

The Prevenient and the Penultimate: Towards a Methodist Theology of the Political for Twenty-First Century

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Methodists have a history of political engagement in issues as diverse as the abolition of slavery, the regulation of alcohol consumption, liberation from colonialism and apartheid, pacifism, and workers rights. Yet, as often been noted, despite this activism Methodism has not developed common theological categories to interpret either its own political role or its understanding of the political sphere. The closest it has come to the first has been a somewhat problematic appeal to “social holiness.” This paper addresses the second dimension within the context of political developments at the beginning of the twenty first century.

The Political Context

All theological interpretations of the political sphere have emerged in particular contexts and related to the organisation of the political power in that context. Contemporary Methodism is present in a complex diversity of political contexts from stable constitutional democracies with developed state apparatus, through various forms of authoritarian government and kleptocracies, to contexts of civil war and warlordism. Terms such as state, government, authority, and law can mean vastly different things in these diverse contexts. Any theological interpretation needs to be flexible and open to revision and adaption. Hence this paper refers more generally to politics or the political to refer to the organisation and use of power for the purpose of ordering and governing a human community or society and (in most cases) the territory it inhabits. This broad description recognises that there is multiplicity of ways in which societies are ordered and political power is arranged. The paper is to be seen as an invitation to further dialogue and debate from other contexts.

While there is a multiplicity of political contexts at a national level there are also diverse intersecting international and transnational dynamics which have a major impact on national politics. The collective label of globalisation applied to these dynamic conceals the complexity, multiplicity and conflicted character of these dynamics. Yet within this multiplicity economic factors play a significant role in interrelating the diverse elements. This is seen in the role of transnational companies whose economic power dwarfs that of many states, the influence of global markets on local economies and the well being of ordinary people, conflicts over access to and control over mineral resources and other raw materials, and the struggle to control agricultural production. The interrelationship of these dynamics at a global level and the dependence of all states on the well-being of their economies have resulted in even powerful states having to shape their social and economic policies in favour of those who control these powerful economic dynamics even when it brings suffering to their citizens. The exact relationship between political authorities and the controllers of economic power varies from blatant bribery, through lobbying and donations to political parties, to close working alliances and the formation of state related companies.

A third dimension that needs to be noted is the complex and changing religious context. In the majority world many Methodist Churches live and witness in religiously pluralistic contexts, in some cases Christianity is a minority religion. The religious context of western world is rapidly changing with increasing secularisation and the rise of the “nones”, on the one hand and increasing religious pluralism as a consequence of immigration on the other. Internationally the continuing influence of militant Islam challenges understandings of the role of religion in society.

Sources for a Methodist Theology of the Political

While Methodists instinctively turn to John Wesley for theological inspiration, when it comes to grappling with the political Wesley fails them. His writings on political themes are few and are primarily focused on defending the political status quo. As Theodore Webber has shown Wesley was an organic constitutionalist who firmly believed that the British constitution provided the best guarantees for maintaining liberty and order.¹ This conviction was integrated with a theological insistence that governing authority was established by God and it was the duty of all citizens to subject themselves to that authority – which in the case of England meant submission to and support for the king. While insisting that God establishes political authorities he provided no detailed discussions of the function or purpose of government.

Weber has attempted to reconstruct Wesley's understanding of the purpose of government from scattered references throughout his corpus and analysed them in relation to the typology that interprets government as either being rooted in the order of creation and thus directed toward the promotion of the general good of the people or being rooted in the order of preservation and hence is focused on the restraint of evil.² He argues that Wesley's references to the state cannot be systematically related to either of the traditional types. He concludes that Wesley's writings are examples of contextual reasoning and there is no underlying systematic theological paradigm. There is however a major problem with this analysis that is the typology of orders of creation and preservation obscure a key factor which Weber discusses but does not grasp its systematic significance for Wesley. This is that the category that Wesley uses to interpret human society outside of Christ is neither creation nor preservation but prevenient grace. Prevenient grace has both a negative dynamic – restraining evil and a positive dynamic – partially restoring the good creation. Wesley's theology of prevenient grace provides a comprehensive framework that integrates the various aspects of Wesley's political thought that Weber highlights. Given the significance of prevenient grace within Wesley's theology as a whole it provides a significant theological basis for developing a theology of the political that is rooted in the Methodist tradition.³

The significance of the theology prevenient grace for contemporary theology was emphasised by José Míguez Bonino in his 1977 and 1997 Oxford Institute papers.⁴ He proposed that John Wesley and William Burt Pope's interpretations of prevenient grace provide significant resources for the development of a contemporary Methodist theological response to socio-political challenges. In what follows I take up Miguez Bonino's proposal and attempt to develop a contemporary Methodist theology of the political rooted in prevenient grace.

¹See Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingsway, 2001).

² See Weber, *Politics*, 276-295

³ Prevenient grace provides a more adequate basis than Weber's proposal of the political image of God (Weber, *Politics*, 391-420) given that the very few references to it in Wesley's writings and that Wesley uses it to describe the relationship between human beings and their fellow creatures and not the relationships within human society. Developing a theology of the political rooted in prevenient grace includes Webers emphases but puts them in a more comprehensive context.

⁴ See his "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective" in Theodore runyon, (ed), *Sanctification and Liberation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 49-63 and "Salvation as the Work of the Trinity: An Attempt at a Holistic Understanding from a Latin American Perspective." In M. Douglas Meeks, (ed), *Trinity Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*. (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000), 69-83. See also his "Wesley in Latin America: Theological and Historical Reflection" in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism* Edited by Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1998), 169-182

Aspects of a Contemporary Theology of Prevenient Grace

John Wesley's theology of prevenient grace was one of his most significant contributions to theology. While it was developed initially as a means of holding together human depravity and human responsibility thus enabling him to reject Calvinistic predestination on the one hand and pelagianism and semi-pelagianism on the other; it was no mere theological stop gap developed in his conflict with the Calvinism. It became an integral part of his understanding of God's work in the world and the human response to that work. Prevenient grace is significant connectional element in his theology that links and integrates a number of diverse dimensions of his thinking. This connectional dimension is given greater systematic significance in the theology of William Burt Pope. I will not provide an analysis of Wesley and Pope's views but rather attempt to develop the contours of a contemporary theology of prevenient grace that develops some of their key insights as the basis for the construction of a Methodist political theology.⁵

The Anthropological Presuppositions – The Defaced Image of God

Underlying any theology of prevenient grace are theological presuppositions about human identity and nature and consequences of sin. Hence the first task of constructing a contemporary theology of prevenient grace is to explicate these anthropological presuppositions.

God created human beings in a dynamic and complex network of relationships with God, with each other and with the earth and all its creatures. Within this network of relationships human particularity has traditionally been portrayed through the multidimensional motif of the image of God. Wesley expounded this motif in relation to three dimensions – a natural, a moral and a political image. At the centre of his exposition was the understanding that human beings were created to participate in the vibrant life of God who is love. Through participating in the dynamism of God's love they would love God and their fellow human beings and care for the fellow creatures. The natural image referred to those elements of the human person that provided the capacity for them to live in relationship with God, humanity and fellow creatures, the moral to the character of love that reflected the character of God and which expressed itself in behaviour patterns manifesting justice, mercy and truth. The political dimension was their calling to have stewardly reign over the earth.

Since the time of Wesley there has been considerable debate within Biblical scholarship about the meaning of the image of God in Genesis and its relationship to the use of this motif elsewhere in the Bible. The major trend in Old Testament scholarship reads the motif of the image of God in Genesis in relation to two contexts. The first is the use of images/statue of various gods in Ancient Near Eastern religions. Such images were understood to not only portray the god but also to embody the presence of the god in the sanctuary. The second context is the descriptions of kings and other

⁵ For Wesley's understanding see Charles Allen Rogers, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in Theology of John Wesley" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1967), Randy I. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* 1994), 83-93, Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) and J. Gregory Crofford, *Streams of Mercy: Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John and Charles Wesley* (Lexington: Emeth, 2010). Prevenient grace is an integral element in Popes systematic theology and references can be found throughout his *A Compendium of Christian Theology Being an Analytical Outline of a Course of Theological Study, Biblical, Dogmatic and Historical*. Volumes 1-3, (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880) see also Dale Elden Dunlap, "Methodist Theology in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century: With Special Reference to the Theology of Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, and William Burt Pope." (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1956). As part of the preparation for this paper I drafted an article on Pope's theology of prevenient grace which I will be submitting for publication.

members of the ruling classes as being the images of a god. When read against these contexts, the Genesis account of creation is an affirmation that human beings are created to be God's representatives on earth. This entails both reflecting God's character and representing God's interests in their multidimensional interaction with God, with other human beings and their fellow creatures. The affirmation that all human beings, and not just the ruling classes, are created in the image of God is an assertion of the particular dignity and value of all human beings and of their agency within history. This assertion has greater poignancy if the first creation account reached its present form during the Babylonian exile. It would then be a strident affirmation of human dignity and agency in the face of oppression, alienation and disempowerment.⁶ The reflective dimension is given explicit expression in the numerous passages in the Pentateuch where the character and action of God is portrayed as an ethical model and norm. The reflection and representation are inextricably related with each other. One cannot represent God if one does not reflect the character of God. One reflects the character of God as one engages the world on God's behalf. This contemporary interpretation correlates with Wesley's political and moral image and its assertion of agency may be understood to imply aspects of his natural image.

