

Prevenient Grace: A Wesleyan Perspective on Mission

Clive Burrows

The subject of the paper, 'Prevenient Grace, a Wesleyan Perspective on Mission', may seem a little odd in a conference with the theme, 'Towards a European understanding of Holiness'. In the context of mission, I believe that the Wesleyan theology of prevenient grace, is a fruitful place to start. There is a series in *the International Bulletin of Missionary Research* called 'Pilgrimage in Mission'. Some of the things which I will say are part of my own pilgrimage in mission over the past twenty years or so.

The range of theological influence on Wesley is important for us to note as it has a bearing on the implications of this paper. John Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace was influenced by the 17th century Anglican scholars William Beveridge and John Pearson, the sermons of William Tilley, an Oxford high churchman, and by the Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay. Wesley's theology was profoundly influenced by the whole heritage of Christian history and Christian doctrine including the Eastern Fathers. It was especially as he wrestled with the problems and tension between divine sovereignty, predestination and free will that his understanding of prevenient grace was formed and developed.

Wesley understood and defined prevenient grace, or, in the language of his day, 'preventing grace', to be that grace which goes before. In a sermon on Philippians 2:12-15 on the relationship between God's sovereign work and man's free response, Wesley offers this definition of prevenient grace:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed, and very properly so, preventing grace, including first the wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning His will, and the first transient conviction of having sinned against Him. All these imply some tendency towards life, some degree of salvation, the beginning of a

deliverance from a blind unfeeling heart quite insensible of God and the things of God.¹

Wesley's whole ministry was, in fact, based upon the conviction that he could offer the Gospel to all men everywhere because the grace of God was already at work, albeit incipiently, in all men. He was driven by the unfaltering conviction that God had prepared the way of salvation for all men and that from beginning to end that salvation was all of grace.

Fallen man is entirely dependent on the initiative of love and grace and the Spirit of Christ must begin to work the change that leads to salvation. The Spirit breathes into man the breath of Christian life and so the grace of God is *prevenient*, it goes before, it accompanies, it follows man totally with grace. The grace to prevent or go is the initiator of salvation.

In Wesley's terms Christ has provided, by his finished work of redemption, an outward sufficiency of salvation. The merits of which have made provision for the salvation of all who will repent and believe the Gospel. Christ has further provided an inward sufficiency of power given by God to everyone to enable them to respond to God's grace and by faith to receive salvation by faith. This inward sufficiency of power or sufficient inward grace is *prevenient* grace, which awakens the sinner from the sleep of death and gives him the ability to seek the Lord while he may be found. The provision of *prevenient* grace is universal in scope.²

Wesley accepted Robert Barclay's thesis that God out of his infinite love does not delight in the death of a sinner but has given His only Son to the end that, 'Whoever believes on him should not perish...' and that, 'He is the true Light of the world that enters and enlightens every man that comes into the world' (John 1:9). Both Wesley and Barclay accepted that this Light if it was not resisted would lead to salvation of all men.³ For Wesley this was *prevenient* grace.

Wesley, of course, was fiercely attacked by those who accused him, in his doctrine of universal grace, of detracting from God's glory by glorifying

¹ J. Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, The Bicentennial Edition, ed. Frank C Baker (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 3:203; also, Herbert McGonigle, *John Wesley's Doctrine of Prevenient Grace* (The Wesley Fellowship, 1995), 3.

² For fuller treatment see McGonigle, 12.

³ *Ibid*, 12-13.

man's free will. But Wesley defended this position by explaining that free will itself is in reality a will set free by divine enabling – or a divine or prevenient grace. Wesley was no less convinced than the Calvinists of the extent of original sin and its consequences. For Wesley there was only one means by which the helpless sinner could respond to the gracious merciful love of God and that was by prevenient grace.⁴

With the movement of language and of vocabulary in the last two centuries prevenient grace is perhaps better understood as 'enabling

⁴ This story offers insight from another direction: "A circumstance within the author's knowledge reflects so much light upon the subject that he trusts he shall be pardoned for relating it. A young minister, about three years after he was ordained, had an opportunity of conversing familiarly with the great and venerable leader of the Arminians in the kingdom; and wishing to improve the occasion to the uttermost, he addressed him in nearly these words:

'Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose that we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission, I will ask a few questions, not from impertinent curiosity but for real instruction.' Permission being readily and kindly granted the young minister proceeded to ask, '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 in your heart?'

