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PREVENIENT GRACE: THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN THE DRAMA OF RESCUE

There must be an alternative. Does salvation come purely by God's sovereign decree or does salvation come purely by human initiative? Must we shove one another into one camp or the other? Surely not! Good theology is always balanced without compromise.

In addressing the issue of "Reconceiving Evangelism in the Wesleyan Traditions," I've been asked to focus on prevenient grace. I do so happily as I feel that this is an excellent point of contact for dialogue with the other groups of the Institute. A part of John Wesley's genius was his ability to achieve balance between perspectives normally at odds with each other. Wesley emphasized the grace of God so as to portray God as the principal character in the drama of rescue while preserving the freedom of human response--the heart of an evangelistic appeal. The catalyst for all of this was an understanding of prevenient grace with justifying and sanctifying grace to follow.

Let's begin this brief study by suggesting just two headings:

- I. Prevenient Grace Defined
- II. By Grace We Are Saved Through Faith, the Larger Picture

I. Prevenient Grace Defined

As with many theological issues, there is frequently a question

behind the question. Before we can discuss Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace, we must first of all discuss his understanding of grace itself. In his sermon, "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," Wesley writes that "by 'the grace of God' is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I a sinner, through the merits of Christ, am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God, the Holy Ghost, which 'worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure'" (Works, Vol. 5, p. 141; cf. Vol. 5, p. 106). If we can pursue this image even further, grace, in much of Wesley's writings, is nearly synonymous with the work of the Holy Spirit. To refer to the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of grace might well have been his way of disguising the language of the Spirit in an age when any mention of the Spirit at all was frequently hammered as rank enthusiasm. Who knows for certain? For now, however, there is at least some cause to make the association between grace and Holy Spirit. So, what does this mean?

Prevenient grace has been commonly referred to as that work of God in the life of the believer (or at least potential believer) between conception and conversion. If our identification of grace with Spirit is legitimate, then what we are really talking about is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer between conception (or physical birth, let's not haggle) and conversion.

Prevenient grace was, of course, not a term unique to John Wesley. The theologians of the old Franciscan School referred to prevenient

grace as that "law" which convicted and thereby prepared one for "real grace" which came through the sacraments. The Reformers objected. Luther, in particular, regarded the whole medieval conception of grace as a degradation of the Word. The entire reformation bias insisted that grace was imparted through the Word. We should not, therefore, find it surprising that the Spirit was also tied very closely to, if not bound by, the Word. To broaden our scope just a bit, listen to the words of John Calvin. He writes that while Paul "urges the Thessalonians not to 'quench the Spirit' (1 Thess. 5:19-20), [he] does not loftily catch them up to empty speculations without the Word... Certainly a far different sobriety befits the children of God, who just as they see themselves, without the Spirit of God bereft of the whole light of truth, so are not unaware that the Word is the instrument by which the Lord dispenses the illumination of His Spirit to believers" (Institutes I. ix. 3).

Wesley, although no doubt aware of Calvin's admonition, expanded his own understanding of grace to include any work of the Spirit, by whatever means, in the life of the believer. Even more important is that Calvin not only limited the Spirit's works to the Word, but he insisted that the quickening of the Word, and thereby the Spirit, was imparted only to the elect. This, of course, limited prevenient grace (or common grace according to Calvin) to those predestined or foreordained to become a covenant people.

Hopefully not to confuse the issue further, Wesley seems to have emphasized the term prevenient grace in contrast to an opposing Calvinism

which determined to preserve the sovereignty of God (admittedly a worthy task), but dispensed with the freedom of human response. Again, to state it simply, Calvin and the reformed theologians to follow spoke of prevenient grace as that common grace limited, and available only to the elect. It was irresistible. Wesley, on the other hand, spoke of prevenient grace as that preventing grace universal, and available to all. It was resistable.

Wesley insisted that salvation "from the first drawing of grace in the soul, till it is consummated in glory" was the work of God (Works, Vol. 6, p. 44). He writes that the work of salvation includes "all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed natural conscience, but more properly, preventing grace;--all the drawings of the Father; the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more;--all that light wherewith the Son of God 'enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world;...' " (Works, Vol. 6, p. 44). In light of all of this, Wesley might have argued thusly.