In Wesley's understanding the fall resulted in the destruction of the image of God in humanity. Adam's sin shatters the relationships between God, humanity and the earth. It inaugurates spiritual death and brings about distortion within the depths of the human person. The consequence is that the whole of the human person is affected by sin bringing about a natural bias away from God and the good and toward evil that distorts attitudes, character and behaviour. The human being is no longer capable of pursuing good. This fallen state is passed on to Adam's decedents. The pervasiveness of this bias toward evil is such that instead of being the image of God Wesley describes them as bearing the image of the devil.⁷ Yet despite this elements of the natural and political image remain. While Genesis does not describe the image of God as being destroyed and at the end of the flood narrative it affirms that human beings are God's image bearers yet the downward spiral of evil from Genesis 3 to Genesis 11 portrays humanity as using its history making agency in ways which neither represent God's interests nor reflect God's character. Further New Testament texts portray the process of salvation as a process of renewal in the image of God.⁸ While Wesley's understanding of the divine image being replaced by a diabolic image is not justified by the Biblical texts, an interpretation of human sin as severely distorting the image of God resulting is a legitimate theological construction from the diversity of the canonical witness.

This understanding of the defacement of the image of God is centred on the loss of the moral image through human sin with the result that human beings are radically turned in on themselves. Integral to this is a bias toward evil that leads to further sin in a downward spiral of pervasive depravity. In developing their interpretation of the distortion of the divine image both Wesley and Pope emphasised the impact of human sin in the depths of the human personality. At the core of this understanding is the loss of agency as a consequence of the inherited bias toward evil. Human beings are no longer able to choose the good. As a result they are perpetrators of sin who act contrary to the moral demands of God's love. For Wesley this encompassed both active sin against God and others (doing harm and neglecting the worship of God) and passive sin of standing by while

⁶ See J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005)

⁷ See Sermon 59, "God's Love for Fallen Man" 1. In *The Works of John Wesley* (begun as "The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley" [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–1983]; continued as "The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley" [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—]; 18 of 35 vols. published to date), vol. 2:423.

⁸ See for example 2 Cor. 3:18, Col. 3: 9 &10 and Eph. 4: 22-24.

others suffered (not doing all the good one can). In both cases we betray our identity as God's representatives and fail to reflect the character of God who is love.

Social gospel and liberation theologians, within and outside the Methodist tradition, have emphasised the social character of sin and evil. Affirming both the social character and agency of human beings they recognised that human beings create dynamic communal and social structures. These structures exist in a dynamic and dialectical relationship with human persons. While created by human activity they gain a life of their own which transcends the intentions of individual human persons. They develop an identity, power and determining influence which is more the sum of their parts and which is independent from the decisions of those who participate in them. Social structures are both dynamic and lasting. Some are relatively new others have existed for centuries yet they change and develop in new ways in response to new situations. Functioning in an ideological as well as a material dimension they shape our existence, our choices, our thinking, our behaviour and our character. When structures exist over time they are no longer perceived as human creations and appear rather as part of the natural order. Their ideologies and values are internalised thus shaping the persons who participate in them. These structures mediate, influence and shape our relationships with each other and with the earth. As creations of sinful humanity such structures are distorted by, embody and perpetuate human sin. Some of these structures are inherently evil. Others are not and many have been created to perpetuate good yet to the extent that they are shaped by human sin they perpetuate evil. As a consequence of their transcending individual persons and communities, structures perpetuate evil despite the good intentions and responsible actions of people who participate in them.⁹ While Wesley did not interpret sin in this way it coheres with his emphasis on the corrupting effects of wealth, his recognition of structural causes of poverty and his condemnation of slavery and the colonial exploitation of India. It complements his understanding of the corrupting power of sin and provides a more adequate analysis of the complex dynamics of sin in human life and society.

Wesley and Pope's interpretation of the defacement of the moral image focuses on the dehumanising consequences of the deep bias toward evil that shapes the human person. Its focus is thus on the loss of agency that leads to the perpetration of sin. Even when this is enriched by integrating the social dimension of sin and evil it is an incomplete interpretation of the distorting and disabling consequence of human sin. The narrative of the fall does not end with the expulsion from Eden but with the murder of Abel and its impact on the primal family.¹⁰ This in turn inaugurates a vicious spiral of sin and violence leading up to the flood narrative. While sin distorts the image of God and restricts human agency through the pervasive personal bias toward evil its primary victims are those who suffer the consequences of others sin. Hence the Genesis narrative emphasises the spread of violence as an expression of human sin. Violence inflicts not only physical harm but also deep wounds within the depth of the human person. Wesley was well aware of the consequences of sin on the victims from his interaction with the marginalised, the poor and the victims of society sin. He went further and emphasised the suffering of the victims was a motivation to work for personal and social transformation. This is exemplified in *Thoughts upon Slavery* and in the following extract from his sermon "National Sins and Miseries":

⁹ Stephen Charles Mott provides useful summary of this dimension of evil in *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-17.

¹⁰ See Brigitte Kahl, "Fratricide and Ecoside: Rereading Genesis 2-4." in Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen, eds., *Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Churches Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 53-68

Now let each of us lay his hand upon his heart and say, "Lord, is it I?" Have I added to this flood of unrighteousness and ungodliness, and thereby to the misery of my countrymen? Am not I guilty in any of the preceding respects? And do not they suffer because I have sinned?" If we have any tenderness of heart, any bowels of mercies, any sympathy with the afflicted, let us pursue this thought till we are deeply sensible of our sins, as one great cause of their sufferings.¹¹

Yet he did not integrate this into his understanding of the distortion of the image of God within the human person and hence into his soteriology. The closest he comes to it is in a comment on Genesis 9:6 extracted from Matthew Henry.

Man is a creature dear to his Creator, and therefore ought to be so to us; God put honour on him, let us not then put contempt on him. Such remains of God's image are still even upon fallen man, that he who unjustly kills a man, defaceth the image of God, and doth dishonour him.¹²

Human sin defaces the image of God within the victims of the sin. It is not clear how Wesley understood this though the emphasis seems to be the God is dishonoured by human action. However the recognition that the image of God is defaced or distorted in the victims of sin can also be interpreted in the light of Wesley's recognition of the misery caused by the sin of others. Human sin leads to multidimensional impact on the human person restricting and distorting their ability to act God's representatives in the world.¹³

One dimension is that the trauma of violence, degradation, exclusion and humiliation experienced by the victims of human sin causes deep wounds within the human person. This woundedness impacts the agency of the victims and hence their ability to image God in the world. Contemporary trauma studies have explicated how the psychological consequence of violence hinders the ability to think, decide and act.¹⁴ By reducing and warping agency human sin distort the victim's ability to represent God and reflect God's character in the world. Woundedness like sin is not a purely individual reality. It impacts and shapes the networks of relationships in which we live and becomes embodied in social and communal structures. It is also passed on from one generation to another. Tragically, in many cases, those who are deeply wounded become perpetrators of abuse and violence. The result is the creation of complex multigenerational networks of sin, abuse and woundedness. It must also be noted that woundedness is not only the consequence of human sin; it may be the consequence of human fallibility and mistaken decisions made with the best intension or of disease or natural disaster. While a full discussion of this dimension lies beyond the scope of this paper it is worth noting that the impact of so called natural evil is often deeply interconnected with human sin,

¹¹ Sermon 111 "National Sins and Miseries" 2:8 Works Vol. 3:575

¹² John Wesley *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 3 vols. (Bristol: W. Pine, 1765; reprinted Salem; Schmul, 1975), note on Genesis 9:6, these comments are taken from Matthew Henry and stand in tension with Wesley's understanding of the loss of the image of God. For Henry's comments see Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008). Compare his comments on James 3:9 and on 1 Peter 2:17 in *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1976).

