

# **Does the Bible Teach Prevenient Grace?: A Response**

presented by A. Philip Brown II, PhD  
at the Bible Faculty Leadership Summit  
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## ***Thanks and Affirmation***

Thank you Dr. Combs for the opportunity to broaden my understanding of this area of theology through preparation for this response. Thank you also for affording me an opportunity to practice the truth-speaking charity that Eph. 4:15-16 indicates should characterize all interaction within the Body of Christ, and that should be especially characteristic of theological dialogue within Fundamentalism. I sincerely pray that this response will eventuate in “the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Given what I assume to be its rapid preparation for this conference since I received it a week ago, the paper reflects an admirable breadth of research, esp. in its Arminian sources. Toward the end of my response I will suggest additional sources which would strengthen this area. The paper’s clarity, accuracy of definition, genuine attempt to understand the position of Arminius, Wesley, and their adherents regarding prevenient grace, and its directness in addressing the argument adduced from passages often used in support of the doctrine are worthy of commendation.

Perhaps more than anything else about the paper, I appreciate its tone. The subject of prevenient grace was the first topic of extended debate between myself and a Calvinist. You may perceive the tone of his written argument from his characterization of a prominent Arminian source as “ignorant, deceived, or purposefully deceptive.” Thank you for seeking to address this subject with theological objectivity and the charitable assumption of good intention on the part of those whose views you reject.

Caveat Auditor: I am not a systematic theologian by training or vocation. It is my necessary avocation, but I readily admit there are individuals much more qualified to provide response than I. Nonetheless, my response will proceed as follows: I will first give an anecdote from the life of Wesley. Second, I will summarize the essence of the paper’s argument as I understand it. Third, I will suggest two ways in which I believe the paper’s argument can be strengthened and perhaps extended. Third, I will briefly address Dr. Combs’ discussion of Titus 2:11 and his use of John 6. I will conclude with some questions for discussion, and reading recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly modified version of my response. No real substance has been changed. I did not have all the material electronically arranged at the time of presentation. This version reflects the order and substance of my presentation.

The year was 1787. John Wesley was 84 years old and preaching through Kent “both morning and evening, every day. In Hertfordshire, he met Simeon, aged 28, from Cambridge.

“‘Sir,’ said young Simeon, ‘Sir, I understand you are called an Arminian; now I am sometimes called a Calvinist, and therefore, I suppose, we are to draw daggers. But, before I begin to combat, with your permission, I will ask you a few questions, not from impertinent curiosity, but for real instruction. Pray, sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not put it into your heart?’

“‘Yes,’ said the veteran, ‘I do indeed.’

“‘And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything that you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?’

“‘Yes, solely through Christ.’

“‘But, sir, supposing you were first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards, by your good works?’

“‘No; I must be saved by Christ, from first to last.’

“‘Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?’

“‘No.’”

“‘What then? are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?’

“‘Yes, altogether.’”

“‘And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God, to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?’

“‘Yes, I have no hope but in Him.’

“‘Then, sir, with your leave, I will put up my dagger again: for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification, my final perseverance. It is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and, therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree.’” (Tyerman, III, 510–11).

If this were not a conference such as this, I would simply want to conclude with these words: let us cordially unite in those things wherein we agree. However, you expect me to search out terms and phrases that are grounds of contention between us.

### ***Summary of Argument***

As I understand it, Dr. Combs argues that the verses adduced in support of prevenient grace do not provide solid exegetical support for the doctrine. Further, there are verses that clearly contradict the doctrine and teach a contrary doctrine: especially John 6:37 and 44. Given the fact (biblical teaching) of total depravity, the Reformed view of efficacious grace as the unique privilege of the elect is a logical necessity. Prevenient grace is not taught in Scripture.

