

## GRACE: A BRIEF HISTORY

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Grace is unmerited favor.<sup>1</sup> Paul begins and ends his letters with pronouncements of grace. The book of Acts is full of God's grace working in and through the disciples. According to John, all have received grace and it comes through Jesus Christ (John 1:16–17). Paul tells believers that they are justified by grace (Rom. 3:24) and that they stand by grace (Rom. 5:2). Ephesians 2:8 declares that believers are saved by grace. Hebrews 4:16 both describes God's throne in terms of grace as well as saying that all are invited to receive grace there. Grace as a free gift is a major theme in the New Testament. It seems a bit jarring then, when one reads in Origen's (ca. 185–254)<sup>2</sup> *On First Principles* (written ca. 230)<sup>3</sup> the suggestion that some may deserve,

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1. "Grace," *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2:184; "Grace," *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 5th edition, ed. Andrew N. Sparks, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 628. Whereas the dictionary definition of the word *grace* based on its usage within the English language is varied and complex, I have chosen to focus on the theological definition which dominated the sixteenth-century reformation.

2. Ronald E. Heine, "The Alexandrians," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (CHECL), ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 117.

3. Originally written in Greek under the title Περὶ Ἀρχῶν (*Peri Archōn, Concerning the Archons*) see the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), 4:235. Origen's *On First Principles* was written during his Alexandrian years, which Eusebius places before 232, when he left for Caesarea in Palestine. It is only available to us in small pieces and fragments in Greek, but is complete in Latin, as translated in 397 by Rufinus, in Heine, "The Alexandrians," in CHECL, 121–122.

or merit, the gifts of the Spirit and how some may deserve to be sanctified by His grace.<sup>4</sup> How one views grace depends on how one views salvation. Is salvation brought about by human action, church action, or God's action? The history of Christian teachings on grace suggests that all three of these sources of actions have been credited with human salvation, and often with an intermingling of two or more of them.

Paul's teaching on grace and salvation, as famously summarized in Romans 3–8, highlights justification as a free gift of grace (3:24) and that all humans are sinners who do not do good (3:10–12, 23), meaning that law-keeping cannot be the way to righteousness (3:20–21). Yet Paul's teaching also emphasizes the ethical claims of the new life in Christ (Rom. 6:1–2), which life is made possible through the reconciliation by His blood (Rom. 5:9–11), and in which believers are to offer themselves to God as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:13) through the indwelling of the Spirit (Rom. 8:11). Thus Paul says that believers have an obligation (*opheiletai*) to live according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:12) and can expect to share in the sufferings of Christ as well as in His glory (Rom. 8:17). It is this last detail, the ethical obligation to live a righteous life in the power of the Spirit, that became the focus of the discussion of grace by the second- and third-century Christians.<sup>5</sup>

## GRACE PLUS MERIT

Throughout the early Christian centuries, before the best-known controversy on grace between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century, there was a stress on the ethical demands of living out one's faith that included an aspect of human merit. Initially this conceptualization of living saintly lives was perceived to be the responsibility of all Christians, but it was especially

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4. Origen, *On First Principles*, Preface 3; Book 1.3, *ANF*, 4:239, 255. In both places Rufinus, the Latin translator of this work by Origen, uses the Latin word *merēre*, meaning “to merit,” to denote the deserving character of the person receiving the grace and the gifts of the Spirit. Origen's original Greek, of which we only now have fragments, was probably some form of the word ἀξιόω (*axioō*), which has the basic meaning of to “consider worthy.” See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

5. B. Studer, “Grace,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity (EAC)*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino, trans. Eric E. Hewett, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 2:168.

perceived in Christian martyrs.<sup>6</sup> Later, it became associated primarily with monasticism.<sup>7</sup> J. William Harmless suggests that, “Early Christian monks were in the business of doing ordinary Christianity extraordinarily well.”<sup>8</sup> This section will follow the passage from an understanding that all Christians have a responsibility to live ethical lives in response to the salvation provided by God, as Paul taught, to an understanding that human effort adds to, or even prepares the way for, God’s grace. As the focus on human merit towards salvation intensified, it was perceived that only a small group of saintly Christians could achieve this merit, the martyrs and ascetics.

Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110)<sup>9</sup> appealed to the Christians in Rome not to save him from martyrdom but to allow him through death to achieve life through copying Christ: “permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God.”<sup>10</sup> In this context Ignatius stressed the obligation of copying Jesus Christ, but he went beyond to stress a reward for such an achievement. However, in another letter, Ignatius also suggested that “if He were to reward us according to our works, we would cease to be.”<sup>11</sup> As such, Ignatius illustrates the tension felt throughout Christian history between meriting a reward for moral actions in following the example of Christ, and unmerited favor in receiving better than believers deserve.

Later, Justin Martyr (ca. 110–ca. 165)<sup>12</sup> spoke in terms that emphasized human ability to choose good or evil actions: “We hold it to be true, that

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6. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Martyr Passions and Hagiography,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 603.

7. Eva-Maria Faber, “Grace,” in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology (ECTh)*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2:647.

