

An Appraisal of Prevenient Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

P. V. Joseph*
pvjoseph@bu.edu

Introduction

Although Paul was the first exponent of the Christian doctrine of grace, it has assumed a central stage in theological thinking since Augustine's battle with Pelagius. Deliberations on this important doctrine continued through the Reformation period, and eventually resulted in divergent interpretations in two important theological systems within Protestantism – Arminianism and Calvinism. While Calvin and his successors were responsible for its development within Calvinism, it was John Wesley who developed the Arminian doctrine of grace. This paper seeks to provide a fairly balanced and comprehensive discussion of Wesley's concept of prevenient grace within the context of Wesleyan soteriology, taking into consideration the issues of human depravity, human freedom, and divine sovereignty. It explores a cross-section of Wesleyan interpreters, digging into Wesley himself, and displaying the complexity of the issues at stake. It also explores the issues within the wider context of the Christian tradition itself, bringing Wesley in conversation with the leading traditional theologians, particularly with Augustine and Calvin.

*Palolil V. Joseph, lecturer in Luther W. New Jr. Theological College, Dehradun, India is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the Boston University School of Theology, Massachusetts, USA.

1. Preventive Grace in Wesley's Theology

The word "preventive" comes from the Latin verb *praevenīō* which is formed of two Latin terms, *prae* meaning "before" and *veniō*, "come." Thus, the word means, "to come before," "to go ahead," or "to precede." The concept of preventive grace is traced back to St. Augustine who developed it in his confrontation with Pelagius.¹

Preventive grace was Wesley's answer to the problem he encountered with regard to the doctrine of human depravity. Grounded within the larger Protestant tradition, Wesley accepted and affirmed total human depravity. However, with his conviction that God's grace is free for all, and that the offer of salvation is available to all, Wesley could not accept the doctrines of limited atonement and eternal election. On the other hand, he had difficulty with the Roman Catholic and Eastern theologies which did not accept total depravity, but provided space for human freedom to respond to God. Wesley found both of these positions to be problematic because they "underestimated the impact of Inbeing Sin and endangered the unmerited nature of God's restoring grace."² Wesley is convinced that total depravity has rendered humanity incapable of reaching out to God. This problem of human incapability is resolved by God counteracting "the effects of original sin through preventive grace, which restores a small measure of freedom to humans, enabling them to respond to God."³ Wesley found here the possibility of maintaining the doctrine of total depravity on the one hand, and on the

¹ Augustine, "On Nature and Grace," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994; fourth printing, 2004), 133; Also, "On the Spirit and the Letter," 110. (Hereafter, NPNF). Reacting to Pelagius' denial of human depravity and his teaching about human ability to do divine will without the assistance of divine grace, Augustine developed his concept of the sovereignty of grace which is gratuitously given to humanity. Augustine taught the depravity of humanity and their absolute inability to save themselves without the grace of God. For Augustine, this grace is preventive, and it "'goes ahead' of humanity, preparing the human will for conversion." Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001; reprint 2003), 450.

² Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 83.

³ Henry H. Knight III, "Love and Freedom 'by Grace Alone' in Wesley's Soteriology: A Proposal for Evangelicals," *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 60. See also, Leo G. Cox, "Preventive Grace – A Wesleyan View," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12, no. 3 (1969): 146.

An Appraisal of Preventive Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

other, the possibility of human response to God through the enablement by preventive grace—this being the work of God.⁴

Wesley understands preventive grace as God's grace which is commonly made available to all human beings.⁵ As enabling grace, preventive grace has only a preparatory function in the salvific work of God. In fact, salvation begins with preventive grace: "...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."⁶ As a divine initiative, preventive grace becomes operative in human life, restoring the human faculties corrupted by sin. Consequently, humanity is made conscious of its sinfulness and need for salvation.⁷ Collins explains it as follows: "the doctrine of preventive grace reveals that God takes the first step in the process of salvation and heals some of the most damaging effects of original sin."⁸ Preventive grace is not, however, the saving grace:

⁴ Robert V. Rakestraw, "John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 27, no. 2 (June 1984): 196. See also Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 83.

⁵ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *John Wesley's Message Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 22; see also Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 48.

⁶ John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 488. [Hereafter, *Anthology*]. Thomas Oden finds an association between preventive grace and "grace of calling (*gratia vocans*) or summoning grace," Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace*, 49.