## **Directions for Development or Clarification**

### **Historical Theology**

Regarding the section on prevenient grace and original sin. This discussion ought to not be presented as a disagreement between Calvinism and Arminianism. The doctrine of original sin and man's response to the Gospel has its roots in the earliest of Christian theological reflection. In *Early Christian Doctrine*,<sup>2</sup> J. N. D. Kelly demonstrates that, prior to the Augustine-Pelagius clash, both Greek and Latin fathers understood men to inherit corruption because of Adam's sin; however, they explicitly denied that Adam's posterity inherit his guilt or are culpable for his sin.<sup>3</sup> Further they argued that men possessed "free-will" and cooperated with God in faith even as He drew them to himself.<sup>4</sup> This means that this doctrinal disagreement may not legitimately be situated solely in a post-Reformation context. The understanding of prevenient grace classified as Arminian has had adherents across the length and breadth of Christian history. All who have or do maintain this position may indeed be mistaken, but the antiquity of the understanding deserves both acknowledgment and attention.

As a minor addendum: I think the historical section of your treatment under II.B. would be strengthened by distinguishing Arminius' views from those of his followers.

### **Methodological Comments**

Systematic theology exists as a web of logical relations. Touch one strand and the entire web moves. It is a kaleidoscope of intermingling ideas. You cannot shift its focus without changing the picture.

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<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Dr. Thomas McCall at Trinity International University for bringing this material to my attention.

<sup>3</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 353-357. Regarding the Greek Fathers, Kelly 350 writes, "there is hardly a hint in the Greek fathers that mankind as a whole share in Adam's guilt, i.e., his culpability." He outlines the Greek father's position as consisting of the following three points: (1) "they take it for granted that all men were involved in Adam's rebellious act"; (2) "alongside their assumption of free will, they clearly hold that the Fall affected our moral nature"; and (3) "certain fathers envisaged ... the transmission of sin itself" (350-51). Regarding the Latin fathers, Kelly 355 quotes Ambrose: "This hereditary sin ... is a wound which makes us stumble, but need cause us no anxiety at the day of judgment; we shall only be punished then for our personal sins. ... It is clear that [Ambrose] envisages the inherited corruption as a congenital propensity to sin (the phrase he uses is *lubricum delinquendi*) rather than as positive guilt." (*Enarr. in ps.* 48, 9; *De Abrah.* 2, 79). From Ambrosiaster, Kelly 356 cites, "You perceive that men are not made guilty by the fact of their birth by but their evil behaviour' (*Quaest. vet. et novi test.* 21 f.). He concludes this section in "Fallen Man and Grace": "Although we have only cited these two, there is little doubt that their views were representative" of the Latin position prior to Augustine (356).

<sup>4</sup> Kelly, 356-57: "On the related question of grace, the parallel truths of man's free will and his need of God's help were maintained, although we can discern increasing emphasis being laid on the latter." Kelly offers the following citations to support his conclusion. From Hillary: "We must be assisted and directed by His grace..." (*Tract. in ps.* 118, litt 1, 2; *ib.*, litt. 16, 10); Jerome: "It is for God to call and for us to believe" (*In Is.* 49, 4); Ambrose: "In everything the Lord's power cooperates with man's efforts" (*Expos. ev. Luc.* 2, 84); Victorinus: "Victorinus insists most plainly that the very will to do good is the work of God and owes its existence to the operation of His grace" (*In Phil.* 2, 12 f.; Kelly, 357).

Your inclusion of a discussion of original sin shows your awareness of the interconnectedness of all theology, which is itself a reflection of the nature of truth. In order to respond accurately to the Arminian position on prevenient grace one must demonstrate an understanding of not only the location of this doctrine within the Arminian and Wesleyan systems, but identify how it relates to the logic of the system. If the system builds this doctrine on an exegetical foundation then it is legitimate to examine it critically and evaluate the coherence and cogency of its exegetical base. If the system builds this element as an extension of its logical infrastructure, then an exegetical analysis of the position is relevant only if one can demonstrate that the doctrine is in direct contradiction to Scripture. If such a direct contradiction cannot be conclusively demonstrated, then it is the logical infrastructure upon which the doctrine is built that really needs attention. Prevenient grace within Wesleyan-Arminianism is logical superstructure not exegetical foundation.

