, “My sheep *hear* my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). It causes a turning in the life of Lydia. That is directly visible in her walk. She urges Paul to stay at her home.

When we reflect this matter, what is then an internal call? The Westminster Larger Catechism summarizes, “Effectual calling is ... whereby ... [God] doth, in his accepted time, *invite and draw them to Jesus Christ*, by his Word and Spirit; ... so as they ... are hereby made willing and able freely *to answer* his call, and *to accept and embrace* the grace offered and conveyed therein.”¹¹ An important question to us is, do we know about this internal call? Have we heard the voice of the Lord Jesus in all our sin and misery? Do we know Him? Have we experienced in our heart the urge to come unto Him? Those are the questions that we need to be able to answer.

⁹ Spurgeon, C.H., *Around the Wicket Gate*, 3. https://www.spurgeongems.org/chs_around-the-wicket-gate.pdf

¹⁰ This word is also used in Matthew 6:1 (take heed), Acts 8:10 (give heed), and 1 Timothy 4:13 (give attendance).

¹¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, question 67.