

## Article VII. Prevenient Grace

We believe that the human race's creation in Godlikeness included ability to choose between right and wrong, and that thus human beings were made morally responsible; that through the fall of Adam they became depraved so that they cannot now turn and prepare themselves by their own natural strength and works to faith and calling upon God. But we also believe that the grace of God through Jesus Christ is freely bestowed upon all people, enabling all who will to turn from sin to righteousness, believe on Jesus Christ for pardon and cleansing from sin, and follow good works pleasing and acceptable in His sight.

We believe that all persons, though in the possession of the experience of regeneration and entire sanctification may fall from grace and apostasize and, unless they repent of their sins, be hopelessly and eternally lost.<sup>1</sup>

This article forms an essential step in understanding the doctrine of salvation from a Nazarene perspective. Our soteriological heritage is Wesleyan, and so we turn to the writings of John Wesley in order to understand the nature and importance of prevenient grace.

### *Wesley's Understanding of the Nature of God and Human Beings*

In Wesley's sermon "On Guardian Angels" we find the first explicit reference to the fact that God is love and that he favours those who are most like him.<sup>2</sup> During these early years a central theme in his writings had to do with the scriptural assertion that human beings are created in the "image of God." While this was a theological commonplace, it became central to Wesley's conception of salvation. In his first university sermon he discussed what it meant for the human race to be created in the image of God.<sup>3</sup> He painted a very high picture of Adamic perfection,<sup>4</sup> but it was love that was central: "His [Adam's] affections were

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<sup>1</sup> *Manual Church of the Nazarene, 2001-2005* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2001). Paragraphs cited are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, 4:232. Love is the core quality that is at the heart of what it means to be created in God's image; see *Ibid.*, 217-73, 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 354. See also *Works*, 3:533.

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, 4:293-95.

rational, even, and regular—if we may be allowed to say ‘affections’, for properly speaking he had but one: *man was what God is, Love* [emphasis mine].”<sup>5</sup> Love is a relational quality and God is a Triune Being who is in relationship with the other persons of the Godhead as well as the persons that he created; it is the relationship of holy love that is defining of their personhood rather than some ontological substance.<sup>6</sup> Wesley was adamant that love can only truly exist where there is liberty and the power of contrary choice.<sup>7</sup> Human freedom required obedience to be tested,<sup>8</sup> and we failed the test by freely choosing to violate God’s clear command, resulting in sin entering the world. The impact of this on humanity was that “sin hath now effaced the image of God. He is no longer nearly allied to angels. He has sunk lower than the very beasts of the field. His soul is not only earthly and sensual, but devilish.”<sup>9</sup> The doctrine of original sin was, therefore, one of the “fundamental” truths of religion and its sure evidence was the fact of death.<sup>10</sup> It impacted not only the body, but also the nature of each person.<sup>11</sup>

Wesley believed that God intended the human race to regain all that had been lost due to the wrong choice exercised in Eden. This was to be accomplished as a result of re-establishing a right relationship with God. Even at this stage of his spiritual journey, Wesley dismissed the Calvinist ideas of predestination and election as impugning God’s justice and mercy. However, like the Calvinists, he was sure that the “natural man” (all persons apart

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>6</sup> See Ibid., 225-35, 348-50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 302-03.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 354.

from the influence of God's grace) was not open to be taught of God and unable to earn his favour.<sup>12</sup> The only answer to our plight was to be found in Jesus Christ, for in him we are restored to "such a measure of present happiness as is a fit introduction to that which flows at God's right hand for evermore."<sup>13</sup> "To recover our first estate, from which we are thus fallen, is the one thing now needful—to re-exchange the image of Satan for the image of God, bondage for freedom, sickness for health."<sup>14</sup> All of God's providential dealings with us and the direct workings of the Holy Spirit are directed toward this end,<sup>15</sup> and it was envisaged in terms of perfect love:

For to this end was man created, to love God; and to this end alone, even to love the Lord his God with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. But love is the very image of God: it is the brightness of his glory. By love man is not only made like God, but in some sense one with him. . . . Love is perfect freedom. . . . Love is the health of the soul, the full exertion of all its powers, the perfection of all its faculties.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley was in the Arminian wing of the Church of England and this is seen in his strong emphasis on humanity's freedom of choice and moral agency in the process of the recovery of the image of God. For him, sin was always a result of choice, otherwise it impugned God's justice and goodness and denied the reality of love. Wesley did not stand with those who held to a narrow understanding of the *sola fide* and *sola gratia* of strict Calvinism; he was certain that God freely allowed humans the power of choice and this was not contrary to any of his divine attributes.<sup>17</sup> Wesley's retained his earlier understanding of God as love and humanity created in his image—also defined in terms of love. Its importance

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<sup>12</sup> *Works*, 1:401-02.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-57.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 355-56.

