

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

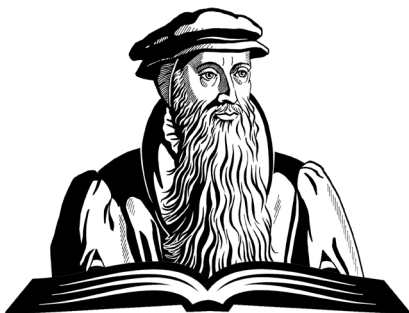
Module 5:

SOTERIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Lecture 3

**THE DOCTRINES OF
EFFECTUAL CALLING AND
REGENERATION**



The John Knox Institute
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Rev. Robert D. McCurley is minister of the Gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

greenvillepresbyterian.com

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Module 5 ~ The Doctrine of Salvation

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Module 5 ~ Lecture 3

The Doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration

In John, chapter 11, we're given the remarkable account of a man named Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. He had fallen sick, and his family called for Jesus to come. But in the intervening time, Lazarus died and was buried in a tomb, to the great sorrow and heartache of his family and friends. When Christ arrived, Lazarus had already been dead for four days, and his body had begun to decompose. But Jesus told Martha that she would see the glory of God. He stood at the open door of the tomb, and in verses 43 and 44, we read that Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth." The crowds were astonished, and news of Jesus' miracle spread far and wide. This physical miracle illustrates the spiritual realities of God coming to save a soul. And it's appropriate to draw this parallel, as the Bible does so, in Ephesians 2, verse 1, we read, "And you hath he quickened"—or made alive—"who were dead in trespasses and sins." It's a description of salvation coming to a soul. Lazarus did nothing. He did not call upon the Lord—he was dead. Likewise the sinful soul has no ability to seek the Lord on its own, as we see in Romans 3, none seek after the Lord: "None are righteous, no, not one." When Jesus spoke and called Lazarus forth, Lazarus did not sit, and think, and contemplate Christ's words—he had no such option. He was drawn forth at the Lord's word. So too, when the Holy Spirit effectually calls and regenerates a sinful soul, it is brought to spiritual life by the power of God. The Lord initiates, and the Lord makes efficacious his work of grace, with no contribution or credit to the natural man. He takes the spiritually dead and gives them life.

The series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered the doctrine of Union with Christ, the fountainhead from which all the benefits of redemption flow. In the remainder of this module, we will explore individual components of the application of salvation. In this present lecture, we will consider the doctrines of Effectual Calling and Regeneration. These are two closely-related, though distinguished, doctrines within the Scripture. They address God's initial work of applying saving grace in the individual life of a soul. Calling comes first, followed in close connection by Regeneration.

And so, as is our pattern in these lectures, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Regeneration. We read, in Ezekiel 36, verses 25 to 28, these words: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new

spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

Notice, first of all, that the sovereign Lord takes the initiative in this work. Beginning in verse 25, it says, “Then will *I* sprinkle water upon you . . . *I* will cleanse you. . . . *I* will give you . . . *I* will put my spirit within you.” This is God’s work and God’s action. He comes to the soul to bring about these saving mercies, and it’s not the individual who comes to him. Secondly, regeneration is characterized by cleansing from the guilt and pollution of sin. The language is, “from all your filthiness, and from all your idols.” This constitutes a radical purification of the soul. Thirdly, it includes a transformation of the heart. He says, “A new heart also will I give . . . I will take away the stony heart . . . I will give you an heart of flesh.” This describes a type of heart surgery. God removes a dead, lifeless heart, and supplies a spiritually living heart. This severs the connection with the old man, creating a completely new man after the image of Christ. Fourthly, notice that regeneration negates the past, while re-forming the future. It must cleanse from sin, as well as re-create in righteousness. That which was dead is made alive in Christ. Fifthly, at regeneration, the Spirit indwells the believer, and implants a new principle of grace within him, enabling him to walk in newness of life and obedience to God. Ezekiel says, “I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” This reflects a further transformation of the soul. Sixthly, and lastly, you should note, in verse 28, that all of this is grounded in the covenant of grace. Notice the language: “Ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.” That’s the core of the covenant of grace. Well, this introduces us to the doctrine of Regeneration.

In the remainder of this lecture, we will explore what the Scriptures teach us about both Effectual Calling and Regeneration, within the doctrines of Salvation. And so, secondly, we’ll consider a doctrinal exposition of this material, beginning with the doctrine of Effectual Calling, followed by Regeneration. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 10, paragraph 1, defines Effectual Calling. It says, “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.” Well, the *Westminster Confession* here appropriately subsumes Regeneration under the broader concept of Effectual Calling. You’ll have seen in the language there, taking away their heart of stone, and giving them a heart of flesh, renewing their wills, and so on, that kind of language which refers to regeneration. This is, of course, very appropriate. You’ll notice the word, “calling” in Romans 8:30 probably includes this. But most Reformed theologians have found it helpful to make a distinction between these two facets of the Spirit’s work, Effectual Calling and Regeneration. So for the sake of clarity at the beginning of this lecture, we can distinguish effectual calling and regeneration by comparing the Biblical emphasis with these two things.

