

DOES THE BIBLE TEACH PREVENIENT GRACE?

by
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The word *prevenient* comes from the Latin verb *praevēniō*² (*prae*, before³ + *veniō*, come⁴). The Latin is the basis for the English word *prevent*, which used to have the meaning of “precede.” This archaic usage appears in the KJV rendering of 1 Thessalonians 4:15: “we which are alive...shall not prevent [precede] them which are asleep.” Thus, prevenient grace has in the past been referred to as “preventing grace.” Literally, then, prevenient or preventing grace is understood to be grace that *precedes* or *comes before* salvation. More properly, it precedes any human decision in regard to salvation.

Augustine (354–430) used the term in his battle with Pelagius (354–after 418).⁵ Pelagius held that man is able to do God’s will apart from the grace of God because he is not depraved. Man is not born a sinner, and thus needs no special grace from God to be saved.⁶ Augustine argued that because man is a totally depraved sinner (including total inability), God must initiate the process of salvation. Thus God’s grace must precede any saving response toward God on the part of man.⁷ Augustine’s usage parallels what Calvinists would call special⁸ or electing grace since Augustine’s prevenient grace was

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²*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “prevenient,” 12:444.

³*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “*prae*,” p. 1420.

⁴*Ibid.*, s.v. “*veniō*,” p. 2029.

⁵*On Nature and Grace* 35.

⁶Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (reprint of 1937 ed.; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), pp. 132–33; Alan F. Johnson and Robert E. Webber, *What Christians Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 215–16.

⁷*New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Semi-Pelagianism,” by D. F. Wright, p. 636; *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, s.v. “Prevenient Grace,” by J. Patout Burns, pp. 753–54; Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), pp. 64–66.

only given to the elect.

In the modern day, however, prevenient grace is mostly identified with the views of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) and, especially, John Wesley (1703–1791). As used by them and modern day Arminians, prevenient grace is grace that enables depraved man to believe and be saved, but it does not guarantee such since it may be rejected. Prevenient grace is sufficient for salvation but not efficacious (irresistible). What differentiates Calvinists from Arminians is that the former view “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.”⁹ Calvinists could argue that they believe in prevenient grace since electing grace does come before any human decision in regard to salvation, but they generally do not use the term because of its association with Arminianism.

ARMINIUS

Arminius studied under Theodore Beza (1519–1605), Calvin’s son-in-law, and at first was apparently a Calvinist, but eventually reacted against Calvinism. Arminius and his early followers accepted the doctrine of original sin and the resultant depravity and inability of man to be saved apart from the grace of God. Arminius says:

The whole of this sin [Adam’s first sin], however is not peculiar to our first parents, but is common to the entire race and to all their posterity, who at the time when this sin was committed, were in their loins, and who have since descended from them by natural mode of propagation, according to the primitive benediction. For in Adam “all have sinned.” (Rom. v, 12.) Wherefore, whatever punishment was brought down upon our first parents, has likewise pervaded and yet pursues all their posterity. So that all men “are by nature the children of wrath,” (Ephes. ii, 3,) obnoxious to condemnation, and to temporal as well as to eternal death; they are also devoid of that original righteousness and holiness. (Rom. v, 12, 18, 19.)¹⁰

⁸P. E. Hughes, for instance, explains special grace as having four aspects: prevenient grace, efficacious grace, irresistible grace, and sufficient grace (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Grace,” pp. 480–82).

⁹Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” in *Still Sovereign*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 236. This essay was originally published in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, 2 vols., ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

¹⁰James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, eds., *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols. (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 1:486.

In this [fallen] state, the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace.¹¹

Many Arminians would describe Arminius's view as *total* depravity,¹² while Calvinists often question this assertion.¹³ Arminius's followers did seem to allow for some ability in man's fallen will (Semi-Pelagianism?), though not of such sufficiency to bring one to God but enough to allow one to cooperate with preventive grace. Thus, preventive grace does not necessarily renovate the will (as in Calvinism), but only stimulates or excites it.¹⁴ Still, Arminius, his immediate followers, and all true Arminians believe that man cannot naturally come to God in saving faith apart from preventive grace. Arminius did believe that depravity affects every area of man's being, and, as a result, man is devoid of all positive good. However, the Arminian doctrine of original sin differs from classical Calvinism in that Arminius did not believe that the race suffers any penal consequences of Adam's sin. From the previous quotation, it may seem that Arminius did believe that Adam's posterity is guilty of Adam's sin, but in another place Arminius says:

It may admit of discussion, whether God could be angry on account of original sin which was born with us, since it seemed to be inflicted on us by God as a punishment of the actual sin which had been committed by Adam and by us in Him.... I did not deny that it was *sin*, but it was not *actual sin*.... We must distinguish between actual sin, and that which was *the cause of other sins*, and which, on this very account might be

¹¹ Ibid., 1:526.