'Yes', says 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 Christ?'

'Yes, solely through the blood of Christ.'

'But Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or another to save yourself afterwards by your own 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 another to keep yourself by your own power?'

'No.'

'What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God to preserve you into 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 by faith, 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 the ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite on those things wherein we agree.'

The Arminian leader was so pleased with the conversation that he made particular mention of it in his journals; notwithstanding there was never afterwards any connection between the parties, he retained an unfeigned regard for the young inquirer to the hour of his death." [Preface to *Helps to Composition of Five Hundred Skeletons of Sermons*, Rev. Charles Simeon, Vol 1, Part 1 (Cambridge: John Burges, ca 1813).]

grace'. Wesley firmly held that preventing grace comes to man before there is any movement on his part towards God. All men have some measure of this grace. This is the 'imago Dei', the 'image of God'. Wesley spoke of the Spirit who prompts and enables man at every instance.

We have been looking at a focused aspect of prevenient grace, but it covers a wider span. In Wesleyan understanding, there is something of the image of God, the 'imago Dei' that continues even in fallen man. Roland Allen (1868-1947), an Anglican missiologist⁵ from 1912 to the mid-1930s, penned these powerful words in his book *Missionary Principles*:

Hence we cannot approach this heathen world as men who have nothing to gain, nothing to learn by our approach. We cannot speak as if all we had to do was to bestow our wealth, show to others what we already perfectly enjoy, as though our salvation were complete without theirs. We cannot adopt an attitude borne out of spiritual pride and intellectual self-sufficiency. Our very compassion for those who do not know Christ is mingled with desire and eager expectation. We without them are not made perfect. We without them may not see our Lord's glory. Christ is hidden there in heathen lands and we go to seek Him. In revealing Him to others, we reveal Him to ourselves. We give not as a wealthy man may give to the poor of His own abundance, that which he can spare without diminishing one particle of his own comfort, but as he gives, who scatters his seed on a rich field looking for harvest in which both he and those for whom he labours will find their life.⁶

Allen, though he does not come from a Wesleyan position nor use the term prevenient grace, reminds us that Christ is never carried anywhere by a missionary. Rather, wherever the missionary goes, he goes to meet the Christ who is already there and at work. Is there not a sense of this in Acts 17:16ff, where Luke describes the debate between Paul and the

⁵ 'Missiologist' in the sense that he wrote extensively and, for his time, radically, on mission principles – and particularly on reform in Christian mission.

⁶ Roland Allen, *Missionary Principles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B Eerdmans, 1964), 98. The language is the language of his time – in our more politically correct time, he would no doubt choose alternative terminology.

Athenian philosophers? Paul quotes from some of their own poets and referring to the altar he saw dedicated to the Unknown God, he declares: "...and this God is not far from you."

In more recent times Don Richardson, particularly in his book *Eternity in their Hearts*,⁷ has shown, in society after society, the evidence of the witness of God in those very cultures that we, in a former age, would have described as forsaken by God, godless, or as those 'heathen' lands. Prevenient grace in its wider context means that there is no place in this world where God is not. Or to express it as graphically as my African friends do: "Jesus Christ did not come piggyback on a missionary to Africa. Jesus Christ was always here in Africa." It is a most freeing, radical, optimistic understanding of the grace of God in mission, that wherever we go in the world, we go to meet the Christ who is actively (not dormant or merely passively) there.

In recent years I have begun to realise the depth of meaning in the call to be a witness to Jesus Christ. That call is to witness Christ at work not, first of all, a call to be on a platform, a call to expound. It is a call to meet Christ where he is and to witness Christ at work. In the graciousness of God, this Christ calls us to join him in his work.

