

# Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?

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## The Nature of Fallen Humanity

This chapter explores whether the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace can be supported from the Scriptures. Before examining this question, I want to emphasize that there is a significant area of common ground between Wesleyans and Calvinists. The disagreements that we have in some areas can cause us to overlook the extent to which we agree on major doctrines. In one arena of theology, namely, anthropology, the harmony between Wesleyans and Calvinists is of the utmost importance and our harmony in this area should be celebrated. Both camps acknowledge that fallen human beings are born with a corrupt nature that is in bondage to sin, and that human beings can do no good apart from the grace of God.

To sketch in the biblical data on the human condition since the fall is helpful. Thereby we will see the extent to which Wesleyans and Calvinists agree, and the gulf that the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace creates between Arminians and Calvinists will also be illuminated. Paul teaches that all human beings are born with a corrupt nature inherited from Adam (Rom. 5:12-19). Without specifying the precise connection between Adam's sin and our condemnation—which is itself the subject of a long theological controversy—it is clear from the text that we are sinners because of Adam's sin.<sup>1</sup> Through Adam's sin we died (Rom. 5:15, 17), are condemned (Rom. 5:16, 18), and are constituted as sinners (Rom. 5:19).<sup>2</sup>

Harmonizing with this portrait of humanity in Romans 5 is Ephesians 2:3, which says we are by nature "objects of wrath." Human beings by nature (*physei*) are deserving of wrath, indicating that they are all born with a nature that is sinful. The near context in Ephesians 2 confirms the depth of human depravity. Human beings are "dead in transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1; cf. 2:5 and Col. 2:13). The deadness of fallen humanity indicates that we are devoid of life upon our entrance into the world. We have no inclination toward genuine righteousness or goodness. Paul proceeds to say in Ephesians 2:2-3 that we lived under the sway of the world, the devil, and the flesh before conversion.

What is in the consciousness of those who are under the control of the "flesh"? There is not necessarily a conscious awareness of rebellion against God. Life in the flesh consists in "gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts" (Eph. 2:3). The desires of people who are "by nature objects of wrath" are naturally and instinctively sinful desires. In other words, unregenerate people sin by merely doing what they wish to do,

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1 For two insightful treatments of this text see Douglas J Moo, *Romans 1-8*, WEC (Chicago Moody, 1991), 325-59, C E B Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols, ICC (Edinburgh T. and T. Clark, 1975, 1979), 269-91.

2 Arthur Skevington Wood ("The Contribution of John Wesley to the Theology of Grace," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H Pinnock [Minneapolis Bethany Fellowship, 1975], 212) demonstrates that Wesley interpreted our participation in Adam's sin similarly.

by carrying out the motivations that are in their hearts. Sinful desires dominate those who are in the flesh.

Is there biblical warrant for saying that the desires of the unregenerate are dominated by sin? Ephesians 2:3 suggests such a conclusion in saying that people are dead in trespasses and sins and that they are "by nature objects of wrath." The trespasses and sins flow from a nature that is sinful and warrants God's wrath. Titus 3:3 confirms such a conclusion. "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." Note here that Paul says that we were "*enslaved* by all kinds of passions and pleasures" (italics added). It is fair to conclude that people who are enslaved by their own desires are under the domination and tyranny of sin. This kind of tyranny is not externally coerced. People do what they want to do, in that they pursue their own pleasures and desires. Nonetheless, to describe this pursuit of their own desires as slavery because they have no desire, inclination, or aspiration to do good is appropriate.

The bondage of the will, then, is a slavery to our own desires. Unregenerate human beings are captivated by what they want to do! Jesus himself diagnosed sinning as an indication of slavery. "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34; cf. 2 Pet. 2:19). Paul confirms that unregenerate people are slaves of sin. He reminds the Romans that "you are slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:17) and speaks of the time "when you were slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:20). They had presented "the parts of [their] bod[ies] in slavery to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness" (Rom. 6:19). Believers have been crucified with Christ "so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:6). If Christ died so that we should no longer be slaves to sin, the clear implication is that we were formerly slaves to sin. Sin is described in Romans 6 as a power that holds its captives in thralldom. Unbelievers are enslaved to sin in the sense that all they want to do is sin. They are free to do what is good in the sense that they have opportunities to do so. They fail to avail themselves of these opportunities, however, because they do not desire to do what is good. The captivity of sin is so powerful that they always desire to sin.

Do unregenerate human beings always sin? Is there not some good in their lives? We are not saying that they are as evil as they can possibly be. Jesus says, "... you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children" (Luke 11:13). If people were as evil as they possibly could be, they would not desire to give good things to their children. They would presumably find ways to inflict only evil upon their children. Unbelieving parents often love their children and their friends (cf. Matt. 5:46-47). They also may do much that is good for society. It should be noted that Jesus still says that they are evil. Evil people still give good gifts to their children and do kind things for other people.