8. J. William Harmless, SJ, “Monasticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 510.

9. It is impossible to accurately date Ignatius (see *ANF*, 1:45, 48), and the discussion is ongoing; see Graydon F. Snyder, “Ignatius of Antioch,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity (EEC)*, 2nd ed., ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1999), 559.

10. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans* 6, 8, in *ANF*, 1:76–77. See the thread of references throughout his letters to his own achievement of martyrdom in imitation of Christ in Snyder, “Ignatius of Antioch,” *EEC*, 559–560.

11. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 10, in *ANF*, 1:63.

12. *ANF*, 1:159; Theodore Stylianopoulos, “Justin Martyr,” in *EEC*, 647.

punishments, and chastisements, and good rewards, are rendered according to the merit of each man's actions."<sup>13</sup> In this context, he found himself arguing against those who falsely accused Christians of fatalism on account of their belief in prophecy, so, Justin argued strongly in favor of human responsibility. He went on to insist that "unless the human race have the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions."<sup>14</sup> In another context, arguing that Christians teach a punishment of wrongdoing in afterlife similar to, but more rigorous than, the teachings of Plato,<sup>15</sup> Justin uses the argument that those who choose well, and "by their works show themselves worthy of His (God's) design, they are deemed worthy . . . of reigning in company with Him, being delivered from corruption and suffering."<sup>16</sup> Note that Justin is speaking of humans as they came from the hand of God, with free will. In keeping his argument simple, Justin makes no distinction in human ability to choose before or after the Fall. Though the context of his argument in his apologetic purpose makes him speak more forcefully, and simply, of Christian ethical behavior, nevertheless, Justin's actual words speak in favor of salvific rewards for human works. Note his words to Trypho: "The Holy Ghost reproaches men because they were made like God, free from suffering and death, provided they kept His commandments, and were deemed deserving of the name of His Sons, and yet they, becoming like Adam and Eve, work out death for themselves."<sup>17</sup>

Theophilus of Antioch,<sup>18</sup> in his only extant work, *To Autolycus* (*Ad Autolycum*, ca. 180),<sup>19</sup> also emphasizes the choice set before pre-Fall humans,

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13. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 43, in *ANF*, 1:177.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 8.

16. *Ibid.*, 10, in *ANF*, 1:165.

17. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 124, in *ANF*, 1:262.

18. I choose not to attempt a life dating of Theophilus of Antioch. The date of birth given by Marcus Dods (*ANF*, 2:87–88), he admits, is one of pure conjecture. Dods goes on to suggest that the only solid date in Theophilus's life from any source is Eusebius's date of his succession as bishop in Antioch as the eighth year of Marcus Aurelius, or 168.

19. The date for *Ad Autolycum* is quoted in Frederick W. Norris, "Theophilus of Antioch," in *EEC*, 1122. Significantly, Norris dates only Theophilus's work, not his life. This date is based on the terminus of the chronology Theophilus gave in book three. The final

and then he argues a similar choice for post-Fall humans. In reference to Adam, the first created human, Theophilus wrote: "If he were to turn to the life of immortality by keeping the commandment of God, he would win immortality as a reward from him and would become a god; but if he turned to deeds of death, disobeying God, he would be responsible for his own death." Theophilus went on, now in reference to all humans: "For as by disobedience man gained death for himself, so by obedience to the will of God whoever will can obtain eternal life for himself." Continuing, the next statement contains Theophilus's idea of grace and salvation: "God gave us a law and holy commandments; whoever performs them can be saved."<sup>20</sup> This emphasis of Theophilus suggests a shared dependence between humans and God for salvation.

The Christian writers of the second century were primarily interested in ethics and lifestyle rather than in clear theological distinctions,<sup>21</sup> including distinctions about grace. Irenaeus of Lyon (writing ca. 190)<sup>22</sup> can be included in that statement, but his articulation that there is "one God who is the creator of the world and the Father of Jesus Christ, [and] that there is one divine economy of salvation and one revelation"<sup>23</sup> shows Irenaeus to be a more systematic thinker than his predecessors. To understand Irenaeus on salvation is to see his stress on Christ's recapitulation of Adam. Jesus Christ, as human, succeeds where Adam, the first human, failed,<sup>24</sup> and also died as the redemptive sacrifice, in order to give the gift of eternal life to humans: "through the flesh of our Lord, and through His blood, we have been saved."<sup>25</sup> As such,

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entry (*Auto.* 3.27–28) is the death of "Emperor Aurelius Verus," in 169, which leads us to believe that the book was written before the death of Marcus Aurelius, who died in 180.

20. Theophilus of Antioch, *Auto.* 2.27. Quotations from Theophilus of Antioch are from the translation by Robert M. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch: Ad Autolycum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

21. Frances Young, "Christian Teaching," in *CHECL*, 103.

22. Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 8–10. Whereas the only solid date we have in the life of Irenaeus is his trip to Rome as Christian leader from Gaul in regards to the martyrdoms of 177, Irenaeus does denote Eleutherius as twelfth and current bishop of Rome (ca. 174–ca. 189) as he wrote his lists of bishops now found in *Against Heresies* 3.3.3.

23. Mary T. Clark, RSCJ, "Irenaeus," in *EEC*, 587.

24. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.21.1–2, in *ANF*, 1:548–550.