The request for hard exegetical evidence for prevenient grace is as invalid a criterion for evaluation as would be the request for hard exegetical evidence that Christ's active righteousness is imputed to my account in justification. Both positions belong to the realm of theological inference in their respective systems, though both systems provide Scriptural data that appears to fit with and support their theological inferences. The idea of prevenient grace may be properly assailed from other vantage points: (1) provide Scriptural data that necessarily contradicts or renders the position untenable, (2) demonstrate the invalidity of the theological premises from which the inference is derived, (3) demonstrate that the necessary implications of the position are contrary to revealed truth. The paper has made use to some degree of each of these angles of attack to which I will respond in a moment.

I believe your treatment of prevenient grace would be strengthened by identifying more clearly the points of substantive agreement that exist between Calvinism and Arminianism on the doctrine of grace, without particular adjectival modifiers. For example, we both acknowledge that grace, which in this theological context is any underserved good we receive from God, is the sole grounds of the continued existence of the human race after the fall, the restraint of the evil in us and the impulse to do anything of benefit to others. We agree that no man is untouched by grace; God must initiate the process of salvation; God's grace both precedes any response on the part of man and cooperates with the elect's grace-enabled will. And this is only a partial list of our agreements.

That said, it is clear that we do disagree on

- In regard to grace
  - Who receives the grace that enables us to respond to the gospel call?
  - What is the nature of this grace? Is it resistible or irresistible?

Beyond simply identifying where we differ, I strongly believe we must pursue the questions "Why do we differ? What in Wesleyan theological formulation necessitates the concept of prevenient grace? What in Calvinistic theological formulation necessitates the concept of irresistible grace?" I would answer that there are two antecedent theological

conclusions that essentially determine our differing answers: the nature of God's intent in the atonement, and the nature of divine justice.

- In regard to the atonement
  - Was God's intent to make atonement available to all men or to provide it only for the elect? ref. 1 Tim. 4:10
- In regard to theology
  - Wesleyans frequently have recourse to the justice of God in their defenses against Calvinism, but I have never read one that supplied exegetical grounds for defining the nature of God's justice.
  - God is just and His justice has been revealed. He has revealed that His justice requires both knowledge and intent for culpability. (or assigns culpability on the grounds of knowledge and ability (?). Culpability is not liability to consequence. Culpability is responsibility for consequences. All humanity was liable to the consequence of Adam's sin; None but Adam were responsible for Adam's sin.
  - I believe the OT reveals the nature of divine justice in the requirements/criteria God encodes under the theocratic judicial system to determine culpability. At least two of the criteria are intent and knowledge. Regarding intent: ref. Exod. 21:13-14; Num. 35:10-34; Deut. 19:1-13; Josh. 20:1-9; Regarding knowledge: ref. Rom. 2:12-15; 5:13.

Regarding the conclusion that total depravity in a Wesleyan-Arminian system is a "hypothetical depravity" – I can understand why you came to this conclusion given statements like Wesley's that no one actually exists in a state of total depravity. It is, however, an incorrect conclusion. A hypothetical depravity would be a depravity that exists only as a mental construct. No orthodox Arminian or Wesleyan has ever held such a position. All men are totally depraved extensively and apart from grace would be totally depraved intensively (Rom. 3:10-18). The fact that we both teach that grace, call it prevenient or common, currently restrains human depravity to some degree makes it clear that neither of our systems hold that all men experience the full ravages of inherited depravity. Where we differ is the extent to which grace counteracts the disease of sin with regard to man's ability to respond to God. Wesley & Fletcher "We both steadily assert that the will of fallen man is by nature free only to evil" (Burtner and Chiles, *Compend of Wesley's Theology*, 132-33).

Regarding the statement "Apparently, Wesley did not want to identify involuntary transgressions as sin in order to maintain his illusionary doctrine of Christian perfection." I would note that (1) the theological motive for Wesley's distinction of sin properly so-called and sin improperly so-called was not his doctrine of Christian perfection; it was primarily to guard against the antinomianism rampant in the liberal Calvinism of his day; (2) I regard all violations of God's word as sin and still maintain that the Bible teaches a doctrine of entire sanctification [Perhaps a paper articulating the biblical and systematic theological grounds and implications of that view would be in order in the future]; (3) As it has been the rare occasion upon which I have read a theologian who opposes the Wesleyan understanding of 'entire sanctification' who could articulate the doctrine in a way that I would agree with, I would recommend again the general axiom of critical

study we must understand our opponents position well enough to articulate it as he would before we may legitimately embark upon critique. I believe that a more careful attention to the primary historical and subsequent theological literature on this subject would at least deepen one's appreciation for the care with which Wesley formulated the doctrine he termed "Christian perfection."

