

PREVENIENT GRACE—A WESLEYAN VIEW

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The common ground upon which we as evangelical theologians stand is important and discussion in the area of our agreements is of great value. Though we agree that the Word of God is unfallibly true, our fallible minds often travel divergent paths in their attempts to grasp that truth. Christian fellowship, then, is based more upon love and understanding than upon full agreement in all doctrines.

Occasional discussion of some of our differences also proves helpful in that we receive a better understanding of each other. To know and appreciate another's view, even when one does not agree with it, builds up Christian love and fellowship in the Spirit. It is for this reason that this paper on prevenient grace has been prepared. It is hoped that this endeavour will make more understandable one of the distinct emphases in Wesleyan circles.

1. *Prevenient grace is common or universal grace.* John Wesley used the word "preventive" which in his day meant "going before." This grace which goes before salvation is given to all men. Wesley wrote:

All the blessings which God hath bestowed upon man are of his mere grace, bounty or favour; his free undeserved favour; favour altogether undeserved; man having no claim to the least of his mercies. It is free grace that "formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him a living soul" and stamped on the soul the image of God, and "put all things under his feet." This same free grace continues to us at this day, life and breath and all things. There is nothing we are or have or do which can deserve the least thing at God's hands. "All our works, thou, O God! has wrought in us." These, therefore, are so many more instances of free mercy: and whatever righteousness may be found in man, this is also the gift of God.¹

Prevenient grace is revealed in God's providential care for all his creatures. Paul recognized this when he said, "for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Man's fall into sin would have ended God's providential grace for him had there not been the gracious plan of redemption. Now to fallen man that grace continues to flow in order to fulfill the divine purpose of redemption. There is continuity between the providential grace for all and the grace that leads to salvation.

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1. *The Works of John Wesley*, authorized edition published by the Wesleyan Conference, London, 1872 (14 vols.; photo offset edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958). V. 7.

For Wesley the very existence of the race was dependent upon God's grace. Had the penalty of Adam's sin fallen without mercy, Adam would have died and the race perished with him. Thus physical life itself and all blessings resulting therefrom are a direct result of this grace. God's grace is in every man, not in the sense of being born in him, but it is "infused" into him. The heathen in some measure are given a knowledge of God and a conscience that bears witness to right and wrong. Wesley wrote that the "very first motion of good is from above, as well as the power that conducts it to the end." It is God who "infuses every good desire" and who accompanies it and follows it.² Thus a man may be of a compassionate and benevolent spirit, be courteous, gentle, kind, do good deeds and even attend church. All of this good results from prevenient grace.

This grace contains all the qualities ascribed to common grace by the Reformers. Dr. M. Eugene Osterhaven in his excellent article on "Common Grace" describes the general working of grace in a way very similar to the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace. Common grace according to this article "restrains sin so that order is maintained, and culture and righteousness are promoted." God does this by restraining sin in the lives of individuals and of society. "God by His providence restrains the perverseness of our nature from breaking out into external acts." Dr. Osterhaven further remarks that common grace enables man to do some good. God has not utterly forsaken mankind but continues to give them abundant evidence of his compassion. Man is enabled to do good of a certain kind because of the general providence and blessing of God toward all men.³

Though the teachings of common grace and prevenient grace have much in common, the essential difference is seen at the point where common grace and special grace are understood by Calvinists as essentially different. The Wesleyan teaches that the prevenient grace leads on to saving grace, prepares for it, enables a person to enter into it. The difference between the two for Wesleyans would be in degree and not in kind.

2. *It is ministered through the Holy Spirit.* Often grace is looked upon as the unmerited favor of God, which of course it is. But this grace is also seen to be a power of God operative in the lives of men. For this reason there is a close relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God.

A recent book entitled, *With the Holy Spirit and With Fire*, by Samuel M. Shoemaker, underlines this aspect of grace very clearly. Dr. Shoemaker writes:

I think of Him as the roving center of all God's activity in the

2. *Ibid.*, VI, 509.