The importance of this understanding somehow must shape and direct what we do. For if Christ is already there and is already preveniently at work in all people and all cultures, then we must accept there is no God-forsaken place anywhere in the world and that we never go anywhere to start the Spirit's work, but we go to further the work of the Spirit. If the Spirit is already at work in a context very different than our own, we must be open to learn from them the ways in which he has been at work, before our arrival.⁸

Max Warren, another Anglican who wrote around the same time as Allen, reminds us, another man's cultural faith is holy ground. "That, we have already recognised," he said, "...we do well, having taken off our shoes, to walk with care. We may find ourselves treading on a man's dreams."⁹ Let me put that in a slightly different way: When approaching another

⁷ *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981).

⁸ Cf. Alex R G Deasley, *Christian Ministry in an Age of Revolution*, unpublished paper, Nazarene Theological Seminary, May 1990.

⁹ Max Warren, *Perspectives on Christian Mission* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964), 40. Warren was General Secretary of CMS from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s.

culture, another religion, another people, take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground, lest you trample someone's dreams.

The implication of what Warren and Allen state is that if God, in Christ, is preveniently at work in the lives of people of all cultures, then when we approach a people with their religious understanding and their culture we must approach them with respect. Before we cast everything aside, let us be careful and sensitive to understand what Christ might have been saying through their culture and religious understanding. That does not mean that we will not inform them, that we will not offer them the Gospel, the scriptures, that we will not further the work of Christ, but let's be careful about our approach. We may be used to articulate the Good News of God there in terms of what they already know but in light of the fuller revelation of God in Christ.

Professor Andrew Walls, of the *Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-western World* at Edinburgh University, has a magnificent illustration I find both compelling and useful. He describes the cross-cultural situation of the Western and the non-Western Christian world by picturing the audience in a magnificent old traditional theatre. On the stage a drama is being acted out. The central character is Jesus Christ, the plot being enacted is the drama of redemption. Everyone in the theatre observes this same drama but each sits in a different seat, in a different place, in a different position. Though the drama is the same the view that each one has, visually and audibly, is determined by the seat in which they are sitting. It is affected by various aspects of the architecture of the theatre. It depends for instance on how high up you might be as to what view of the stage you might have, how far to the side, who, or what, is in front of you. Other contingencies include the height of the individual viewer, his eye sight and hearing ability. It depends on where the activity on the stage actually is as to whether you have a better or a poorer view visually and audibly from your position. Everyone witnesses the same drama, but nobody sees the complete drama (nor exactly the same drama). Walls concludes that we will understand better the meaning of the drama of redemption when we each come from our cultural position and we begin to dialogue and discuss and to share what we have seen and what we have heard.¹⁰

¹⁰ From notes taken in a university seminar.

Too often, we have presupposed that we have the best view. Allen reminds us that in going to meet the Christ who is there, we are going so that our own salvation might be the more complete. It is not "...as if", he says, "your salvation is complete without theirs".¹¹ There is one supreme reason to be a church in mission and it is this: that unless we are a church in mission, we are not completely a church. Our salvation is limited by the view we have from our own perspective. Conveniently, Christ is there, Christ is at work, he invites us to go and to join with him.

Kwame Bediako is an African Christian from Ghana, an ordained Presbyterian minister and also a very capable scholar and professor. Bediako reminds us that the mission story of Africa has been one of the surprise stories of recent Christianity.¹² Two centuries ago, the sending nations of the Christian universe, Europe and North America, saw no hope for the Christianising of Africa. The hope lay in those more civilised cultures in China and in India.

I have a friend who is the archivist at the Basel Mission, Paul Jenkins. The Basel Mission House, founded in 1815, has been historically a centre for the sending of evangelical missionaries from German-speaking Switzerland and South Germany. Once, when showing a group of my students around the Mission, Paul Jenkins related this story: Once a year, at the time of missionary appointment, all of the candidates were squeezed into the corridors surrounding the manager's office where the appointments were read out. The most intellectually capable, were assigned to China. The next group to India. The ones who were just average, were sent to Africa. Nobody really had tremendous hope for the Christianising of Africa and since the life expectancy was greatly reduced by going there the most astute were not usually assigned there.