25. *Ibid.*, 4.14.2, 3, *ANF*, 1:541–542; see also 3.19.1–3, in *ANF*, 1:448–449.

Irenaeus anticipates, but does not clearly differentiate, several of the ingredients of salvation which are later articulated: freedom to choose, substitution, saved by grace, and growing in grace.

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 160–215)<sup>26</sup> and Origen both talk in terms of becoming “worthy to receive the power of grace from God,”<sup>27</sup> but Origen develops the idea more thoroughly. In his preface to his work now known as *On First Principles*, Origen suggests that the gifts of the Spirit are given only to those who deserve them, and that the correct meaning of the scriptures “is not known to all, but to those only on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the word of wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> He calls such people “lovers of wisdom” who “prepare themselves to be fit and worthy receivers of wisdom” and who have obtained from the Holy Spirit “the gift of language, of wisdom, and of knowledge.” These few, as Origen further describes, are ones who “turn to the Lord” and are able to view scriptures “with unveiled faces” having “deserved to be sanctified by His grace.”<sup>29</sup> So, according to Origen, salvation and the understanding of scripture are only available to those in whom the Holy Spirit works: “The operation of the Holy Spirit does not take place at all in those . . . who are endued indeed with reason, but are engaged in evil courses.” Origen makes it even more clear when he continues: “In those persons alone do I think that the operation of the Holy Spirit takes place, who are already turning to a better life, . . . who are engaged in the performance of good actions, and who abide in God.”<sup>30</sup> In Origen’s view, sanctifying grace, salvation, and the Holy Spirit are only available to those who have already changed their lives and actions, people Origen calls “saints.”

One could argue that Origen and Clement are speaking in these places only of sanctifying grace, and that they would understand that there is also grace which precedes. It must be granted that Origen also argues that the Father and the Son are always working in both saints and sinners, but that this work is largely to be understood as having provided them with existence

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26. Walter H. Wagner, “Clement of Alexandria,” in *EEC*, 262–263.

27. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.22, in *ANF*, 2:435; see also 5.1, in *ANF*, 2:445: “‘For by grace we are saved:’ not, indeed, without good works.”

28. Origen, Preface to *Princ.* 3, 8, in *ANF*, 4:240–241.

29. Origen, *Princ.* 1.1.2, 3, in *ANF*, 4:242.

30. Origen, *Princ.* 1.3.5, in *ANF*, 4:253.

and rational thought.<sup>31</sup> He actually speaks of a “special ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ to those upon whom he confers by nature the gift of reason, by means of which they are enabled to be rightly what they are.” This is clearly a manifestation of grace, but Origen immediately turns his attention to “another grace of the Holy Spirit, which is bestowed upon the deserving.” This grace Origen equates with the new wine which cannot be poured into old wineskins. “Men should walk in newness of life, that they may receive the new wine, i.e., the newness of grace of the Holy Spirit.” He concludes, “The Holy Spirit is conferred on the saints alone.”<sup>32</sup> Origen overtly argues that people are to turn to a life of good works on their own, before they can merit the gifts of the Holy Spirit. His stress on the human ability to behave is built on his view of Christ, as our brother, offering a salvation by example.<sup>33</sup> Origen goes on to teach a perfectionism empowered by the Holy Spirit, but the initial change is made by the saints for themselves. For Origen, saints begin their own salvation and then depend on the Holy Spirit to finish it.

Many other early Christian teachers and bishops from many locales follow a similar pattern as that of these Alexandrians, Clement and Origen. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 340–ca. 395) “preserved the primacy of God as the source of all good, while maintaining human responsibility in freely responding to God’s call by a continuous process of conversion.”<sup>34</sup> Nyssa taught that human ascetic exertions were met by God’s responsive grace. “Gregory articulated this as *synergia*, a working together of human effort and God’s grace.”<sup>35</sup>

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31. Ibid., 1.3.8, in *ANF* 4:255.

32. Ibid., 1.3.7, in *ANF* 4:254.

33. Origen views the Son as “being God through participation in the Father’s divinity,” not by nature. John W. Reeve, “The Trinity in the Third and Fourth Centuries,” in Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 138. For a discussion of the ramifications on salvation from Origen’s low Christology, see Darius Jankiewicz, “Lessons from Alexandria: The Trinity, the Soteriological Problem, and the Rise of Modern Adventist Anti-Trinitarianism,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 50.1 (2012): 5–24.

34. David L. Balás, O. Cist., “Gregory of Nyssa,” in *EEC*, 495–497.

35. Karen Jo Torjesen, “Grace,” in *EEC*, 482. For an in-depth discussion of Gregory’s position in contrast to both Augustine and Pelagius, see Ekkehard Mühlenberg, “Synergism

One of the dominant views that come out of the first five centuries of Christian writers concerning salvation is that humans are born in a sinful condition, walking away from God, but are capable on their own of turning toward God, and on their own begin to walk toward God. Grace enters the picture to forgive past sins and empower the walk toward God into a walk with God. In the fifth century two very different ideas come to light.