⁷ See, Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 87; Kenneth J. Collins, *Wesley on Salvation: A Study in the Standard Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 23. In this context, one might note Michael Leffel's observation on preventive grace: "In the Wesleyan tradition, the name given to God's activity that prepares all persons for salvation is Preventive Grace. By all reviews, it is regarded as God's activity that 'comes before' (*pre-venio*) we are aware of other manifestations of God's presence in our lives. Wesley's doctrine of Preventive Grace expresses his conviction that God remains present in the human situation to open up universal, subtle, gradual, and cooperant opportunities for all persons to become "the new creation" God intended.... Wesley broadly summarized his understanding of Preventive Grace by suggesting that salvation begins with 'preventing grace.'" G. Michael Leffel, "Preventive Grace and the Re-Enchantment of Nature: Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Psychotherapy and Spiritual Formation" *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 2 (2004): 133.

⁸ Collins, *Wesley on Salvation: A Study in the Standard Sermons*, 23. See, Knight III, "Love and Freedom 'by Grace Alone' in Wesley's Soteriology: A Proposal for Evangelicals," 60.

Salvation is carried on by ‘convincing grace,’ usually in Scripture termed ‘repentance,’ which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation, whereby ‘through grace’ we ‘are saved by faith,’ consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.⁹

Prevenient grace is seen in the context of the natural state of humanity, the totally depraved and corrupt state. Wesley has often been accused of a shallow view of human depravity. The fact remains, however, that he is fully convinced of the helplessness of humans and their total depravity. In his sermon, “Original Sin,” Wesley gives a clear exposition of the total depravity of humanity. Distinguishing between Christianity and heathenism, Wesley underlines total depravity thus:

They (heathens) knew not that all men were empty of all good, and filled with all manner of evil. They were wholly ignorant of the entire depravation of the whole human nature, of every man born into the world, in every faculty of his soul, not so much by those particular vices which reign in particular persons, as by the general flood of atheism and idolatry, of pride, self-will, and love of the world. This, therefore, is the first, grand, distinguishing point between heathenism and Christianity.¹⁰

In his sermon “Of the Church,” he writes:

We are called to walk, First, “with all lowliness:” to have that mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus; ...to be deeply sensible of our own unworthiness, of the universal depravity of our nature, (in which dwelleth no good thing,)—prone to all evil, averse to all good; insomuch that we are not only sick, but dead in trespasses and sins, till God breathes upon the dry bones, and creates life by the fruit of his lips.¹¹

Since human beings are totally depraved and have no good in themselves, and are unable to save themselves, God takes the initiative

⁹ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 488. Thomas Oden identifies a fourfold sequence of the work of saving grace in Wesley. They are preventing grace, convincing grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 246.

¹⁰ Wesley, “Original Sin,” in *Anthology*, 333.

¹¹ Wesley, “Of the Church,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. vi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 398. [Hereafter, *Works*].

Paul's Defense of his Gentile Mission in Romans

to save humanity. As noted above, the presence of prevenient grace enables the human person to respond to God's offer of salvation. For Wesley, responding to God's initiative is not so much the human *ability*, but it is the human *responsibility* and freedom which comes through divine enablement. Colin Williams maintains that "Wesley holds these two (man's inability to move himself toward God and his freedom to respond to God) together, without resorting to any form of Pelagianism, by his twin doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace."¹² One must also note that human response to the divine overtures implies human freedom. By employing that freedom, the human person can either accept the offer of salvation or reject it. This does not mean salvation is the work of the human person, but it is entirely the work of God, as we shall see in the subsequent discussion.

Is prevenient grace biblical? If one were to search for proof texts for the doctrine of prevenient grace, it is absent in the Bible. Wesley was convinced that the idea of God's grace being freely given to all is a scriptural teaching.¹³ He found the following passages particularly important in this regard: Wesley believed that Paul's argument in Romans 8:32 that God in Christ freely gave us "all things" includes grace which is "free for all."¹⁴ He considers the Johannine passage, "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world*" (1: 9) as signifying prevenient grace.¹⁵ Further, Wesley argues that Paul's reference in Romans 2:12-14 to Gentiles who instinctively do the requirements of the law is the consequence of divine grace being effective in them. Similarly, Wesley finds traces of preceding grace in Micah 6:8 (*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*) which forms the basis of a person's

¹² Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d), 41.

¹³ Speaking about Wesley's source of prevenient grace, Rogers writes, "the term 'prevenient grace' and the more explicit theological content of the notions seems, for Wesley, to come from the theological tradition of the church... The doctrine of prevenient grace is part of the church's theological tradition present in both ancient and medieval theology, and particularly prominent in English Protestant theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." Charles Allen Rogers, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in Theology of John Wesley" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1967), 25-29.

¹⁴ Wesley, "Free Grace," in *Anthology*, 50-51.