¹³ Within a Methodist context Andrew Sung Park has explored this dimension of sin drawing on the Korean concept of Han. See his *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) and *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004). See also Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louiseville: Westminster/John Knox, 2009)

¹⁴ See Jones, *Trauma and Grace*

A second dimension of the way sin distorts the ability of its victims to image God in the world is suggested by a comment in Wesley's sermon "On Visiting the Sick":

But may not *women*, as well as men, bear a part in this honourable service?" Undoubtedly they may; nay, they ought; it is meet, right, and their bounden duty. Let all you that have it in your power assert the right which the God of nature has given you. Yield not to that vile bondage any longer. You, as well as men, are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time, to "do good unto all men."¹⁵

Wesley challenged women to reject the restrictions placed on them by the culture of the day and to assert their rights as people created in the image of God. In an interesting parallel to this in *Thoughts upon Slavery* Wesley condemns slavery as an illegitimate denial of natural liberty and argues that when enslaved people resist slavery they are asserting their natural liberty.¹⁶ Given that he understood liberty as a manifestation of the natural image of God the consequence of slavery was that it prevented people from representing God in the world. Social, cultural, political forces and structures prevent people from acting as God's representatives in the world and thus distort and deface the image of God in them. This restricting impact maybe the consequence of hard power through the use of legal, physical, military or other overt forms of power. It can also be the soft power of ideological persuasion, cultural values or inherited traditions. In both cases the dehumanisation is often internalised so that people see themselves through the eyes of those who wield power. The internalisation of the dominant ideology in turn strengthens the power of the dehumanising structures. This distortion of the image of God is intensified when people unnecessarily acquiesce to these dehumanising restrictions and when they refuse to resist them. Unnecessary acquiescence is an expression of being turned in upon oneself and thus of sin. The effect of such oppressive structures is also to deeply wound people restricting their agency and preventing resistance.

These dimensions cohere with an understanding of original sin as deeply distorting the human person and the social dimension of human sin. On the one hand the deep wounds caused by sin impact our relationships with others and the social and communal structures we create. When these wounds are not healed they can contribute to the creation of dysfunctional and distorting structures at all sorts of levels. On the other hand social structures that embody sin and evil perpetuate the abuse of others and create deep wounds. Social structures can become networks of power relationships which transcend personal decision making, yet which connect victims and perpetrators in complex dynamics of abuse and exploitation. Given their dynamic and transcendent character they include a further group of people, that is those who benefit from the exploitation and abuse of others even though they do not directly participate in this abuse, may even be unaware of it or even oppose it.

The image of God is thus distorted in the complex interactions of human sin that dehumanises the victims, the perpetrators, the bystanders, the disempowered and the beneficiaries. Yet in the complex dynamics and structures of human life we cannot easily divide human beings into any one of

¹⁵ Sermon 98 "On Visiting the Sick" *Works* 3:395&396

¹⁶ See *Thoughts upon Slavery* 3:8 and 3:11 in John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed., 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 11: 68 & 69.

these categories. While in some cases it is possible to clearly identify perpetrators and victims in many situations we distort and experience the distortion of the image of God in diverse ways within ourselves. In one set of relationships we are perpetrators and beneficiaries of sin, while simultaneously we suffer at the hands of others. The brokenness of the image of God is a hybrid reality within us, within our relationships and within our communal and social structures. However this does not mean that we can no longer make ethical judgments on the behaviour of people. There are levels of sin, woundedness and accountability that need to be discerned and responded to. Perpetrators of evil cannot be equated with their victims. Woundedness does not excuse acts of violence.

The Soteriological Goal - God's Coming Reign

A distinctive feature of a Wesleyan theology of preventient grace is the proposition that all of God's gracious activity has a soteriological goal. It is this assertion that distinguishes Wesleyan preventient grace from Calvinist common grace.¹⁷ Preventient grace prepares the way for and anticipates the coming salvation, hence ones interpretation of preventient grace is shaped by ones soteriology. Wesley used a number of motifs to describe his understanding of salvation a predominant one was that of renewal in the image of God. For Wesley this meant the restoration of the moral image of God within the person through the work of the Spirit culminating in the attainment of Christian perfection where a person's life would be dominated by the influence of God's love that they would in turn love God and their neighbours. When however we move beyond Wesley and expand the understanding of the defacement of the image of God to include human woundedness and to take account of the dynamic reality of human social structures we need a more inclusive and multifaceted description of salvation. Such a multifaceted understanding of salvation is in accord with the kaleidoscope of multivalent and multidimensional images and motifs employed by biblical writes to portray God's salvation.¹⁸ These images respond to multidimensional reality of human sin and its consequences as well as the consequences of the brokenness of creation. Taken together they provide a complex picture of God who heals, liberates, forgives and transforms.

Within this diversity three comprehensive images stand out. First, the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, that is comprehensive well being of people within the diversity of their multidirectional relationships. Second, the motif of the new creation and related to it the motifs such as the new birth, the new heavens and a new earth, a New Jerusalem, and a renewed people of God. Third, the motif of the reign of God that is characteristic of the synoptic portrayal of Jesus' teaching. This image is multivalent; Jesus never defined it but rather told diverse parables whose provocative images illuminate aspects of God's reign yet which are ambiguous and open to diverse interpretations. Rooted in the Old Testament particularly in the prophets vision of *shalom* and the coming renewal of God's people, the image of the reign of God evokes a multifaceted picture of salvation whose coherence is found in the relationship of the diverse facets to the coming of God. God's coming is related to the restoration of the people of God, the removal of sin and all that separates humanity from God, the establishment of justice and peace for Israel and the nations, overcoming sin and evil, the liberation of the oppressed, the healing of the sick, the feeding of the hungry, the ending of human suffering, the renewal of creation, the actualisation of *shalom* for all people and much more.

¹⁷ See Wesley, *Predestination Calmly Considered*, 42 in *Works* (Jackson) Vol. 10:228, and William Burt Pope, "Methodist Doctrine" in J. O. A. Clark, (ed.) *The Wesley Memorial Volume, or, Wesley and the Methodist Movement, Judged by Nearly One Hundred and Fifty Writers Living or Dead* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1881), 168-190, 179.

¹⁸ See Joel B. Green, *Salvation* (St Louis: Chalice, 2003).

God's reign in its personal and social dimensions entails the overcoming of sin and woundedness within the complexity of human society through the comprehensive restoration of the image of God in human beings.

God's reign has erupted into history in Jesus Christ and is proleptically actualised in his body the church. Personal salvation is participation in the reign of God through being united to Christ, accepted by God and transformed by the Spirit – in traditional terms this is justification and the new birth. God encounters human persons as the personal, vibrant, variegated transformative love who draws them into a dynamic relationship with Godself that heals, liberates, transforms and empowers them; integrates them into a new community with others; overflows in self-giving service to others, and re-establishes their calling to facilitate the flourishing of their fellow creatures – in traditional terms this is sanctification.

The Christological Lynchpin

Christology is the lynchpin that links and holds together the diverse dimensions of a theology of preventient grace. This can be seen in two of Wesley's assertions concerning preventient grace. The first is regular reference to Christ as: "The true light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9) as a biblical basis for his understanding of preventient grace and the second is his argument that preventient grace is an outworking of the universal atonement. These aspects are developed in more detail by Pope. Wesley's usage points two Christological dimensions. The first is a revelatory dimension. The life, teaching, death and resurrection are the ultimate revelation of God in history. All other revelation is a manifestation of the Divine Logos who became incarnate in and hence ultimately revealed in Jesus. Hence both Wesley and Pope affirmed that God had revealed Godself in diverse ways to all human beings but that this revelation was to be interpreted and evaluated in the light of the revelation in Jesus Christ which fulfils all other revelation.

The second dimension is soteriological – preventient grace is an outworking of the saving work of Jesus Christ. The incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ is the nexus of the interaction between human sin and reign of God. In the incarnation God became human as a first century Jew who understood himself as the agent of God's eschatological renewal and transformation of Israel. Jesus embodied and proclaimed in word and deed the coming of God's reign.¹⁹ What was striking was that Jesus embodied this reign in a colonised country on the margins of the Roman Empire amongst the poor and excluded members of the society. His embodiment of God's reign resulted in his being arrested, tortured, and crucified – abandoned by humanity and by God. However God raised Jesus from the dead, affirming that the excluded and rejected one is the Son of God. Thus this locus of pain and suffering becomes the ultimate revelation of God in history. In the paradox of the cross God was revealed as the ultimate victim of human sin. All that is done against the image bearers of God and the creation of God is done to God. In loving faithfulness God refuses to allow sin to separate humanity from Godself and takes responsibility for human sin, embraces its pain and absorb its repercussions. God simultaneously identifies with and participates in the suffering of the wounded victims of human sin and refuses to retaliate against the perpetrators of sin who inflict suffering on Godself. In the resurrection God reveals Godself as simultaneously the one who heals and empowers the wounded and who transforms and re-orientates the sinners. The resurrection and

¹⁹See Markus Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 42-69 & 77-102, William R. Herzog II, *Jesus Justice and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2000), 47-70, 111-216, and N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, volume 2. (Minneapolis: Fortress. 1996).

the subsequent coming of the Spirit is the irrupting of God's new creation in the midst of the old. It proclaims God's victory over all dehumanising powers. It is the empowering and transforming presence of God in the midst of suffering, oppression and evil.