## AUGUSTINE AND THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY

Pelagius (ca. 350–ca. 425),<sup>36</sup> a monk from the British Isles, came to Rome around 405 and endeavored to reform the Christians in Rome until the invasion of Aleric forced many to flee Rome in 409.<sup>37</sup> Pelagius then made a circuit through Christian Europe, ending up in Palestine, espousing an idea that humans were not that bad off at birth but learned sinful behavior patterns by being raised in a sinful environment. What came to be known as Pelagianism was the idea that all humans are born without sin, but that each person falls victim to sin by choosing it, much like Adam and Eve did. The obvious implication of this view is that if sin is merely a choice and not an integral part of a sinful nature, then it only takes a choice to overcome it. In Pelagianism, Jesus Christ is not so much Savior as example. Grace is for forgiveness of past sins, but the choice to no longer sin is a human capability, not a special grace of Christ.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)<sup>38</sup> could not have disagreed more, though his actual understanding of Pelagianism may well have come more from the teachings of Celestius, his fellow fifth-century North African,<sup>39</sup> than from Pelagius himself.<sup>40</sup> Augustine strongly held that all humans since Adam, except Jesus, the second Adam, are born with a sinful nature. Augustine does correct this major wrong from Pelagianism by teaching

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in Gregory of Nyssa,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 68 (1977): 93–122, especially 109.

36. Joanne McWilliam, “Pelagius, Pelagianism,” in *EEC*, 887.

37. Brinley Roderick Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 1988), 1.

38. Margaret R. Miles, “Augustine,” in *EEC*, 148.

39. Michael P. McHugh, “Celestius (Fifth Century),” in *EEC*, 228–229.

40. Rees, *Pelagius*, 2–3, 10–11.



that humans are born sinful and are unable to change under their own power.<sup>41</sup> Augustine argued that only through grace can humans recognize their sinful condition, perceive the forgiveness offered by the sacrifice of Christ, experience the invitation of God drawing them to Himself, and respond by choosing to allow Him to save them and change them.<sup>42</sup> In other words, Augustine identified that grace was not just the forgiving of those who have chosen God and turned toward him. Rather, God initiates the process by giving His grace before any action, knowledge, or choice from the human. This concept is called *prevenient grace*, the grace that comes before salvation. It is this *prevenient grace* that ensures that God initiates salvation by wooing sinners and empowering them to change. This *prevenient grace* is not needed by Pelagians or those earlier teachers who held that humans were able to turn toward God on their own, like Origen, John Chrysostom, and many others.

The problem with Augustine's solution to the error of Pelagianism was that he went too far. He rightly taught that humans were born sinners, unable to initiate a saving relationship with God, and that God's *prevenient grace* initiated the salvific relationship, but he turned the whole process of salvation into a *monergism* from God's side. The term is built on *monos* (one, singular, or only) and *ergos* (work), and in the context of salvation means that all activity of salvation is from God, humans can do nothing, not even have an empowered choice. In Augustine's understanding, even *prevenient grace* could not be resisted. *Monergism* contrasts the term *synergism* (working together), where both God and the human have a role in salvation. Most Christian theologians before Augustine and also after him until the Protestant Reformation were *synergists* of some kind. Augustine's *monergism* was based on the concept that saved humans were predestined to be saved and had no choice in the matter at all. Though Augustine's view of predestination was centered much

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41. This is not to say that all aspects of Augustine's teaching on original sin are biblically correct. For example, his explanation that sin is transmitted through sexual impregnation clearly lacks biblical support.

42. J. Patout Burns, "Grace: The Augustinian Foundation," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, World Spirituality 16 (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 336–337.

more on church<sup>43</sup> and nations<sup>44</sup> than the more individualistic predestination embraced later by Luther and John Calvin, it shared some of the same problems. Namely, it left no room for any human choice concerning salvation. "It was Paul's teaching on grace that provided Augustine with the foundation of his own much more comprehensive and sophisticated doctrine; but he carried his interpretation of that teaching to limits which left him with a theory of predestination unacceptable to the majority of later theologians—though not to Calvin."<sup>45</sup>

So in the Pelagian controversy Pelagius got it right that humans do have a choice in their own salvation, but he got it wrong that humans were born without sin, chose sin based on the sinful environment, and then chose to not sin based on their own abilities. Pelagianism had far too large a role for the human in his understanding of synergism.

Augustine got it right in that humans are sinful from birth and are unable to even consider salvation or a relationship with God without God's prevenient grace wooing, inviting, and empowering their choices and faith. What Augustine got wrong is that salvation is only for the predestined, born in Christian churches and nations, and for a few that are called out of paganism. Augustine taught that those predestined to salvation have no choice in the matter: they cannot refuse salvation. Though he did not coin the Calvinistic term *irresistible grace*, Augustine taught something very similar to that in his monergistic understanding of salvation.

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43. "Now if the binding and shutting up of the devil means that he cannot deceive the Church, must his loosing therefore mean that he will be able to do so again? God forbid! For he will never deceive the Church which was predestined and chosen before the foundation of the world, of which it is said that 'the Lord knoweth them that are His,'" Augustine, *Civ.* 20.8, in *Augustine: The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought Series, ed. Raymond Guess and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 982–983.