## **Titus 2:11 and John 6**

### **Titus 2:11**

I agree with your conclusion that *πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποῖς* modifies *σωτήριος* and not *ἐπεφάνη*. Hence the verse communicates that because the grace of God has appeared salvation has been brought to all men. I would confess that I find the conclusion that "all men" refers to all categories of men in such a way that it need not include the totality of mankind unconvincing. I would note that contextually, Paul refers not only to believing older men, older women, young women, children, young men, and bondslaves, but also to opponents in v. 8 and apparently unbelieving masters in v. 9. The question I would raise is in what sense does that grace bring salvation to all men?

### **John 6**

Regarding John 6 within a Calvinist framework:

There are several avoidable problems with the paper's argument from John 6.

First Morris' observation "There is not one example in the New Testament of the use of this verb where resistance is successful" appears impressive until one examines the data. Of the eight occurrences of *ἔλκω* in the NT, three have impersonal objects which could not resist. James 2:6 says the rich drag the poor to the judgment seat, but arrival at court does not constitute success in one's suit. It is not a necessary inference that the rich's "drawing" was successful simply because they brought the poor to trial. Most seriously, Morris' assumes his conclusion regarding John 12:32. If Christ does indeed draw all men to himself through his cross-work, then that drawing is not universally successful for all are not saved.

Second, the D. A. Carson quote is logically flawed. Carson argues, "The combination of [John 6] 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." The problem with Carson's logic is that it implicitly defines prevenient grace as a universal constant. If one believes that *all* men are drawn *all* the time, then v. 44 is indeed meaningless and Carson's logic holds. If, however, *all* men are drawn *some* of the time or even only once in a life time, his logic does not hold. No man can come to Christ, unless the Father should draw him.

Third, I would argue that rather than helping the Calvinist system, the argument that *ἔλκω* necessarily denotes an efficacious drawing makes it liable to more objections than it need be. For example, passages such as Acts 7:51, "You are always resisting the Holy Spirit";

Luk 13:34 “I would ... but you would not”; Isaiah 65:2/Rom. 10:21 “All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and rebellious people”, naturally imply desire and drawing on God’s part but resistance on man’s part. God does draw men who resist. Were I a Calvinist, I would argue that God’s drawing is universal in scope, occurring at least once for every man, but that those to whom efficacious grace is not given inevitably resist that drawing because they are totally depraved and enslaved to sin. The benefits of this argument are several:

- It works in the John 6 context. One could argue that the reason the Jews were not coming to Christ in faith is because the Father was not drawing them at that time. Or one could argue that the Father was indeed drawing them through Christ’s message but because the Father had not granted them efficacious grace—the “it” of v. 65—they could do only what was natural to them, i.e., resist the drawing.
- This view also permits John 12:32 to retain its most natural reading: Christ draws all men to himself due to His being lifted up on Calvary. However, this drawing is resisted by those whom the Father has not predestined to eternal life.

Raise these questions:

John 1:9 – I have never used this verse in support of prevenient grace and have often wondered why others did. However, admitting that ‘coming into the world’ modifies light, we still need to provide an explanation for the meaning that this true light “enlightens every man” – which do we qualify – the meaning of ‘enlighten’ or the referent of ‘every man’

### ***Recommendations for Reading***

- Randolph Foster, *Objections to Calvinism: As It is c.* 1853. Schmul Publishing. Note that the Schmul edition has multiple misprints and is a poor copy of the original. 1850-53 edition as still available on the market and at reasonable prices.
- William Burton Pope: 3 vol *A Compendium of Christian Theology*
- Thomas Ralston, *Elements of Divinity*.

Thank you.