If people are not as sinful as they can possibly be, then in what sense are they slaves to sin? It is crucial to establish a biblical definition of sin. Of course, sin consists in disobeying the law (1 John 3:4). But the root of sin is much deeper than this. Romans 1:21-25 clarifies that the heart of sin is failing to glorify God as God. The heart of sin is a belittling of God and a scorning of his glory, which involves a failure to glorify and thank him (Rom. 1:21). As Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sinners do not give God the supreme place in their lives but exchange "the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:23). In other words, people "served created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25). Sin is not first and

foremost the practice of evil deeds but an attitude that gives glory to something other than God. People may be loving to their children and kind to their neighbors and never give a thought to God. The essence of sin is self-worship rather than God-worship. The serpent persuaded Eve and Adam to eat the fruit of the tree by promising them that they would "be like God" (Gen. 3:5). They could dispense with God and worship themselves; they would worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Such a conception of sin helps us understand how people can perform actions that externally conform with righteousness yet remain slaves of sin. These actions are not motivated by a desire to honor and glorify God as God. They are not done out of an attitude of faith, which brings glory to God (Rom. 4:20). Faith brings glory to God because he is seen to be the all-powerful one who supplies our every good, and thus is deserving of praise and honor. Actions that externally conform with righteousness may still be sin, in that they are not done for God's glory and by faith. The necessity of faith is underscored by Romans 14:23, where Paul notes that "everything that does not come from faith is sin." Slavery to sin does not mean that people always engage in reprehensible behavior. It means that the unregenerate never desire to bring glory to God, but are passionately committed to upholding their own glory and honor. Of course, the power of sin is such that all have fallen short of conformity with God's law (Rom. 1:18-3:20). No one has perfectly done all that the law requires. The extent of our slavery to sin is, however, even deeper than this. It is not merely that the "sinful mind is hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7). It is also true that it "does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Rom. 8:7). Those in the flesh have an intense hatred of God burning within them, whether they are conscious of this or not. Moreover, they have no ability to keep God's law. Paul is not saying that there is no opportunity to keep the law. Nor is he saying that people want to keep the law, but God prevents them from keeping it. His point is that those in the flesh have no moral ability to keep the law perfectly or to glorify God. The power of sin is so great that they "cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8) and do his will. They are slaves to sin.

## **The Wesleyan View of Fallen Humanity**

It is notable that John Wesley would agree with the preceding diagnosis. He writes,

I believe that Adam, before his fall, had such freedom of will, that he might choose either good or evil; but that, since the fall, no child of man has a natural power to choose anything that is truly good. Yet I know (and who does not?) that man has still freedom of will in things of indifferent nature.<sup>3</sup>

Human beings since the fall are so enmeshed in the power of sin that apart from divine grace they cannot choose what is spiritually good.<sup>4</sup> This point is often acknowledged by Wesley scholars.<sup>5</sup> Harald Lindström rightly remarks that "Wesley maintains that natural man

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3 *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson, 14 vols. (1831; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 10:350. Hereafter designated as *Works*.

4 Wesleyan theology differs from that of Charles Finney in that Finney believed that all people possess the ability, apart from grace, to choose what is good. Contrary to Wesleyans he rejects the idea that people are born morally depraved because of Adam's sin. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that Finney repudiated the doctrine of prevenient grace. See J. E. Smith, "The Theology of Charles Finney: A System of Self-Reformation," *Trin J* 13 (1992): 75-77, 82-84.

5 See Wood, "Theology of Grace," 212-13; Charles A. Rogers, *The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley* (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1967), 107-13, 156-58, 194-98, 200-2.

is totally corrupt."<sup>6</sup> He is "sinful through and through, has no knowledge of God and no power to turn to him of his own free will."<sup>7</sup> Robert V. Rakestraw says that in Wesley's theology "men and women are born in sin and unable in themselves to make the least move toward God."<sup>8</sup> Colin W. Williams affirms the same point: "Because of original sin, the natural man is 'dead to God' and unable to move toward God or respond to him."<sup>9</sup> Leo G. Cox says, "By nature man receives nothing that is good. ... He is free but free only to do evil and to follow on in the way of sin."<sup>10</sup> Wesley did not believe that the will of fallen humanity was free. He says, "Such is the freedom of the will; free only to evil; free to 'drink iniquity like water;' to wander farther and farther from the living God, and do more 'despite to the Spirit of grace!'"<sup>11</sup> The Wesleyan analysis of the human condition does not differ fundamentally from the Calvinistic one.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in 1745 John Wesley said that his theology was "within a hair's breadth" of Calvinism "(1) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God. (2) *In denying all natural free-will*, and all power antecedent to grace. And, (3) In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God."<sup>13</sup> Wesley's analysis of the human condition and his bold proclamation of divine grace should warm the heart of any evangelical Calvinist.

### Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan System

If Wesleyans and Calvinists concur on the human condition, wherein do they differ? One major place that Wesleyans break with Calvinists is through their doctrine of prevenient grace. Elton Hendricks says that this doctrine "played a more important role in Wesley's theological thought than in that of any other Protestant theologian."<sup>14</sup> Williams affirms that it "has very great significance in his theology."<sup>15</sup> Even though Calvinists and Arminians hold much in common, H. Ray Dunning rightly says that "the truth that holds them but a hair's breadth apart at the point of the watershed is the doctrine of *prevenient grace*."<sup>16</sup> The differences between Calvinists and Arminians on this point should not be minimized. William Ragsdale Cannon is correct in saying that "though Wesleyanism and Calvinism come in this instance so close together, they are in reality worlds apart."<sup>17</sup> How crucial is prevenient grace to the Wesleyan system? Wesleyans themselves seem to concur that their theology hinges on the doctrine. Robert E. Chiles says that "without it, the Calvinist logic is irrefutable."<sup>18</sup> Williams asserts that Wesley's theology of prevenient grace "broke the chain of logical

6 Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (London: Epworth, 1950), 45.