3. M. Eugene Osterhaven, "Common Grace," *Basic Christian Doctrines*, Carl F. H. Henry, ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, publishers, 1962, pp. 171-177.

world. He is the Inspirer of all truths—philosophical, scientific, practical, as well as spiritual. He is the Creator of all beauty whether it be channeled through worthy or unworthy instruments. . . . He is the Author of all truth everywhere—it is His to know and His to dispense. He is in every work of mercy in every good and gentle life, in every reconciliation between estranged people or groups, in every lift of the spirit of taxed and suffering people. In all the good that men seem to do, we will find an unseen Hand at work, in motivating it and giving grace to carry it through. In the blackest and worst of men, whatever spark of goodness remains to be touched, it is the Holy Spirit. He is more pervasive than ether. He is God in His widest, most ingenious, most far-flung aspects. He is God in His most minute and intimate aspects. He is God at work in us and available to us. In His own very gentle way, He is taking the initiative with us.⁴

Whether we agree with Mr. Shoemaker in all his statements or not, his ideas are instructive. Rather than holding that the good found in man apart from salvation is a goodness left over from the fall of man, Wesleyan-Arminianism has always taught that God has supernaturally restored to all men a measure of His Spirit through the grace that flows from Calvary. Dr. L. M. Starkey in his study on Wesleyan theology emphasizes the fact that Wesley identified the grace of God with the power of the Holy Spirit in human life.⁵ Any good found in government or in any person would be a result of the presence of God's Holy Spirit. Since He is the Spirit of truth, then any truth that comes to mankind even apart from Christianity, is a result of the Holy Spirit. In fact some knowledge of God is impressed upon the minds of men by the Holy Spirit. The very existence of the natural law and its application, even by ungodly men, cannot be separated from the work of the Spirit of God. Thus a degree of grace is ministered to all men by the Holy Spirit whether they have the Scriptures or not.

3. *It leads to salvation.* Though Wesleyans can allow that all that is claimed for common grace can also be claimed for prevenient grace, yet they hold that the primary purpose of prevenient grace is not to restrain sin and give good desires and blessings to man; this grace is given in order to lead men to repentance and salvation. God's primary purpose in allowing the human race to exist is to bring men to salvation. Wesley wrote:

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none seeing there is no man that is in the state of mere nature; there is no man unless he has quenched the Spirit,

4. Samuel M. Shoemaker, *With the Holy Spirit and With Fire*, New York: Harper and Brothers, publishers, 1960, p. 45.
5. Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1963, p. 63.

that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: it is more properly termed, *preventing grace*. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Everyone has sooner or later good desires; although the generality of man stifle them before they can strike deep root or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And everyone, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared with the hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he has.⁶

Wesley had no difficulty in describing the fall of men in very black terms. The fall corrupted human nature and made man utterly devoid of any of the moral glory with which he was created. By nature man is completely fallen. Original sin involved man in guilt and exposed him to God's wrath. God's anger rested upon the human race because of the sin of Adam. By nature all are the children of wrath. But while Wesley saw this black and dark side in man, he also saw this preventient grace given to all men, and setting aside the penalty for the guilt inherited from Adam.

Because of the grace of God, no man will be punished for Adam's sin. Every man is given a fresh start through grace. John Fletcher insisted that by this free gift to all men God had granted unconditional pardon for original guilt. Eldon Fuhrman states that by this understanding of the justification of all men by God's grace, Wesley admitted the exceeding sinfulness of original sin with its full penalty on the one hand and on the other hand magnified the atoning work of Christ. "This absolved him from the weakness of the Semi-Pelagians, who denied the full force of the penalty; it also saved him from the extreme conclusions to which the federal headship of Adam had been carried."⁷ Growing out of this benefit of preventient grace there is the doctrine that all infants who die in infancy are redeemed through the free grace of God and all other persons who are incapable of choice.

Salvation begins with preventient grace and continues until final glorification. Wesley wrote:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*: including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning His will, and the first transient conviction of having sinned against Him. All these imply

6. Wesley, *op. cit.*, VI, 512.

7. Eldon R. Fuhrman, "The Wesleyan Doctrine of Grace," *The Word and Doctrine*, Kenneth E. Geiger, ed., Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, publisher, 1965, pp. 143-444.

some tendency towards life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation carries on by *convincing grace*, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*: which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby "through grace" we "are saved by faith;" consisting of those grand branches, justification and sanctification.⁸

Thus the salvation of man is dependent upon man's response by prevenient grace to the saving grace of God.

4. *It provides for personal responsibility.* Though some persons who claim to be Wesleyans appear Semi-Pelagian, one cannot rightly accuse John Wesley of falling in this category. As already stated, he painted the fall of man in very black terms. By nature man receives nothing that is good. In fact he is completely unable to make a good choice of any kind through nature. He is free but free only to do evil and to follow on in the way of sin. From nature he receives no prompting of goodness within himself. There is no good desire coming by way of birth. He is totally depraved and totally unable.