¹⁵ Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," in *Anthology*, 491.

knowledge of good and evil.¹⁶ Matthew 5:45, which speaks of God's providential care for the righteous and unrighteous, is taken by Wesley as inferring "a more general dispensing... of grace by God."¹⁷ While these are not direct references to prevenient grace, for Wesley, they nevertheless suggest the grace of God made available to the whole human race. The eminent New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, while admitting the weak exegetical foundation of prevenient grace, thinks that it comports with the divine character (cf. John 3:16).¹⁸ Similarly, the renowned theologian, Thomas Oden, identifies prevenient grace as an important doctrine grounded in the Scripture, and he adduces several passages to substantiate its biblical basis.¹⁹

2. Divine and Human Factors in Wesleyan Soteriology

Wesley traces the beginning of the human aspect involved in salvation to repentance which is possible through prevenient grace. Repentance, for Wesley, is being conscious of one's own sinfulness. He writes, "And first, repent, that is, know yourselves. This is the first repentance, previous to faith... Know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art. Know that corruption of thy inmost nature... Know that thou art corrupted in every power, in every faculty of thy soul."²⁰ This self-awareness of one's own sinfulness is accompanied by "an earnest desire to escape from one's present condition and enter the door of the kingdom of God. Then it is that faith comes as the gift of God."²¹ Faith, for Wesley, is the work of God; more specifically, "[i]t is

¹⁶ Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," in *Anthology*, 486; see also Rogers, "The Concept of Prevenient Grace in Theology of John Wesley," 25-26.

¹⁷ Ben Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005), 207.

¹⁸ Witherington contends that the absence of evidence for prevenient grace must not be used to rule out this doctrine. While the phrases "prevenient grace" and "common grace" are absent in the Scripture, he claims that their idea is present in the New Testament. His following statement may be pertinent here: "Perhaps we need to admit that there is some mystery about all this, and neither the concept of universal prevenient grace nor the concept of common grace and particularistic election adequately explains the biblical data." Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 207-9.

¹⁹ See especially chapter 2 in Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace*. Oden refers to passages such as Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:1, 8; Titus 2:11-13; Rev. 3:20 to establish the biblical basis for prevenient grace (pp. 47-49).

²⁰ Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," in *Anthology*, 128.

²¹ Weems, *John Wesley's Message Today*, 25.

An Appraisal of Prevenient Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

the gift of God.' No man is able to work it in himself. It is a work of omnipotence... It is the free gift of God, which he bestows... on the ungodly and unholy."²² This faith leads the penitent sinner to justification through grace.

In order for justification to be effectual in the life of a penitent sinner, it must be founded on faith. In this regard, Cannon's observation seems worthwhile: "But the Wesleyan conception of justification, though it rests on the foundation of grace as its cause, depends likewise on faith as the instrument or condition of its being made effective."²³ Further, as Cannon points out, in Wesley, faith and grace are identical and both come from God: "Faith, for Wesley, is really nothing more than grace made conscious in the individual, or grace transformed from its latent stage into one of power and effectiveness."²⁴ The fact that grace and faith become the basis for justification does not rule out the place of human response in the process of justification. Human response comes out of the exercise of human freedom, which God respects. Wesley says, "(God) did not destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before. Least of all did he take away your liberty; your power of choosing good or evil: He did not force you; but, being assisted by his grace, you, like Mary, chose the better part."²⁵ How do we see the human response here in the works of justification? About this Cannon writes that "in the very act of man's willingness to receive the gift of faith he becomes an active factor in the fulfillment of the necessary conditions which God has set for his justification."²⁶ Wesley believes that accepting the human response in the process of salvation does not undermine the sovereignty of God, because human response is possible only through the enablement of divine grace.

Wesley's understanding of divine sovereignty, according to Maddox, is found in his "distinction between God's work as Creator and as Governor." For Wesley, "it may be permissible to speak of God working alone and irresistibly when creating and sustaining nonpersonal nature, but not when governing human life—for this would eliminate human responsibility. As Governor, God enables human obedience, but will not

²² Wesley, "Of Reason and Religion," in *Works*, vol. viii, 5-6.

²³ William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: University Press of America, 1974), 103.

²⁴ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 103.

²⁵ Wesley, "The General Spread of the Gospel," in *Works*, vol. vi, 280.