God's intention in the work of Christ is the salvation of the world. This universal intent has concrete consequences in all of human history for God always acts towards and interacts with humanity on the basis of the work of Christ. As Pope argues this is not only because God Christ saving work was part of God's eternal purpose but because the resurrection of the crucified one is the preeminent revelation of the triune God. What takes place in the crucifixion and resurrection is not something new in the life of God it is the historical actualisation of the dynamics of the life of the triune God.²⁰ It thus the concrete manifestation of how the triune God relates to humanity in all times and places.

The Pneumatological Outworking

Prevenient grace is the multidimensional personal active presence of the Spirit of God amongst and within all human beings preparing for and anticipating the coming of God's reign. Preparation and anticipation are two interrelated dynamics that give rise to penultimate actualisations of God's *shalom* for humanity and the earth. Prevenient grace is always directed toward salvation. On the personal level it is important to make a distinction between a broader dynamic of prevenient grace at work in all people and a more intensified or concentrated dynamic that accompanies the preaching of the gospel. The focus of what follows is on the broader dynamic.

Prevenient grace is not a universal upgrade of fallen humanity that uniformly overcomes sin and its consequences in every human being. It is the free and sovereign work of the Spirit who blows where the Spirit wills, interacting with all human beings in the depth of their person, within the complexity of their diverse relationships and within the dynamism of their history. The Spirit relates to each person within the particularities of their existence to liberate, heal and empower them. The Spirit's transforming presence cannot be limited to the depths of the human person. Human beings are social and historical creatures who live in dynamic networks of relationships with each other and the earth. They create social structures that transcend them, influence their lives, shape their behaviour and influence their thinking. Hence the Spirit in prevenient grace engages the vast multifaceted arena of human social relationships whether these are informal or have cultural, social or institutional structures preparing for and anticipating God's reign. Here to we find diversity and complexity in the activity of the Spirit as the Spirit works to reform and transform them and to create new social and cultural structures and institutions.

The multifaceted dynamism of human history in its personal, communal, social and institutional dimensions is thus the outworking or the interaction between human beings with their created potential and finitude, their pervasive sinful biases and debilitating woundedness; the realities of the created world, and the active transforming, healing, renewing and empowering presence of the Spirit. Wesleyan theology has emphasised both the Spirit's sovereign initiative and the importance of human response to the work of the Spirit. The active presence of the Spirit interacts with, struggles with, entices and draws human person, communities and societies, enabling, motivating and evoking them to respond. The effectiveness of prevenient grace is dependent upon the human response. It is through this response that the reign of God is prepared for and anticipated. As Pope puts it, "this prevenient influence is literally bound with the human use of it being without meaning apart from

²⁰ Compendium 1:348 and 2:263-296

that use.”²¹ Within this vibrant interaction the Spirit responds to the human response. Positive responses lead to new, fuller and often surprising actualisations of *shalom*. Negative responses can result in the Spirit withdrawing opening the way for greater depravity. However within the complexity of history human responses often combine both positive and negative dimensions and the Spirit’s sovereign freedom excludes any attempt to determine the outcome of the interaction. Hence the Spirit’s active presence in preventient grace initiates a complexity of open, dynamic, interactive and multifaceted processes within the human person, human societies and communities and social structures preparing for and anticipating God’s reign. The Spirit works in, with and through persons and the structures they create. Preventient grace should not be understood as a miraculous intervention in the course of human history but rather as the hidden presence of God in the midst of life healing, liberating, enticing, empowering, drawing or struggling with human beings.

The biblical witness to the character and activity of God provides models, paradigms and motifs that enable us to discern the active presence of the Spirit within this dynamic complexity. They provide the hermeneutical glasses that focus and sharpen our vision leading us to identify processes, movements and influences as preparations for and anticipations of God’s coming reign. However we ourselves are caught up in the process so our identifications are necessarily limited and fallible and dependent on the Spirit’s active presence. Seen in the light of the biblical portrayal of God we can identify one primary characteristic of the Spirit’s active presence. This is that the Spirit works in a particular focused way in the locations of human vulnerability, brokenness, exclusion, oppression and suffering. It is from these locations that God delights to transform human beings and societies.²²

Preparation is multidimensional, a central element is the restoration of agency enabling human beings to respond to God’s call to represent God in the world. In Wesley and Pope’s writings this entails the countering of the deep natural bias toward evil. The Spirit of God works within the depths of the human person to enable them to reject what is evil and choose what is right. However, as we argued above, agency is also distorted by woundedness and by powerful social forces and structures. Hence the restoration of agency also entails the healing of inner wounds and the empowerment to resist the domination of dehumanising forces and structures. Human beings are thus empowered to make responsible moral decisions.

A second dimension of preparation is a revelatory. Both Wesley and Pope argued that the Spirit reveals in a partial manner to all human persons the requirements of the moral law. In Wesley’s case this forms part of a complex theology of law.²³ The core of the moral law is the two fold love commandment to which he sometimes added a third dimension of loving God’s creatures. The more detailed moral commands are the actualisation of the love command within the context of the relationships God has created in the world. It thus prescribes what is due to every creature according to their nature and relationships to each other.²⁴ Wesley often summarised the character of God and hence the content of the moral image and requirements of the moral law with the triad of “justice, mercy and truth.”²⁵ The moral law was imbedded in human nature at creation as the moral image of

²¹ Compendium 2:358 & 359

²² See my ““On (Re)centering the Margins: A Euro-African perspective on the ‘Option for the Poor’” in Joerg Rieger (ed), *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Theology* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 45-69.

²³ See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 98-100 and Kenneth J. Collins “John Wesley’s Theology of Law” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Drew University, 1984).

²⁴ See Sermon 34 “The Original, Nature, Properties and use of the Law” in *Works* 2: 4-19

²⁵ See for example Sermon 20, “The Lord our Righteousness”, 1,2, *Works* 1:452, and his comments on Exodus 15:11 in *Notes upon the Old Testament* (this reference is particularly significant as this is one of the few places in the *Notes Upon the Old Testament* where Wesley adds a comment not found in his sources) and Sermon 44, “Original Sin”, 1,3, *Works* 2:175.

God, obliterated by the fall and then partially re-inscribed through prevenient grace so that God “again ‘showed thee, O man, what is good’ (although not as in the beginning), ‘even to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.’”²⁶ Wesley thus notes that the Golden Rule “that glorious rule of mercy as well as justice”²⁷ is “a rule many believe to be naturally engraved on the mind of everyone that comes into the world.”²⁸

Given my argument above this revelatory dimension should be understood to have a dynamic social and historical character. An awareness of the moral law of justice, mercy and truth arises within the network of relationships that constitute societies and communities. Different communities and groups will articulate and emphasise different aspects of the moral law and deemphasise, neglect and even suppress others. New and varied understandings of what justice, mercy and truth entail emerge within historical processes as the active presence of Spirit evokes diverse preparations for and anticipations of God’s coming reign in interaction with human responses and the particularities of a given context. This is however, for the Christian, not a source of revelation independent to and supplementary to God’s revelation in Christ witnessed to in the Bible. Wesley argued that the same moral law revealed through prevenient grace was revealed with greater clarity to Israel in the moral core of the Mosaic Law and expounded most completely by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. As Pope emphasises Christ is the ultimate revelation of God who fulfils, transforms and corrects all other revelation and hence in him we discover the full meaning and significance of justice, mercy and truth.

In revealing the moral requirements of the law the Spirit makes people aware of the brokenness and failures of human society. The Spirit thus awakes people from their complacency to look squarely at the way human sin is distorting human society and inflicting pain on people. However this revelation of human failure does not only illuminate society it illuminates our personal sin and our participation in the social sin. Equally importantly the Spirit inspires hope for something different, for a new world where sin and suffering no longer dominate humanity – that is the Spirit inspires a longing for God’s reign even when people cannot articulate this hope in religious or theological language. The Spirit breaks open closed and dominating ways of thinking to inspire new creative visions of the future. It is this inspiring of hope that motivates and empowers people to challenge injustice, oppression and falsehood and to work for justice, mercy and truth.

