

Prevenient Grace and Semi-Pelagianism

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A consistent charge against Arminianism is that it is a form of semi-Pelagianism. Arminians consistently deny this charge and so it warrants an examination. This paper seeks to examine the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace and to demonstrate that it supports the charge of semi-Pelagianism. In the course of the examination, I hope to show that the doctrine of prevenient grace does not bear the weight of the biblical evidence against it.

Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

The Pelagianism controversy in the early 5th century pitted the teachings of Augustine's view of divine grace against that of Pelagius. Basically Pelagianism is understood as teaching that the natural man has "the capacity of self-determination by asserting the possibility of achieving sinless perfection in this life without grace."¹ In popular terms, Pelagianism would be the purest form of salvation by works. Pelagianism denies the doctrine of Original Sin and therefore of the depravity of man. It affirms free will in the libertarian sense in which man has a natural capacity to choose contrary to all possible factors that might otherwise determine one's choices. Thus, it denies that God determines or decrees the actions of men. This would violate human liberty. Subsequently, the internal work of divine grace is not necessary in order to procure acceptance before God who demands moral perfection as a prerequisite of salvation.² In affirming libertarian free will, Pelagianism asserts that man has the ability to act with sinless perfection if he so chooses. This is an absolute sort of anthropocentric construct and as such is rejected as heretical by all orthodox Christians including Arminians.

In the wake of the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy Semi-Pelagianism took hold in several quarters by a number of theologians. It was regarded as a middle ground between Augustine and Pelagius and his followers. However, the term semi-Pelagianism was not used until the 16th century Reformation.³ In contrast to Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism states that man is affected by the fall of Adam, but that his free will is retained so that while he is inclined toward sinful behavior, he is not in full bondage to sin. John Cassian, the principal proponent of semi-Pelagianism, states, "There are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator."⁴ Although, divine grace is necessary for salvation, that grace is resistible due to our natural freedom to choose contrary to its influence. Cassian and other semi-Pelagians rejected Pelagianism as heretical but felt Augustine's doctrine of unconditional election and predestination went too far in combating Pelagius' error. Augustine regarded the semi-Pelagians as brothers in Christ. Likewise, the charge from Calvinists that Arminianism is semi-Pelagian, while a serious charge, is not intended to consign Arminianism to heresy. Calvinists who do so have been unfair to the genuine teachings of Arminians.⁵

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100-600* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 313.

² Pelagius affirmed the grace of God but that it was an external grace in the form of God's moral law. It has no necessary influence on whether one chooses to obey it or not.

³ For more on the Pelagian and semi-Pelagian controversy see R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy Over Free Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), especially chapters 1, 2 and 3.

⁴ Quoted in Pelikan, *Catholic Tradition*, p. 323-24.

⁵ Some of the reason for this stems from the departure of Classical and Wesleyan Arminianism by influential figures like Charles Finney whose theology was much more in line with Pelagianism. His subsequent influence on Evangelical Christianity has been debilitating in a pervasive way. See Sproul, *Willing to Believe*, p. 169-85.

In order to be saved, semi-Pelagianism gives priority to the initiation of faith via one's free will, the latter being regarded as a gift of God's grace to all men. This in turn provokes God to supply further helping grace that the person must cooperate with in order for his faith to have a saving character to it. The capacity one has in exercising faith is the degree to which God will supply grace toward salvation.⁶ There is a balance between the human initiative and the subsequent divine initiative.⁷ Rebecca Weaver says concerning John Cassian:

Human dependence on grace meant for Cassian that at every stage of the process of salvation grace must be operative; however, the freedom of the human will meant that grace must function in such a way as not to deprive the will of its freedom to choose. The operation of grace as conceived by Cassian, therefore, is highly variegated. God interacts with the multitude of individual persons in the multitude of ways necessary to assist them toward salvation while at the same time preserving their freedom. The notion of grace as variegated was important to Cassian's position, for it served to protect the self-initiating character of the human will.⁸

There seems to be some debate in defining the parameters of what semi-Pelagianism espouses. Our concern here focuses upon the priority of grace versus free will. For example, Roger Olson quoting Nazarene theologian Orton Wiley states in essence that semi-Pelagianism teaches that in the partial depraved nature of man, he makes the first move toward God in procuring salvation but then needs divine grace to move further. The initiating act of man provokes God's response with the necessary grace to complete salvation.⁹ Thus, semi-Pelagianism would teach that man initiates the process of salvation and God responds by supplying the necessary grace to help the process along. In contrast, Classical and Wesleyan Arminians argue that God must first initiate the process via prevenient grace and then man responds. In either case, there seems to be no debate that whoever initiates the process, man or God, that a cooperative effort is necessary. Thus, both positions affirm a synergistic view of salvation.

In an article written by the staff of *Modern Reformation*, a Calvinistic journal, the authors make a distinction between semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism.¹⁰ In a helpful chart they categorize both as forms of synergism. However, they make the same distinction that Olson and other Arminians make, that in Semi-pelagianism man takes the initiative in salvation and in Arminianism, God takes the initiative. In either case, grace and man's free will cooperate in the procurement of salvation. In their chart they make a distinction between 2 types of monergism. On the one hand, there is the monergism which teaches that God alone initiates and completes salvation. This is consistent with the teaching of the Augustinian/ Calvinist understanding of soteriology. On the other hand, there is the monergism of Pelagianism in which man alone initiates and completes salvation. In between these two poles exists various forms of synergism. The authors place Arminianism closer to that of the Augustinian/ Calvinist side and semi-Pelagianism closer to the Pelagian side. The closer one comes to the theocentric monergism of Augustine and Calvin the greater the affirmation of Original Sin and human inability. The closer one comes to the anthropocentric monergism of Pelagius the greater the denial of Original Sin

⁶ Ibid., p. 324.