²⁶ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 106.

force it.”²⁷ Through this distinction Wesley seems to affirm the sovereignty of God on the one hand, and preserve human responsibility on the other. In this regard, the following observation of Maddox is quite appropriate and vital:

Perhaps the best way to capture Wesley’s conviction here is to say that he construed God’s power or sovereignty fundamentally in terms of *empowerment*, rather than control or *overpowerment*. This is not to weaken God’s power but to determine its character! As Wesley was fond of saying, God works “strongly and sweetly.” That is, God’s *grace* works powerfully, but not irresistibly, in matters of human life and salvation; thereby empowering our *response-ability*, without overriding our *responsibility*.²⁸

Thus, Wesley is able to uphold the divine sovereignty, affirming the absolute power and majesty of God, and at the same time accepting the place of human responsibility and freedom in the salvific work of God. Therefore, he believes that although God in his sovereignty desires to save all humanity, the human persons must respond to God’s offer of salvation. In his sermon, “Free Grace,” Wesley writes, “‘The power of the Lord is present to heal them,’ but they will not be healed. They ‘reject the counsel,’ the merciful counsel, ‘of God against themselves,’ as did their stiff-necked forefathers. And therefore are they without excuse, because God would save them, but they will not be saved. This is the condemnation. . . .”²⁹ God’s grace is resisted here, and consequently people are not saved. This implies that there is no coercion on the part of God, rather God desires a positive response on the part of the human person in order to receive the offer of salvation by exercising the God-given freedom. By the effectual working of prevenient grace, the corrupted faculty of the human person is restored so as to respond to the divine overtures.³⁰ Maddox beautifully captures this in the following passage: “this grace *inspires* and *enables*, but does not *overpower*.

²⁷ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 54-55. For another brief discussion on the distinction between God’s work as Creator and as Governor, see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 37-38.

²⁸ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 55.

²⁹ Wesley, “Free Grace,” in *Anthology*, 56.

³⁰ In “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 488, Wesley writes, “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

An Appraisal of Prevenient Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

Put in more technical terms, Wesley understood grace... to be resistible or co-operant. Put in my suggested terms, he understood grace to be responsible—it empowers our response, but does not coerce that response.”³¹

What becomes evident from the preceding discussion is God's honouring of human freedom in the process of salvation. God does not use the divine *absolute decree* and *irresistible power* to coerce positive human response towards salvation, but provides space for the positive exercise of human liberty. About this Wesley writes, “Indeed, were he (God) to do this (saving the humanity) by an absolute decree, and by his own irresistible power, it would imply no wisdom at all. But his wisdom is shown by saving man in such a manner as not to destroy his nature, not to take away the liberty which he has given him.”³² But Wesley is hopeful that the human person can respond to divine overtures positively because of prevenient grace.

Wesley seems to place human freedom/response and God's sovereignty in a state of tension. While God respects human freedom, the positive human response towards God is God's own work, because it is God who generates such positive desires through prevenient grace: “God breathes into us every good desire, and brings every good desire to good effect.”³³ Therefore, the human person cannot boast of his/her role in salvation, because it comes through God's “grace” and “unmerited mercy.” Wesley clarifies it by building his thought here on Philippians 2:12-13 “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Therefore, salvation is finally and absolutely God's own work, from the beginning to the end.

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. Salvation is carried on by ‘convincing grace,’ usually in Scripture termed ‘repentance,’ which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation, whereby, ‘through grace’ we ‘are saved by faith,’ consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification.”

³¹ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 86.

³² Wesley, “The Wisdom of God's Counsels,” in *Works*, vol. vi, 326; cf. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 106.

³³ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 488.

3. Is Wesley Synergistic or Monergistic?

Synergism and Monergism are key concepts in Arminian and Calvinistic soteriology, and they have different shades of meaning. Synergism is “[t]he view that in the act of justification (or the experience of conversion), the human will can cooperate with God’s grace.”³⁴ It is the “theological belief in free human participation in salvation.” It acquires a heretical form in Pelagianism—which “denies original sin and elevates natural and moral human ability to live spiritually fulfilled lives”—and semi-Pelagianism, which “embraces a modified version of original sin but believes that humans have the ability, even in their natural or fallen state, to initiate salvation by exercising a good will toward God.”³⁵ Monergism, in a broader sense, “points to God as the all-determining reality, which means that everything in nature and history is under the direct control of God.” Soteriologically speaking, it accepts God as “the sole determining agency in salvation” and denies any human cooperation with God in salvation.³⁶

The question of whether Wesley is synergistic or monergistic is often traced back to the accusation that Wesley believed in salvation by works.³⁷ Wesley has sought to counter these accusations and clarify his theological position. Reacting to one of his critics, Wesley categorically rejects both absolute election and salvation by works. He writes, “I do not believe... any such absolute election, as implies that all but the absolutely elect shall inevitably be damned... I do not believe salvation by works.”³⁸ He attributes most of such accusations to his opponents’ failure to read his works carefully and fully. These accusations have generated divergent views as to whether John Wesley is synergistic or monergistic. Perhaps it is helpful to examine briefly some important debates on this issue.