Wesley and Pope refer to a third related dimension of preparation. This is the limitation of human depravity and the restriction of human sin. Human beings are not as evil as they could be. For Wesley and Pope this was primarily achieved in the depth of the human person through the human conscience. Contemporary developments in psychology, cultural anthropology and sociology have demonstrated that our behaviour patterns, our consciences and our understanding of right and wrong are deeply influenced by the network of social relationships within which we live. Hence we should see prevenient grace as working not only within the human person but also within the networks of relationships and structures within which we exist to restrain evil. In restraining evil in its personal and social dimensions the prevenient grace limits the wounds inflicted on others.

A fourth dimension of preparation for God’s reign is the entering into the depths of the anguish of human beings, experiencing their pain, groaning with them, and crying out for the healing and

²⁶ Sermon 34, “The Original, Nature and Purpose of the Law”, 1.4, *Works* 2: 7.

²⁷ Sermon 95, “On the Education of Children”, ¶ 11, *Works* 3: 352, see his exposition of this in Sermon 30, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount – Discourse Tenth”, *Works*. 1: 660-663.

²⁸ Sermon 30, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount – Discourse Tenth”, ¶ 22, *Works* 1: 661.

restoring reign of God. This is not an ineffectual, helpless solidarity it is the active presence of the Spirit in the midst of human suffering. Grace confronts evil for the good of the victims. The Spirit challenges, critiques and judges persons, networks and structures that oppress, exploit and denigrate. Preventive grace fractures and breaks open the networks of power and injustice in all dimensions to create loci of hope, healing, transformation and liberation in the midst of human suffering. These fractures become the spaces where the Spirit enabled people can anticipate God's reign through the pursuit of justice, mercy and truth. They also become places where the Spirit plants the mustard seed of God's reign. When the seed germinates and becomes a tree, God's reign flourishes in the midst of suffering and the roots expand the fractures undermining the foundations of the oppressive structures and networks of power.

Preventive grace entails not only a preparation for the coming of God's reign it also anticipates God's reign. The active presence of the Spirit elicits multidimensional foretastes of what God's reign is like. The first dimension is that human beings are empowered to do good. They are enabled to fulfil in some measure the requirements of the moral law summarised by the triad of justice, mercy and truth. The more they fulfil them the more they are enabled to do so. All the moral good that is present in human society is the consequence of the active presence of the Spirit. The Spirit is at work in mobilising and directing social and communal movements that promote justice, mercy and truth, and that foster healing and reconciliation. Wesley could thus affirm that legally entrenched civil rights are a "gift from God".²⁹

A second dimension is the active presence of the Spirit is a healing, transforming and empowering presence which works towards the healing of the deep emotional and psychological wounds inflicted by human sin on its victims. The goal of the Spirit's work is to enable all human beings to live a fully human life and to overcome the debilitating effects of woundedness. The Spirit empowers powerless and the vulnerable, lifts up those who have been humiliated, heals the wounded, welcomes the excluded and strengthens the weak. In a particular way the Spirit works on the margins of networks of power, in the fissures and cracks in the dominant systems, on the garbage dumps of exploitative cultures and under the feet of oppressors. The Spirit empowers, transforms and liberates the vulnerable, the excluded and the oppressed enabling them to resist those forces that would deny them the right to act as image bearers of God.

A third dimension is to recognise with Wesley that the Spirit anticipates God's reign in all people regardless of their religion or lack thereof, Wesley noted that there is more justice, mercy and truth to be found in non-Christian societies in Africa, India and China than in protestant Europe.³⁰ Pope summarises it thus:

Those who yield to the influences of the restraining and prompting Spirit of conviction, and strive to *cease to do evil and learn to do well*, are in the way of duty approved by God. ... It is incorrect even to affirm that there is no ethical duty possible to the unregenerate. ... there is a religious life before the regenerate life, and it has its morals.

²⁹ NT Notes on Acts 22:28 – Wesley's comment is extracted from Philip Doddridge see his *The Family Expositor* (London: William Baynes and Son, 1825), 552. Wesley and Doddridge refer to "civil privileges", the comment is on Paul's claiming his rights as a Roman citizen to protect himself from being scourged indicating that they are referring to legally entrenched rights. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (Dublin. Thomas Ewing: 1768) provides "publick right" as a synonym for privilege.

³⁰ Sermon 61 "The Mystery of Iniquity", 33, Works 2:467 & 468, and *Thoughts upon Slavery* 2:11, Works (Jackson) 11:65.

There are *fruits meet for repentance*, which are also *the fruit of the Spirit*, though not yet the Spirit of regeneration.³¹

A fourth dimension related to the above is the affirmation that the Spirit is present and active not only in all people regardless of their religion but also to acknowledge that the Spirit is active in other religions. In *Thoughts upon Slavery* Wesley relates the presence of justice, mercy and truth in African societies to their non Christian religions, either Islam or African traditional religion. Pope affirms that God “planted a religious germ in man’s heart which has always been developing with infinite variety in every variety of soils.”³² Human religion in its diversity is a response to the active presence of the Spirit. Wesley could thus affirm the efforts of Socrates to work for the religious reform of Athenian society as inspired by the Spirit.³³ Pope similarly saw the reformers in non Christian religions as responding to the preventient grace when their reform efforts brought these religions closer to the revelation of God.³⁴ He thus interpreted them as preparatory anticipations of God’s revelation in Christ.

The consequence of the active presence of the Spirit in the human person and in human culture and society is that human existence and society exists in the dialectic of human sin and preventient grace. Human existence is at the same time sinful and graced so that there is a constant, dynamic and interactive tension between sin and grace. In interpreting human society both aspects need to be emphasised. It is to be expected that we will find within human society, within particular cultures, societies and communities and within persons manifestations of human depravity and the active presence of the Spirit. Because the work of the Spirit is interactive we would expect that there could be growth in justice, mercy and truth as the Spirit responds to those who promote these values. Yet because human depravity is always present we will expect retrogression, failure and even radical reversals. Yet again because the work of the Spirit is personal, free and unpredictable we will not be surprised by dramatic and unexpected movements towards justice, mercy and truth. Yet even in the midst of depravity the Spirit responds to, limits, overcomes and redirects the sinful intentions and evil consequences human persons and social structures. The Spirit can and does bring good out of evil without legitimating the evil. Human sin often perverts and undermines the good consequences of the Spirits work. Thus even those institutions designed to promote “justice, mercy and truth” are often corrupted and produce a mixture of good and evil. While those institutions designed for other purposes, notably the creation of wealth for a few can despite themselves be used by God to bring about good. This does not legitimate the institutions but demonstrates the free and strong grace of God.

The Human Response – Penultimate Actualisations of *Shalom*

As a consequence of and in response to the preparatory and anticipatory activity of the Spirit new realities emerge and old realities are transformed. While these realities are inspired and enabled by the Spirit and the consequence of the Spirits enticing and striving, they are human constructions developed in response to the Spirit. They are not in an immediate sense actualisations of God’s reign. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s categories of the ultimate and the penultimate provide a suggestive way of

³¹ *Compendium* 3:193.

³² *Compendium* 1:59

³³ See comments Acts 4:19 in *NT Notes*. It is not entirely clear how Wesley understood Socrates critique of Athenian society, though his comments on Acts 17:23 suggest he saw it as primarily a religious reform.

³⁴ *Compendium* 1:380

interpreting their relationship to God's reign.³⁵ Constraints of space prevent a detailed analysis of Bonhoeffer's usage of the concepts in dialogue with a Wesleyan theology of prevenient grace. My aim is a more modest attempt to draw on and reinterpret aspects of Bonhoeffer's thought to develop the understanding of prevenient grace developed above.³⁶

In the context of the present discussion the ultimate is to be understood as the coming of God's reign.³⁷ The penultimate is human society in this world as it is directed toward the coming of God's reign. There is a temporal relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate as the penultimate is that which comes before, which prepares the way for and anticipates God's reign. However the relationship is not to be understood in terms of ideology of progress. The ultimate is not the conclusion to a process of development; it is not the completion of the penultimate. It is qualitatively distinct from the penultimate. The coming of God's reign is the breaking in of the eschatological future. It is God's new and unprecedented work. It transcends all that precedes it even when it takes up and transforms aspects of the penultimate. On a personal level it can be described in Wesleyan terms it is the qualitative distinction is brought about by the new birth.

How then should the penultimate be understood? It is the partial and fragmentary actualisations of *shalom* or to use Wesley's language the embodiment of justice, mercy and truth within this world. The Hebrew motif of *shalom* refers to the overcoming of sin and evil resulting in the comprehensive wellbeing of human beings as they live in fellowship with God, in relationships of justice and equity with each other and in dynamic interdependence with their fellow creatures and the earth. In its fullest sense *shalom* is a way of describing the ultimate, however to the extent that persons, societies and communities practice justice, mercy and truth in response to prevenient grace *shalom* is actualised in a partial and fragmentary way. These actualisations occur within this world that is within the potential and restrictions of finite creation and creatures; they are limited and distorted by human sin and ignorance, and participate in the brokenness of creation. Human responses to prevenient grace are thus do not "build the kingdom of God of earth" and events of political liberation are not the coming of God's reign. Such human achievements are penultimate.