⁷ Rebecca Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996), p. 72.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006), p. 30.

¹⁰ "Grace, Sin and the Will: The Structure of the Debate" *Modern Reformation* 21:1 (Jan-Feb. 2012), p. 12-17.

and human inability. Although there is some merit to the distinctions the chart makes under the rubric of synergism between Arminianism and semi-Pelagianism, it would seem the distinctions are more sharply made than the evidence may warrant.

It must be agreed that Arminianism affirms in principle a similar view of Original Sin and human inability that the Augustinian/ Calvinist tradition teaches. Furthermore, there is no doubt that Arminianism teaches the priority of divine grace working inwardly to initiate the process leading to salvation. However, it is not equally clear that semi-Pelagianism consistently affirms that man always is the first to initiate the first move towards God. Historical scholarship has taken note of this. Jaroslav Pelikan indicates that semi-Pelagians believed that sometimes faith preceded the supply of grace and at other times grace preceded the exercise of faith.¹¹ This is confirmed by Weaver's study. She states that for Cassian, "In the case of some persons, grace will assist the will that already desires the good, whereas in the case of others, grace will arouse the will to good when it is not so inclined."¹² In either case, faith is always exercised via the free will of man by either cooperating with or resisting the grace of God and that seems to be the main point of semi-Pelagianism. However, as will be argued, the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace in terms of its practical outworking is not a one-time static event, but an ongoing and successive process whereby the unbeliever is drawn by stages to the culminating point of exercising saving faith. Yet, all along that process, the unbeliever must continually cooperate with grace in order to procure more grace. In this sense, Arminianism concurs with the semi-Pelagian notion that free will triggers the grace of God whether strictly in the initiation of the process or according to their view of prevenient grace in the continuing invocation of further supplies of grace.

The Doctrine of Prevenient Grace

When Arminians deny that their theology is semi-Pelagian the assertion is made in part due to their doctrine of sin. The common Classical and Wesleyan Arminian position is that man is indeed born in sin and concurs with Calvinism in the doctrine of the Total Depravity of man. Accordingly, man in his natural state is in bondage to sin such that he is not free to act with faith apart from the grace of God.¹³ However, the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace mitigates the practical implications of this doctrine nearly to the point of nullifying its effects. This is an important point because prevenient grace is a central plank in Arminian theology. Roger Olson calls prevenient grace the "linchpin" of Arminian soteriology.¹⁴ Olson surveys with approval the theological statements of various historical proponents of the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace. For example, he states at length that:

For... later Arminians of the nineteenth century, Christ's death not only resolved the guilt issue of original sin, so Adam's sin is not imputed to every child born, but it also mitigated the corruption of inherited depravity. From the cross flowed into humanity a power of spiritual death as to excite in them various degrees or religious feelings, and enabling them to seek the face of God, to turn at his rebuke, and, by improving that grace,

¹¹ *Catholic Tradition*, p. 324.

¹² *Divine Grace*, p. 72.

¹³ See Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology*, pgs. 137-57 where he argues convincingly that this has been the majority position of Arminians throughout history. Calvinist Thomas Schreiner draws the same conclusion from his review of Wesleyan theologians in his article, "Does Scripture teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?" in *Still Sovereign* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 232-33.

¹⁴ *Arminian Theology*, p. 178.

to repent and believe the gospel. [William Burton] Pope agreed. Christ's life and death, he averred, provided a free gift to all humanity. 'The gift was the restoration of the Holy Spirit; not indeed as the indwelling Spirit of regeneration, but as the Spirit of enlightenment, striving and conviction.' This common (not universal) Arminian doctrine of universal prevenient grace means that because of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit no human being is actually in a state of absolute darkness and depravity. Because of original sin, helplessness to do good is the natural state of humanity, but because of the work of Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit universally no human being actually exists in that natural state.¹⁵

John Wesley developed the Wesleyan tradition of the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace that is widely accepted today. Wesley lays out this doctrine in his sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation" (sermon #85).¹⁶ There he says prevenient grace brings forth "...the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God." Wesley further states:

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. Every one 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.

Wesley states, "No man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath." Elsewhere in his writings Wesley states, "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.'"¹⁷ Further in Sermon #85 Wesley makes a remarkable statement that is of a piece with the basic outline of semi-Pelagianism. He believes the restored free will of man can be used to invoke more grace he calls "convincing grace" that is associated with emerging signs of conviction and repentance.¹⁸ He exhorts men to "stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace." First of all, this suggests a cooperative effort that brings about salvation, although Wesley is careful to say that God's gracious work is the primary impetus for the reception of salvation so that there is no boasting in the sinner. Nonetheless, this formulation suggests a semi-Pelagian framework for understanding how salvation is procured by placing in the restored free will of man the power to initiate further grace. Pelikan states that in semi-Pelagianism, "It was by grace that each stage of conversion was effected."¹⁹ Yet, in each stage man must cooperate with grace before more is given. This sounds no different than Wesley's view.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 153-54.

¹⁶ <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/85>.

¹⁷ *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 10:230.