¹² E.g., H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1941), 2:128; Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), p. 149. Carter shies away from the term *total* to describe depravity, and instead speaks of the universality of depravity in order to distinguish the Arminian view from classical Calvinism (Charles W. Carter, ed., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 1:262–63). Jack Cottrell says that man is not totally depraved, but “truly depraved” (“Conditional Election,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975], p. 68).

¹³ E.g., Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, p. 150; *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Arminianism,” by R. W. A. Letham, p. 46.

¹⁴ William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, 2 vols., 9th ed. (reprint of 1889 ed.; Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), 2:188; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:327.

denominated “sin.”¹⁵

This statement is usually interpreted by both Calvinists and Arminians to mean that Arminius is willing to speak of Adamic sin in the sense that it produces sinful acts in Adam’s posterity because of the corrupt nature they receive from him, but it cannot be called the “actual” sin of his posterity in the sense that they are in anyway culpable for Adamic sin.¹⁶ Whatever we may conclude about Arminius himself, it seems clear that his immediate followers held that mankind is not guilty because of Adam’s sin. Man does receive a corrupt nature from Adam, but that is simply a misfortune, not in any way a penal consequence of Adam’s sin.¹⁷ Thus depravity may be described as personal deprivation, not depravation. Carter, an Arminian, notes: “Actual sins committed by individuals are the result of the deprivation that issues from original sin.... For him [Arminius], original sin (a term he used reluctantly) is the absence of original righteousness, but not the imputation of guilt for Adam’s sin.”¹⁸

Because man is not actually guilty of Adamic sin, he is not liable to punishment except for his own voluntary acts of sin. Man’s own sins are the unfortunate result of the corrupt nature he receives from Adam. Since man labors under this disability, “it is no more than equitable, that God should furnish a grace that shall be a sufficient assistance to overcome the inherited evil.”¹⁹ Thus, early Arminianism held that this prevenient grace is a matter of God’s justice.²⁰ Prevenient grace mitigates depravity to the extent that man now has a free will and thus the ability to believe the gospel. This view of grace is synergistic, meaning that man, having a free will, can now cooperate with God in his regeneration.²¹ However, this grace is resistible so that sinners may continue in their sin. Since prevenient grace is given to

¹⁵Nichols and Bagnall, *Writings of James Arminius*, 1:374–75.

¹⁶Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, 2:184–85; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:108. Picirilli, contrary to most Arminians, believes that Arminius did hold that Adamic guilt was passed to his posterity (*Grace Faith Free Will*, p. 152).

¹⁷Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 2:181; Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 495; Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. in one (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 602; Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, p. 150; Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:107–8. Carter, *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 1:263.

¹⁸*Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 1:262–63.

¹⁹Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 2:190.

²⁰Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:108; Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 601.

²¹Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:355; Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 496; Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, p. 35.

the entire race, the Scripture's teaching on depravity and inability is in reality only hypothetical.²² Arminius and his early followers gave little if any direct scriptural support for preventive grace, seeing it mainly as a theological necessity. Since man is depraved and unable by nature to respond to the gospel, and yet God demands faith in the gospel, God can only do so justly if he first provides preventive grace to enable man to believe.

WESLEY

Arminian theology was popularized in the 18th century by the preaching of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.²³ He accepted the title Arminian and founded the *Arminian Magazine*. Wesley is sometimes seen as adopting the more pure teaching of Arminius himself rather than his followers and/or making it more biblical so that it is sometimes called evangelical Arminianism.²⁴ It is generally said by many Wesleyans²⁵ and Calvinists²⁶ alike that Wesley taught total depravity, or at least something very close to it.

Whether, Wesley himself taught the race actually inherits the guilt of Adamic sin is debated.²⁷ On the one side there are statements made by Wesley that clearly declare his belief in the doctrine. For example, he says: "God does not look upon infants as innocent, but as involved in the guilt of Adam's sin; otherwise death, the punishment denounced against that sin, could not be inflicted upon them."²⁸ On the other side is Wesley's well-known maxim: "Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God."²⁹ Apparently, Wesley did not want to identify involuntary transgressions as sin in order to maintain his illusionary doctrine of Christian perfection. Note his distinction:

²² Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, p. 240.