44. "Because he is thus bound and shut up, then, the devil is prohibited and prevented from seducing those nations which belonged to Christ: the nations whom he formerly seduced or held in bondage. For God chose those nations before the foundation of the world, to deliver them from the power of darkness and to translate them into the kingdom of His dear Son, as the apostle says. (Cf. Eph 1:4)," *ibid.*, 20.7, in *Augustine: The City of God*, 981.

45. Rees, *Pelagius*, 53.

## TWO KINDS OF SEMI-PELAGIANISM

As the name suggests, semi-Pelagianism is like Pelagianism in that it places too much responsibility for salvation on the human rather than on God, just not to the extent of Pelagianism. There is no single, simple definition of semi-Pelagianism because it comes in many forms, as well as being viewed from many different perspectives. For instance, a stark Calvinist would view any human input in salvation as semi-Pelagianism, even a God-empowered response to God's gracious call.

The two kinds of semi-Pelagianism addressed in this section represent (1) those who believe humans can individually cooperate with God in the works of salvation and (2) those who believe the works of the corporate church ensure their salvation.

Most of the Christian teachers before Augustine taught that humans have the innate ability to turn toward God and initiate the process of their own salvation. In the immediate aftermath of Augustine's monergism, including a selective predestination and a grace that could not be refused, there was a reaction in favor of human choice. Unfortunately, this return to free will also included a return to the first kind of semi-Pelagianism: humans can cooperate in the works of salvation.

John Cassian (ca. 365–ca. 433)<sup>46</sup> opposed Augustine's monergism as too simplistic in regard to divine grace and human will. The synergistic models he developed within his work *Conferences*, written as a record of conversations between ascetic monks, were later named "semi-Pelagianism" and condemned at the Council of Orange in 529.<sup>47</sup> Cassian's two models of grace and will, developed in *Conf.* 13, have recently been labeled the "cooperative model" and the "alternative model."<sup>48</sup> Both of these models include the human cooperating with God in the works of salvation and correspond to the first kind of semi-Pelagianism previously discussed. In spite of their condemnation at Orange, they reflect two ongoing threads in monastic thought. Also, Cassian's appeal to the rule of faith in the church in *Conf.* 13.11.4, 5 suggests the second kind of semi-Pelagianism.

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46. Paul C. Burns, CSB., "John Cassian," in *EEC*, 219.

47. Faber, "Grace," in *ECTh*, 2:648; Karen Jo Torjesen, "Grace," in *EEC*, 483.

48. Alexander Y. Hwang, "Manifold Grace in John Cassian and Prosper of Aquitaine," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63.1 (2010): 97–101.

In the cooperative model, Cassian suggests that some people, and he specifically means the strong-willed ascetics of the type that are participating in his recorded conversations, desire to practice holiness and live righteous lives and they engage their wills in this practice. Cassian argues that all humans have the seeds of virtue in their soul on account of being created by God, and though he recognizes that God provides the germination of the seeds unto perfection, he also reacts against accounting all good works to God: "Therefore, we must be on the watch lest we attribute all the good works of the holy persons to the Lord in such a way that we ascribe nothing but what is bad and perverse to human nature."<sup>49</sup> In this cooperative model, "the grace of God initiates and inspires the free will towards the good, but the free will can choose to follow or resist the actions of grace at each stage in the process of perfection."<sup>50</sup> Cassian seems to be asserting a shared power of the will between God and humans in the good actions of salvation. The analogy of a diligent farmer attempting to grow crops is used to illustrate the cooperation between the human and God: "Consequently, just as the divine goodness does not bestow an abundant yield on sluggish farmers who do not plow their fields frequently, so neither will night-long anxiety be profitable to those who labor if it has not been smiled upon by the Lord's mercy."<sup>51</sup>

The cooperative model of John Cassian contains a high view of human ability in cooperating with God in salvation. It is similar to the earlier models which suggested that humans prepare for their own salvation. It compares well with what Augustine complained was the position of Tyconius (fl. 370–390),<sup>52</sup> the Donatist writer of the seven *Rules* of scripture interpretation. Concerning rule five, "about the promises and the law," which Augustine says should rather be called "about grace and the commandments," Augustine repined, "Tyconius did some good work in his treatment of it, but still left something to be desired. While discussing faith and works, he said that our works are given to us by God on the strength of our faith, but that faith itself comes from us in such a way that we do not have it from God."<sup>53</sup> This

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49. John Cassian, *Conlatio*, 13.12.5–7; quoted in Boniface Ramsey, OP, trans., *John Cassian: The Conferences*, ACW 57 (New York: Paulist, 1997), 479–480.

50. Hwang, "Manifold Grace," *SJT*, 98.

51. Cassian, *Conlatio* 13.3.3; Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 468.

52. Pamela Bright, "Tyconius," in *EEC*, 1148.

53. Augustine, *Doctr. chr.*, 3.46; quoted in Edmund Hill, O.P., trans., *Teaching*

understanding of Tyconius represents many who have said that humans initiate their own faith, a position shared by John Cassian's cooperative model, though sometimes Cassian speaks in terms of humans having perfecting faith. Ironically, in the second model identified within the thirteenth of the *Conferences*, the "alternate model," John Cassian appears to be saying the exact opposite.

