

Prevenient Grace: Why I am a Methodist and an Evangelical

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First, I am a Methodist because I believe in prevenient grace. For Wesley, the spiritual life has no hope of a beginning without God's prior action on behalf of the sinner. Prevenient grace is a collective term for all the ways in which God's grace comes into our lives prior to conversion. Prevenient grace literally means, "the grace that comes before" and captures well what the early church called the *preparatio evangelica*, i.e. the preparation for the good news. One of the ways in which the Methodist-Wesleyan tradition is sometimes misunderstood by those in other traditions is in regard to our doctrine of sin. It may come as a surprise to some of our Reformed readers that the doctrine of total depravity (the famous T in the Calvinistic TULIP) is shared by Wesleyans and Methodists just as ardently as by Calvinists. Methodists, like our Reformed brothers and sisters, believe that salvation is impossible without a free and prior act of God on behalf of the sinner. Total depravity means that we are dead in our sins and therefore cannot help or assist ourselves. Sin is not merely a "ball and chain" which impedes our progress. We are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:5). Methodists affirm this truth. However, Methodists take very seriously the theological tension which exists between, on the one hand, the clear teaching of Scripture that we are dead in our sins and totally void of any ability to save ourselves (Eph. 2:1, Col. 1:21, 2:13; Lk. 15:24) and the universal call to the Gospel which requires us to "come" (Matt. 11:28), "repent" (Acts 2:38), "believe" (Acts 16:31) and a whole array of other commands, all of which call us to specific acts of faith and obedience. Since spiritually dead people have no capacity to respond, it is clear that God is bestowing grace in countless ways into our lives prior to our regeneration or conversion. Prevenient grace provides the link between human depravity and universal call. The important difference between Methodists and Reformed Christians is not on the fact of depravity, but on whether God's prior action is limited to the elect (Limited Atonement – the L in the TULIP) or is universal. Despite the enormous respect we have for John Calvin, Methodists do not believe that the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement fits the biblical data as well as the doctrine of prevenient grace. The Methodists believe that God has universally acted on behalf of Adam's fallen, depraved race. We believe that Christ, as the Second Adam, rescued the human race with an act of grace which grants them the capacity to accept or reject the good news of the Gospel when it is proclaimed. Wesleyans believe that if the doctrine of human depravity is not linked to God's action in prevenient grace, then it creates an untenable theological conflict which, at least potentially, makes God either unjust or the author of evil, neither of which fits with a biblical view of God. For, if a spiritually dead person is incapable of responding to God's call, then upon what basis is he or she held accountable for sin? Prevenient grace demonstrates how we can be totally depraved, yet given grace to respond and, if we do not respond, can be held fully accountable for our disbelief.

For Methodists, prevenient grace is the bridge between human depravity and the free exercise of human will. Prevenient grace lifts the human race out of its depravity and grants us the capacity to respond further to God's grace. Jesus declared that "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Methodists understand this text as referring to a divine drawing rooted in the Triune God which precedes our justification. It is God's act of unmerited favor. It is God's light "which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9), lifting us up and giving the human race the capacity to exercise our will and respond to the grace of Christ. Thomas Oden puts it well when he says that "the divine will always 'goes before' or 'prevenes' (leads the way) for the human will, so that the human will may choose freely in accord with the divine will."¹

Wesleyan thought affirms that God has taken the initiative to create a universal capacity for the human race to receive his grace. Many, of course, still resist his will and persist in rebellion against God. Wesleyan thought is actually a middle position between a Pelagian view (which makes every person an Adam and admits no sin nature or bondage due to Adam's nature) and the Reformed view (which affirms limited atonement). What Wesleyans mean by free will is actually "freed will," i.e., a will in bondage which has been set free by a free act of God's grace. It is, of course, not free in every possible respect, since we are all influenced by the effects of the Fall in many ways; but we now have a restored capacity which has enabled our heart, mind, and will to respond to God's grace. I love the fact that Methodists believe that even if you go to the ends of the earth with the gospel, you will always find that God precedes you and, in effect, "beats you there!" Perhaps prevenient grace is summed up best by the famous interruption to a missionary who was lecturing in Africa about how the missionaries brought the Gospel to Africa. The African believer interrupted and said, "The missionaries did not bring the Gospel to Africa; God brought the missionaries to Africa." This insightful comment shifts the emphasis to God's prior agency and the great *missio dei* (mission of God) whereby God is always the first actor in the great drama of redemption. Wesleyans fully embrace the importance of human decision and the exercise of the will. However, this is not possible without God's prior action.

¹ Thomas Oden, *Systematic Theology* vol., 2, *The Word of Life* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 189.