

APPENDIX 3

SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSALLY SUFFICIENT ENABLING GRACE

In chapter 11, I indicated my reasons for coming to the conviction that God enables everyone to respond to his self-revelation in faith, in a way that leaves them accountable for their response, on at least one occasion of their lives. The critical issue is, of course, whether Scripture teaches universal sufficient grace of the sort that I have proposed. The Wesleyan appeal has generally been made to John 1:4,9, “the true light which enlightens everyone,” who came into the world in incarnate form, in Jesus. The proposal that John refers to a universal illumination of human intellectual and moral faculties by the Logos has also been affirmed by theologians of Calvinist leaning.¹ The major problem with the Wesleyan model of a universal prevenient grace which enables everyone to repent and believe, through a remedial work in their nature, is that it does not accord well with biblical descriptions of the state of the unregenerate prior to the efficacious work of saving grace. Paul describes sinners in their “natural” state as unable to submit to the law or to please God (Rom 8:7-8). Without the Spirit of God, people are unable to understand or accept the things that come from God (1 Cor 2:14). These are descriptions of the way people are without God's enabling grace, and it does not seem reasonable to read them as descriptive of the human condition only prior to a work of grace which all people experience at a very early point in life. If there is an enabling of those who receive revelation it would seem more likely that it *accompanies* the revelation than that it precedes it indiscriminately. It is improbable that God does a permanent work of grace in the life of all people, which ameliorates the ill effects of sin in human nature. That would be tantamount to arguing for

a universal but non-efficacious regeneration (in its narrow sense). It is more likely that the inner enablement which accompanies the divine revelation, at some points in the life of everyone, is limited to the time of reception of that revelation and does not constitute a change in the nature of the sinner. That deep and permanent change is only wrought by the Spirit in those who are effectively drawn to faith in Christ.

By way of specific explicit biblical teaching, one is hard put to cite texts specifically indicating a universal distribution of grace to all people which enables them to respond to divine revelation in a responsible way. This gives us pause but it does not invalidate the proposal if (1) there are biblical passages which provide an implicit ground for this deduction, and (2) there are no biblical passages that negate it. I am convinced that both of these criteria are satisfied.

Thomas Oden makes the helpful observation concerning our experience, that “as one moves in a progression from those justified by grace through faith to incorrigible sinners, the boundaries of sufficient grace are tested. The first of these is easy to establish; the argument for sufficiency becomes progressively harder as one proceeds along the spectrum.”²

Implicit in Other Biblical Teaching

The first criterion is met through the analysis of the factors discussed above as benefits of this proposal.

- (1) In God’s righteous judgment of sinners, personal acts of unrighteousness are the ground upon which God’s wrath falls upon the unrepentant.
- (2) God is genuinely distressed when humans reject his overtures of love and his calls for repentance.
- (3) In some significant sense, God desires that all people be saved..
- (4) Scripture commands us to proclaim the good news that Christ died for sinners and to call people to

repent and believe. And, finally, (5) salvation is completely God's gracious work, including our growth in holiness. In all of these areas, I have attempted to demonstrate that a coherent position is best supported if God enables people to repent and believe when he addresses them in his self-revelation.

Not Negated by Other Biblical Passages

Are there, then, biblical passages which would invalidate the proposal? At first sight, it might seem that the passages to which Calvinists have traditionally appealed to demonstrate the spiritual inability of sinners would have this negative effect. These passages include particularly John 3:3-5; 6:44; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-5.³ A closer analysis, however, indicates that this is not so. What these passages teach us is that, in our fallen condition, *apart from the gracious intervention of God*, none of us comes to God. No one can say that Jesus is Lord, without the working of the Holy Spirit in our minds and wills. Calvinist theologians have frequently distinguished between an external call and an internal call. The former is the summons that comes through God's self-revelation but which is sometimes rejected (Acts 13:46; 2 Thess 1:8; Mt 10:15; 11:21-24; Jn 5:40; 16:8,9; 1 Jn 5:10). The internal call, however, is the work of the Spirit, within the hearts and minds of recipients of revelation, which enables their positive response and therefore effects salvation.

John Murray, for instance, admits that the Bible does not use these terms but he argues for their validity because, in most cases, the Bible uses terms for calling in regard to salvation, to indicate, not the universal call, but "the call that ushers men into a state of salvation and is therefore effectual."⁴ (Cf. Lk 14:23; Rom 1:6,7; 8:30; 9:23-24; 11:29; 1 Cor 1:9,26,27; Gal 1:15; Eph 1:18; 4:1,4; Phil 3:14; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:11,12; 2 Tim 1:8,9; 2:14; Heb 3:1,28; 1 Pet 2:9; 2 Pet 1:10; Jude 1; Rev 17:14). This work, which is done by the Spirit to make the call effective, is described as revelation (Gal 1:16; Mt 16:17), as an

opening of the heart (Acts 16:14), an opening (Lk 24:45) or illumination of the mind (1 Cor 2:6-16), and as God's causing of growth in the Word that is sown by preachers (1 Cor 3:5-9). I am proposing that another distinction needs to be made, *within the "inner call,"* between an enablement that makes people duly responsible for their failure to respond to the call of divine revelation and an enablement that makes the call efficacious. It is to the latter that Murray refers when he writes of the internal call, which is simply designated as "calling," in the New Testament passages cited above.