7 Ibid.

8 Robert V. Rakestraw, "John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace," *JETS* 27 (1984): 196.

9 Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 41.

10 Leo G. Cox, "Prevenient Grace-A Wesleyan View," *JETS* 12 (1969): 147.

11 *Works*, 5:104.

12 So also Melvin E. Dieter, "The Wesleyan Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 21-23; M. Elton Hendricks, "John Wesley and Natural Theology," *Wesley Th J* 18 (1983): 9; J. Weldon Smith III, "Some Notes on Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace," *Religion in Life* 34 (1964-65): 70-74. The extent of the agreement should be qualified, according to H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1952), 2:353.

13 *Works*, 8:284-85. Italics added.

14 Hendricks, "Natural Theology," 8.

15 Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 41.

16 H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1988), 49.

17 William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: University Press of America, 1974), 102.

18 Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790-1935* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 50.

necessity by which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination seems to flow from the doctrine of original sin."<sup>19</sup> It seems fair to conclude that if prevenient grace is not taught in Scripture, then the credibility of Wesleyan theology is seriously undermined.

Before probing to see whether Scripture teaches prevenient grace, it is necessary to explore what Wesleyans mean by the term. We need to recall that Wesley himself was not a systematic theologian but a pastoral theologian who developed his theology in the course of his ministry. Thus, no systematic treatment of the theme of prevenient grace is found in his writings.<sup>20</sup> In Wesleyan theology there are various conceptions of prevenient grace that we do not need to specify here since, as we shall see, there is common ground within the various positions on the issue that concerns us.<sup>21</sup>

In some respects Wesleyans use the term *prevenient grace* in a way that matches with the Calvinist term *common grace*.<sup>22</sup> The conscience, according to Wesley, is to be ascribed to prevenient grace.<sup>23</sup> It is not to be understood as a natural gift but is supernaturally given by God.<sup>24</sup> In addition, some moral excellence and virtue in the world exists even among those who are unregenerate.<sup>25</sup> Prevenient grace is responsible for the goodness that is present to some extent in every society, even in cultures that are largely non-Christian.<sup>26</sup> We are not surprised to learn, then, that the relationship between prevenient grace and natural theology has been explored by some, with a close connection being suggested.<sup>27</sup>

The Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace differs from the Calvinistic conception of common grace in one important area. In the Calvinistic scheme common grace does not and cannot lead to salvation. It functions to restrain evil in the world but does not lead unbelievers to faith. For Wesleyans, prevenient grace may lead one to salvation. Cox rightly says, "The Wesleyan teaches that the prevenient grace leads on to saving grace, prepares for it, enables a person to enter into it."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in Wesley's theology it seems that a proper response to prevenient grace could lead to the salvation of those who have not heard

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19 Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 44. See also his comments on 46. In agreement with Williams are Rakestraw ("John Wesley," 197) and Wood ("Theology of Grace," 215).

20 For a survey of the positions of Wesley and John Fletcher see Mark Royster, *John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace in Missiological Perspective* (D.Miss. dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 1989), 30-72.

21 Rogers in his dissertation (see n. 5) has provided the most comprehensive analysis of Wesley's doctrine. See particularly his distinction between the early (*Prevenient Grace*, 127-35) and later Wesley (159-263) on prevenient grace. For the purposes of this chapter only Wesley's later theology of prevenient grace is in view. Rogers also includes a survey (5-16) of Wesleyan scholarship on prevenient grace; see also Royster (*Missiological Perspective*, 73-93). For three different understandings of prevenient grace in the Wesleyan tradition see Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 33. Chiles (*American Methodism*, 150-51) specifies two strands of prevenient grace among Wesleyans.

22 So Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 296; cf. Cox, "Prevenient Grace," 143-44. In fact, Wiley (*Christian Theology*, 2:357) thinks that the Wesleyan conception of prevenient grace precludes any need for "common grace."

23 *Works*, 7:187-88. For Wesley's understanding of the role of prevenient grace in relationship to the conscience see Rogers, *Prevenient Grace*, 184-89.

24 So Rakestraw, "John Wesley," 197; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 48. Wesley (*Works*, 7:187; see also 6:512) specifically says it is "a supernatural gift."

25 Wesley, *Works*, 7:345; see also 7:374.

26 So John Miley, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1894), 2:244, 246.

27 See Hendricks, "Natural Theology," 7-17; Smith, "Prevenient Grace," 77-80; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 46-47.

28 Cox, "Prevenient Grace," 144.

the gospel.<sup>29</sup> What we are interested in exploring, however, is not how prevenient grace affects those who have never heard the gospel. The distinctive aspect of prevenient grace that is relevant for our discussion is that it provides the ability to choose salvation, an ability that was surrendered by Adam's sin. Wesley describes it as follows:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first 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.<sup>30</sup>

What separates Calvinists from Wesleyans is that the former see electing grace as given only to some (the elect) and insist that this grace cannot ultimately be resisted. The latter argue that prevenient grace is given to all people and that it can be resisted.