The benighted Africans seemed too remote from the grace of God. But the surprise story of Africa, is that the centre of gravity of the Christian world has slipped to the southern continent, and more particularly to Sub-Saharan Africa, to Latin and South America and to Southern parts or the Far East, the Pacific and to Asia. It is estimated that by the year 2000, there will be well over three hundred million Christians in Africa. Sixty percent of the Christians of the world presently live outside America and Europe. There are more Anglican bishops and Christian in Africa than

¹¹ Allen, *Missionary Principles*, 98.

¹² Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Press, 1992).

there are in the rest of the world. At the time of the next Lambeth Conference, from which cultural basin should the next Archbishop of Canterbury come? Of course those of us who belong to other denominations and groups might ask similar questions of our own pious leadership.

The tremendous movement of Christianity that has taken place, reminds us that God has been actively and dramatically at work in places where we doubted that he was. In order to be complete Christians, the Western church must have ears to hear the voice of the church in other places.

Peter Cotterell,¹³ years ago before the fall of the Communist world, reminded us that it was time for the Western Church to hear the voice of the Chinese Church and the Eastern European Church. We must multiply these by every church that exists in every cultural area. We must be able to listen. Eastern Europeans characterise or caricature Western Europeans, business people and missionaries, by saying they have very active mouths and very ineffective ears. Let us avoid being guilty of not hearing what Christ is teaching through the church in those places where we go to minister.

In the Autumn of 1991, at European Nazarene Bible College, we received the first 'Russian-Russian' student – we already had several 'German-Russian' students. That bridge was my personal link to evangelical Christianity within the former Soviet Union. My next visit there will be my tenth over a period of almost six years. In preparing to go the first time, the question arose, "What should we plan to preach, what should we plan to teach?" Tithing? Commitment? You realise that you go there primarily to learn. You go to listen. You go to discover. These visits have been absolute life-changing experiences for me. The spirituality of Christians in Eastern Europe has informed my own spirituality. My spirituality has grown. It is in the process of becoming more and more complete. I have many truly amazing stories to recount from these visits which I will not take time for now. Amazingly, particularly to those of the our Wesleyan persuasion, I found an underground evangelical church the roots of which go back a century to British Brethren and German

¹³ Former missionary to Ethiopia and Principal of London Bible College, and author of many books including, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (London: SPCK, 190) – one of the themes that a conference on Holiness should address.

Pietism without any real Wesleyan-Holiness tradition in their background.

They call themselves Baptists – because they believe that born again, believing Christians should witness the fact openly by believer’s baptism. Of course now that East is open to West many Western Christian leaders and groups, including many Baptists of different ilk, have made their way in and so many have gone with open cheque book at hand, ready to write a cheque. These wise Christian leaders have said, “Wait, tell us what you believe and what you have come to achieve – explain your intentions.” Very often they have been told to put away the cheque books. Quite a number of these Western Baptists have approached them with the intention of informing them what their theology should be. “You are Baptists,” they have said, “and this is what all Baptists believe.” They said to me, “What is eternal salvation? We have never believed this, we do not believe it and we will never believe it.” And, as I sought to unpack the beliefs of these Christians, separated from contact with outside Christianity from the West for seventy years, these Christians said: “We believe that the Christian is called of God to be crucified to Christ and live a life of holiness.”

Now, detail by detail, there obviously would not be total agreement in the expression of this with our position as Western Nazarenes. But would we expect there to be? This is the work of the Christ who goes before. The expression of holiness illuminates the realities of their cultural world. The Word of God is heard from their cultural context and that is where it makes its application.

The Word of God is always ‘indigenous’ and ‘pilgrim’. It is making itself at home, and yet it is never fully at home within any culture. Nor can it be. That is why the expression of Christian truth, and especially in respect to holiness, can never fossilise within the old structures and terms. It must be on the move, and re-expressing itself in terms of the realities that people face in their world of the here and now.

The Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace offers to us a source of confidence in the Christ-who-goes-before, a sense of privilege to be invited by him to participate in his mission, and a deep humility as we begin to understand more of the nuances of the drama of redemption as the gospel of Christ works its work in cultures and situations very different from our own.