²³ Johnson and Webber, *What Christians Believe*, p. 224.

²⁴ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:329; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (reprint of 1879 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 106.

²⁵ E.g., Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:128; Carter, *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 2:266–67.

²⁶ E.g., *New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Arminianism," p. 46; A. A. Hodge said that "the strict Arminians deny total depravity.... Arminius and Wesley were more orthodox but less self-consistent" (*Outlines of Theology*, p. 108).

²⁷ See Carter, *Contemporary Wesleyan Theology*, 1:266–67.

²⁸ *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., 3rd ed. (reprint of 1872 ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 9:316.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12:394.

(1.) Not only sin, properly so called, (that is, a voluntary transgression of a known law,) but sin, improperly so called, (that is, an involuntary transgression of a divine law, known or unknown,) needs the atoning blood. (2.) I believe there is no such perfection in this life as excludes these involuntary transgressions which I apprehend to be naturally consequent on the ignorance and mistakes inseparable from mortality. (3.) Therefore *sinless perfection* is a phrase I never use, lest I should seem to contradict myself. (4.) I believe, a person filled with the love of God is still liable to these involuntary transgressions. (5.) Such transgression you may call sins, if you please: I do not, for the reasons above-mentioned.³⁰

Wesley has difficulty saying that all men are guilty of Adam's sin because that would mean they are guilty of an involuntary transgression, which in turn would create problems for his doctrine of Christian perfection, which doctrine does not allow involuntary transgressions to be called sin. On the other hand, since he believes some children die without committing personal sins, Wesley is forced to agree that the guilt of Adam's sin is in some sense imputed to them. At one place he says we are "in some degree guilty"³¹ of Adam's sin. Most Wesleyans, as true Arminians, have generally denied the imputation of the guilt of Adam's first sin to the race.³² Based on Romans 5:15–19, Wesley believed that the death of Christ absolved Adam's posterity of the any eternal guilt of Adam's sin.³³

There is no doubt that Wesley's view of depravity included total inability. Still this depravity and inability of man is only hypothetical since God gives prevenient grace to every man to offset the effects of depravity and enable each person to believe the gospel.³⁴ As Williams correctly observes, by this doctrine of prevenient grace, Wesley "broke the chain of logical necessity by which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination seems to flow from the doctrine of original sin."³⁵ But, of course, this is a synergistic view whereby man's free will is now able to cooperate with God in his regeneration.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., 11:396.

³¹ Ibid., 9:420.

³² So A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, p. 108. E.g., Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:109–40.

³³ *Works of John Wesley*, 9:253–54.

³⁴ Ibid., 6:509. Wesley repeatedly speaks of prevenient grace in his writings (ibid., 5:141, 9:103, 12:157, 14:356). See also Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (London: Epworth Press, 1950), pp. 44–50.

³⁵ Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 44.

³⁶ Robert V. Rakestraw, "John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (June 1984): 199.

While early Arminianism held that preventive grace is a matter of God's justice, Wesley argued it was strictly due to the grace of God as a first benefit of Christ's universal atonement.³⁷ Wesley and Wesleyans have attempted to give the doctrine of preventive grace a more scriptural grounding. The Wesleyan view of preventive grace is almost identical to the Calvinist view of common grace³⁸ in that it incorporates all the benefits of common grace but adds to it the restoration of man's free will so that he is now able to believe the gospel.³⁹

PREVENTIVE GRACE

Arminian theology has traditionally taught that preventive grace is a *universal* enablement given to all men; it overcomes depravity, restores free will, and enables all men to believe the gospel. A variation of preventive grace is advocated by some who believe that this grace is an *individualistic* rather than a universal enablement.⁴⁰ This means that preventive grace is not given universally to all men but only to those *individuals* who come under the intelligent hearing of the gospel.⁴¹

Scriptural Arguments for Universal Preventive Grace

John 1:9

Arminians often appeal to John 1:9 as teaching preventive grace:⁴² "There was the true Light which, coming into the world,

³⁷Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:108; Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 601.

³⁸For the Calvinist view of common grace, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 657–65.