So, just briefly, effectual calling is an act of summoning the sinner, whereas regeneration is an act of God begetting again the sinner. Secondly, effectual calling occurs on a conscious level—we’re aware of it, whereas regeneration occurs in the subconscious—we’re not aware of it

initially. Thirdly, effectual calling comes from without, whereas regeneration is a work of God within. Fourthly, effectual calling is an activity of moral suasion, whereas regeneration is a creative activity of God.

So, turning, first of all, to Effectual Calling, we must first recognize that the terms “call” and “calling” are used in two different ways in the Bible. This has been frequently distinguished by the terms “external call,” and “internal call.” The external call is the simple presentation of the gospel that you see in preaching, and so on. The internal, or effectual call is the work of God efficaciously and savingly applying the gospel to the soul of an individual. So, at some point in time, the external call—the preaching of the word—and internal call take place simultaneously in the elect. Whereas, by way of contrast, the external call takes place without the internal call in the unbeliever—in the reprobate. So the external call is made effectual, powerful, by the Holy Spirit, in the heart of the elect. The word “calling” in Scripture refers to the internal or effectual call the vast majority of the time, like in that passage in Romans 8, verse 30.

As we already noted, with regards to the external call—the outward call, this is the presentation and explication of the doctrines of the gospel. So it includes the overtures of the promises of the gospel to those who sit under the preaching of the word. The promises are what provides a warrant for the sinner to believe and repent. And we’ve talked about this in previous lectures, but we’re speaking specifically about “warrant” here. The sinner is sitting and listening to the preaching of the gospel. What gives the warrant to receive, to lay hold of those promises, and to apply them to their own soul, to believe them, and to respond with repentance? Well, the warrant is not a knowledge of the secret counsel of God whether they’re elect or not. The warrant is not something that is found inside their own soul that they have to recognize or untangle. The warrant to believe is in the promises themselves which comes in this external call. The external call is addressed universally to all those who hear the gospel. You see it in the opening words of Isaiah 55. You see it in Jesus’ words at the end of Matthew 11, “Come unto me, all ye who labour and are heavy laden,” and so on. Well, this external call is obviously broader than election. We know that, because we read, in Matthew 22, verse 14, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” So, when it says, “many are called,” it’s talking about the external call in the preaching there.

But then next, we need to think about Effectual Calling, which is our primary focus, with this internal call. And there are various stages of effectual calling. This is highlighted in *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question 31—different facets of effectual calling. They include things like the fact that the Spirit convinces of sin and misery, John 16, verse 8. The Spirit comes and convinces the soul of sin and misery. The Spirit enlightens the mind, enabling it to see—1 Corinthians 2, verses 14 and 15; John 16, verse 4. And the Spirit comes and renews the will. This is another component of effectual calling—1 Thessalonians 1, verses 4 and 5, or what we saw earlier, in Ezekiel 36, or places like Acts 16, verse 14. So it is the Spirit’s work to create the response in the soul. Another component of effectual calling is the Spirit persuading and enabling the sinner to embrace Christ, who is freely offered in the gospel—John 6, verse 37, verse 44, verse 65, and so on. So God is the author of effectual calling—1 Corinthians 1, verse 9, or 2 Timothy 1, verses 8 and 9.

God is the author of the effectual call, which is the first step in the application of salvation to the individual. The Father, the first person of the Trinity, is the one who planned salvation. We saw that in a previous series of lectures. And the Father is the One who calls his elect. Again, Romans 8:30; 1 Corinthians 1, verse 9; 1 John 3, verse 1; and others. So that’s the role of the Father. It is the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who is the efficacious applier of effectual calling. We see this in John 3, verse 5; and chapter 6, verse 63. So the Father initiates, and the Spirit enlightens

the soul.

Well, we should think further about some of the characteristics of effectual calling. We see that it is a divine summons, which actually unites the believer to Christ. It's based on the sovereign, eternal decree of God, and it is through the irresistible and persuasive power of the Spirit that it comes about. So it takes place, along with the external call, within the conscious recognition of men. Man's mind is engaged in the conviction of sin, and the persuasion to embrace Christ. All of this helps us understand the doctrine of Effectual Calling.