Anthony Hoekema has suggested that we speak of an efficacious call rather than an inner call because he notes that in a passage like Matthew 13:19, Scripture speaks of something happening "in the heart" of some who are not saved, through the preaching of the Word. He is on the right path, but I wish to go further. In Acts 7:51, for instance, Stephen complains that the people *resist the Holy Spirit*. This could be simply the Spirit's work of conviction of sin, but it could well be more than that, including an illumination or enablement. Consequently, it seems wise to continue to speak of an inner calling, but to distinguish between a work of grace which is merely enabling and one that is effective.

Thomas Oden speaks of three aspects of calling: external, internal ("addressed to the heart through the Spirit") and efficacious ("wherein God's intent is fulfilled through grace awakening a fitting human response").⁵ What distinguishes his position as Wesleyan is the belief that the reason for the efficacy is found in the human response rather than in the power of the divine drawing. Louis Berkhof identifies, and biblically supports, three factors in the external call: (1) a presentation of the gospel facts, (2) an invitation to accept Christ in repentance and faith, and (3) a promise of forgiveness and salvation. He then comments: "From the fact that these elements are included in external calling, it may readily be inferred that they who reject the gospel not merely refuse to believe certain facts and ideas, but resist *the general operation of the Holy Spirit which is connected with this calling,* and are guilty of the sin of obstinate

disobedience. By their refusal to accept the gospel, they increase their responsibility, and treasure up wrath for themselves in the day of judgment, Rom 2:4,5" (emphasis supplied).⁶

Berkhof argues that the external calling is a *bona fide* calling in spite of the spiritual inability, since a person's "inability in spiritual things is rooted in his unwillingness to serve God. The actual condition of things is not such that many would like to repent and believe in Christ, if they only could."⁷ Earlier, while speaking of common grace, Berkhof stated that "it does not effect the salvation of the sinner, though in some of its forms (external calling and *moral illumination*) it may be closely connected with the economy of redemption and have a soteriological aspect" (italics supplied).⁸ Likewise, John Owen stated that "even *common* illumination and conviction of sin have, in their own nature, a tendency unto sincere conversion."⁹ Clifford notes that clearly "there is a procurement of grace which is broader than the thesis of [Owen's] *Death of Death* will allow." John Gill, on the other hand, denied a ministry of the Spirit in conviction of sin to those not chosen to salvation¹⁰ and it was precisely on this ground that Gill and other hyper-calvinists denied the validity of universal offers of grace.¹¹

The critical question is: What is the effect of this "general operation of the Holy Spirit which is connected with this calling," of which Berkhof speaks? The seeds of my proposal can be found here. It is human unwillingness which must ultimately be overcome by the persuasion of God's drawing power, but an inability to be willing need not always be assumed, given God's gracious work in those to whom his revelation (itself an act of grace) is addressed. Berkhof teaches that the internal call which is efficacious works "by moral suasion plus the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit."¹² "The Spirit of God operates through the preaching of the Word only in a morally persuasive way, making its persuasions effective, so that man listens to the voice of his God." This is only effective, suggests Berkhof, when there is an additional "powerful operation of the Holy Spirit, applying the Word to the heart."¹³

We are obviously unable to observe the working of the Spirit within a human mind or “heart.” We see only its effects. When people come to faith, we know that the Spirit has done this work of persuasion and application. I propose that the justice of God’s judgment of unbelievers suggests to us a work of the Spirit, persuading and enabling, even in those who do not believe—a work that leaves them responsible for their unbelief, but not one which is effective in leading them on to belief. Perhaps, the seed that falls on rocky ground and among thorns is illustrative of a measure of positive response to the gospel on the part of those who have sufficient but not efficacious grace. God does a distinctive work in the “soil” of the fourth group (Matt 13:20-23).

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1. E. g., Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. I, 71. They also cite R.V.G. Tasker and William Plummer to this effect.
 2. Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 78.
 3. Cf. Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 150; and *Saved*, pp. 81-82.
 4. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 88. Also Hoekema, *Saved*, pp. 82-86.
 5. Oden, *Transforming Power*, p. 202.
 6. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1949), p. 460.
 7. *Ibid.*, pp. 462-63.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 436.
 9. John Owen, “A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit” (1674), in *The Works of John Owen*, 3: 236; cited by Clifford, *Atonement*, p. 102.
 10. John Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts* (London, 1773), ii, p. 123; cited by Clifford, *Atonement*, p. 104.
 11. Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790: An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 113.
 12. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 469.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 470.