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.<sup>31</sup> Prevenient grace provides people with the ability to choose or reject God. As sinners born in

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29 See Dunning (*Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 161-70) for a helpful discussion. See also Rogers, *Prevenient Grace*, 243-47.

30 *Works*, 6:509.

31 The description of prevenient grace in this paragraph is supported by Langford, *Practical Divinity*, 33; Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 339; Rakestraw, "John Wesley," 196; Williams, *Wesley's Theology*, 41, 46; Chiles, *American Methodism*, 149; Cox, "Prevenient Grace," 147-49; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 45-46; Hendricks, "Natural Theology," 9-11; Smith, "Prevenient Grace," 75; Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 106, 259; William B. Pope, *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880), 2:358-67.

Rogers's own conclusions regarding Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace, on first glance, seem to be radically different from that suggested by the other scholars. Further analysis, however, reveals that the difference is one of degree, not one of kind. Rogers argues (*Prevenient Grace*, 217-19) that prevenient grace, according to Wesley, does not provide people with the ability to choose salvation. Prevenient grace in Wesley's thought is a gift given, not a gift that is offered and can be rejected. People are passive in the reception of faith, and there is no emphasis on the role of human decision in receiving faith. Thus faith is irresistible at the moment given. Rogers's explanation may lead one to think that Wesley was a Calvinist! But this is not the whole story. Rogers contends that prevenient grace (*Prevenient Grace*, 228-30, 237, 271, 282-83, 288) in Wesley's thought plays a decisive role before one comes to faith. Prevenient grace operates through the law and conscience to bring conviction of sin and despair of ever pleasing God. People have the freedom to resist the conviction of sin that comes from the law and conscience. If they do not respond appropriately to the conviction of sin mediated by the law and conscience, then they will not be saved. Prevenient grace leads one to the very brink of salvation if one responds positively to the "means of grace" that precede saving faith. Thus, prevenient grace is irresistible at the moment one exercises faith, but long before one receives faith the grace of God can be resisted. Only those who satisfactorily respond to prevenient grace come to the point where saving faith can be exercised. It seems that Rogers is in harmony with other Wesleyans in his conception of prevenient grace, for the grace God gives can still be resisted. Human beings may choose to respond to or resist the influence of the law and conscience. The final and ultimate determination lies with human choice. Rogers differs from other Wesleyans in locating the point of resistance in another place in Wesley's theology, namely, one's response to the means of grace before conversion.

For views that are quite similar to Rogers's see Royster (*Missiological Perspective*, 90-91) and Robert E. Cushman, "Salvation for All: Wesley and Calvinism," in *Methodism*, ed. W. K. Anderson (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1947). It is clear from Royster's concluding definition that ability to choose what is good is included in his understanding of prevenient grace, for he says (92) that prevenient grace provides "the freedom/power to respond positively to subsequent directions from God."

Adam, they had no ability to do good or to choose what is right. But as recipients of prevenient grace they can once again choose the good. Wesley said, "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.'"<sup>32</sup> Prevenient grace does not guarantee that the good will be chosen. It simply provides the opportunity or liberty to choose salvation. People may stifle the grace given and turn away from God, or they may respond to God's grace and turn to him in order to be saved.

Obviously, prevenient grace fixes a large gulf between Calvinism and Wesleyanism. Calvinists contend that the unregenerate have no ability or desire to choose God. God's election of some is what brings them from darkness to light, from Satan's kingdom to God's. Wesleyans believe that God has given prevenient grace to all people. As descendants of Adam they were born with no ability or desire to choose God, but God has counteracted this inability by the gift of prevenient grace. Now all people have the ability to choose God. The ultimate determination of salvation is the human decision to say no or yes to God.<sup>33</sup>

### **Wesleyan Arguments in Favor of Prevenient Grace**

For all Bible-believing Christians, the most important question in matters of doctrinal dispute is this: what is the Bible's teaching as it pertains to the issue at hand? Calvinists and Arminians likewise must turn to the Bible. The critical question is whether or not the doctrine of prevenient grace is supported by Scripture. We cannot examine this issue until we see the arguments that are put forward to defend the doctrine. Wesleyans use at least four arguments to support the idea that prevenient grace is a doctrine rooted in Scripture.

First, the Scripture text that is appealed to quite often is John 1:9.<sup>34</sup> "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." The meaning of this text is not analyzed in detail by Wesleyan scholars, but their understanding seems clear enough. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world brought enough light to all people so that they are now able to reject or accept the message of the gospel. The illumination (*phōtizei*) refers to the granting of grace that overcomes the darkness that penetrated human hearts as a result of Adam's sin. This illumination does not guarantee salvation; it simply makes it possible for men and women to choose salvation.

Such an understanding of the verse may be confirmed in the subsequent context. Some rejected the light and "did not receive him" (John 1:11), while others responded to the light and "received him" (John 1:12). It should also be noted that this illumination is not restricted to a few. It is granted to "every person" (*panta anthrōpon*). This would support the Wesleyan view that prevenient grace is given to all people.

A second argument employed by Wesleyans is that prevenient grace is granted in the atonement of Christ (e.g., Tit. 2:11; John 12:32).<sup>35</sup> This argument is bound up with the

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<sup>32</sup> *Works*, 10:229-30.