Against this black picture, however, Wesley then placed prevenient grace flowing into the life of every person. It is the power of God's Holy Spirit lifting that individual above what he had received by birth and creating in him a beginning of life which will lead on to further life if he responds to it. In this sense every person has a degree of divine life not inherited at birth.

Actually then man's true freedom comes through grace. Apart from prevenient grace, man would have no freedom, except freedom to do evil. There would be no power in himself to choose the good or to even know the good. Prevenient grace provides both the incentive to follow the good, the knowledge of the good and even the power to choose for the good.

It is for this reason that one can ascribe to man the power to make his own choice in regard to salvation. The very power to make this choice comes from the grace of God. With the power to choose salvation goes also the offer of saving grace. But man is still capable of rejecting the salvation offered to him. The grace that is provided is not irresistible. Man may react to this grace favorably, follow it and be saved or he may reject it, turn aside from it, and find himself more and more choosing the evil of his own nature. Thus a man wilfully sins in rejecting the grace given to him, or he may live by yielding to the grace being given.

Wesley did not ascribe to man a natural power to make good choices,

8. Wesley, *op cit.*, VI, 509.

nor did he teach that the choice of an individual's salvation was completely up to God. Man has total inability plus the free grace of God. He makes a choice of right through the grace that God has given to him. The ability to choose is a gracious ability.

With this grace given to him man can cooperate with God. Wesley sets the truth "without me you can do nothing" alongside the words "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 2:12, 13). Then he proclaims "Here the charm is dissolved! The light breaks in, and the shadows flee away." God has joined these two together, let no man put them assunder.⁹ Wesley described man's reaction to this grace as follows:

Hence we may . . . infer the absolute necessity of this re-action of the soul (whatsoever it be called) in order to the continuance of the divine life therein. For it plainly appears, God does not continue to act upon the soul unless the soul reacts upon God. He prevents us indeed with the blessings of his goodness. He first loves us and manifests himself unto us. While we are yet afar off, he calls us to himself, and shines upon our hearts. But if we do not then love him who first loved us; if we will not hearken to His voice; if we turn our eye away from him and will not attend unto the light which he pours in upon us; his Spirit will not always strive: He will gradually withdraw, and leave us to the darkness of our own hearts. He will not continue to breathe into our soul unless our soul breathes toward him again; unless our love, and prayer, and thanksgiving return to him, a sacrifice wherewith he is well pleased.¹⁰

Here is a form of synergism understood in the midst of a monergism. Initially God works and after His work begins, then it is possible for man to cooperate with Him.

5. *It preserves the sola gratia and the sola fide.* The manner in which the *sola gratia* is preserved can now be seen. Since man could do nothing about his own salvation even in the sense of responding to it, except through the grace that is initially given to him by God, then his very reaction to that grace is of grace. Though grace is not the cause of his right reaction, it certainly is the means by which he reacts to God and yields to further grace. When final salvation is obtained, a person may look back and say, "It is grace that has brought me home." Such grace dismisses all idea of any human merit for any act that man has accomplished, even his act of free choice in believing for salvation. All merit is through the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. In this sense it is by grace only than a man is saved.

At the same time the idea of the *sola fide* is preserved. Preventient

9. *Ibid.*, X, 478.

10. *Ibid.*, V, 233.

grace actually gives more place to the *sola fide* than can be found in the eternal decrees. Wesley could not understand why his Calvinist friends accused him of not teaching "by faith only." It bothered him considerably until one day a thought flashed across his mind. He expressed it in this manner:

I was in perplexity when a thought shot across my mind, which solved the matter at once. This is the key: those that hold "everyone is absolutely predestinated either to salvation or damnation" see no medium between salvation by works and salvation by absolute decrees. It follows that whosoever denies salvation by absolute decrees, in so doing (according to their apprehension) asserts salvation by works.

And herein I verily believe they are right. As adverse as I once was to the thought, upon further consideration, I allow there is, there can be, no medium. Either salvation is by absolute decree, or it is (in a Scriptural sense) by works.¹¹

Wesley went on to declare that neither can it be by faith for, "Unconditional decree excludes faith as well as works." If salvation is by the decree of God then it cannot be by faith as a condition for salvation. Wesleyans believe that prevenient grace enables a person to repent and believe, and since a man can reject or accept more grace, his salvation is dependent on his faith in Christ, not on an eternal decree, and this faith is an activity of man.

In conclusion then, prevenient grace not only restrains sin in men, but lifts all men to a salvable point. He can by this grace choose more grace leading on to salvation, or he may reject the grace. Thus salvation is "by grace through faith," and the whole plan is the gift of God.

11. *Ibid.*, XI, pp. 493-494.