¹⁸ Colin W. Williams ties this notion of convincing grace in Wesley's theology to the preaching of the gospel. See *John Wesley's Theology Today*, p. 42.

¹⁹ *Catholic Tradition*, p. 324.

Summarizing, most Arminians hold to these distinctive features of prevenient grace. 1) It is bestowed upon all men at birth. 2) It mitigates the effects of the fall mainly by restoring to man libertarian free will that is able to respond positively to the gospel by exercising faith. 3) It allows men to be enlightened concerning the truth of the gospel. 4) It is not saving grace but it leads to faith which does save. 5) It is resistible by virtue of the fact that it enables the ability of the will to act contrary to it if one so chooses. Thus, in order to activate its power one must cooperate with it by not resisting it. 6) It precedes regeneration and thus the spiritual transformation of the believer. It should be noted that a few Arminians disagree with the first point. For example, Robert Picirilli believes that prevenient grace (which he calls pre-regenerating grace) is only supplied in the hearing of the gospel.²⁰ However, a central point is that the doctrine entails stages of grace in which cooperation at each stage leads to more effusions of grace. This contributes to the charge that Arminianism is consummate with semi-Pelagian thought.

Defending the Charge of Semi-Pelagianism

Olson states emphatically in his work, “Arminius’s theology was not Pelagian or semi-Pelagian in any sense because Arminius rested every good in human life, including ability to respond to the gospel with faith, on prevenient grace that restores free will. The free will of human beings in Arminius’s theology and in Classical Arminianism is more properly denoted *freed* will. Grace frees the will from bondage to sin and evil, and gives it ability to cooperate with saving graces by not resisting it.”²¹ It is difficult to see how these statements differ from semi-Pelagianism as understood earlier. At the very least, the practical implications are nearly identical with it. Thus, Arminians can affirm with Calvinists in the doctrine of Original Sin and Total Depravity but this has no practical value for their theology because it is nullified by their doctrine of prevenient grace. Although Olson denies the implications here, the Arminian doctrine of Original Sin and Total Depravity can only rightly be viewed as hypothetical. Olson affirms that natural humanity still suffers from the effects of inherited sin, but that his freed will is able to “influence him toward the good.”²² He says, “No person is left by God entirely in that state of nature without some measure of grace to rise above it if he or she cooperates with grace by not resisting it.”²³ Olson indicates that the effects of the inherited sin nature remain upon all human beings who are born in sin, but that simultaneously they receive prevenient grace. This in effect enables true libertarian freedom. Olson states, that an “actual inability and an actual ability” exist alongside each other in a dual state, “one is natural and the other is supernatural.”²⁴ Thus, the natural man is enabled with the ability to continue in accordance with his sinful nature or to act contrary to it by inclining himself toward the spiritual good. However, there are several problems with this perspective. I will address four principal issues.²⁵

²⁰ Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), p. 158.

²¹ *Arminian Theology*, p. 142. Schreiner after reviewing extensive sources for Wesleyan theology says, “What is common in all Wesleyan theories of prevenient grace is that the freedom, which was lost in Adam’s sin, is sufficiently restored to enable people to choose salvation” (“Prevenient Grace”, p. 236).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

²⁵ I am not addressing some of the key Biblical texts Arminians use in support of prevenient grace such as John 1:9; 12:32; Rom. 2:4 and Titus 2:11. Thomas Schreiner addresses these texts in his article, “Prevenient Grace.” which can also be accessed at <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/category/reformed-theology/arminianism/prevenient-grace/>.

A Deficient View of the Sin Nature

First of all, prevenient grace has a deficient view of the sin nature and its impact on the unbeliever. It does not comport with a faithful understanding of Total Depravity as taught in Scripture and consistently held by Calvinists. Do all men in their natural state of inherited sin (Rom. 5:12, 18, 19) have some ability to move toward the good and to exercise saving faith? Before answering this question, it should be made clear that the question regards *all* people not *some* people (i.e. the elect only). In other words, Calvinism and Arminianism are in full agreement that grace is necessary for a person to exercise saving faith. In fact, there is no substantial difference in their respective interpretations of Eph. 2:8-9. Even Arminians admit that faith is a gift of God's grace.²⁶ Faith cannot be exercised apart from prevenient grace. This is not where the problem lies. Rather the issue lies in the fact that Arminianism asserts that *all* men are afforded this grace to believe and each has the equal capacity to exercise their wills to that end. But is that the teaching of Scripture?

The Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace nullifies the effects of the Fall such that men are enlightened concerning the truth that leads to the gospel and that all men have the capacity for "seeking" God. But Paul makes it clear in Romans 3 that: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (vss. 10-12). The present active verbs in this passage indicate the present status of all unregenerate human beings. There is no mitigation of the Fall here. According to Romans 8:8, those in the flesh (i.e. in the natural sinful state) are both *unwilling* and *incapable* of pleasing God. This is the thrust of Paul's argument in the previous verse: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law [*it is unwilling*]; indeed, it cannot [*it is incapable*]" (vs. 7).