<sup>33</sup> Rakestraw ("John Wesley," 199) rightly says that in Wesley's theology "that one is ultimately the determining factor in the decision of his or her justification. Faith is offered as God's free gift, but the sinner must then actively respond to that offer and reach out with the arms of true repentance to receive the gift."

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Wesley, *Works*, 10:230, 7:188; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> So, e.g., Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:247; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:353; Adam Clarke, *Christian Theology* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1835), 117; Wood, "Theology of Grace," 216; Langford, *Practical*

universality of Christ's atonement. His death for all necessarily implies that grace is given to some extent to all. The argument is that Christ would not die for all unless all were granted the opportunity to accept or reject him. John 12:32 can be understood as supporting this theory. Jesus says, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Henry Thiessen says about this verse, "There issues a power from the cross of Christ that goes out to all men, though many continue to resist that power."<sup>36</sup> In the death of Christ grace is operative so that all people are "drawn" (*helkuō*) to him. The drawing does not guarantee salvation but makes it possible,<sup>37</sup> supporting the idea that grace is given in the atonement that reverses the total inability of people to choose God. In addition, it should be pointed out that John 12:32 refers to "all people" (*pantas*). The grace given in the atonement is not limited to some but is universally distributed, giving all people everywhere the opportunity to respond or reject it.

The third Wesleyan argument in favor of prevenient grace has a theological cast. God must have granted the power to choose him because otherwise the warnings, invitations, and commands in Scripture are meaningless.<sup>38</sup> Why would God give commands to people if they are unable to put them into practice? There are numerous texts in Scripture in which commands, invitations, and warnings are employed. Perhaps Romans 2:4 is a particularly appropriate verse to cite in support.<sup>39</sup> "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" God would not command people to repent and be waiting for them to repent if he knew that they could not do so. His kindness is such that he has provided the means for every person to repent if they would only avail themselves of that means.

Fourth, prevenient grace is supported by the very nature of God.<sup>40</sup> A God of mercy, wisdom, justice, and love would not leave human beings without an opportunity to repent and choose salvation. A God of love and mercy who desires all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) would see to it that all have the chance to partake of salvation. If God elects only a few, he is guilty of partiality.<sup>41</sup>

## **A Critique of the Wesleyan Arguments for Prevenient Grace**

We now proceed to analyze the four arguments for prevenient grace advanced by Wesleyans. I will argue that their case is unpersuasive and that their doctrine of prevenient grace is not found in Scripture. Wesleyans, however, advance some exegetical and theological arguments in defense of prevenient grace that will be considered here.

We turn first of all to John 1:9. The crucial phrase for our purposes is *phōtizei panta anthrōpon* (enlightens every person), which enlightening is ascribed to "the true light." Wesleyans understand this enlightenment to refer to prevenient grace, which is given to all people, but there are serious reasons for doubting that this is the meaning of the verse. In fact, the verse can be understood in three other ways that do not yield the Wesleyan interpretation.

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*Divinity*, 34; Smith, "Prevenient Grace," 75; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 49; Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 339.

36 Thiessen, *Systematic Theology*, 261.

37 Cf. Grant R. Osborne, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 249.

38 Cf. Clarke, *Christian Theology*, 130, 132; Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:245-46.

39 Cf. Thiessen, *Systematic Theology*, 106.

40 So Wesley, *Works*, 10:36ff; Wood, "Theology of Grace," 211-12; Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 46.

41 Cf. Thiessen, *Systematic Theology*, 260.



First, the illumination could refer to general revelation, which is granted to all people through the created order.<sup>42</sup> This shifts the debate to different ground, for some argue that general revelation is sufficient for salvation.<sup>43</sup> Such a view is unpersuasive given Paul's estimation of general revelation in Romans 1:18-32.<sup>44</sup> In any case, D. A. Carson is correct in dismissing a reference to general revelation since this would have been more appropriately dealt with earlier in the prologue (i.e., John 1:3-4).<sup>45</sup> The specific context is not general revelation but the response of people to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.

Second, the illumination may refer to an inward illumination that leads to conversion.<sup>46</sup> In this case, John would not be saying that illumination is given to all people "without exception" but to all "without distinction."<sup>47</sup> The light is not confined to the Jews, but also has an effect among the Gentiles. Other sheep that are not of the fold of the Jews will be brought in (John 10:16). Jesus died not only for the Jews but also for the children of God scattered throughout the world (John 11:51-52).

The context of John 1:9-13, however, suggests that another interpretation is the most probable.<sup>48</sup> The word *enlighten* (*phōtizō*) refers not to inward illumination but to the exposure that comes when light is shed upon something. Some are shown to be evil because they did not know or receive Jesus (John 1:10-11), while others are revealed to be righteous because they have received Jesus and have been born of God (John 1:12-13). John 3:19-21 confirms this interpretation. Those who are evil shrink from coming to the light because they do not want their works to be exposed (v. 20). But those who practice the truth gladly come to the light so that it might be manifest that their works are wrought in God (v. 21). The light that enlightens every person does not entail the bestowment of grace, nor does it refer to the inward illumination of the heart by the Spirit of God. Rather, the light exposes and reveals the moral and spiritual state of one's heart. C. K. Barrett rightly says that "the light shines upon every man for judgement, to reveal what he is."<sup>49</sup> Or, as Carson remarks, "Inner illumination is then not in view" but "the objective revelation" that occurs at the coming of the "true light."<sup>50</sup> John 1:9 is not, therefore, suggesting that through Christ's coming each person is given the ability to choose salvation. The purpose of the verse is to say that the coming of the true light exposes and reveals where people are in their relationship to God.<sup>51</sup>

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42 So Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 95.