Prevenient grace describes the Spirit of the Lord calling us before we were born, who from our birth has made mention of our name (Is. 49:1; cf. Ps. 22:9-10). It describes the Spirit who gently moves our wills, who draws and woos us, as it were, to walk in the light (Works, Vol. 10, pp. 232 f.). It describes the "hound of heaven" stalking, if not courting, us between conception and conversion, preventing us from moving so far from the way that when we finally understand the claims of the Gospel upon our lives, He guarantees our freedom to say yes.

For Wesley this doctrine of prevenient grace served two purposes. First of all it preserved the integrity of our own freedom and of a human response. It guaranteed the validity of an evangelistic appeal. In his Predestination Calmly Considered, Wesley objects to Calvinism just along these lines. He offers this challenge:

"Make the case your own: Here are you, a sinner, convinced that you deserve the damnation of Hell. Sorrow, therefore, and fear have filled your heart. And how shall you be comforted? By the promises of God? But perhaps you have no part therein; for they belong only to the elect. By the consideration of His love and tender mercy? But what are these to you, if you are a reprobate? God does not love you at all; you, like Esau, he hath hid it even from eternity. What ground then can you have for the least shadow of hope? Why, it is possible (that is all,) that God's sovereign will may be on your side. Possibly God may save you, because He will! Oh poor encouragement to disparing sinners! I fear 'faith' rarely 'cometh by hearing' this!" (Works, Vol. 10, pp. 220 f; cf. Vol. 10, p. 223).

Secondly, Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace gave God the initiative and the drama of rescue. In his sermon "Working Out Our Own Salvation," he writes: "God worketh in you; therefore, you can work: Otherwise it would be impossible. If He did not work, it would be impossible for you to work out your own salvation..." Still, however, he preserves the integrity of our own response. Listen to the balance of these words to follow: "Yet this is no excuse for those who continue in sin, and lay the blame upon their Maker, by saying, 'It is God only that must quicken us; for we cannot quicken our own souls.' For allowing that all the

souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Everyone has, sooner or later, good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world...so that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath" (Works, Vol. 6, p. 512). Here we can see clearly a prevenient grace which is both resistable and universal.

Not to belabor the point, but in spite of Wesley's insistence that our freedom, and in fact our responsibility to respond, was the result of God's sovereign initiative, the Calvinist's were still not satisfied. He was continually labeled a pelagian for "robbing God of His glory in man's salvation." They insisted that one must hold to election (and reprobation as the natural consequence) or yield to free-will. Wesley countered these charges by insisting (interestingly enough) that he did not carry free-will as far as they did. In his Predestination Calmly Considered, he argues: "Natural free-will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which 'enlightens every man that cometh into the

world'" (Works, Vol. 10, p. 230). Wesley then concludes that "God nevertheless may have all the glory. Why, the very power to 'work together with him was from God'" (Works, Vol. 10, p. 230).

Before moving on to the next heading, allow me to put all of this in a contemporary setting. Some years ago I saw a man give his life to Christ after spending twenty-eight of forty-four years in prison. As I went to see him the next day, he met me at the bars only to exclaim: "Tuttle, I laid awake all last night thinking. Suddenly it occurred to me that it takes an average of twenty-five different witnesses before any real encounter with God takes place and just because you were number twenty-five you think you did it all. You stink. He nailed me. I actually thought that I had done it all when twenty-four just as important had gone before me. How could I be so stupid? I did not fully understand prevenient grace.

Even Wesley never felt compelled to say it all at once. He did not have to see the change take place before his very eyes in order to feel affirmed in ministry. He was frequently content to be one of the twenty-four. Let me illustrate by taking you back two-hundred years to an inn not too far from here. Picture a large room dimly lit by candlelight. Two men sit arguing at a table over several pints of beer. One begins to curse the other bitterly invoking the name of God. Just then a small man enters by a side door and after observing the two in heated debate approaches the one cursing: "Sir, my name is Wesley. Do you see that door over there? When you leave tonight be certain to look both ways as you step into the street. Please do not let a horse run

over you and kill you. If you were to die with that blasphemy on your head you would surely find the hottest place in the lake of fire." Now I don't know if that story is true and perhaps there is not much Gospel evident there, but I would be willing to wager that if it is true that prevenient grace was somehow at work.