Well, we can turn now to the related doctrine of Regeneration. And there are really three different words that the New Testament uses for regeneration. I won't give you the Greek words, but they're translated, the first one's translated "rebirth," or "regeneration." Places like Matthew 19, verse 28; or Titus 3, verse 5. The second word is "to beget again." So, 1 Peter 1, verse 3 and verse 23. And the third word is "to be born from above." Jesus uses this in John 3, verse 3 and verse 7. So regeneration is an act of God, by which he implants the gracious principle of new life in man, sends his Spirit to indwell the soul, and makes the governing disposition of the soul holy. So it is the creative act of God in begetting again. It is often referred to as the new birth, or the act of being born again. That which was dead is made alive in Christ. So regeneration defined in this restrictive sense is, what, well it's instantaneous—regeneration is instantaneous. It's not a lengthy process. That can be distinguished from God's work of conversion, which we'll consider in the future lectures. It is also monergistic. That word means that it is working in one direction. God alone is the One who is at work in regeneration, not man. Well, we can also say that regeneration takes place in the subconscious. So it's something that's taking place secretly in the soul. Man is not aware, if you will, of God's work of regeneration initially. That becomes conscious, with the gift of faith, and the exercise of faith and repentance, and so on. But regeneration, in this restrictive sense, is in the subconscious. And lastly, we can say that man is passive. Man is not contributing, he's not active in any way in God's monergistic work of regeneration. And this helps us, because then it eliminates or it clarifies for us the relationship of regeneration to the order of salvation—the order of the application of salvation, which we discussed in the first lecture. Because, why? Regeneration follows calling—it follows effectual calling. It is both distinguished from calling, and sometimes identified with it, as we noted above. But this requires defining calling and regeneration, both in their restrictive and broader senses. So calling unites us to Christ and the inwardly operative grace of God; whereas regeneration is the beginning of that inwardly operative saving grace, so it follows calling.

But then secondly, it precedes conversion. Conversion refers to faith and repentance. So regeneration comes before faith and repentance. Regeneration is the commencement of all saving grace in us. Conversion—faith and repentance—signifies the first exercise of the gracious disposition that is implanted in regeneration. So being born of God—which is regeneration—produces fruit—the fruit of faith and repentance, and so on. And much of 1 John spells this out for us. God's call requires a reciprocal response of faith, and that faith itself is a gift of God.

So given man's depraved condition, and inability to do any spiritual good, how is it possible for people in such a condition to be brought to faith? How can these things be brought together? Well, it is God's grace, and his re-creative power in regeneration that resolves this tension. He quickens the dead through the new birth. He makes the dead alive. And that regeneration manifests his work of irresistible grace by the Holy Spirit. And having been brought alive, the soul is able to be given the gift of faith, and to exercise that faith. So regeneration is a pivotal change that includes the implanting of a principle of new life in man, a new governing disposition of the soul. The renova-

tion affects the whole man in his mind, in his will, and in his emotions. It is also an instantaneous change, unlike, for example, the continual process of sanctification.

Well, this brings us to emphasizing the glory of God in regeneration, because God the Holy Spirit is the agent who applies the work of redemption, including regeneration to the elect. While the Spirit is the divine initiator and re-creator, the mode of regeneration is mysterious. And John 3, verse 8 brings this out. It's the Spirit who causes the blind to see, the spiritually dead to rise, and the spiritually ignorant to understand. The glory of God is displayed in this grace, mercy, and love. We see that all of the glory, and honor, and praise goes to him alone. We noted earlier that the Reformed doctrine of Regeneration teaches that it is monergistic, not synergistic. So it is God working God working on man. Synergistic would mean "to work together," that God is working, and man is working. That is not true in regeneration. The elect are passive, not active. They're receiving something from the Lord when they're being born again. So in contrast to conversion, regeneration takes place in the subconscious, not in the consciousness of the person. All of this comes together really in Jesus' words to Nicodemus, in John 3, verses 3 to 8. Jesus tells Nicodemus that being born again, or regeneration, is the essential prerequisite for entering the kingdom of God. The word "again," in verse 3, can also be translated "from above," highlighting the monergistic aspect of regeneration that we find elsewhere in Scripture. The Spirit of God is the source of the new birth, as Jesus says, "born of the Spirit." And you'll see this elsewhere, in 1 John, and so on. So this teaches us—all of this teaches us about the nature of the work of regeneration, the work of God's Spirit in bringing the dead to life, and causing his Spirit to indwell them.