³⁹Leo C. Cox, "Preventive Grace—A Wesleyan View," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12 (Summer 1969): 143–44.

⁴⁰E.g., John R. Van Gelderen, *For the Cause of Revival and Evangelism* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Preach the Word Ministries, 2001), pp. 138–39; idem, "Fatalism Versus Faith" *Preach the Word E-zine*, First Quarter 2002, accessed 22 July 2005, available from <http://www.ptwm.org/pages/e-zines.asp?Magazine=Fatalism+in+Fundamentalism>, Internet; Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will*, pp. 153–58. Picirilli's view is not the normal view of his fellow Free Will Baptists. They hold to the traditional Arminian view of a universal preventive grace. See J. Matthew Pinson, *A Free Will Baptist Handbook* (Nashville: Randall House Publication, 1998), pp. 46–50.

⁴¹Lutherans may also hold to something like individualistic preventive grace though they do not call it that. See Demarest, *Cross and Salvation*, pp. 206–8.

⁴²E.g., *Works of John Wesley*, 7:188, 10:230; Steve Witzki, "A Preliminary Defense of Preventive Grace," accessed 22 July 2005, available from <http://www.imarc.cc/pregrace/v18n2witzki.html>, Internet.

enlightens every man.”⁴³ It is grammatically possible for the phrase “coming into the world” to refer either to “the true Light” as in the NASB text (also, ESV, NIV, NLT) or to “every man” as in the NASB margin—“There was the true Light which enlightens every person, coming into the world” (also KJV). If the latter is meant, the phrase seems somewhat unnecessary. What other kind of people are there except those who are coming into the world? It seems more likely to connect the phrase with “the true light” that John then says was “coming into the world.” In fact, throughout John’s Gospel the idea of “coming into the world” or being sent into the world is repeatedly applied to Christ, not men. Compare John 3:19, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil” (also 6:14; 9:39; 11:27; 12:46; 16:28; 18:27). If “coming into the world” refers to Christ, this would seem to present a special problem for the prevenient grace interpretation of John 1:9 since this prevenient grace would only have been available since the coming of Christ into the world. What about the salvation of OT saints and their need for prevenient grace?

Even if “coming into the world” refers to people, John 1:9 is still open to a number of other interpretations besides prevenient grace. Some understand the enlightening to refer to general revelation, which is given to all people through the created order.⁴⁴ Of course, Wesleyans argue that prevenient grace is part of general revelation.⁴⁵ But as Schreiner observes: “Such a view is unpersuasive given Paul’s estimation of general revelation in Romans 1:18–32.”⁴⁶ A study of this passage shows that while there is a revelation of God to all people in nature, it is universally rejected.⁴⁷ Also, as Carson observes, a reference to general revelation is unlikely since that theme has already been dealt with earlier in the prologue (i.e., John 1:3–4).⁴⁸ “The specific context [of John 1:9] is not general revelation but the response of

⁴³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the *New American Standard Version* (NASB), 1995 update.

⁴⁴ E.g., Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 84.

⁴⁵ Cox, “Prevenient Grace,” pp. 143–44.

⁴⁶ Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” p. 239.

⁴⁷ For a thorough exegesis and defense of this conclusion, see Douglas Moo, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 95–125.

⁴⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 123.

people to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.”⁴⁹

Other interpretations have been suggested,⁵⁰ but most likely the verb “enlighten” carries its primary meaning of “to shed light upon,” that is, “to make visible” or “to bring to light.” Thus John is speaking of the light of revelation that has come into the world through the coming of Christ, not an inner illumination. In the rest of the gospel the function of light is judgment; it shines on all and forces a distinction. “It shines on every man, and divides the race: those who hate the light respond as the world does (1:10): they flee lest their deeds should be exposed by this light (3:19–21). But some receive this revelation (1:12–13) and thereby testify that their deeds have been done through God (3:21).”⁵¹ Barrett says that this light shines on every man whether he sees it or not.⁵² This objective revelation that is brought by Christ exposes and reveals our true relationship to God.

In light of these problems and the various possible interpretations of John 1:9, can we honestly say that the Arminian view of preventive grace is clearly and convincingly taught in the verse? It is interesting to note that Arminians commonly cite the verse in a proof-text fashion without wrestling with the verse exegetically.