Paul is at pains to describe the life of the unbeliever as being spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1, 5; cf. Col. 2:13). He says to the believer: "We all once [i.e. when spiritually dead] lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph. 2:3). If the state of the unbeliever (the rest of mankind) is by nature dead and considered as children of wrath, then in what sense are they also recipients of enabling grace that frees them to act in accordance with that grace toward procuring salvation? How can one be a child of divine wrath and the recipient of his grace at the same time? The only way to be relieved of death and wrath is not by prevenient grace, but by being made alive together with Christ which Paul equates in the same verse as being saved by grace. "Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved" (vs. 5; cf. Col. 2:13). In other words, grace is in fact the act of being made alive in Christ. Notice also the work of salvation here, which is a resurrection from spiritual death, is accomplished solely by God. Nothing is said about the instrument of faith at this point. One does not make himself alive from the dead. It is a supernatural work of divine grace. Prevenient grace cannot be described as making unbelievers alive together with Christ. This is exclusive language for believers only. The grace spoken of here is a grace that can only be said to affect the believer. It is a grace that necessitates the *actual* salvation of its recipients not providing *potential* salvation to those who do not resist it.

²⁶ See for example Arminian theologian. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith*, p. 165-67. Picirilli quotes Arminius to this effect as well (p. 161). Also see F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2011), p. 257-60.

An Incorrect View of the Human Will

Inherent in Arminianism's deficient view of the impact of the sin nature upon the unbeliever is a corresponding view of the human will that does not comport with Scripture. Olson states that prevenient grace liberates the will from its bondage to sin and allows it libertarian freedom. He states, "All classical Arminians believe in libertarian free will, which is self-determining choice; it is incompatible with determination of any kind. That seems to amount to belief in an uncaused effect – the free choice of the self to be or do something without antecedent."²⁷ In the libertarian conception of free will, choices that are caused are choices that are coerced and coercion is a hindrance to freedom. In other words, free will means the absence of any hindrances (impediments) to the choices one makes (i.e. it is freedom from hindrances). Hindrances and impediments are primarily the various internal and external influences or causes that may direct the will towards a particular choice including one's desires, his nature, or arguments in defense of a particular choice. Olson states that free will "includes being able to do other than one wants to do and other than one does."²⁸ He states that free will is "the personal power of choice over motives and between alternatives."²⁹ Thus, the will must have the power to override any motives that might direct our choices.

Libertarian free will also affirms that the power of God's Word and even the powerful gracious influence of the Holy Spirit cannot determine choices that are made. They can have an influence and must have an influence in persuading the will if one is to be saved, but the will is the final arbitrator in whether to resist or embrace the influence God and His Word may have upon it. Olson says, "God's influence lies directly on every subject so that nothing can happen without being pulled or pushed by God toward the good. However, free and rational creatures have the power to resist the influence of God. This power was given to them by God himself."³⁰ Nothing can determine choices except the self-determining power of the will. Anything else that would determine the choices the will makes is regarded as coercive. Without such freedom Arminians believe human beings cannot be responsible for their actions.

But Scripture nowhere teaches a libertarian concept of free will. First, it teaches that God ultimately determines all that takes place. As the Psalmist says, "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all" (Psa. 103:19). And again, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Psa. 115:3). The Psalmist also notes God's ownership rights upon the world: "The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it" (Psa 24:1; cf. Deut. 10:14; Exod. 19:5; Job 41:11). Paul says, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). One cannot argue with the Supreme Lord of all. The Potter has the right to do as He pleases with the clay (Isa. 45:9-11; cf. Matt. 20:1-16). God's sovereignty extends from the broad flow of history (Dan. 2:21; Acts 1:7) to the most minute detail of everyday existence. "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt. 10:29; cf. Luke 12:6-7).

All God's actions and future plans are unconditionally made. "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My

²⁷ *Arminian Theology*, p. 71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of My purpose from a far country. Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it" (Isa. 46:9-11). "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num. 23:19; cf 1 Sam. 15:29). God's sovereign plans are irrevocable by anyone or anything. Nebuchadnezzar after being humbled by God acknowledged His sovereignty in this regard saying, "For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'" (Dan. 4:34-35). This indicates that God's sovereign determination extends to the choices and actions of human beings (Prov. 16:1, 9; 19:21; 21:1; Isa. 46:9-11).

Scripture also rules out libertarian freedom by teaching that we cannot act apart from what our natures dictate. God never acts in such a way as to mitigate the immediate causes of one's actions. Those secondary and immediate causes are connected directly to our human natures. The Biblical concept of human nature refers specifically to the spiritual disposition of the heart and mind. It is mission control central (Prov. 4:23). We are bound to our natures that determine the sorts of choices we are capable of making. In this regard, both Jesus and Paul make it clear that unregenerate mankind is in bondage to sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:17). Paul says to believers in Titus 3:3: "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." This enslavement to the sinful nature is the normal disposition of all unbelievers. There is no possibility of being inclined to repentance, faith or any truly undefiled act of righteousness in such a state of existence. In other words, the will remains in bondage to the sinful nature and all one's choices are directed by such a sinful nature. A bad tree cannot produce good fruit (Matt. 7:17-18; 12:33-35; 15:18). Jeremiah communicates this truth in a memorable manner: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). Mankind has no freedom to act contrary to his nature. And the sinful nature never inclines a person to seek God or exercise faith and repentance. Furthermore, these passages do not support the notion that some superintending grace mitigates the impact of the sinful nature. Salvation in no way depends upon the will of man (John 1:13; Rom. 9:16). The consistent affirmation of Scripture is that men are in unmitigated bondage to sin. They have no universally divinely endowed freedom to escape it.

