

Effectual Calling and Salvation

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In regard to what he terms the “subjective aspects” of salvation, Millard J. Erickson argues for the logical order of effectual calling, conversion, then regeneration.¹ Effectual calling occurs when “God works in a particularly effective way with the elect, enabling them to respond in repentance and faith, and rendering it certain that they will.”² This is necessary because “all humans are lost in sin, spiritually blind, and unable to believe.”³ Conversion is “the act of turning from one’s sin in repentance and turning to Christ in faith.”⁴ However, Erickson argues that the faith required for salvation is not merely assent to the truth of certain propositions, but also trusting in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵ Finally, regeneration is an act of God in “giving a new spiritual vitality and direction” to the lives of believers.⁶

Viewing the subjective aspects of salvation in this logical order brings with it, according to Erickson, six implications. One of these is that “Human nature cannot be altered by social reform or education. It must be transformed by a supernatural work of the Triune God.”⁷ This is not merely an implication of Erickson’s view of salvation, it is a logical outworking from the lessons of Scripture. As John says at the start of his gospel, “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 861, 63.

² *Ibid.*, 862.

³ *Ibid.*, 861.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 864.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 870.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 872.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 875.

of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."⁸ No unaided "human decision" will ever choose God. L. Berkhof describes this by stating, "The contagion of [Adam's] sin at once spread through the entire man, leaving no part of his nature untouched, but vitiating every power and faculty of body and soul."⁹ Erickson's implication therefore follows, for if the nature of every human being is incapable of independently choosing God, then no amount of reforms or education instituted by such fallen beings will ever be able to change that nature.

Erickson's fourth implication, while attempting to define the content of saving faith, without clarification could be viewed as being somewhat contradictory to this human incapacity. He states that saving faith requires both correct belief as to God's nature and also "active commitment of oneself to God."¹⁰ This, however, begs the question of whether human beings are capable of actively committing themselves to God. Erickson could be taken to be describing a work that humans perform, thereby contributing to their salvation.

Ted Peters advances a similar definition to Erickson. He states, "Believing and trusting characterize human response to the grace of God. They are something we do."¹¹ However, the method *by which* we do them is via the agency of the Holy Spirit. "The work of the Holy Spirit appropriates and personalizes ... the work of Christ."¹² In context, this likely is also Erickson's

⁸ John 1:12-13 (NIV).

⁹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939), 225-26.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 875.

¹¹ Ted Peters, *God – The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 244.

¹² *Ibid.*

position. After all, the initial step in the logical order he presents is “effectual calling,” which he defines as God working “in a particularly effective way with the elect, *enabling them to respond in repentance and faith, and rendering it certain that they will.*”¹³ Erickson’s definition of effectual calling carries over into his discussion of faith. While faith exhibits itself via human belief and trust, a person is only rendered capable of arriving at that belief and trust because he or she has been enabled to do so by God. Thus, it is not truly a work performed by fallen humanity, independent of God, for which a person can boast. Rather, it is the certain outworking of an initial act of God. Erickson, therefore, could have phrased this implication in such a way as to more clearly reflect God’s ultimate agency and responsibility, but given the grand progression of his thought throughout the chapter, he does not appear to be attributing these acts solely to the fallen will of people.

¹³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 862 (emphasis added).