After quoting a series of passages from Paul, Cassian asserts that for some people, God "draws the unwilling to salvation, removes from those who want to sin the means of fulfilling their desire, and graciously hinders those who are hastening on to what is evil."<sup>54</sup> This sounds more like Augustine's irresistible predestination than Cassian's synergism. However, Cassian goes on to quote "seven sets of scriptural passages, each containing at least one passage that supports divine initiative (grace) and at least one passage that supports human initiative (free will)."<sup>55</sup> Cassian then concludes that this all means "that in each of these cases both the grace of God and our freedom of will are affirmed, since even by his own activity a person can occasionally be brought to a desire for virtue, but he always needs to be helped by the Lord."<sup>56</sup>

So both the cooperative model and the alternative model described by John Cassian include cooperation between God's grace and natural abilities, including free will and internal virtues. As such, both of Cassian's models represent the first kind of semi-Pelagianism, that of individual cooperation in salvation. Cassian's cooperative model works for the strong, ascetic monks whereas the alternative model is aimed at the weak, but both retain the internal seeds of virtue as well as at least some free will. In his summary of the thirteenth of the *Conferences*, Cassian records concerning God's handling of salvation that "sometimes he inspires the beginning of salvation and places in each person a fervent good will, while sometimes he grants the performance of the work and the perfection of virtuousness. . . . Some he supports as they hasten and run, while others he draws unwilling and resisting and compels them to a good will."<sup>57</sup>

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*Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, vol. 1, ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 190.

54. John Cassian, *Conlatio* 13.9.1; Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 474.

55. Hwang, "Manifold Grace," *SJT*, 99.

56. John Cassian, *Conlatio* 13.9.4; Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 475.

57. John Cassian, *Conlatio* 13.18.2; Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 490.

John Cassian also represents the second kind of semi-Pelagianism, depending on the corporate church, though to a much lesser degree than many others. Near the end of *Conferences* 13.11, Cassian refers to the “rule of the Church’s faith”<sup>58</sup> as something he purposefully retains in regard to salvation. Later, he asserts that he is in line with all the fathers of the universal church. To teach within the rule of faith has been an important goal by most Christian teachers clear back to Irenaeus and Origen.<sup>59</sup> It was Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200–258)<sup>60</sup> who most dramatically initialized the teaching that the church is in charge of salvation.

Cyprian of Carthage and his experiences surrounding the Decian persecution in 249–251 clarified for Catholics, and even for the later Donatists, the relationship between salvation and the Church. In the aftermath of the persecution, the Christians of Carthage and the surrounding areas who had looked to the martyrs and those in prison as confessors for spiritual direction and even forgiveness now had to deal with their returned bishop who had fled the city during the persecution, against the distinct writing of his North African predecessor and theological mentor, Tertullian (fl. 200).<sup>61</sup> Cyprian had to reestablish order in the church with his own moral authority called into question. He summoned a synod of North African bishops, who would recognize him as their leader as the metropolitan bishop of the province of North Africa. There he asserted his official authority to reestablish the unity of the Church. In his letters and in his treatise entitled *On the Unity of the Church*, he summarized three principles which became standards of Catholic Church order:

1. “He can longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his Mother.”<sup>62</sup> This attested to Cyprian’s belief, that was gaining universal appeal, that salvation is only available through the Church. Through baptism and the Eucharist the Church offered salvation to its members.

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58. Quoted in Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, 477–478.

59. John W. Reeve, “Understanding Apostasy in the Christian Church,” in *Message, Mission and Unity of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013), 156–160.

60. Robert D. Sider, “Cyprian,” in *EEC*, 306.

61. “More glorious the soldier pierced with a javelin in battle, than he who has a safe skin as a fugitive,” Tertullian, *De fuga*, 10 in *ANF*, 4:122. Tertullian’s flourish date is from Robert D. Sider, “Tertullian,” in *EEC*, 1107.

62. Cyprian, *Unit. eccl.*, 6; in *ANF*, 5:423.

2. "The Church is founded upon the bishops, and every act of the Church is controlled by these same rulers."<sup>63</sup> "For Cyprian the unity of the church, and thus the very possibility of salvation, resides in the office of the bishop."<sup>64</sup>
3. "It is manifest where and by whom remission of sins can be given; to wit, that which is given in baptism. For first of all he gave that power to Peter, upon whom he built the Church, and whence he appointed and showed the source of unity—the power, namely, that whatever he loosed on earth should be loosed in heaven. . . . Whence we perceive that only they who are set over the Church and established in the Gospel law, and in the ordinance of the Lord, are allowed to baptize and to give remission of sins."<sup>65</sup>

This placed the spiritual authority of salvation firmly into the hands of the bishops alone; it denied that either the confessors or the presbyters on their own authority could offer God's grace. Through this Cyprian also asserted that no heretic or schismatic could offer salvation. This concept is built on Tertullian's understanding of the *ordinatio*,<sup>66</sup> which set the bishop up as the high priest, at the apex of the hierarchy of spiritual authority, which was built up, throughout the Middle Ages, into the church as the conduit of grace. This second semi-Pelagian position is on the institutional level: the human institution of the church cooperating with God to bestow grace. So both the individual semi-Pelagianism and the corporate semi-Pelagianism put too much emphasis on the human side of synergism. Both individual and corporate semi-Pelagianism portray humans as cooperating with God in the works of salvation instead of depending on God for the works of salvation and cooperating in a God-empowered response to salvation.