A Deficient View of Regeneration

This leads to a further problem. The Arminian view of prevenient grace undermines a proper view of regeneration. Arminianism says that prevenient grace enables all men with the power of libertarian free will such that they can exercise faith by non-resistance to divine grace or resist it by the same power of free choice. If they choose not to resist grace, then they are afforded the opportunity to provoke more grace that then leads to saving faith. Once saving faith is exercised then God regenerates the believing person.³¹ Thus, in Arminianism faith precedes regeneration. Even though the Arminian argues that it is God who regenerates and not faith, faith is a necessary prerequisite to the reception of the new nature. Thus, it is difficult to escape the charge that faith invokes the divine response bringing us back to the charge of semi-Pelagianism. But once again, Arminians will respond that faith cannot be exercised without

³¹ See for example the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*) given by Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, p. 84.

prior prevenient grace.³² This is immaterial since it has already been pointed out that semi-Pelagianism does not deny such a construct. The main distinctive of semi-Pelagianism is its insistence upon synergism – God’s grace and man’s free will must cooperate together in order to procure salvation.³³ Which comes first is not at issue because the human response in the end has the last word finally prompting God to act with saving/ regenerating/ converting grace. The charge against Arminianism is simply that it is not monergistic. Subsequently, any form of synergism seems inevitably to lead us back to semi-Pelagianism. The Scripture’s teaching on regeneration contradicts the synergistic understanding of prevenient grace. Furthermore, the nature of regeneration has a direct bearing upon how one understands the sin nature and its grip upon the unbeliever.

Paul makes a distinction between the natural man and the spiritual man in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. His teaching here is critical for understanding the Spirit’s role in transforming the nature of those whom God has chosen for salvation. In support of what has already been said, the absolute resistance of the natural man to anything spiritual is reinforced by Paul’s teaching in these chapters. He says, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). Note the contrast between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. The perishing are those who are unregenerate. Their minds are blinded to the truth (2 Cor. 4:4). The gospel has no compelling force to any such person. The gospel has nothing but the appearance of obscurity and absurdity. But those who are being saved experience the unmitigated power of the cross. There is no middle ground. Paul says for the believer that, “[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (vss. 30-31). There is no sense in which the one who believes can claim that he arbitrated the grace of God via his own self-determining freedom of choice. John says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). Again Paul says, “So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Salvation is monergistic. God does all the work necessary for salvation to obtain. Of course, that does not mean humans are passive recipients of His work. Rather divine grace is the necessary cause of human faith.

1 Corinthians 2:14 continues Paul’s argument. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” In other words, unless one has the Spirit indwelling him he cannot ascertain spiritual realities. In this way, one’s faith is completely dependent upon the power of the Holy Spirit (vss. 4-5). The “wisdom” Paul preached to the Corinthians (vss. 1-5) was the gospel – “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (vs. 2). This is not a wisdom that comes naturally to men. It is wisdom born of the Spirit. Paul says the Corinthian believers have received this wisdom of the gospel that led to their faith because they have received the Spirit Himself (vs. 12). Elsewhere, Paul says if a person does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9). Paul is simply describing the power of the Spirit to transform the

³² Ibid., p. 22.

³³ Most Arminians readily admit that their soteriology is synergistic. E.g. Forlines, *Classical Arminianism*, p. 24; Olson, *Arminian Theology*, p. 39. Picirilli rejects the synergism label as he believes this implies that faith is a work and salvation is not by works (*Grace, Faith*, p. 36, 96, 146). Nonetheless, his understanding of prevenient grace is in no way substantially different from other articulate Arminians.

natural man into a spiritual man (vs. 15; cf. 1 Cor. 3:1). In this regard, Paul uses the word “spiritual” to mean one who is of the Spirit. That is not the description of the unregenerate person because Paul has used the word “natural” to refer to such a person. Thus, anyone who is enlightened with the wisdom of the gospel is in fact one who has already received the Holy Spirit and become the recipient of the Spirit’s power to transform one’s nature from a natural unregenerate state to the spiritual regenerate state. But according to the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace one can be enlightened concerning the wisdom of the gospel but still reject it. Paul allows for no such possibility here. True enlightenment concerning the wisdom of the gospel comes necessarily and inevitably from the power of the Spirit which leads necessarily and inevitably to the transformation of regeneration and subsequent saving faith. Such gracious power is irresistible as an unbroken chain of cause and effect.

Likewise, Jesus is also clear that apart from regeneration one is neither able to “see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3) nor “enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In other words, the natural disposition of the unregenerate person is such that he is incapable of understanding the gospel in a spiritually enlightened manner nor is he capable of exercising faith so as to enter the realm of God’s kingdom. The prerequisite of spiritual enlightenment and saving faith is to have one’s nature transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit such that the person is willing and able to repent and believe. But again what is necessary to understand here is that the grace that attends regeneration is an absolutely efficacious and irresistible grace. The primary contention of Arminianism is that any grace leading to salvation is resistible. All prevenient grace does is liberate the will from bondage to sin such that it is free to choose contrary to either influence – grace or sin. In other words, the will is free to resist the forces of the sin nature or concur with them. Likewise, it is free to resist divine grace or concur with it. Saving grace can only be efficacious for the person who wills it to be so. Thus, salvation is ultimately centered and dependent on a particular person’s choice of God not God’s choice of a particular person.