One of the earliest views on this issue comes from George Croft Cell who goes to the extent of calling Wesley a Calvinist. Cell claims

³⁴ “Synergism” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Ed. E. A. Livingstone. Oxford University Press, 2006. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Boston University. 23 November 2008 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t95.e5605>>

³⁵ Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 17-18.

³⁶ Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, 18-19.

³⁷ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 91.

³⁸ Wesley, “Some Remarks on Mr. Hill’s ‘Review of All the Doctrines Taught by Mr. Wesley,’” in *Works*, vol. x, 379.

An Appraisal of Prevenient Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

“Wesley was conscious of being even more strictly *monergistic* in his pure *ethic of grace* than some of the later Calvinists.”³⁹ In fact, Cell claims that there is a fundamental unity between the idea of justification of Lutheranism, election of Calvinism, and Christian perfection of Wesleyanism. He wonders, “whether the dynamic of the Wesleyan Reformation came out of Wesley’s deviation from or lay in his concurrence with the Luther-Calvin idea of a God-given faith in Christ.”⁴⁰ Cell seems to believe that Wesley did not deviate from the path of the Reformers, but was in agreement with them. He finds much greater conformity of Wesley with the Reformers in the doctrine of salvation, and claims that Wesley did not deviate “a hair’s breadth from the early Reformation doctrine of salvation.”⁴¹

According to Cell, while Wesley, within the divine restoration, conceded some “measure of natural free will” to human beings, he firmly believed that all their “power of concurrence with God is itself ‘from God.’” For Wesley, the three constituents of salvation, namely, justification, sanctification, and glorification are the works of God alone. What is significant here, according to Cell, is not human freedom, but the power and the grace of God. It is the grace of God and not human freedom that is operative in the salvific work of God.⁴² In fact, Cell discovers the most powerful monergistic statement of Wesley in his sermon on “Free Grace.” The sermon is seen as Wesley’s attempt to “reaffirm in the most complete and unequivocal manner a monergistic and in the same manner to deny a synergistic view of faith and repentance, of justification and of sanctification, it would seem an end of all argument about, not the soundness of Wesley’s doctrine, but what his position actually was.”⁴³ With a note of finality, Cell seems more than convinced of Wesleyan monergism and that too in the most anti-Calvinistic writing of Wesley. Interestingly, in this anti-Calvinistic sermon, Cell has discovered Wesley as more Calvinistic than Wesleyan.

Cell’s proposition of Wesleyan monergism is rejected by William Cannon who thinks Wesley is synergistic. Cannon argues that in admitting Wesley’s refutation of Calvinistic election and reprobation in

³⁹ George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), 256.

⁴⁰ Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, 244.

⁴¹ Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, 245.

⁴² Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, 256-57.

⁴³ Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley*, 270.

his anti-Calvinistic discourse on *Free Grace*, Cell has interpreted it only in terms of the righteousness of God. He feels that Cell “denies that it has any relationship whatsoever to the positive appropriation of justifying grace on the part of man.”⁴⁴ Cannon says denying predestination and affirming free grace meant bringing the human person “into the picture and to make him an integral part, if not of the actual act of his own justification, at least of the conditions relative to its execution.”⁴⁵ While justification is entirely an act of God and not of humanity, Cannon does not see Wesley denying the human part in receiving faith which is indispensable for justification.

Cannon writes about the Wesleyan understanding of human participation in salvation thus: “Once you grant to man a power great enough to make itself felt as a deciding factor in the acceptance or rejection of the means necessary for the bestowal of saving faith, you lift him, whether you will or not, out of a state of mere passivity into one of activity and of cooperation or non-cooperation with the grace of God.”⁴⁶ Thus, the divine grace towards the human person becomes effective for the sake of humanity (for their salvation) through human participation. Cannon concludes that Wesley’s theology is “decidedly synergistic.” He thinks Wesleyan synergism comes to focus again in the post-justification life. In order to sustain his/her justified life, or rather to preserve it, there must be a willing human cooperation with God.⁴⁷

Colin Williams, although he does not make any categorical statements on synergism/monergism debates, believes Wesley to be synergistic. Wesley, according to Williams, believes that the sole foundation of justification is faith in Christ and the gift of God’s grace. Yet, Wesley holds that God’s grace is operative in human life, enabling us—without coercion—to respond to divine overtures. About this, Colin says, “at all stages God works within us by his grace to enable us to make a free response to his transforming presence.”⁴⁸ Distinguishing between the Wesleyan synergism and semi-Pelagian synergism, Williams denies that Wesleyan synergism is semi-Pelagian. While semi-Pelagianism recognizes the strengthening of the natural human ability (will) by the divine grace, Wesley not only denies natural human ability,

⁴⁴ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 105-6.