<sup>17</sup> *Works*, 4:285.

was seen in his developing dispute with the Calvinists over the process of salvation.<sup>18</sup> The dispute centred on whether salvation required a human response (a measure of free will) or was irresistible (predestination). Wesley's main reason for rejecting predestination ("a doctrine full of blasphemy") was because of the picture of Christ it portrayed. A Saviour who invited all to come but elected only a few, effectively destroyed the justice, mercy and truth of the Father.<sup>19</sup> Wesley firmly believed that "the grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all."<sup>20</sup> If it was not, then no real relationship was possible, since it would be based on coercion (election) rather than liberty and the power of contrary choice. For him, the critical factor was "no Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works."<sup>21</sup> Love was a relational quality, and the rest of his theological picture of salvation had to be congruent with this.

The theological foundation for Wesley's understanding of Christianity had been laid in the period 1725-1739. From his sermon, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (1765), with its clear description of the whole *ordo salutis*, we see that salvation involves a reciprocal relationship of love, for God will only continue in a relationship in which we return the prior love he gives us.<sup>22</sup> Failure to return the love is to experience God's gradual withdrawal, leading to an eventual fall into inward and then outward sin.<sup>23</sup> In his sermon, "The Righteousness of Faith" (1746), Wesley clarified his previous understanding of the distinction between the "covenant of works" that applied in the original creation setting and the

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<sup>18</sup> See *Works*, 3:542-43; 25:637-41.

<sup>19</sup> *Works*, 3:554-56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 544.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 556. He then gave a whole series of texts on God's invitation to all and the role of human choice in our eternal destiny; see p. 558-63.

<sup>22</sup> *Works*, 2:155-69. See especially Outler's introduction, pp. 153-55.

<sup>23</sup> *Works*, 1:442-43. See also *Ibid.*, 250, 61-63.

“covenant of grace” that applies now. Under the former nothing but absolute perfection and obedience would do in order to be accepted by God, and this is impossible for all humans as they are now constituted.<sup>24</sup> Under the latter, we are accepted because “the free grace of God, through the merits of Christ, gives pardon to them that believe, that believe with such a faith as, working by love, *produces* [emphasis mine] all obedience and holiness.”<sup>25</sup>

And what is righteousness but the life of God in the soul, the mind which was in Christ Jesus, the image of God stamped upon the heart, now renewed after the likeness of him that created it? What is it but the love of God because he first loved us, and the love of all mankind for his sake?<sup>26</sup>

It is important to note that righteousness is not defined by Wesley in legal terms as obedience to law or conformity to an absolute standard, but as God’s love expressed in a right relationship with himself and subsequently with all other persons. People were created in receipt of the fullness of God’s love and with the ability to fully return that love to God and to other creatures.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Divine-Human Synergy in Salvation*

Wesley was convinced that this salvation was for everyone and not simply a chosen few, due to the reality of God’s love for the whole race.<sup>28</sup> This commitment meant he had to explain how choice was possible given his belief in original sin and its consequences. As an Arminian, he believed the solution was found in the concept of “free grace.” In his sermon, “Salvation by Faith,” he showed that “grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation”

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<sup>24</sup> See Outler’s introduction in *Ibid.*, 200-02. See also *Works*, 1:204; 2:27.

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, 2:27. See also *Works*, 1:203-6.

<sup>26</sup> *Works*, 1:481. See also *Ibid.*, 495, 579.

<sup>27</sup> *Works*, 2:194. See also *Works* (Jackson), 9:292-93.

<sup>28</sup> *Works*, 2:122.

and it was given to all.<sup>29</sup> All of salvation from the human perspective was purely by grace alone; there was nothing of any merit in human beings since the fall.<sup>30</sup> Such grace

. . . does not depend on any power or merit in man; no, not in any degree, neither in whole, nor in part. It does not in any wise depend either on the good works or righteousness of the receiver; not on anything he has done, or anything he is. . . . for all these flow from the free grace of God. . . . They are the fruits of free grace, and not the root. . . . Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it. Thus is his grace free in all, that is, no way depending on any power or merit in man, but on God alone, who freely gave us his own Son, . . .<sup>31</sup>