John 12:32

Another verse that is supposed to teach universal preventive grace is John 12:32: And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” Witzki observes: “John 12:32 declares that all men are drawn to Christ. This gracious drawing is resistible, but provides all people with the opportunity to believe.”⁵³

First, if this drawing of all men is preventive grace, this verse presents a problem for the salvation of OT saints since this drawing only occurs after Christ is crucified (“if I am lifted up”). Also, this interpretation cannot be harmonized with John 6:37 and 44, where it is clear that in John’s Gospel this drawing activity is selective and renders salvation certain. In John 6:37 Jesus says: “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will

⁴⁹ Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Preventive Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” p. 240.

⁵⁰ See Carson (*John*, pp. 123–24) for the possibilities.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124. See the concurring discussions of C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 161; Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Preventive Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” p. 240; and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 35–36.

⁵² Barrett, *John*, p. 161.

⁵³ “A Preliminary Defense of Preventive Grace.”

certainly not cast out.” The Father does not give everyone to the Son, only certain select ones, and these who are given to the Son by the Father do in fact come to him, that is, believe (cf. John 6:35: “He who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.”). Then in John 6:44 we learn that these select ones who have been given by the Father to the Son and are actually saved are identical to those whom the Father draws: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.” Carson rightly comments: “The combination of v. 37a and v. 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 in v. 44 is meaningless.”⁵⁴ And as Morris observes about the verb “draw” (ἐλκω): “There is not one example in the New Testament of the use of this verb where the resistance is successful.”⁵⁵ And 6:44b makes this clear. The one who is drawn is also the one who is raised up in the last day. That is, the one who is drawn is actually and certainly saved; this drawing is efficacious.⁵⁶

If this drawing in John’s Gospel is efficacious, this could present a problem in 12:32. If Jesus effectually draws all men to himself, is Jesus not teaching universalism? The context of John 12:20–33 shows that the “all” refers to all men without distinction, not all men without exception. A number of Greeks (Gentiles) approached Philip (vv. 20–21) because they wanted to see Jesus. But Jesus ignores this request and begins to explain that the only way Gentiles will come to him is through his death. “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.”⁵⁷ Carson rightly concludes: “Here, ‘all men’ reminds the reader of what triggered these statements, *viz.* the arrival of the Greeks, and means ‘all people without distinction, Jews and Gentiles alike,’ not all individuals without exception.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *John*, p. 293.

⁵⁵ *John*, p. 42, n. 116.

⁵⁶ See the helpful discussion by Bruce A. Ware, “The Place of Effectual Calling and Grace in a Calvinist Soteriology,” in *Still Sovereign*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 212–20. This essay was originally published in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, 2 vols., ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

⁵⁷ Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” p. 242.

⁵⁸ *John*, p. 444.

This use of “all” to emphasize all without distinction, rather than all without exception is quite common in English and Greek.⁵⁹ Paul tells Timothy (1 Tim 2:1) that prayer should “be made on behalf of all men,” not everyman on the face of the earth, an impossible task, but all categories of men, which he explains in v. 2 includes “kings and all who are in authority.” Even Wesley understood “all men” in John 12:32 to mean “Gentiles, as well as Jews.”⁶⁰

Titus 2:11

A final verse that is supposed to teach prevenient grace is Titus 2:11: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.”⁶¹ Both the KJV and the NIV make the adjective “bringing salvation” (σωτήριος) modify “the grace of God” (“the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men”), but this is wrong since the adjective “bringing salvation” (σωτήριος) is in the predicate position, not the attributive.⁶² Thus the reading “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men” is correct.⁶³

“The grace of God” that has “appeared” (aorist indicative indicates past event) is commonly thought to refer to the historical appearance of Christ to provide redemption.⁶⁴ It is, of course communicated to

⁵⁹W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “πᾶς,” p. 784 [hereafter, BDAG].

⁶⁰*Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (reprint ed.; London: Epworth Press, 1966), p. 359.

⁶¹So Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 155; also in the revised ed. by Doerksen, p. 106; Witzki, “A Preliminary Defense of Prevenient Grace.”

⁶²This error is corrected in the TNIV.

⁶³William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 422; Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, Jr., *1, 2 Timothy Titus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 310; George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 319. The KJV follows the *Textus Receptus*, which does have σωτήριος in the attributive position, but this is an inferior reading. E. K. Simpson has shown that the adjective σωτήριος followed by the dative case is a classical idiom meaning “bringing salvation to” (*The Pastoral Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], p. 107). See also C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 114; BDAG, s.v. “σωτήριος,” p. 986.