⁴⁵ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 106.

⁴⁶ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 115.

⁴⁷ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 138.

⁴⁸ Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today*, 72.

An Appraisal of Preventive Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

but insists that human responsiveness is possible only through (preventive) grace. Williams finds Wesley synergistic in this sense of human responsiveness to God—the freedom to receive or resist the divine grace—which itself is God's creation.⁴⁹

However, somewhat different from the above positions, Maddox holds that Wesley's views are incompatible with the monergistic view according to which God's grace is irresistible, and that there is no human instrumentality in salvation. But the Wesleyan preventive grace would go along with the synergistic position that preserves "a role for grace-empowered human co-operation in salvation." Yet Maddox is hesitant to describe Wesleyan soteriology either in terms of monergism or synergism whose "prototypical meanings" he thinks, "are framed within debates between Continental Protestantism and Roman Catholicism." He believes that Wesley has drawn his soteriological views from the Greek fathers and his own Anglican tradition.⁵⁰

Kenneth Collins, in one of the recent works on Wesley's theology, seems unwilling to accept Wesley's as synergistic in its unswerving form. While he does not rule out the co-operant aspect of grace which allows for both divine and human participation in the salvation process, he decidedly claims that for Wesley, grace is the "the work of God *alone*." He maintains that synergism in its truest form cannot hold such a view on grace. He writes: "To be sure, it is precisely grace as the *sole* activity of God that an unswervingly synergist or 'catholic' model, in its preference for cooperation and process, is unable to acknowledge in a thoroughgoing way." Therefore, Collins thinks the "synergistic paradigm... must itself be caught up in an even *larger conjunction* in which the Protestant emphasis on the sole activity of God, apart from all human working, is *equally* factored in."⁵¹

Having examined various positions on Wesleyan synergism/monergism debates, it may be appropriate to take the help of Wesley himself in framing our understanding of Wesley in this important discussion. One of the clearest expositions of Wesley on the relation between divine grace and human response is found in his sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." Wesley begins his argument from the premise that God is *the only* initiator of the salvation process. As noted above, he builds up his thesis on Philippians 2:12-13, "work out

⁴⁹ Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, 72.

⁵⁰ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 91.

⁵¹ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 12-13.

your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” God is the source of everything good: “God breathes into us every good desire, and brings every good desire to good effect... the very first motion of good is from above, as well as the power which conducts it to the end... it is God that not only infuses every good desire, but that accompanies and follows it.”⁵² It is from this unambiguous conviction of God as *the source* and *the initiator* of everything that Wesley gives his call to “work out your own salvation.”

The working of God in human beings forms the basis of the latter’s work. Wesley finds “all men are by nature not only sick, but ‘dead in trespasses, and sins,’ it is not possible for them to do anything well till God raises them from the dead... Yet this is no excuse” to continue in sin.⁵³ Since everyone is the recipient of some measure of divine grace, it is possible for human beings to work. This implies not only the God-given ability to work, but also that God is working in us. Wesley writes: “...no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath. Therefore inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation.”⁵⁴ Interestingly, Wesley finds an unusual support for his view from none other than Augustine himself who upheld the sovereignty of God to the total exclusion of human participation. Augustine is reported to have said, “he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.”⁵⁵

In Wesley’s conception of salvation, human participation is entirely God’s own work. In this context, Maddox’s instruction seems helpful: “As he (Wesley) repeatedly insisted, we must hold in tension the two biblical teachings: ‘Without me you can do nothing,’ and ‘I can do all things through Christ strengthening me.’”⁵⁶ Maddox shows this idea being reflected in several of Wesley’s sermons. In “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” appropriating Jesus’ call to disciples, Wesley is seeking for his hearers a life that far exceeds the religiosity of the Pharisees. Such a life seems impossible, but it is possible through Christ.⁵⁷ Similarly, in “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, XIII,”

⁵² Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 488.

⁵³ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 490.

⁵⁴ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 491.

⁵⁵ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 491.

⁵⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology*, 92. Cf. Cox, “Prevenient Grace – A Wesleyan View,” 148.

⁵⁷ Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” in *Anthology*, 221.

An Appraisal of Preventive Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

Wesley believes it is possible to be merciful like God, to love one's neighbor as oneself, and to love one's enemies through Christ.⁵⁸ Speaking on "On Repentance of Believers," Wesley says in "our utter helplessness" it is in Christ we experience deliverance.⁵⁹ This is reflective of Wesley's fundamental belief and conviction in God's sovereign power and the enabling grace that is available to humans. The opinions of both Maddox and Collins appear to be close to what Wesley believed about the divine role and human agency in justification.