Again, to put all of this just a bit differently, prevenient grace is that work of the Holy Spirit supernaturally restoring all of us to a measure of free-will, wooing us, preventing us from moving so far from the way that when we finally understand the claims of the Gospel upon our lives we are guaranteed the freedom to say yes. It is God's initiative guaranteeing the freedom of our own response. In an age when much of our teaching and preaching smacks once again of works righteousness, this is a vital corrective. Like Karl Barth to follow, John Wesley puts God back on the throne of grace, back in the lead role in the drama of rescue. Surely, "we love God because He first loved us."

II. By Grace We are Saved Through Faith, the Larger Picture

Wesley frequently preached on this text from Ephesians 2:8. Most of our emphasis thus far has dealt with the theology of prevenient grace. At the outset we established that as a necessary foundation. It was Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace that guaranteed the integrity of an evangelistic appeal. Since any appeal calls for response, it is obviously important to be able to make such a response. We must now turn to the larger picture, however, and to the appeal itself. By grace (prevenient grace) through faith constituted the heart of Wesley's Gospel message.

Sermons I and V "Salvation by Faith" and "Justification by Faith" set the stage.

Wesley tells us that he preached basically three kinds of sermons. To the unawakened (those not yet convicted of sin), he spoke mainly of death and hell. To those awakened (but not yet converted), he spoke mainly of faith. To those converted, he spoke mainly of perfection or entire sanctification. Let's, for a moment, focus at the point of his evangelistic appeal--to those awakened. Faith is the key. Wesley goes to great lengths to define it. He tells us what it is not. It is not that faith of a heathen, nor of a devil, nor even that of the apostles while Christ remained in the flesh (Works, Vol. 5, pp. 8 f.). He tells us what it is. It is, in a general sense, "a divine supernatural, evidence or conviction, 'of things not seen,' not discoverable by our bodily senses, as being either past, future, or spiritual. Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself;' but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that He loved me and gave Himself for me" (Works, Vol. 5, pp. 60 f.). Then the passage following this statement provides a further key. There he speaks of repentance (Works, Vol. 5, p. 61). Wesley's evangelistic thrust insisted that faith build upon a firm foundation. The repentance that led to faith was for Wesley what I sometimes refer to as the "I give up." Let me explain.

It is my conviction that Wesley's "instantaneous" conversion experience took 13 years to manifest itself fully. The reason for the delay was that it took considerable effort to divest himself of the bankruptcy of

his own works-righteousness. Wesley, just prior to Aldersgate, included in his Journal these words from a letter written from John Gambold to his brother Charles prefacing them with the statement that he found them "so true." Gambold writes: "The doctrine of faith is a downright robber. It takes away all this wealth, and only tells us it is deposited for us with somebody else, upon whose bounty we must live like mere beggars. Indeed, they are truly beggars, vile and filthy sinners till very lately, many stoop to live in this dependent condition: It suits them well enough. But they who have long distinguished themselves from the herd of vicious wretches, or have even gone beyond moral men; for them to be told that they are either not so well, but the same needy, impotent, insignificant vessels of mercy with the others: This is more shocking to reason than transubstantiation (Works, Vol. 1, p. 96).

Even before leaving for Georgia, Wesley sensed that something was amiss. At that point he attempted to exchange the outward works of "visiting the sick or clothing the naked" for the inward works of a pursuit of holiness "or a union of the soul with God." He comments later that "in this refined way of trusting to my own works and my own righteousness (so zealously inculcated by the mystic writers,) I dragged on heavily, finding no comfort or help therein" (Works, Vol. 1, p. 100). At long last Wesley resolved to seek salvation through faith by first of all "absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works or righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up" (Works, Vol. 1, p. 102). This was the point at which Wesley "gave up." His besetting sin was a misplaced trust. He repented. He gave up his faith in his own

self-righteousness and determined to trust Christ alone as his "sole justification, sanctification, and redemption." Aldersgate followed shortly thereafter.

For the rest of his life this "I give up," this (to us the words of á Kempis) "following naked the naked Jesus" became the spearhead for his evangelistic appeal. His watchwords included such warnings as: do not trust that broken reed of your infant baptism. Do not trust anyone or anything else for salvation apart from Christ. He writes: "As 'there is no other name given under heaven,' than that of Jesus of Nazareth, no other merit whereby a condemned sinner can ever be saved from the guilt of sin; so there is no other way of obtaining a share in His merit, than by faith in His name" (Works, Vol. 5, p. 61). This should provide a key for our own understanding of evangelism as well. Again, give it up! Trust Christ alone! God's prevenient grace is at work in everyone. He wants to bless us. Let me illustrate.