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63. Cyprian, *Ep.* 26.1, in *ANF*, 5:305.

64. Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 121.

65. Cyprian, *Ep.* 72.7, in *ANF*, 5:381.

66. "It is the authority of the Church, and the honour which has acquired sanctity through the joint session of the Order, which has established the difference between the Order and the laity," Tertullian *Exh. cast.*, 7; in *ANF* 4:54; "Of giving [baptism], the chief priest (who is the bishop) has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority, on account of the honour of the Church, which being preserved, peace is preserved," Tertullian, *Bapt.*, 17, in *ANF*, 3:677.

## GRACE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Though Cyprian never intended this exact outcome, in the Middle Ages the church asserted exclusive control over salvation, highlighting the difference and distance from the church as portrayed in the New Testament. Cyprian himself felt that all of salvation was from God. Roger Olson defends Cyprian personally, while still showing the damage of his theological trajectory in Olson's ably nuanced chapter on Cyprian:

In spite of later Protestant polemics against the penitential system that grew out of Cyprian's theology, Cyprian himself was not guilty of works righteousness or self-salvation. Nowhere did he suggest that a person can earn salvation as a reward for good works. . . . On the other hand, the suspicion that Cyprian unintentionally contributed to a growing tendency toward moralism and works righteousness within the church is not entirely unjustified.<sup>67</sup>

There was a shift in understanding from being saved through right practice (orthopraxy) during the second century, into being saved through right belief (orthodoxy) from the third century and on. Both of these are semi-Pelagian in their focus because they put human actions and beliefs into a cooperative balance with God's grace as the means of salvation. Cyprian's assertion that there was no salvation outside the church came to be applied to the sacramental system of orthodox bishops using the storehouse of merits from martyrs and ascetic saints to apply to weak and needy common Christians.

Augustine supplies the protection of church orthodoxy in his argument from Revelation 20:1–3 that Satan cannot cause the church to err because he is bound:

Now if the binding and shutting up of the devil means that he cannot deceive the Church, must his loosing therefore mean that he will be able to do so again? God forbid! For he will never deceive the Church which was predestined and chosen before the foundation of the world, of which it is said that "the Lord knoweth them that are His."<sup>68</sup>

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67. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 120.

68. Augustine, *Civ.*, 20.8, in Dyson, trans., *City of God*, 982–983.



Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160)<sup>69</sup> secures the seven sacraments for the church in book 4 of *The Sentences* both in number and in meaning, not by being original, but by systematizing.<sup>70</sup> As a theologian, he makes careful distinctions as to who is the author of grace and who is the servant of grace. As in his description of the efficacy of baptism, Lombard argues that the Lord is the author of the invisible grace that remits sins in baptism, but that the servant who does the baptizing remits sins “by the visible sacrament.”<sup>71</sup> He gets it right that the Lord is the only source of grace, but he gets it wrong that the human action remits sins. But that is not the worst of it by far. Others who follow him without his fine theological distinctions simply use the sacraments as if the power were their own on the basis of their ordination.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) heightens the level of church hierarchy, especially the papacy, as *amicus sponsa*, friend of the bride. The pope was charged with protecting the church as the bride of Christ, leading believers to salvation. “Bernard developed in this work a theory of the plenitude of papal power which was to be of immense importance for the later Middle Ages. His idea was that the Pope stood in the hierarchy of heaven and earth, not only above every secular power, but also above all others in the Church.”<sup>72</sup>

By the end of the Middle Ages, the church in Europe had taken on the task of exclusively tending salvation on behalf of God through the seven sacraments provided through the hierarchical structure from the pope through the ordained to the laity and was believed to be without error in the understandings of God, humans, and the saving grace it dispensed. On top of that, the system empowered unscrupulous people to take advantage of the authoritarian system, bringing to themselves power, money, and license to act as they wanted. The free gift of God’s grace had been largely overshadowed. It is indeed amazing grace that God reached people in the midst of all that, but He did.

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69. Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 113.

70. Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought in One Volume* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014), 202.

71. Peter Lombard, *Sent.*, 4.5.3.4, in Giulio Silano, trans., *Peter Lombard: the Sentences, Book 4 On the Doctrine of Signs*, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation*, vol. 48, ed. Joseph Goering and Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2010), 31.

72. G. R. Evans, *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 96.

## THE PROTEST TO REASSERT GOD'S GRACE

The protests against both the system and the abuses of the system came about as a rediscovery of grace. Many different concepts of understanding grace were tried. Some felt that the removal of the abuses and the unscrupulous people would solve the problem of belittling God's grace. Others thought that reducing the number of sacraments to just the two from the New Testament, baptism and the Lord's Supper, would suffice. However:

those who claim that the sacraments have the power to justify and to bestow grace are also mistaken. Their mistake consists in confusing the "figure" of the sacrament with the "truth" in it. . . . Such confusion leads to superstition, which consists in placing one's faith in what is not God. This perverts the very nature of the sacrament, whose purpose is precisely to exclude any other claim to justification, and to focus faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, Christ himself is the true substance of all sacraments, for he is the source of their strength, and they promise and grant nothing but him.<sup>73</sup>

### Luther and Calvin: Monergism Again; Common Grace

Though William of Ockham (1285–1347),<sup>74</sup> John Wyclif (ca. 1329–1384),<sup>75</sup> and Jan Hus (died 1415)<sup>76</sup> all contributed to the idea of a reform to Christianity that went back not to laws of Justinian (Emperor 527–565),<sup>77</sup> but back to the message of the Bible itself, Martin Luther (1483–1546)<sup>78</sup> is usually

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73. González, *Christian Thought in One Volume*, 259.