The ultimate gives significance and status to the penultimate. The coming of God's reign gives significance – ultimate significance – to the human constructions by demonstrating them to be preparations for and anticipations of God's reign. The preparatory dimensions open the way for the coming of God's reign while the anticipatory dimension are taken up into and transformed within God's reign. Hence the penultimate cannot be neglected in favour of the ultimate. However the significance of the penultimate is only seen in the light of the ultimate. It is the vision of God's reign

³⁵ Bonhoeffer uses the categories in various writings with the most detailed discussion can be found in his *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Vol. 6, edited by Clifford J. Green, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 146-218. Ján Liguš provides a useful analysis of the use of these categories within the Bonhoeffer corpus in his "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ultimate, Penultimate and their Impact. The Origin and Essence of Ethics." In Guy Carter, René van Eyden, Hans-Dirk van Hoogstraten, Jurjen Wiesma, (eds), *Bonhoeffer's Ethics: Old Europe and New Frontiers* (Kampen: Kok, 1991), 59-72.

³⁶ Three critical points should however to be noted. First Bonhoeffer develops these categories in relation to Christology, a theology of prevenient grace provides a pneumatological undergirding for the category of the penultimate. Second in developing these categories on the personal level Bonhoeffer engages in a discussion of works prior to justification which has similarities with Wesley's discussion on this issue, however for Bonhoeffer justification is the actualization of the ultimate while for Wesley sanctification is. This results in a number of different emphases. Thirdly Bonhoeffer interprets the relationship between the ultimate and the penultimate Christologically – a Trinitarian understanding of God's reign provides a more comprehensive point of departure.

³⁷ In a sermon outline from 1935 Bonhoeffer refers to the coming of God's reign as the ultimate. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Illegal Theologen Ausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935-1937*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Volume 14, (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1996), 629-632.

that enables us to discern the character and content of *shalom* and the revelation of God in Christ that provides the most complete portrait of justice, mercy and truth. Hence the ultimate cannot be neglected or abandoned for the sake of the penultimate.

The character of the penultimate as penultimate must be maintained for the sake of the ultimate. This can take two forms. The first is when the penultimate is given ultimate significance it becomes tyrannical and oppressive. Requiring absolute loyalty and conformity it becomes an idol. The deification of the penultimate must be resisted in the name of ultimate loyalty to Christ to whom all other powers are subject and by whom they are critiqued and judged. The second form is when attempts are made to equate the penultimate with the ultimate. That is when the penultimate is used in the endeavour to establish God's reign on earth. Here to the result is the loss of the justice, mercy and truth. Thus, for example, the confession that Christ is Lord is an integral dimension of the ultimate however the attempt to impose it via the penultimate must be resisted. It is not only a denial of justice which respects human agency, but it destroys the ultimate reality of freely given obedience to God. Religious freedom in the penultimate is the precondition of genuine faith in the ultimate. Hence for the sake of the ultimate the penultimate must be maintained.

The penultimate is the realm of responsible living and acting. In the penultimate we are faced with the challenge of making responsible choices responding to real situations without the certainty of knowing whether our actions are ultimately right. As finite creatures we have limited knowledge, as sinful creatures our best motives are distorted by sin and in a complex and broken world we are confronted by choices in a grey world where there is often no path that is clearly right or good. Often we have to make choices between evils or between goods. Hence we are required to make responsible decisions in the pursuit of greater justice, mercy and truth yet recognising our own fallibility and sin.

The Prevenient, the Penultimate and the Political

At the beginning of this paper I proposed that the most fruitful way to develop a theology of the political rooted in the Methodist tradition is to root the understanding of the political dimension of life in the theology of prevenient grace. In the light of the preceding discussion this proposal needs to be expanded further. The political is a human response to the active presence of the Spirit preparing for and anticipating the coming of God's reign. To the extent that politics is directed toward the reign of God it is an aspect of the penultimate. However politics like all dimensions of human life and society is deeply impacted by sin. When it is dominated by sin it becomes an obstacle to the coming of God's reign and the destroyer of *shalom*. In what follows I will briefly explore the implications of understanding the political as an aspect of the penultimate

The Purpose of Politics

If the political is an aspect of the penultimate what then is its function within the penultimate? Leon Hynson has argued that Wesley understood the primary task of government as the maintenance of liberty.³⁸ Weber countered that liberty and order is a more satisfactory interpretation of Wesley.³⁹ He went on to argue that a more fruitful approach is to see the imitation of God as fundamental to Wesley's ethics and hence to the calling of government. In particular he proposed that government is

³⁸ See Leon Hynson , "Human Liberty as a Divine Right: A Study in the Political Maturation of John Wesley," in *Journal of Church and State* 25 (1983):57-85

³⁹ Weber, *Politics*, 292.

called to imitate the governance of God by administering justice and mercy.⁴⁰ This second proposal from Weber provides a more comprehensive interpretation of Wesley's comments that include but go beyond the maintenance of liberty and order.

As we noted above the concepts of justice and mercy are found throughout Wesley's writings often in a triad with "truth" as a summary of the requirements of the moral law. He used this triad not only to describe the moral character of God and the moral image of God in humanity; but also the moral standard that God expects of persons who have not heard the gospel.⁴¹ Significantly for our purposes is the way that he used this triad in political contexts as a basis for evaluating the activities of governments. Nations were evaluated by the extent of their conformity to justice mercy and truth.⁴² He critiqued slavery and British colonialism as contrary to justice, mercy and truth.⁴³ In an illuminating reference in his *Journal* he criticised the legitimacy of a criminal trial of a man accused of smuggling due its failure to meet the standard of justice, mercy and truth.⁴⁴ Clearly the pursuit of justice, mercy and truth are not the unique calling of those engaged in the political sphere. However Wesley's use of the triad in political contexts suggests that the particular task of the political sphere is the organisation and use of power to govern and order society in such a manner that justice, mercy and truth are established, maintained and promoted. Wesley's usage of justice, mercy and truth suggest the following brief descriptions. Justice entails treating people in accordance with whom they are as persons created in the image of God. Further that people are rewarded or punished in a way that is proportionate to their actions deeds. Mercy entails meeting the needs and changing the situation of those who suffer and those who are the victims of injustice and exploitation. Truth refers to actions and words that display integrity and honesty.

The emphasis on justice, mercy and truth is complimented by a brief comment from Wesley that the task of government is to "redress or prevent numerous evils" and "to promote the solid and lasting welfare"⁴⁵ of the people. This comment is noteworthy in that it emphasises that government responsibility involves both responding to evil and promoting the good of the people. The response to evil was first to redress evil; that is putting right, compensating for or repairing the damage done by evil, and second to prevent evil. The order is important for it places the emphasis of the healing of the victims first. The task of the government is not limited to responding to evil, Wesley's vision is that the government ought to use its authority to promote the welfare of its citizens. Much of the involvement of later Methodist's in politics was attempted to implement this positive vision. Further it accords with an understanding of the political as a penultimate sphere rooted in preventient grace. To the extent that governments implement this vision the way God's reign is prepared and its coming anticipated – that is the political becomes an element of the penultimate.

Politics as a Means of Preventient Grace

If the task of the political sphere is the ordering of society in such a manner that justice mercy and truth are maintained and advanced and the peoples' welfare promoted then politics and political institutions and formations can then be understood as a means of preventient grace. In Wesleyan terms the means of grace are those practises, structures and institutions that God usually uses to

⁴⁰ Weber *Politics*, 297-302.

⁴¹ See, Sermon 1, "Salvation by Faith", 1:1 in *Works* 1:119.

⁴² See Sermon 61, "The Mystery of Iniquity" 33, *Works* 2:467-468.

⁴³ Sermon 61 "The Mystery of Iniquity", 33, *Works* 2:467 & 468, and *Thoughts upon Slavery* 4, *Works* (Jackson) 11:70-75.

⁴⁴ Entry for 3rd of July 1761, in *Works* vol. 21:332 & 333.