⁶⁴Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), p. 234; I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), p. 266; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 422; Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy Titus*, p. 310; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 318.

us through the gospel.⁶⁵ It may be that the “all men” refers to “all groups of people,” referring back to the various classes of people in the preceding verses (e.g., slaves),⁶⁶ or it may simply emphasize the universal offer of the gospel.⁶⁷ In any case, “bringing salvation to all men” does not, of course, mean universal salvation, but the universal provision and offer of the gospel, a common theme for Paul in the Pastorals. For example, he says in 1 Timothy 2:3–4: “This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (also 1 Tim 4:10).

Thus, there is nothing in Titus 2:11 suggesting that the atonement has somehow counteracted the effects of Adam’s sin and enabled all men to believe. Schreiner wisely observes:

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.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Although Arminians universally appeal to the idea of prevenient grace, they have failed to make a convincing case. Enns concludes: “There is, however, no clear indication of this kind of prevenient grace in Scripture.”⁶⁹ Similarly, Erickson says: “The problem is that there is no clear and adequate basis in Scripture for this concept of a universal enablement. The theory, appealing though it is in many ways, simply is not taught explicitly in the Bible.”⁷⁰ Even Clark Pinnock, who wished to accept prevenient grace in order to avoid Calvinism as the logical result of a soteriology that begins with total depravity, admits that he was forced to give up on the idea because “the Bible has no developed doctrine of universal prevenient grace.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 266; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 318.

⁶⁶ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 319; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 422; Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy Titus*, p. 310.

⁶⁷ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 268.

⁶⁸ Schreiner, “Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense,” p. 241.

⁶⁹ *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 499.

⁷⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85), 3:925.

⁷¹ “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989),

Although Arminians generally affirm their belief in man's depravity and inability, their doctrine of a universal prevenient grace that mitigates the effects of depravity and restores man's ability results in only a hypothetical depravity that does not do justice to the biblical text. Paul spends a good deal of time telling us things like "there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Rom 3:11) and "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:14). But according to Arminianism there never has actually existed any person like the apostle Paul is describing. It does not seem reasonable that Paul would write to the Romans and Corinthians emphasizing a depravity that does not exist, nor has ever existed. When Paul says "there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God," it seems like he is describing a real existing human condition, not a hypothetical one.

Scriptural Arguments for Individualistic Prevenient Grace

Those who would argue for a form of prevenient grace that only comes (but always comes) to those who actually hear the gospel do not suffer from the just mentioned objection since in their system everyone in the world suffers from actual depravity and inability until they come under the hearing of the gospel. However, scriptural evidence is still necessary to demonstrate the validity of this individualistic prevenient grace. Picirilli and Van Gelderen both list John 6:44 and 16:8 as support.⁷² Picirilli adds Acts 16:14.⁷³

Acts 16:14 says that when Paul preached the gospel at Philippi, "a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." Picirilli explains: "pre-regenerating grace [Picirilli's preferred term for prevenient grace] may therefore be called *opening the heart*."⁷⁴ But this verse does not prove that what Luke is describing is prevenient grace. This can just as easily be a reference to efficacious grace since Lydia responded in faith to the opening of her heart. Because she did not resist this work of God, there is no proof that it was resistible, prevenient grace; it could just as easily have been irresistible, efficacious grace.

Regarding John 6:44, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him," Van Gelderen says that "*draw*, meaning

p. 22. Instead, he gave up on total depravity (ibid.).

⁷² Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will*, pp. 154–55; Van Gelderen, *Revival and Evangelism*, pp. 138–39; idem, "Fatalism Versus Faith."

⁷³ *Grace Faith Free Will*, pp. 154–55.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 155.

‘attract,’ pictures divine conviction rather than a forced, or inevitable, belief.”⁷⁵ But I have already demonstrated previously that the drawing of John 6 is not just an “attraction,” but also an efficacious work. Van Gelderen fails to cite the last part of John 6:44, “and I will raise him up on the last day,” which shows that those who are drawn are not just “attracted,” but are effectively saved and *will* be raised up on the last day.