James makes it clear that regeneration is due to the sovereign will of God in the life of its recipients. “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (James 1:18). First of all, God’s will here speaks of his irrevocable sovereign will. Secondly, the phrase “brought us forth” literally means “gave us birth.” The means by which He unconditionally willed believers to be born again was through the instrument of His word of truth, the message of the gospel. This gospel message is the same “wisdom of God” Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 2:7 that is distinguished from the wisdom of men. Paul’s message is the wisdom of God and that same message, called the word of truth by James, is applied in regeneration to those God willed to be saved and is accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. He says, “My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5; cf. Rom. 1:16). Again, salvation is monergistic, but not passively received. Regeneration always efficaciously results in the conversion of its recipients. Regeneration is God’s work in the recipient and conversion (i.e. faith and repentance) is the inevitable active response of the person who has been regenerated. The synergistic view of Arminianism says God does His part in prevenient grace, but if the recipient doesn’t do his part in exercising his free will, he cannot be saved. The Scripture nowhere teaches this concept.

A Deficient View of the Power of Grace

This reinforces another important conclusion. Divine saving grace is irresistible. Arminianism mitigates the power of grace by its view of prevenient grace. Arminians hold that grace has no power in the life of its recipients unless a person activates that power by his free will. This indicates that the determining factor of salvation rests not in the hands of God but in the hand on the one who exercises free will in a favorable response to grace. In other words, divine grace is completely resistible. Nonetheless, Arminians like Olson deny that Arminianism is man-centered and that the free choice of the sinner is the deciding force determining salvation. He insists that it is the grace of God that inclines one to choose and this choice is defined as “nonresistance”³⁴ to divine grace. However, he seems to forget that the corollary of libertarianism means equal resistance to grace otherwise man is not regarded as free. This poses serious problems for the doctrine of prevenient grace.

Resistible Grace. Many Arminians take pains to explain why a person chooses Christ when under the influence of prevenient grace. But little is said about those who reject Christ under the same influence. For example, Thomas Oden, a Wesleyan, states:

Grace works ahead of us to draw us toward faith, to begin its work in us. Even the first fragile intuition of conviction of sin, the first intimation of our need of God, is the work of preparing, prevenient grace, which draws us gradually toward wishing to please God. Grace is working quietly at the point of our desiring, bringing us in time to despair over our own unrighteousness, challenging our perverse dispositions, so that our distorted wills cease gradually to resist the gift of God.³⁵

This statement could easily fit the theology of any Calvinist if the grace described here were irresistible. However, the Arminian concludes that such grace is resistible. What is peculiar about this description of prevenient grace is that this could never be the experience of the one who resists it. In what sense does this grace draw one to faith, convict of sin, prepare one to please God, causing such a person to despair over unrighteousness, challenging their perverse dispositions and yet in the end they still resist the gift of God? How does the Arminian describe the work of prevenient grace in the life of the person who resists it? Wesley’s answer was to exhort men to “stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.” Thus, the sort of grace Oden describes does not seem possible unless a person of his free will chooses to allow God to supply more of this grace at each nascent stage of being awakened to the truth of the gospel and one’s spiritual need for it. The Arminian is at pains to say that salvation solely rests upon God’s grace and non-resistance to this grace, but God appears not to supply it unless one wants it. The picture is one in which grace is withheld until further movements toward acceptance release it in evermore incremental stages. In the end, it is dependent upon man’s free choice to cooperate at every step of the way toward saving faith. That however, appears indistinguishable from semi-Pelagianism.

Roger Olson, demurs. He says,

Wesley anticipated the Calvinist accusation that by affirming even grace-enabled free will he was opening the door to Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism. He rejected that

³⁴ Ibid., p. 157.

³⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity*, p. 249. Picirilli gives a similar explanation for how grace impacts the one who believes, but says little about the one who does not believe. See *Grace, Faith*, p. 155-58. He says, “When we come to try to explain why some, when hearing the gospel, give more evidence of... conviction than others, we are not always able” (p. 158).

criticism as invalid, attributing all goodness in human beings to God's supernatural grace: "Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it."³⁶

The problem with this statement is it is not possible for God to supply the grace and the goodness unless the recipient continues to long for more of it. And this points out a major problem for the Arminian. The Arminian wants to avoid any charge that salvation rests ultimately upon human free will. They want to say salvation rests upon divine grace. Olson says, "The decisive factor [for the reception of salvation] is the grace of God – from beginning to end."³⁷ He says, "The only 'contribution' humans make is non-resistance."³⁸ But Olson fails to mention if at any point between beginning and end that the recipient of grace resists it, then grace fails to be effective. The Arminian conception of grace cannot save as long as it is resisted. Let's consider this problem further.

Unbelief a Gift. Remember that according to Arminianism, prevenient grace supplies the gift of libertarian freedom (i.e. contrary choice). Prior to prevenient grace, man's will was in strict bondage to sin which concurs with the Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity. Thus, if the Arminian says that the will to believe is a gift of initial prevenient grace, then they must also affirm that the concurrent will to disbelieve is also a gift of grace since both responses are necessary if libertarian freedom is true. It is not exactly an appealing point to say that the will to disbelieve is a gift of grace, but that has to be a necessary corollary to the fact that grace is what first supplies libertarian freedom.