4. Human Nature and Grace: Continuity or Discontinuity

The consequence of Adamic fall is the corruption of the divine image that Adam carried and the total depravity of human nature. Thus, Adam's sin has pushed humanity into a natural state where humans are "unassisted by the grace of God, that 'all the imaginations of the thoughts of (their) heart' are still 'evil, only evil,' and that 'continually.'"⁶⁰ In this depraved state, human beings are "atheists" having "no knowledge of God, no acquaintance with him." Consequently, they have "no love of God," but are self-centered and worshippers of themselves, thus dishonouring God. They are lovers of the world, who are drawn to "the desire of the flesh," and who indulge in "sensual appetites."⁶¹ A similar description of human sinfulness manifested in atheism, idolatry, pride, love of the world, and self-centeredness is found in Wesley's sermon, "On the Deceitfulness of the Human Heart."⁶² The sinfulness of humanity is such that in the human heart there is "an inexhaustible fund of ungodliness and unrighteousness so deeply and strongly rooted in the soul, that nothing less than almighty grace can cure it. From hence naturally arises a plentiful harvest of all evil words and works."⁶³ Thus, Wesley sees corruption as having permeated every aspect of human life. Humanity has "very far gone from original righteousness" and they are in a state of enmity with God. The gravity of human corruption is seen in the following passage: "Know that thou art corrupted in every

⁵⁸ Wesley, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, XIII" in *Works*, vol. v, 432.

⁵⁹ Wesley, "On Repentance of Believers," in *Anthology*, 416-17.

⁶⁰ Wesley, "Original Sin," in *Anthology*, 329.

⁶¹ Wesley, "Original Sin," in *Anthology*, 329-31. For a more detailed description of human nature by Wesley, see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 34-37.

⁶² Wesley, "On the Deceitfulness of the Human Heart," in *Works*, vol. vii, 338-39.

⁶³ Wesley, "On the Deceitfulness of the Human Heart," 340.

power, in every faculty of thy soul, that thou art totally corrupted in every one of these, all the foundations being out of course... Thy will is... utterly perverse and distorted, averse from all good... prone to all evil, to every abomination.”⁶⁴

Wesley’s view of human depravity is very much in line with Augustine, and the magisterial Reformers, Luther and Calvin. In the words of William Cannon, “Wesley goes all the way with Calvin, with Luther, and with Augustine in his insistence that man is by nature totally destitute of righteousness and subject to the judgment and wrath of God.”⁶⁵ However, on the conception of grace, Wesley differs with the Reformed understanding of depravity. His contention is that a “natural human person” without grace does not exist. He believes that every human person has some measure of prevenient grace in him/her. Wesley says,

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called ‘natural conscience.’ But this is not natural; it is more properly termed ‘preventing grace.’ Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man... Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And every one, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.⁶⁶

Human beings, even in their depraved state, are the recipients of God’s prevenient grace. It is the *free grace* of God and therefore, it is available to all irrespective of any merit. “The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all... It does not depend on any power or merit in man... but on God alone.”⁶⁷ Therefore, for Wesley, “‘natural man’ is a logical abstraction that does not correspond to actual man and woman.”⁶⁸ In the words of Umphrey Lee, “In this

⁶⁴ Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom,” in *Anthology*, 128.

⁶⁵ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 200.

⁶⁶ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 490-91.

⁶⁷ Wesley, “Free Grace,” in *Anthology*, 50.

⁶⁸ Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, 38-39.

An Appraisal of Preventive Grace in John Wesley's Soteriology

world man exists as a natural man plus the preventive grace of God.”⁶⁹ Plainly speaking, humanity in the natural state is not without grace. The impossibility of natural human person without grace even in the state of total depravity raises the question as to how grace is related to nature.

The presence of preventive grace opens up the possibility of more grace depending on the human response to divine initiatives. Wesley says, “Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.”⁷⁰ Preventive grace, which itself is the gift of God, is the guarantee for “more grace” from God which is the convincing grace, the justifying grace, and the sanctifying grace.⁷¹ In this context, one might think of preventive grace as a sort of link between depraved humanity (human nature?) and the grace of God, suggesting continuity between human nature and the grace in Wesley's theology.