Grace was free for all to whom it was given, otherwise it would undermine preaching by making the gospel unnecessary and destroy holiness by removing the motives of hope of heaven and fear of hell.<sup>32</sup> Grace and faith did not, however, mean that people had no role to play in their salvation and Wesley denied that people had to be entirely passive while waiting for its bestowal. He agreed that people should wait for true faith but he defined this in an active sense through making use of the means of grace. He believed they were a “means of grace” because they “do ordinarily convey God's grace to unbelievers.” He was certain that you could use them without trusting in them.<sup>33</sup> This was a vital statement, for it emphasised that it was essential to trust in God alone for salvation, while using (but not relying upon) the means that he had supplied.<sup>34</sup>

The disputes with the Calvinists served to emphasise the centrality of love for Wesley's whole conception of salvation, and love required freedom (liberty) for its existence. He believed that the Calvinists had confounded the work of God as Creator with his work as

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-18.

<sup>31</sup> *Works*, 3:545.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 545-57.

<sup>33</sup> *Works*, 2:131-34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-27.

Governor of the creation “wherein he does not, cannot possibly, act according to his own mere sovereign will; but, as he has expressly told us, according to the invariable rules both of justice and mercy.” Wesley argued that “all reward as well as all punishment, pre-supposes free agency; and whatever creature is incapable of choice, is incapable of either one or the other.” Thus when God acted as Governor he no longer acted as “mere Sovereign.” We are creatures who can either obey or disobey God, “so every individual may, after all that God has done, either improve his grace, or make it of none effect.” Therefore all will be rewarded for what they chose and none will be punished for what could not be chosen.<sup>35</sup>

For [God] created man in his own image: . . . endued with understanding, with will, or affections, and liberty—without which neither his understanding nor his affections could have been of any use, neither would he have been capable either of vice or virtue. He could not be a moral agent, . . . all the manifold wisdom of God (as well as all his power and goodness) is displayed in governing man as man; . . . as an intelligent and free spirit, capable of choosing either good or evil. . . . governing men so as not to destroy either their understanding, will, or liberty! He commands all things . . . to assist man in attaining the end of his being, in working out his own salvation—so far as it can be done without compulsion, without overruling his liberty. . . . to afford man every possible help, in order to his doing good and eschewing evil, which can be done without turning man into a machine; without making him incapable of virtue or vice, reward or punishment.<sup>36</sup>

In order to affirm both the reality of human sinfulness that would seem to preclude a free response to God, and the need for liberty if a relationship of love were to be genuine, Wesley stressed the role of prevenient grace in salvation.<sup>37</sup>

. . . salvation begins with what is usually termed . . . 'preventing grace'; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward

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<sup>35</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 10:362-63. See also *Works*, 23:55.

<sup>36</sup> *Works*, 2:540-41. See also *Works*, 2:400-03, 17, 37-50, 71-84, 88-89, 529, 53; 4:24; *Works* (Jackson), 10:361-63, 457-80; *Letters* (Telford), 5:211-12; 6:263, 287. For a practical application of his belief, see *Thoughts upon Slavery* in *Works* (Jackson), 11:59-79. For an examination of the relationship of liberty, understanding, affections and will, please see Jerry L. Walls, “‘As the Waters Cover the Sea’: John Wesley on the Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 4 (1996); Granville C. Henry, “John Wesley’s Doctrine of Free Will,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 185 (July 1960).

<sup>37</sup> *Works*, 3:199-209. See also *Works*, 4:4. For an example of how prevenient grace works in a person’s life, see “On Conscience” in *Ibid.*, 480-90.

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, . . .<sup>38</sup>

He explained to Isaac Andrews: “Undoubtedly faith is *the work of God*; and yet it is *the duty of man* to believe. And every man may believe *if* he will, though not *when* he will. If he seek faith in the appointed way, sooner or later the power of God will be present, whereby (1) God works, and by *His* power (2) man believes.”<sup>39</sup> Wesley went so far as to say “perfect love and Christian liberty are the very same thing; and those two expressions are equally proper, being equally scriptural. . . . And what is Christian liberty but another word for holiness?”<sup>40</sup> He quoted with approval Augustine’s dictum that “he that made us *without ourselves* will not save us *without ourselves*.”<sup>41</sup>

[God] did not take away your understanding, but enlightened and strengthened it. He 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. Just so has he assisted . . . many thousands in a nation, without depriving any of them of that liberty which is essential to a moral agent.<sup>42</sup>

Wesley conceded that there may be rare cases where God worked for a time irresistibly in a person’s life but even then they must make the final decision about their salvation. He was convinced that since God provided grace freely for all to seek his way, no one will go to

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<sup>38</sup> *Works*, 3:203-04. If God did not work first, salvation would be impossible. His conclusion was: “For, first, God works; therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works; therefore you *must* work.” See *Ibid.*, 206. See also *Ibid.*, 385-97, 432; *Works* (Jackson), 8:322-23; *Letters* (Telford), 5:263.