43 In fact, in Wesleyan theology there is not a clear line of demarcation between general revelation and special revelation with respect to prevenient grace. See above.

44 See Moo's (*Romans* 1-8, 91-124) thorough exegesis in defense of this conclusion. Neither does Romans 2:14-15 suggest the possibility of salvation through obeying one's conscience. See Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Paul Believe in Justification by Works? Another Look at Romans 2," *The Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993): 131-58. Wesley believed that this passage taught the doctrine of prevenient grace. See John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, 2 vols. (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), comment on Romans 2:14 in volume 2.

45 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 123.

46 The word *phōtizō* has the meaning of inward illumination in, e.g., Psalm 18:9 (LXX); Ephesians 1:18; 3:9.

47 So Carson, *John*, 123.

48 For the interpretation suggested here see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 161; Carson, *John*, 124.

49 Barrett, *John*, 161.

50 Carson, *John*, 124.

51 John emphasizes that the light, Jesus, has come into the world so that people might believe in him (1:6-8; 12:35-36) or follow him (8:12). The call to believe in the light, though, is a far cry from saying that all have been given the ability to do so. Indeed, John, speaking of those who did not believe, says they "could not believe" because God "has blinded their eyes" (12:39-40). This judicial hardening by God does not lessen human responsibility in John's eyes (cf. 12:43). Jesus has come into the world as light so that people would

Wesleyans appeal to grace given in the atonement and Christ's death for all as an indication of prevenient grace. I shall not examine the question of the extent of the atonement since that is treated elsewhere in this work.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Calvinists have typically seen grace as bestowed upon the elect in the atonement, but in this case the grace bestowed is effective and guarantees salvation. The question is whether in the atonement of Christ the Wesleyan conception of prevenient grace is taught; that is, does Scripture teach that people are given the ability to choose or to reject God by virtue of the atonement? Doubtless grace is manifested in the atonement. For instance, Titus 2:11 says that "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." Calvinists usually argue that this text teaches that the atonement secures and accomplishes redemption for the elect. It is not my purpose to defend or refute that interpretation. Even if the text were suggesting that salvation is potentially available for all people (cf. 1 Tim. 4:10), that is a far cry from saying that through the atonement God has counteracted the effects of Adam's sin so that all people have the opportunity to accept or reject him. Titus 2:11 says that God's grace has been manifested through Christ's work on the cross, but it does not say that God has thereby supplied the ability to believe to all people. Wesleyans conclude from the atonement effected by Christ that enough grace has been imparted to all people so that they can now choose whether or not to believe. But it is precisely this point that is not taught explicitly in the verse. It does not necessarily follow that since grace was manifested in the death of Christ that all people as a result have the ability to believe in him. Specific exegetical support for this conclusion is lacking.

A text that might lead to the Wesleyan conclusion is John 12:32. But this involves a misreading of the text. In John 6:37 Jesus says, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." Note that this text specifically teaches that only some will come to Jesus, namely, those who have been given by the Father to the Son. In other words, the Father has not given all to the Son; he has selected only some, and it is they who will come to the Son and believe in him (cf. John 6:35).<sup>53</sup> The teaching of John 6:37 is reaffirmed in 6:44. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him at the last day." The word *draw* (*helkuō*), which is used in John 12:32, is also used in John 6:37. The point of John 6:44 is that the Father does not draw all people, only some. Carson rightly remarks, "The combination of v[erse] 37a and v[erse] 44 prove that this 'drawing' activity of the Father cannot be reduced to what theologians sometimes call 'prevenient grace' dispensed to every individual, for this 'drawing' is selective, or else the negative note of v[erse] 44 is meaningless."<sup>54</sup> The Johannine conception of drawing is not that it makes salvation possible, but that it makes salvation effectual. Those who are drawn will come to Jesus and believe in him.

Does this definition of drawing mean that John teaches universalism, since 12:32 says that Jesus will draw all to himself by virtue of the cross? The context of John 12:20-33 helps us answer that question. Greeks, that is, Gentiles, approached Philip because they wanted to see Jesus (vv. 20-23). Jesus ignores the request and instead speaks of the need for a gram of wheat to die in order to bear fruit (vv. 24-26), and of his commitment to carry out his

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believe in him and they should do so! For some wise comments on how God's judicial hardening is compatible with other biblical themes see Carson, *John*, 448-49.

52 See chapter 11 by J. I. Packer.

53 For more detailed support of divine election in John see Robert W. Yarbrough, "Divine Election in the Gospel of John," in chapter 2 of this work; see also D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 125-98.

54 Carson, *John*, 293.

commission (vv. 27-28). Jesus' death is the means by which God's judgment of the world and his triumph over Satan will be accomplished (v. 31). He concludes by saying that if he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself (v. 32).