⁴⁵ *A Serious Address to the People of England with regard to the State of the Nation* in *Works* (Jackson) volume 11: 141.

convey God's grace to people.⁴⁶ Hence the sphere of politics is a means through which the Spirit acts to counteract sin and evil, and to prepare for and anticipate the coming of God's reign. There is precedent for describing the political as a means of grace in Wesley's identification of "works of mercy" as a means of grace.⁴⁷ To the extent that politics works for the good of others it is an expansion of "works of mercy" to address the social dimensions of sin and woundedness. Further as Joerg Rieger has argued the identification of "works of mercy" as a means of grace has an important consequence in that it transforms them in such a way that grace flows in two directions. On the one hand God uses "works of mercy" to transform the situation of the needy. On the other those who perform "works of mercy" encounter God and are transformed by God as they engage with the needy. Politics as the engagement in the struggle for justice, mercy and truth thus becomes the means of a twofold encounter with the transforming grace of God. The lives of the recipients of justice, mercy and truth are transformed and the providers simultaneously may encounter God through their engagement.

Importantly Wesley argued that the means of grace are not to be identified with God's grace. There is no automatic relationship between the use of the means and the encounter with God's grace. The political sphere is a deeply conflicted area with diverse forces at work. Injustice, exploitation, corruption and oppression are as much characteristic of the political processes as justice, mercy and truth. Here the forces of sin and woundedness in their deeply personal as well as social forms are present and active. Yet in the midst of this the Spirit is at work wrestling with people, inspiring them with new visions; encouraging them to resist evil and to promote justice; empowering them to overcome the powerful; enticing them with hope for a better future, and sustaining them they are wearied and disheartened by the long struggle. Hence there can be no simplistic identification of the political as a means of preventient grace. Here as elsewhere Spirit's activity is dynamic calling for and evoking human responses to which in turn the Spirit responds. The Spirit's work is also personal and the Spirit desires to draw the political into a personal empowering relationship. The Spirit's activity is mysterious, free, unpredictable, and multidimensional hence we might see evidence of the active presence of the Spirit in some dimensions of politics and not others. However to the extent that political actors and structures become engaged in the promotion of justice, mercy and truth they have the potential to become a means of grace. To the extent that they do not they cease to be a means of grace and may become an instrument of evil.

Wesley distinguished between the instituted means of grace and the prudential means of grace.⁴⁸ The instituted referring to those means of grace which we find described and commended in scripture and the prudential means are those which are not directly attested to in scripture but which are the product of human reasoning based on scripture and which experience has shown to be means through which God encounters human beings. The Methodist movement itself can be understood to be such a prudential means of grace.⁴⁹ It was an exceptional movement raised up by the Spirit to renew and reform the church so that the church could become once more the effective means of grace that God established it to be. The exceptional character of Methodism legitimated its departures from the established order. Where the established church had ceased to function, as in

⁴⁶ Sermon 16 "The Means of Grace" in Works 1: 376-397.

⁴⁷ See Sermon 92 "On Zeal", 5, Works vol. 3: 313 & 314, and Joerg Rieger, *Grace under Pressure: Negotiating the Heart of the Methodist Tradition*. (Nashville: GBHEM, 2011), 29-42.

⁴⁸ See Works 10: 40 and 41, Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 193-195

⁴⁹ See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace", The Källstad Lecture
Överås Metodistkyrkans nordiska teologiska seminarium, Göteborg, Sweden -- May 24, 2005

post revolutionary USA, then the exceptional means of grace took over the role of an instituted means of grace became such an instituted means.

In an analogous fashion the political arena can be understood to include both ordinary instituted means of grace and prudential means of grace. The instituted means of grace are the structures of government called and mandated by God to govern society. These are human structures that are created in response to the active presence of the Spirit. As is the case of all human structures they are shaped by culture, history, and economics. They reflect not only the work of the Spirit but also the potential of creation and the finitude and sinfulness of humanity. To affirm that they are a means of grace does not lift them above the fray of normal human activity but rather affirms that God graciously condescends to use them despite this. However as the human structures they can become so infected by sin that they become instruments of injustice, cruelty and corruption. They become allied to the powerful and oppressors of the weak. Instead of working for the welfare of the people they exploit the people for the extravagant benefit of the few. They cease to be a means of grace and become instruments of evil.

The prudential means of grace are the Spirit's response to the failures and corruption of the institutional means of grace. The whole array political movements and institutions that may compliment and at times work to correct, transform and even replace the governments are prudential means of grace to the extent that they promote justice, mercy and truth. However these are only prudential in the sense that we do not find detailed scriptural prescriptions for such structures. However the Bible bears witness that the Spirit characteristically empowers and envisions those outside the structures of political power, often those on the margins of society to become the means of bringing justice, mercy and truth to the people. Given that in many cases governments work with and for the interests of the rich and powerful at the expenses of the poor and vulnerable prudential means of grace are the usual way in which the Spirit works in unjust and exploitative societies. Genuine democracies may be understood as attempts to integrate the prudential and the instituted means of grace.

A Politics of Realism and Optimism

Political theology grounded in prevenient grace is characterised by realism and optimism. It is realistic because it recognises the reality of human finitude, ignorance, self deception and sinfulness. It is not that human political institutions are as bad they could be but that they have the potential for great evil and even their good actions are influenced by sin and evil. Wesley argued that the good actions of the regenerate are corrupted and influenced by sin and even those who attain Christian perfection are ignorant and limited, and therefore make ethical mistakes. How much more will this be true when dealing with the sphere of prevenient grace? Politics as an aspect of the penultimate is subject all the limitations of the penultimate.

Locating politics in the penultimate affirms that there are no perfect solutions; that a political policy that attempts to do what appears to be the absolute good can have devastatingly bad consequences, and that compromise might be the right and best action. It recognises that politics has to do with power and the struggle to maintain power in order to act. Hence it must be realistic. Yet realism can be end up being compromise in favour of the elite who dominate the economic and political spheres. So the challenge must be posed of: "Realism for whom?" Politics becomes a means of grace when it embrace a realism that serves justice, mercy and truth. That is a realism that sides with the vulnerable and promotes the healing of the wounded.

However God's Spirit is present and active within and through the complexity of human structures and networks. Because politics can become a means prevenient grace we can expect it to be a means of bringing about surprising transformation; to be characterised by progressive growth in justice, mercy and truth, and sometimes against great odds to promote the well being of the people. It affirms a Wesleyan theology of law and gospel. What God commands God also enables people to fulfil. Yet optimism does not involve a commitment to an ideology of progress. Grace is resistible and original sin is present. Even in the midst of actions that promote justice, mercy and truth, one will find that which promotes injustice, cruelty and falsehood. Optimism must be qualified by realism but realism must not become illegitimate compromise or give way to despair.

Affirmation of Pluralism

Wesley argued strongly for the right to religious freedom and the duty of the state to protect this freedom even though he did not question that the British state had a particular relationship to Christianity in general and the Church of England in particular. For Wesley this was a consequence of his understanding of liberty as an integral component of the natural image of God. Justice required that it be respected. A theology of the political rooted in prevenient grace directed toward the establishment of justice, mercy and truth, moves beyond the recognition of religious freedom and affirms religious pluralism in the political sphere. It confesses that the Spirit is actively present not only in all human beings but also within diverse religions and philosophies. In a remarkable sermon, "A Caution Against Bigotry" Wesley argued for mutual respect and co-operation amongst Christians even when they hold radically different beliefs with regard to doctrine and ethics if they have a common cause of "casting out devils" by which he meant promoting the gospel including the message of inward and outward holiness. Towards the end of the sermon he proposed that his readers should consider whether it is possible to work together with "a Papist, an Arian, a Socinian ... a Jew, a deist, or a Turk."⁵⁰ He thus suggested cooperation with people of different religions as long as they have the common cause of "casting out devils". How this relates to the preaching of the gospel is not clear – however it is clearly applicable to the political context. People of different religions and no religion can work together in the pursuit of justice, mercy and truth even when the concrete meaning of this triad will require considerable discussion. In some cases this might involve working with some who not Christians against some who profess Christian faith when these are not pursuing justice, mercy and truth.

An affirmation of the active presence of the Spirit within the diverse religions and philosophies pushes us beyond cooperation to mutual valuing and dialogue. The followers of other religions and philosophies have an understanding of and commitment to justice, mercy and truth because of and not despite their adherence to a particular religion or philosophy. Further because the diverse religions and philosophies developed in specific contexts with their own histories their adherents will bring particular contributions to debates concerning the meaning and significance of justice, mercy and truth. These particular will enrich the discussion and can lead to fuller expressions of justice, mercy and truth. Hence a Methodist political theology rooted in prevenient grace affirms pluralism in the political realm and rejects all forms of religious nationalism and Constantinian mixtures of religion and the state.