Contrary to Wesley's teaching, Augustine holds that while grace is free (*gratis*), it is not given to all, but only to the elect.⁷² Along with Augustine, Calvin maintains that saving grace is irresistible, and this “grace is given specially and gratuitously to the elect.”⁷³ Wesley, on the other hand, believes that even in the most depraved state, there is grace in humanity, since there is no “natural human person” without grace. But Calvin teaches “grace is not bestowed on all promiscuously.”⁷⁴ Yet, Calvin believes that God's favor (grace?) is offered to all and every person can ask for it: “Men are indeed to be taught that the favour of God is offered, without exception, to all who ask it.” But he underscores, “since those only begin to ask whom heaven by grace inspires.”⁷⁵ Further, he explains, “the grace offered by the Lord is not merely one which every individual has full liberty of choosing to receive or reject.”⁷⁶ In this regard, Calvin quotes Augustine to substantiate his position: “We know that Divine grace is *not given to all men*, and that to those to

⁶⁹ Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), 125.

⁷⁰ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Anthology*, 491.

⁷¹ See, Rakestraw's discussion on preventive grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace, in Rakestraw, “John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace,” 196-202.

⁷² Augustine, “On Nature and Grace,” NPNF, 5:122; “On the Gift of Perseverance,” NPNF, 5:531, 536.

⁷³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book II: 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 264.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book II: 3, 260.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book II: 3, 260.

⁷⁶ Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book II: 3, 263.

whom it is given, it is not given either according to the merit of works, or according to the merit of the will, but by free grace.”⁷⁷ Calvin would concede the presence of common grace in human beings which he holds responsible for “some purity” and “virtue” in human nature. He believes that “[i]n every age there have been persons who, guided by nature, have striven toward virtue throughout life. ...amid (the) corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.”⁷⁸

Augustine seems rather silent on common grace. His emphasis is more on the sovereignty of grace which is given gratuitously to the elect, and the grace Adam enjoyed before the fall. Augustine does not see continuity of that grace after the fall although he would attribute “[a]ll good qualities... which (human nature) still possesses in its make, life, senses, intellect” to God.⁷⁹ For Augustine, grace is primarily saving grace which is prevenient, and it “‘goes ahead’ of humanity, preparing the human will for conversion”⁸⁰ Contrary to Wesley’s view of prevenient grace, Augustine’s prevenient grace is in line with Calvin’s special or electing grace.⁸¹ The elect are enabled to choose Christ because of prevenient grace in them. According to Augustine, “[t]here could be no merit in men’s choice of Christ, if it were not that God’s grace was prevenient in His choosing them.”⁸² The absence of common grace and the availability of saving grace only to the elect would rule out any possibility of continuity between nature and grace in Augustine. On the other hand, if one were to take the Calvinist view of common grace, one could perchance find continuity between nature and grace. However, common grace is not salvific and Calvin rules out grace being found in the depraved in the way Wesley would find in his prevenient grace.⁸³

⁷⁷ Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book II: 3, 264. Emphasis added.

⁷⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, Book II: 3.3 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), 292.

⁷⁹ Augustine, “On Nature and Grace,” NPNF, 5:122. See, Louis Berkhof, *Common Grace*, <http://www.theologue.org/CommonGrace-Berkhof.html> (Accessed July 28, 2009).

⁸⁰ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 450; Berkhof, *Common Grace*.

⁸¹ William W. Combs, “Does the Bible Teach Prevenient Grace?” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 10 (2005): 3-4.

⁸² Augustine, “On Grace and Free Will,” NPNF, 5:460.

⁸³ While there is commonality between Calvin’s common grace and Wesley’s prevenient grace, there are essential differences between the two. About this Leo Cox writes, “Though the teachings of common grace and prevenient grace have much in common, the essential difference is seen at the point where common grace and special

Conclusion

Salvation, for Wesley, is absolutely the work of God, and it is accomplished solely through the divine agency. God is reaching out to humanity in grace initiating the process of salvation. In the divine initiative, Wesley discovers that God's grace—prevenient grace—is making human involvement in God's salvific work possible. In other words, the human person is able to respond to God's overtures through the enablement of God's restoring grace. The human enablement and the consequent human response to divine initiatives are God's own work. Therefore, Wesley is convinced that God's sovereignty is never undermined by human participation. In fact, it is God's sovereignty that empowers human participation in the redemptive work of God. Thus, within his soteriological understanding, Wesley, through his concept of grace, finds room for divine-human participation without endangering the sovereignty of God. Perhaps a dispassionate and a more objective appraisal of Wesley's concept of grace could serve to dispel the apprehensions about his soteriology, and open up the possibility for more meaningful interaction between all those who subscribe to the tenets of the historic Christian orthodoxy, including the Arminians and Calvinists.

grace are understood by Calvinists as essentially different. The Wesleyan teaches that the prevenient grace leads on to saving grace, prepares for it, enables a person to enter into it. The difference between the two for Wesleyans would be in degree and not in kind." Cox, "Prevenient Grace – A Wesleyan View," 144.