The context is of paramount importance for understanding John 12:32. Jesus appears to ignore the request from his disciples to meet with the Greeks who wanted to see him. But the point Jesus makes is that the only way Gentiles will come to him is through his death. He must die in order to bear much fruit and bring Gentiles to himself. The power of Satan as the ruler of the world will be broken only by the cross. Thus, when Jesus speaks of drawing all people to himself by virtue of the cross, the issue in the context is how Gentiles can come to Jesus. The drawing of all does not refer to all people individually but the means by which Gentiles will be included in the people of God. Carson again rightly interprets the verse. "Here 'all men' reminds the reader of what triggered these statements, [namely,] the arrival of the Greeks, and means 'all people without distinction, Jews and Gentiles alike', not all individuals without exception."<sup>55</sup> The Wesleyan theory that prevenient grace is provided in the atonement so that people are given ability to choose salvation cannot be supported from the context of John 12.

The third Wesleyan argument for prevenient grace is probably the most powerful one. Why would God give commands unless people were given some ability to obey them? Romans 2:4 says that his kindness is intended to lead people to repentance. Does this not imply that people have the ability to repent if they would only choose to do so?

It should be acknowledged that Wesleyan logic is coherent here, and one can see why Wesleyans would deduce human ability from the giving of commands. Nonetheless, even though their logic is impeccable, it does not necessarily follow that their conclusion is true. An argument may be logically co-herent and not fit with the state of affairs in the world because the answer given is not comprehensive. To put it another way, one of the premises in the Wesleyan argument is not in accord with the reality of life as it is portrayed in the Scriptures. They are incorrect in deducing that God would not give commands without giving the moral ability to obey them. The distinction between physical and moral ability is crucial.<sup>56</sup> For instance, human beings are physically able (in most cases) to walk up steps, but they are physically unable to jump over houses. In a similar way, God gives commands to unbelievers that they can physically obey; that is, they could observe his commandments if they desired to do so. Unbelievers are morally unable to keep God's commands in the sense that they have no desire to obey all of his commandments. God commands all people (Gal. 3:10; Rom. 1:18-3:20) to obey his law perfectly, but no one is morally able to do this. Because all people are born with a sin nature inherited from Adam, they will inevitably sin. Even though people cannot morally obey God's commands, biblical authors assume that they should keep his commandments. They should keep his commandments because they are right and good (Rom. 7:12) and are not physically impossible to keep. People could observe the commandments if they wanted to do so. The biblical view, however, is that unbelievers as slaves of sin have no desire to keep God's law.<sup>57</sup>

The state of affairs that obtains under the law remains when Christ comes. That is, all

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>56</sup> For a recent explanation of this distinction which is a model of clarity see David M Ciochi, "Understanding Our Ability to Endure Temptation A Theological Watershed," *JETS* 35 (1992) 463-68.

<sup>57</sup> It should be pointed out that Adam was created with both physical and moral ability to obey God's commands. We cannot here pursue the difficult question as to why Adam sinned.

people should come to Jesus in order to have life (John 5:40). Jesus upbraids those who do not believe despite all his works (Matt. 11:20-24), and he invites all to come to him (Matt. 11:28-30). Yet he also teaches that no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father (John 6:44), and only those to whom the Father and Son reveal themselves will come to know him (Matt. 11:25-27). All people are summoned to believe in Jesus and are censured for not believing. Nonetheless, the Scriptures also teach that they have no moral ability to believe, and that the only way they will believe is if they are given by the Father to the Son. This revelation is not vouchsafed to all people but only to the elect. Jesus commands believers to be perfect (Matt. 5:48), but the need for forgiveness (Matt. 6:14-15) demonstrates that perfection is impossible to attain.

The problem with Wesleyanism at this point is that it is guided by human logic and rationality rather than the Scriptures. Their view that commands would not be given that people could not morally obey is certainly attractive. But our counterargument is that such a notion is not taught in the Scriptures. The doctrine of original sin and human inability is an offense to reason.<sup>58</sup> This is not to say that it is irrational. The distinction between physical and moral ability goes a long way toward resolving the difficulties. Nonetheless, not all the difficulties are resolved by the Calvinist view, for ultimately we do not fully understand how people can be responsible for sin when they are born with an inclination that will inevitably lead them to sin.

An example from another area of life might help. Robert Wright in an article on alcoholism was musing on the theory that it might be determined by one's genes.<sup>59</sup> If so, could we conclude that people are not responsible for alcoholism? Wright correctly says no. If we draw this conclusion, then the reality of human responsibility will be slowly whittled away as we discover the impact of genetics on human behavior. Even if alcoholism is determined genetically, people are still responsible for their behavior.<sup>60</sup> We may not fully understand how both determinism and human responsibility can be true, but both are necessary to account for the nature of humanity and genetic research. So too, sinners who have inherited a sin nature from Adam and who have no moral ability to obey God's law and no inclination to respond to him are still responsible for their failure to respond to God's grace.

The preceding comments prepare us for understanding Romans 2:4. The wording of this text should be taken seriously, but our own philosophical presuppositions should not be read into it. It is the case that the kindness of God should lead people to repentance.<sup>61</sup> God's kindness is not a charade but is profoundly present in that he spares people and does not immediately destroy them for their sin. The kindness and patience of God should induce people to seek him and to confess their sin. But this text does not say that people have the moral ability to repent and turn to God. It simply says that they should repent and turn to him. Wesleyans read into this verse their theology of prevenient grace, thereby squeezing

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58 This is the title of Bernard Ramm's book on original sin, *Offense to Reason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

59 Robert Wright, "Alcohol and Free Will: The Supreme Court Reopens an Old Question," *The New Republic* 197, 24 (14 December 1987): 14-16.