I have always thought it interesting that the word pneuma (Spirit) translates ruach (wind) in the LXX. Wind equals Spirit and Spirit equals wind. That is no accidental metaphor. Most of us know that wind blows from high pressure to low pressure, the point of least resistance. Likewise, the Holy Spirit (in this case prevenient and justifying grace) moves from high pressure to low pressure, to the point of least resistance, to the "I give up."

This is the key to the larger picture. Prevenient grace prepares us for repentance and belief. Our yes then creates low pressure so that the

Holy Spirit no longer woos, but rushes to the very center of our being creating and recreating after the mind of Christ. At this point allow an old evangelist a word of exhortation. You can take it. People the world over are being drawn by the Spirit of God. The prevenient grace of God is at work all around us. People, like Wesley, are weary of the bankruptcy of their own self-sufficiency. People are restless and uneasy. They cannot change their own lives. They cannot turn around. Most do not like doing what they do. Those with jobs can look forward to a two-day weekend, or a two-week vacation, or for the less fortunate a solid piece of meat, or a good education for the eldest child, but little more. Many are discontent with a form of godliness which denies the power to pull it off. They are weary of the law without strength or inclination to obey it.

Wesley's understanding of the Gospel was good news/bad news/good news (Works, Vol. 5, pp. 54 f.). The first good news was that we were created in the image of God (original righteousness). The bad news was that we blow it (the effects of original sin). The second good news was that God is in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, restoring us to our original righteousness. (Vol. 9, pp. 339 ff.). Unfortunately, some Christians proclaim only bad news/good news. There is no original good news. That means that we are reconciled but not restored to the righteousness that glorifies God. Similarly, some Christians have little or no bad news. There is simply nothing to overcome. Again, Wesley's genius was his balance. He knew that if the people called Methodist would give up their besetting sins and trust Christ alone, that His Spirit would move to that low pressure and create the faith that brings conviction, assurance, and victory over that which separates and

diminishes. Wesley did not want Methodists merely saved from hell, but from sin as well. He insisted that sin is the stuff that hell is made of. People want faith. They want to belong to something that is important, even costly! Believe it or not, they want to become disciples. God's prevenient grace is at work everywhere and in everyone. Let's get our shirts off and start flagging down traffic because the bridges are out all over the world.

There are probably more people in the world today who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ than ever before. I am told that there are more Muslims now in parts of London than Christians. Yet, our Gospel is applicable the world over. We owe the gods of this world nothing. The Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has made His grace available. He is at work. The harvest is ripe. There are presently 80 million animists in Africa. Sociologists tell us that during the next 25 years animism will no longer be a viable alternative for most African believers. As animists are exposed to education and other forms of thought, they tend to look elsewhere for explanations that satisfy their inner questions more adequately. The bottom line is that over the next quarter of a century 80 million people in Africa will be looking for new answers to important questions. You can well believe, however, that Christians alone will not be the only ones looking for an audience.

Again, God is already at work. Let me conclude with a personal story. A few weeks ago I was flying between Tulsa and Detroit. It was the end of a semester and I had some papers that I desperately needed to grade. As I approached my seat, I realized that an attractive woman was sitting

in the seat next to mine. I thought to myself that if I could just get my briefcase out and get my papers on my lap before she spoke, I was safe. I would not have to engage her in conversation. Well into my second paper she suddenly looked at me and said, "You are grading papers. What do you teach?" I replied, "Theology." She then asked, "Where do you teach?" I replied, "Oral Roberts University." She responded, "Oh really, I've never heard of that; where is it located?" I replied, "Have you ever heard of Oral Roberts?" She answered, "No."

At that point I simply folded my papers, put them away, and did what I should have done to begin with: address her fairly and openly. She began to tell me about herself. At first she was telling me how wonderful her life was. And then, without my being aware of the transition, she began to describe just how miserable she was. She began to ask me questions. At one point she remarked, "I know that these are stupid questions." I replied quite sincerely, "Lady, I've never heard such intelligent questions in all my life. Please ask on." Would you like to know what her last question was? "Bob, what's to prevent me from putting my faith and trust in Jesus Christ right now?"

Is prevenient grace a relevant doctrine? You know it is. Our opportunities are all around us. God is at work. He wants to bless. Furthermore, He wants to use us as an instrument of that blessing. He wants us to bless others. And, if we take Him seriously, He might well bless us in the blessing.