This does not deny the particular identity of the church and its contribution to the political sphere. The distinctive identity and role of the church arises from it as the product and means of

⁵⁰ Sermon 38 "A Caution Against Bigotry" 4.4, in *Works* vol. 2:77

regenerating and sanctifying grace as well as prevenient grace in its more concentrated form. The consequence of this is that the church participates more directly in the ultimate. Rather than being a dimension of the penultimate the church is the proleptic manifestation of God's coming reign in the context of this world. Through revelation in Christ the church has access to the fuller presentation of the moral law, it is called to proclaim and embody the biblical narratives of salvation and is the means through which God brings about deep personal transformation and moral formation. The political calling of the church is first of all to be the church – that is the community which more fully expresses the lifestyle of God's reign within its communal life. Yet an engagement with the political beyond the church is an essential dimension of the church's identity; not in order to transform the political into the ecclesial but to promote greater expressions of justice, mercy and truth in a way which respects the political as a means of prevenient grace and a dimension of the penultimate.

The Priority of the Political over the Economic

A political theology that understands politics as a means of prevenient grace promoting justice, mercy and truth will affirm the priority of the political over the economic. That is, it will argue for the political regulation of the economic sphere so that it acts in accordance with justice, mercy and truth. It is worth noting that while Wesley argued that preachers should not preach politics and that the main political task of the church was to support the king he was prepared to criticise the government and promote alternative policies when it came to economic exploitation. This can be seen in his opposition to the slave trade and economic activities associated with it; his critique of the British colonial activities in India carried out by the East India Company, and his various proposals to deal with poverty including major tax reforms.⁵¹ Given the complex and diverse relationships between the economic and political spheres in the contemporary world the exact relationship needs to be negotiated in each context with a view to the establishment and maintenance of justice, mercy and truth. The priority of the political does not mean a corrupt relationship in which the economic is used to enhance the power and wealth of the political elite. It does mean a critique of the dominant model in many countries where the political sphere is administered for the benefit of the economic elite. It is the affirmation that political authorities are mandated to so order society that it is characterised by justice, mercy and truth. Where this goal is undermined by economic interests political authorities have a responsibility to regulate the economy for the benefit of all.

Power to the People

A major theme in Wesley's political tracts was the rejection of the philosophical idea that political power came from the people and was delegated to the governing authorities by them. This in turn led him to reject appeals for more democratic forms of government and strongly criticise mass movements demanding political change. He justified his position theologically by appealing to Romans 13 and related New Testament passages.⁵² The central theological issue for him was that government entailed the use of force including deadly force to punish people. No human being has the right to kill another. The authorisation of the use of force, particularly deadly force, must come from God. Hence God must be the source of political power. He did not address the major issue of how God authorises particular governments. Wesley was well aware of the complexity of the history of government in England that led to the constitutional arrangement of his day. Yet he asserted that this arrangement was authorised by God and hence to be obeyed even though it owed its existence

⁵¹ "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions" in *Works (Jackson)* 11:53-58

⁵² "Thoughts Concerning the Origins of Power", in *Works (Jackson)* 11:46-52

to the Glorious Revolution. His comments on 1 Peter 2:13 may indicate something of his reasoning. He argues that secular powers are: "Instrumentally ... *ordained* by men" but "originally all their power is from God."⁵³ Government's come to power by diverse human processes but once they are in power their authority comes from God. Wesley pragmatically rejected more democratic forms of government because he believed they would result in a decrease in liberty and he rejected the attempt to provide a philosophical basis for democracy through the claim that power comes from the people. If this is a legitimate construction of Wesley's argument then he would not oppose democratic forms of government that guaranteed greater levels of justice, mercy and truth as long as it was recognised that their power to govern comes from God.

Theodore Weber has argued for an alternative Wesleyan view of the political calling of all people through the use of the motif of the political image of God. In this model God gives authority to governments through the people. This basic argument is strengthened through the understanding, developed above that to be created in the image of God is an assertion in the face of oppressive political powers that all human beings are created to be God's representatives. As we argued above one dimension of preventer grace is the empowerment of people to fulfil their calling to represent God by pursuing justice, mercy and truth. Hence a political theology that understands politics as a means of preventer grace will affirm the political initiative of the masses; whether this initiative takes the place through democratic political processes or through mass movements such as those that rose up against communism in Eastern Europe, apartheid in South Africa, and the Arab dictators in North Africa. In his comments on Acts 23:28 referred to earlier Wesley implies that all people have a political responsibility. He states: "In a thousand circumstances, gratitude to God, and duty to men, will oblige us to insist upon [civil rights]; and engage us to strive to transmit them improved, rather than impaired to posterity." He also made surprisingly positive comments in his *Journal* on mass action to redress economic exploitation. In his entry for 27 May 1758 he notes describes the following scene:⁵⁴

The mob had been in motion all the day. But their business was only with the forestallers of the market, who had bought up all the corn far and near, to starve the poor, and load a Dutch ship, which lay at the quay; but the mob brought it all out into the market, and sold it for the owners at the common price. And this they did with all the calmness and composure imaginable, and without striking or hurting anyone.

Wesley does not comment on the incident but his sympathies clearly seem to be with the mob. In another place he writes about a popular uprising in Ireland and comments in his *Journal* of 15 June 1773:⁵⁵

When I came to Belfast, I learned the real cause of the late insurrections in this neighborhood. Lord Donegal, the proprietor of almost the whole country, came hither to give his tenants new leases. But when they came, they found two merchants of the town had taken their farms over their heads; so that multitudes of them, with their wives and children, were turned out to the wide world. It is no wonder that, as their lives were now bitter to them, they should fly out as they did. It is rather a wonder that they did not go much farther. And if they had, who would have been most in fault? Those who were without home, without money, without food for themselves and families? Or those who drove them to this extremity?

⁵³ NT Notes – 1 Peter 2:13

⁵⁴ Works vol. 21:150

⁵⁵ Works vol. 22:377 & 378

Moving beyond Wesley these mass political movements can be understood theologically as the assertion of ordinary people of their responsibilities and rights as bearers of the image God to the extent that they promote justice, mercy and truth. As such they are responses to the empowering presence of the Spirit and a means of preventient grace.

The Priority of the Margins

Politics which understands itself as a means of preventient grace affirms the priority of the margins – those who are vulnerable, excluded, exploited, oppressed and victimised. This has two dimensions the first is that the margins ought to be the centre of political policy and decision making. Justice requires a particular attention to those who are unjustly treated. Mercy requires a transformation of the situation of those who suffer. Truth requires that we see things from the perspective of their impact on the excluded, the exploited and the victims. It entails a rejection of the perspective of those who twist the truth in the service of the economic and political elite. The validity of political processes as a means of grace is thus to be measured by the impact they have on the margins

The theology of preventient grace developed above argues that the Spirit is present and active in the fissures and cracks of systems of human power to bring about the restoration of the defaced image of God through the transformation, healing and empowerment of the excluded, the exploited and victimised. The goal is that that they can act as the representatives of God in the world promoting justice, mercy and truth. In *Thoughts upon Slavery* Wesley shows considerable sympathy with the various ways that enslaved people resisted slavery arguing that this was an expression of their natural liberty. For Wesley liberty is a dimension of the image of God. A theology which confesses that the Spirit is active in restoring the image of God in human beings by empowering the marginalised must therefore affirm the response of the marginalised to the work of the Spirit. It thus affirms the agency of the marginalised and their resistance against oppressive and unjust systems. Politics that becomes a means of preventient grace moves beyond placing the margins at the centre of its policies to affirming and promoting the agency of the marginalised. In doing so it functions as a means of grace for people at the centres and at the margins. The liberation and well being of the elite is dependent upon the liberation and well being of the margins.

Conclusion

A political theology rooted in preventient grace provides a Methodist political theology that arises out of key elements in the Methodist tradition, supplies a theological interpretation of Methodist political praxis and points the way towards dynamic new involvement in the political sphere. Such a political theology affirms the contributions of others whether Christians or not; it is thus appropriate in contemporary pluralistic contexts. Its recognition of the diversity of human responses to the Spirit gives it flexibility in relating to diverse political contexts.

Further it provides a way of bringing together key themes that are present in other traditions and thus makes an important ecumenical contribution. In common with the Lutheran two kingdoms theory it recognises the distinction between the different ways that God works in the world but it is based on Wesleyan rather than a Lutheran understanding of law and gospel and affirms that the government has a positive role in promoting the welfare of the people. In common with the Reformed tradition it affirms the role of the church in reforming politics and the importance of the moral law as a basis for human law. But it rejects the theocratic Christianising tendencies of some forms of Calvinism and affirms religious pluralism. With the Anabaptist tradition it emphasises the

unique identity of the church as constituted by the biblical narratives, it affirms the place of disciplines Christian living and the striving for perfection. But it rejects the tendency to withdraw from the complexity and compromise of the political sphere. We can also find within it the emphases that resonate with Christian realism and liberation theologies. Yet it is not merely an eclectic mix of diverse elements it has a unique identity rooted in Methodist theology and praxis.