60 Wright himself seems to fall prey to rationalism insofar as he subordinates human responsibility to determinism. Nonetheless, he insists that life will not make sense unless we hold people to be responsible.

61 The present indicative *agei* is understood here as conative. So C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 8. *Agei* should not be pressed as a present indicative to say that God's kindness is actually leading the Jews to repent. The point of the verse is that God's kindness should lead them to repent.

more out of the verse than it says.<sup>62</sup>

What we have said about Romans 2:4 leads us naturally to the fourth argument used for prevenient grace, that is, the justice, wisdom, mercy, and love of God. What I have been arguing is that the fundamental problem with the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace is that it is not taught in the Scriptures. It is a philosophical imposition of a certain world view upon the Scriptures. This world view is attractive because it neatly solves, to some extent, issues such as the problem of evil and why human beings are held responsible for sin. But the Scriptures do not yield such neat solutions.<sup>63</sup> God is wholly just in condemning sinners who have no ability to obey his law (Rom. 8:7-8). They fail to keep the law because they do not want to obey it. In sinning they carry out the desires of their hearts. God is merciful and loving in not destroying them immediately and offering them salvation. It is a mistake, however, to say that God's love and mercy will provide every person an equal chance to believe. God would be just in sending all to hell since all have sinned. The love and mercy extended to the elect is undeserved. God is obligated to save no one, but out of a heart of mercy he saves some (Eph. 2:4-7). Those who believe that God must extend mercy equally to all are subtly falling into the trap of believing that God would not be good without showing mercy equally to all. This comes perilously close to the conclusion that God should show mercy to all to the same extent, and that such mercy is obligatory. But if God should show equal mercy to all, then mercy is no longer viewed as undeserved. In this view mercy extended to all is demanded by justice. This kind of reasoning should be rejected because the Scriptures make it clear that no one deserves to be saved, that all people could be justly sent to hell, and that God's mercy is so stunning because it is undeserved.

The scandal of the Calvinist system is that ultimately the logical problems posed cannot be fully resolved. The final resolution of the problem of human responsibility and divine justice is beyond our rational capacity. The doctrine of prevenient grace in the Wesleyan sense is read into the Scriptures because it solves so many logical problems and attempts to clarify how God is just and loving. Calvinists also affirm God's mercy, wisdom, justice, and love. We trust that he is good, and that no one will perish who does not deserve judgment. There is significant evidence to vindicate the justice, mercy, and love of God. Nonetheless, we cannot comprehensively explain how these attributes of God fit the reality portrayed in the Scriptures. There are finally some mysteries that we cannot unravel.

## Conclusion

The doctrine of prevenient grace should be accepted only if it can be sustained from a careful exegesis of the Scriptures. What was most striking to me in my research was how little scriptural exegesis has been done by Wesleyans in defense of prevenient grace. It is vital to their system of theology, for even Wesleyans admit that without it "Calvinist logic is irrefutable."<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, not much exegetical work has been done in support of the

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62 Another text that could be used to support prevenient grace is Acts 7:51, where Stephen says to his adversaries, "you always resist the Holy Spirit." It is true that there is a work of the Spirit that is resisted by unbelievers. This should be distinguished, however, from saying that God has granted all people the ability to respond to his grace. In fact, the text seems to suggest the opposite. People resist the Holy Spirit because of their bondage to sin. Scripture teaches that for the elect God graciously overcomes their resistance and brings them to repentance (2 Tim. 2:25-26).

63 For a semi-popular treatment that is a more detailed explanation of the biblical view see D. A. Carson, *How Long O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

64 See note 18.

doctrine. This is particularly astonishing when one compares the biblical data for prevenient grace to Calvinist texts that support unconditional election. The Calvinist case has been promulgated, rightly or wrongly, via a detailed exegesis of numerous texts. The plight of humanity due to Adam's sin (which we investigated) is reversed only by the electing grace of God, according to the Calvinist. Wesleyans contend that prevenient grace counteracts the inability of humanity due to Adam's sin, but firm biblical evidence seems to be lacking. One can be pardoned, then, for wondering whether this theory is based on scriptural exegesis. Millard Erickson rightly says about it, "The problem is that there is no clear and adequate basis in Scripture for this concept of universal enablement. The theory, appealing though it is in many ways, simply is not taught explicitly in the Bible."<sup>65</sup>

Prevenient grace is attractive because it solves so many problems, but it should be rejected because it cannot be exegetically vindicated. But if prevenient grace is rejected, then all people are in bondage to sin. They will never turn to God because they are so enslaved by sin that they will never desire to turn to him. How then can any be saved? The Scriptures teach that the effectual calling of God is what persuades those who are chosen to turn to him. God's grace effectively works in the heart of the elect so that they see the beauty and glory of Christ and put their faith in him (2 Cor. 4:6). Because God's choice lies behind our salvation, we cannot boast before him that we were noble or wise enough to choose him. We can only boast in the Lord who chose us to be his own (1 Cor. 1:29, 31).

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65 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 925.