<sup>39</sup> *Letters* (Telford), 7:202. He explained further, “In order of thinking God’s working goes first; but not in order of time. Believing is the act of the human mind, strengthened by the power of God.” See pp. 202-03. See also *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>40</sup> *Letters* (Telford), 5:203.

<sup>41</sup> *Works*, 2:490.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

hell for eternity but those who choose to do so; it would not be by God's absolute decree.<sup>43</sup> He was equally sure that all that is good in human beings was produced solely by the power of God, even when "God has now thoroughly cleansed our heart, and scattered the last remains of sin" we still remain unable to do good unless every moment we are endued with power from God.<sup>44</sup>

In his debates with Calvinists over predestination Wesley makes reference in one of his shorter treatises to the fact that the issue will never be resolved simply by "reason" but by an appeal to Scripture.<sup>45</sup> He acknowledged that to refute their position the meaning of any one text or collection of texts must be interpreted in the light of "the whole scope and tenor both of the Old and New Testament."<sup>46</sup> The reading stance taken on any text or texts must derive from a basic conviction regarding God's essential nature displayed in the whole of Scripture. Against the Calvinists, Wesley argued that God's sovereignty cannot be seen in isolation from his justice and mercy, and neither of these can be divorced from "the scriptural account of his love and goodness." Wesley noted that the Scripture expressly states that God is love and this love is toward all, not merely the "elect." On this basis, any particular text or texts that can be interpreted to support the application of predestination and election to the salvation of individuals must be wrong, as it contradicts God's nature as love, from which flows justice and mercy. These, in turn, cannot be inconsistent with God's sovereignty and God's gracious gift of human responsibility.<sup>47</sup> However, the main reason Wesley opposes the Calvinist

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 366-68. See also *Works*, 23:355; *Works* (Jackson), 10:360; *Letters* (Telford), 6:239-40.

<sup>44</sup> *Works*, 3:53. See also *Works* (Jackson), 8:285; 13:337-38.

<sup>45</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 10:285. Wesley appeals to the "plain meaning" of the text and warns of seeking to apply to individuals that which was meant to apply to the apostles, the Church or the Jewish community and nation; see pp. 285-95.

<sup>46</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 10:210-11.

<sup>47</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 10:211-36, 42-55. See also his comments on Mk. 3:13 and 1 Jn. 4:8 in *Notes* (NT).

interpretation of predestination, election and perseverance is because it diminishes a living relationship with God and “directly and naturally tends to hinder the inward work of God in every stage of it.”<sup>48</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Wesley was convinced that for love to be real, humanity had to exercise the power of choice to enter and maintain a relationship with God; thus a coerced relationship (the Calvinist doctrine of predestination) is a contradiction in terms. He retained his conviction that God was to be understood essentially as a God of love who desired a loving relationship with all people; all other aspects of his nature, character and purpose are to be understood in relation to love. Furthermore, there is nothing in God’s declarations or actions that would contradict the primacy of love. A love-based relationship could not then exist without liberty and the power of contrary choice. Wesley believed this was guaranteed by God’s establishment of a covenant of grace to replace the covenant of works that had existed prior to the Fall. In upholding the primacy of God’s initiation of the relationship, Wesley remained steadfast in his opinion that grace, truly understood, enabled a genuine human response to God’s invitation. The whole of the Christian life is by grace from beginning to end and the gracious restoration of the power of choice ensures that it is a free relationship for the whole of life. It can, therefore, be maintained or rejected at any stage. Wesley was certain that his picture was both biblical and faithful to the early church and his Anglican heritage. Accordingly, he rejected the whole Calvinist conception of a Sovereign God who issues irresistible decrees to govern his creation. He considered this to be theologically unsound and fundamentally unfaithful to God’s stated mission to seek the redemption of the whole race on

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<sup>48</sup> *Works* (Jackson), 10:256.

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the basis of his love and mercy alone. While he admitted individual texts could be read to support the Calvinist interpretation, he continued to argue for a holistic reading of Scripture (the analogy of faith). The divine-human interaction is, therefore, to be defined by love and relationship, and is not to be expressed by conformity to divine laws imposed by a Sovereign God, through a series of decrees that are isolated from mercy and justice.

David B. McEwan  
Nazarene Theological College  
Brisbane, Australia  
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