Denial of Further Grace. But Arminianism cannot resolve the main conundrum here. Further effusions of divine grace are withheld if the recipient does not use his libertarian freedom to respond positively to the grace given. This seems a cruel by-product of the gift of libertarian freedom. Only if you use that freedom correctly will God supply more grace, otherwise you are barred access to further grace. One might take Thomas Oden's description of prevenient grace as something that happens wholesale at one time resulting in the freedom to exercise faith and thus procure salvation once and for all. But no Arminian would say that God's grace is dispensed in every case all at once and then faith is exercised to procure salvation. Everyone's conversion experience is different. Some respond to the call of the gospel immediately and without any intervening deliberation. But many more experience various promptings, convictions, awakenings to spiritual need, God-ward directed desires, increased understanding of the gospel, and so forth before exercising faith. These come in successive stages or waves and in varying intensity and so forth. Each occurrence culminates eventually in saving faith, but only if each occurrence of grace is responded to positively. If at any point the sinner resists these occurrences of grace then he cuts off further supplies of grace. Each successive act is wholly dependent on the positive response of the recipient, otherwise further acts are denied. Thus, it is not just one act of free will that procures salvation, but several and perhaps enumerable acts of free will. Thus, no matter how important and necessary divine grace is, in the end salvation is primarily conditioned and dependent on free will and only secondarily upon grace. Arminians are at pains to emphasize the priority of grace, but the final accent rests upon free will.

The Beggar Analogy. Olson offers a couple of analogies to describe the Arminian position on grace and free will. One is borrowed from Arminius himself.³⁹ A rich man representing God offers a beggar alms. The only condition of the beggar receiving the alms is that he simply reach

³⁶ *Arminian Theology*, p. 169.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

out his hand to take it. The principal source for the receiving of alms is not the liberty of the receiver, according to Arminius, but the liberality of the giver. Olson takes this analogy and expands it.⁴⁰ The rich man bestows the gift upon the poor man by offering him a check that simply needs to be endorsed and then deposited in the bank. Olson says surely no one would suggest that the decisive factor for the reception of the check was the endorsing and depositing of it in the bank. But there are several problems with this analogy. First, there is the assumption that the beggar/ poor man recognizes that he is poor and desperate and needs the money offered him. Again, the Arminian would say this recognition comes as part of prevenient grace. But as we have seen, it only comes if the person responds positively to each “spark of grace” offered along the way. Every aspect of grace as Thomas Oden earlier described it would have to be positively responded to (or as Olson says, not resisted). But what do we make of the one who resists? If it is always possible to resist prevenient grace then grace is only made effective by one’s freely cooperating with it. Otherwise grace has no power to save. If grace was truly effective in the analogy Olson presents then the poor man would need to do nothing. The money would be automatically deposited into his bank account. But Olson would likely object. In this case, such a deed would be done apart from his freedom to accept or reject it. But that does not follow from the nature of the analogy. What beggar would refuse an automatic deposit to his bank account? Why is he begging in the first place? The point is, grace by its very nature does the work Thomas Oden described earlier and it does so irresistibly moving the recipient to saving faith. But that is the Calvinist position not the libertarian position of Arminians.

The Failure of Grace. So we are still left with the question of what to make of the one who resists grace. If two persons are the equal recipients of prevenient grace and one resists while the other does not, what explains the difference? Did grace succeed in one case and fail in the other case? The Arminian would be awfully hard pressed to say grace failed for the man who resisted. It was wholly dependent on his free choice to resist. But once you say this, then it is no longer dependent on grace. Furthermore, you must say the same for the man who did not resist. Was grace more powerful for him? Again, the Arminian would have to be compelled to say no if grace is to be regarded as non-partisan in its effects. It depended on his freely accepting the grace offered. The Arminian would not want to say that the one who does not resist actually gets a little extra grace to push him over the fence whereas the other doesn’t get quite enough. That would make God unfair and it would be hard to distinguish from a deliberate determination of God to be inclined to save one person over the other. For Arminianism grace must be an equal opportunity employer. Each person should receive an equal share of grace. Thus, it is extremely difficult to avoid the fact that in the end the deciding factor is not primarily God’s grace but man’s free will that procures salvation. And again, this state of affairs essentially amounts to semi-Pelagianism. The only way one can truly affirm that grace is what saves is if grace in the end is irresistible and wholly efficacious in its salvific results for the one who believes in Christ.

Another question begs for an answer. Is not God’s grace the most compelling and powerful force on earth? Why wouldn’t it be if God desired the salvation of men as much as Arminians claim He does? Olson is unequivocal about the foundation for Arminian theology. It is protecting the character of God as primarily good and loving.⁴¹ This would seem to provide the impetus for a magnanimous display of love toward all of humanity. In an Arminian account of matters, what reason would a God who desires the salvation of all men yet respecting their free will would not use every powerful resource He could muster to persuade men short of forcing

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴¹ *Arminian Theology*, p. 97-114.

them to believe? And if that is the case, then how could such grace possibly be resisted? The only answer the Arminian can give is that man simply has the free will to refuse grace and for no other reason.

Free will is not an adequate answer to this dilemma. Oden quotes Wesley on how prevenient grace works. Wesley says, “God recreates our freedom to love from its fallen condition of unresponsive spiritual deadness.”⁴² This explains the responsiveness of some who receive prevenient grace, but it does not explain the unresponsiveness of other recipients of prevenient grace. The freedom God creates in prevenient grace to love must also be the same freedom it creates to hate. But hate is more indicative of the fallen condition of man which is rightly described here as “unresponsive spiritual deadness.” This undermines the whole nature of prevenient grace. Arminians consistently emphasize that prevenient grace is meant to induce responsiveness not continued unresponsiveness even though they explicitly acknowledge the latter must be true because libertarian freedom is necessary for salvation to be meaningful. In other words, a relationship with God cannot be meaningful unless one is free to reject it. Libertarianism teaches that any choice made that could not as easily not been made must necessarily be a choice that is determined by outside forces and therefore coerced. A coercive choice is no choice at all. So unresponsiveness to grace is a necessary corollary of libertarian freedom as unattractive as that seems to the Arminian.