Well, thirdly, we can consider this doctrine polemically, and we'll consider two things briefly. First of all, the error of baptismal regeneration. And there are various forms in which this erroneous doctrine is represented. The Roman Catholics believe that baptism washes away original sin. Anglicans have a different form. The Lutherans have a different form of this same error. It teaches that the grace of regeneration is effectually conveyed by the rite of baptism, which is viewed as the instrumental cause. Reformed theologians reject this. They reject the infusion of grace by baptism, which disengages the indispensable work of the Spirit in granting the gift of faith. A related and more subtle doctrine is that of presumed regeneration for those who are baptized. So there are some who would say, "Well, we don't believe in baptismal regeneration as the Roman Catholics do, but instead, we view children and others who have been baptized, we presume that they regenerate, that the Spirit has regenerated them." And this is a problem. It comes from a faulty doctrine of the covenant. They believe that because, for example, a child has received the sign and seal of the covenant, that therefore, we should view them as having received all of the substance and reality of the covenant. And so they'll say things like, "Well, you don't tell a baptized person that they need to be born again, because we're presuming that they're already born again, because they're baptized. Well this whole idea is exploded in the Bible; it's absolutely erroneous, and it comes out clearly in John, chapter 3. Because here you have Nicodemus coming to Jesus. Nicodemus is a son of the covenant, if there ever has been one: circumcised on the eighth day, raised in the religion of the Old Testament Jews, he himself had become a teacher, a minister within that religion, and so on. Jesus comes to him, not presuming at all that he's regenerated. Jesus comes to the son of the covenant, and says, "Ye must be born again." He tells him that he has to be born from above—born of the Spirit. And so we must reject the doctrine of presumed regeneration for those who are baptized. Well that deals with baptismal regeneration and some of its forms.

Secondly, there's the question of elect infants. So the *Westminster Confession*, chapter 10, paragraph 3 says, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through

the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.” So this section refers to infants and those who are physically incapable of being outwardly called. Those who are mentally retarded, and so on. It’s not a reference, in other words, to the unevangelized throughout the world. Notice that the Confession does not state that all infants who die in infancy are elect. But it does say that regeneration is the prerequisite for being reconciled to God. Infants, of course, are incapable of expressing the fruits of faith and repentance, which require conscious comprehension, intellectual capabilities, and so on. But the Lord is able to come, and to, by the Spirit, irresistibly regenerate the soul of even an infant, and to bring them to new life. Some of the older Reformed theologians refer to “the seed of faith” being implanted by the Spirit within the elect, within elect infants, by which they are justified, which is an act of God independent of man. That faith won’t be expressed in an infant who doesn’t have the capabilities. The point is, God is savingly working in them.

Well, we’ll hasten on. Fourthly, considering this doctrine practically, we can draw some practical applications for ourselves. A few things—first of all, we need to see the importance of bringing souls under the preaching of the gospel. Earlier in the lecture, we talked about the external call. This is the appointed means that God has given and uses. In Romans 10, Paul asks that series of questions, where he ends up saying, How will they hear without a preacher, and how will they have a preacher unless one is sent, and so on. And he goes on to say that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of the Lord. This is the means—the preaching of the gospel that the Holy Spirit accompanies to call the elect to himself. And so it reinforces for us the priority of evangelism, both in our own local area, but also the priority of foreign missions. Christ’s great commission was to go and to preach the gospel to all nations, discipling the nations. And so this is a priority for us.

Secondly, we see the indispensable work of the Holy Spirit to make that preaching powerful or efficacious. So without the Spirit, it would all be in vain. Therefore, we need to pray for the ministry of the Spirit. We need to pray the Spirit would accompany the word preached, in the souls of those who hear it. Because, after all, we can do many things—ministers, and Christians, and even godly parents—you can do many things, you know, for other people—for your children, or otherwise. You know, in the case of children, you can discipline them, you can catechize them, you can have family worship, you can give them a Christian education, you can teach them the things of the Lord, and so on, but we cannot give another soul what they need most—that is, a new heart, and the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can do this. And so you see the indispensable work of the Spirit and our need to pray for them.

Thirdly, the church must never cease to proclaim boldly to all, “Ye must be born again.” This must be a clarion blast that goes forth from the pulpits throughout the world, telling needy sinners, “Ye must be born again.” You need a new heart. You need God to cleanse you from the filthiness of sin. You need the Holy Spirit to indwell you. You need the principle of grace planted in your soul. “Ye must be born again.” Let us never, ever cease from proclaiming that important truth.

Fourthly, and lastly, we see the wonder of God’s sovereign grace, which leads us to worship. We see that all of the glory, from beginning to end, goes to the Lord alone, for his saving mercies in redeeming a sinful soul. And that ought to leave us with a breathtaking sense of the wonder of God’s sovereign grace. That ought to fuel the heart of the born-again, regenerate Christian. It ought to fuel them with praise and adoration for the Lord’s riches and mercy. And may the Lord deepen our worship in that way.

Well, in this lecture, we have considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about

Effectual Calling and Regeneration. We've seen the sovereign work of God in initiating the application of salvation to the soul. This constitutes the beginning of a string of pearls that we will explore over this module. In the next lecture, we will consider, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Saving Faith.