John 16:8 is the well-known verse on the convicting work of the Holy Spirit: “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” This divine “convincement” is equated with prevenient grace.⁷⁶ But the equation of conviction equals prevenient grace misunderstands the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit. Conviction is in no way an enabling ministry. The word “convict” (ἐλέγχω) means “to bring a pers. to the point of recognizing wrongdoing.”⁷⁷ The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to convict those who hear the Word of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Conviction is sometimes instrumental in turning the sinner (Matt 18:15; 1 Cor 14:24–25) and sometimes it is not (Matt 18:16ff; Jude 14–15). Another work of the Holy Spirit (effectual call) is required for people to respond properly (i.e., in repentance and faith) to this conviction. Clearly, John 16:8 does not actually say that any ability to believe unto salvation is restored or that because of conviction man now has a free will.

CONCLUSION

Arminians offer very little actual hard exegetical support for prevenient grace, whether of the universal or individualistic variety, and what they give is hardly convincing. This is somewhat amazing since it is vital to their theological system—everything hinges on prevenient grace. As Chiles, an Arminian, admits, “without it, the Calvinist logic is irrefutable.”⁷⁸ Prevenient grace seems to be more of a theological necessity in the Arminian system than a demonstrable teaching of Scripture.

Schreiner offers a nice conclusion to our discussion:

But if prevenient grace is rejected, then all people are in bondage to sin.

⁷⁵ “Fatalism Versus Faith.” Of course, Calvinists deny that the efficacious drawing of God’s grace “forces” anyone to believe, rather it makes one willing to believe.

⁷⁶ Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will*, p. 155; Van Gelderen, “Fatalism Versus Faith.”

⁷⁷ BDAG, p. 315.

⁷⁸ Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790–1935* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), p. 50.

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).⁷⁹

⁷⁹Schreiner, "Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense," p. 246.

APPENDIX

Contrasting Positions on Original Sin and Grace

	Pelagianism	Semi-Pelagianism	Arminianism	Calvinism
Original Sin	Man is born innocent. Adam's sin affected only himself	Man is born spiritually weak. No imputation of Adam's sin	Total depravity (?) and total inability (hypothetical). Imputation of Adam's sin usually denied	Total depravity and total inability. Imputation of Adam's sin
Grace	No special grace needed	Man cooperates with God's grace	Prevenient grace leads to cooperation	Efficacious grace
Free Will	Yes	Yes	Yes: as a result of prevenient grace	No: free only to follow his own nature
Election	None	Conditional	Conditional	Unconditional
Salvation	Human monergism: man initiates his own salvation	Synergism: God and man cooperate	Synergism: God and man cooperate	Divine monergism: God alone saves; man participates
Examples	Charles Finney, ⁸⁰ Modern Liberals	Dave Hunt, ⁸¹ Norman Geisler, ⁸² Roman Catholicism	Methodists, Wesleyans, Lutherans (?), Pentecostals, Free Will Baptists, Evangelicals, ⁸³ Fundamentalists ⁸⁴	Evangelicals, Fundamentalists

⁸⁰ See Gerald L. Priest, "Revival and Revivalism: A Historical and Doctrinal Evaluation," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (Fall 1996): 245–46; Jay E. Smith "The Theology of Charles Finney: A System of Self-Reformation," *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992): 82–84.

⁸¹ *What Love Is This? Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, OR: Loyal Publishing, 2002), pp. 92–96. He denies total depravity and inability.

⁸² James R. White places Geisler in the Arminian camp (*The Potter's Freedom* [Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000], p. 20). Admittedly, Geisler's position is not easy to pin down. He affirms a belief in "total depravity," but denies it includes total inability, arguing that man still has a free will after the fall, faith is not a gift given only to the elect, and that man must cooperate with God's grace (Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3. [Minneapolis: Bethany, 2004], pp. 126, 128, 135, 144, and *Chosen But Free* [Minneapolis: Bethany, 1999], pp. 34, 35, 57, 60, 65, 93). I would argue his position seems closer to Semi-Pelagianism. Of course, Geisler would deny this since he clearly, though quite falsely, claims to be a moderate Calvinist.

⁸³ E.g., Thiessen, *Systematic Theology*, p. 155; also in the revised ed. by Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 106.

⁸⁴ E.g., John R. Rice, *Predestined for Hell? No!* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, 1958), pp. 50–54; E. Robert Jordan, *Calvinist or Biblicist?* (Lansdale, PA: Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, n.d.). Jordan cites texts used to support prevenient grace (John 1:9, Titus 2:11) and says about Titus 2:11: "He did not say that salvation appeared unto all men, but the enabling grace of God, that enables the lost sinner to receive salvation (when it is presented to him), has appeared to all men."