But, the problem is unresponsiveness is characteristic of spiritual deadness and Arminians seem unwilling to recognize this as part of the logical result of their doctrine of prevenient grace. To say prevenient grace provides the renewal of free will makes no sense. The freedom to choose to love God and exercise saving faith is not a problem. Calvinists agree with this in substance as long as freedom of choice is defined as acting willingly or voluntarily in accordance with one’s regenerated nature. But to say free will also creates the equal freedom to reject God is simply to say that the person still retains the conditions of spiritual deadness that prevented them from loving God or exercising faith in the first place. Arminians believe that Original Sin and Total Depravity placed the will in bondage and that prevenient grace restores the will with libertarian capacities. But to say that the recipient of prevenient grace can resist all such grace and continue to reject God is to say that grace fails for some. In fact, it is non-existent for those who resist it. Grace is only present and effective (i.e. successful for leading one to salvation) for those who do not resist, but this is what Calvinists have said all along. Grace is irresistible.

Furthermore, since libertarian free will by its nature has no antecedent causes and choices are contingent and therefore unpredictable, the libertarian must concede that there is no explanation for why one responds with non-resistance to grace while another resists it. But this is an absurdity. Few rational people believe choices never have their reasons. Choices always have determining causes even if we cannot always determine what those causes are. Again we come back to the same pressing questions. What reason does the recipient of prevenient grace have for resisting it? If God’s grace is powerful and compelling then what keeps one from being persuaded by it? Would we not say that this person is somehow blind to what other recipients of grace see? If so, would they still not be in bondage to their spiritually dead nature that blinded them in the first place? If the other recipient of prevenient grace is able to see, what reason explains why he does so? The Arminian has eliminated the failure of God’s grace so the only alternative lies in the person himself. To say belief or unbelief depends strictly on the contingent, unpredictable, causeless choice of the recipient of grace is to be mired in the arbitrary

⁴² Thomas Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 249.

confusion that libertarian freedom amounts to. Therefore, the choice of believing and not resisting grace must be regarded as virtuous and the choice of the one who resists grace and refuses to believe is decidedly un-virtuous otherwise how do you explain the difference? So then, the problem reduces itself to the conclusion that one person believed because he was the better person than the one who did not believe. And if that is the case, the Arminian is forced to wrestling with the more serious criticism that their view of salvation amounts to works-righteousness. It depends on the particular virtue of the person who believes.

Now of course it is true that the choice of a person who believes in Christ is virtuous and the choice to remain in unbelief is un-virtuous. Unbelief is sin. Belief is righteous. This being the case, salvation cannot depend upon the free will of man to resist or not resist the grace of God (John 1:12-13; Rom. 9:16). The grace of God must be wholly responsible in every aspect of the reception of salvation. This means that grace must first transform the recipient as matter of course such that his nature is regenerated and made capable of seeing and believing. Such a transformation must of necessity lead to saving faith as a divinely enabled gift not a humanly initiated work otherwise grace is nullified. The power of grace rests in its efficacious nature as dispensed by a gracious God. If the power of grace can only be activated by the virtuous choice of the believer, then salvation would be by received only by people with prior virtue. Indeed belief is a virtuous response, but not one that is rooted in one's free will. The virtue of faith and repentance rests wholly in the efficacious and irresistible nature of transforming grace. Salvation depends on God who has mercy (Rom. 9:16). No one can come to Christ unless he is drawn by the Father (John 6:44). This drawing power cannot be resisted because all who come to Christ are the same people God gave to Christ (John 6:37). This is why Jesus says no one comes unless it has been "granted" by the Father (John 6:65). Thus, saving faith is wholly a gift of divine grace that obtains necessarily in the life of the recipient. It is not a gift that can be rejected, but then again, neither is it a gift one would ever desire to reject. When God changes the heart of a sinner (Ezek. 36:26-27) the sinner willingly comes only to Christ (John 10:3-5, 14) and with full joy (Psa. 13:5; 51:12; 110:3). Thus, contrary to all protests, the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace is rooted in semi-Pelagian notions that undermine the nature of true grace.

Conclusion

The Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace is fraught with serious problems. It has a deficient view of human depravity allowing its view of divine grace to mitigate the effects of depravity. It does so by enabling all human beings with an ability to "seek" after God contrary to the Bible's descriptions of corruption and spiritual inability in the natural man. Subsequently, the doctrine under-girds a deficient view of the natural human will by saying it is freed from the bondage of sin and capable of acting contrary to the unbeliever's sin nature. It has a deficient view of regeneration by failing to recognize that apart from receiving a new nature the natural man cannot and will not believe upon Christ for salvation. Finally, the doctrine has a deficient view of God's grace and the unmitigated power it has to transform sinners. Rather, Arminians believe divine grace can and must be resisted placing the final determining power for salvation in the hands of the man who wills not the God who has mercy upon spiritually impotent and recalcitrant creatures. The natural man is depraved, his will enslaved by an unregenerate nature and incapable of exercising faith in Christ apart from the monergistic transforming irresistible grace of God. These conclusions place the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace under the essential rubric of semi-Pelagianism under which it is difficult for it to escape.