74. Evans, *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers*, 150–151. Ockham taught that secular rulers and church councils had more authority than popes.

75. *Ibid.*, 158–164. Wyclif not only urged and labored for translation of the Bible into the vernacular, but he taught that the Scriptures had more authority than all the popes, clerics, and orders of monks. He encouraged biblical preaching as more important for salvation than the Eucharist.

76. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 370: "So similar was Martin Luther's theology to Hus's that many labeled him 'the Saxon Hus.'"

77. F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 30; "Canon law, with its enormous impact on the medieval church, took its shape and, indeed, much of its substance from the law reforms of Emperor Justinian," *ibid.*, 33.

78. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 375.

credited with starting the Protestant Reformation in 1517 with his 95 Theses against the sale of indulgences. Thesis 82 struck at the very essence of the problem of the papal church being the conduit of grace as it challenged: "Why does not the pope liberate everyone from purgatory for the sake of love (a most holy thing) and because of the supreme necessity of their souls? This would be morally the best of all reasons. Meanwhile he redeems innumerable souls for money."<sup>79</sup> This protest would flower into a renewed understanding of grace, over and against the church-oriented semi-Pelagianism that was so prevalent in medieval scholasticism.

The spiritual struggles of Martin Luther as a young man were largely caused by Gabriel Biel's [ca. 1425–1495] teaching on grace.<sup>80</sup> Biel taught that God infuses grace into the souls of those who themselves remove the obstacles of grace "by ceasing from the act of sin, by ceasing to consent to it, and by eliciting a good movement toward God."<sup>81</sup> This sounds a lot like the grace earned by Origen's saints and taught in John Cassian's cooperative model. Luther was troubled because he "could not meet the precondition for salvation."<sup>82</sup> Luther discovered, first in the Psalms, and later in the book of Romans, that grace is not earned, but received as a free gift from God. "True repentance is to be seen as the result, rather than the precondition, of grace."<sup>83</sup> To put it simply, Luther learned to depend on God to do what Luther could not: initiate salvation with gifts of grace.

This breakthrough brought Luther to want to study and teach only the Bible and Augustine, not the medieval scholastics.<sup>84</sup> Unfortunately, Luther failed where Augustine failed, and where John Calvin (1509–1564)<sup>85</sup> failed, in turning from an incorrect synergism that gave too much responsibility to

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79. Ibid., 378.

80. Lane, *Concise History of Christian Thought*, 143–144.

81. Gabriel Biel, *Commentary on the Sentences* 2.27.1, quoted in Lane, *Concise History of Christian Theology*, 145.

82. Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 94. Note the excellent discussion of Luther's coming to term with God's righteousness as a gift rather than as His wrath in *ibid.*, 93–101.

83. Ibid., 96–97.

84. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 102.

85. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 408.

the human for salvation to a monergism where the human will is always bound<sup>86</sup> and the response to God's work of salvation is purely passive.

Before addressing Jacob Arminius and the theological answer to total passivity in predestination, there is another understanding of grace that is adopted by John Calvin: common grace. The basic idea of common grace is not bad, since it teaches that God gives gifts to all persons, not just those who respond positively to Him. That is true. God gives the blessings of life and rain to all kinds of people, not just to those who have accepted His salvation. So, this gift of grace is common to all. Where Calvin gets it wrong is when he argues that this common grace *is not* an invitation to salvation. For Calvin, God's will is absolute. So, if He wants to save you, you'll be saved. If not, you'll be lost. Period.<sup>87</sup> Calvin himself downplayed predestination as a consequence of God's sovereignty and His initiative in salvation. His successors reimagined predestination as a central tenet of reformed thought on the sovereignty of God.<sup>88</sup> With regard to grace, however, a complete lack of human choice in the matter of salvation, as in monergism, leaves saving grace as only for some and not for others (limited atonement) and as irresistible. But here is the flaw in Calvin's concept of common grace: since it is for all, it cannot be useful toward salvation. It looks like a false gift. An individual can be thankful to God for the blessings, but he or she cannot respond to God in a relationship. That is awkward. Rather, what seems to be true is that all God's gifts are invitations toward a saving relationship, so common grace is a subset of prevenient grace.

### Jacob Arminius: Prevenient Grace, Empowered Choice

Jacob Arminius (1560–1609)<sup>89</sup> taught that all grace is of one kind, and it all leads to salvation, and it is offered to everybody. This is not to say that he did not recognize different forms of grace, or that there are many different gifts freely given by God; it's just that God is attempting to save everyone (John 12:32), so all His gifts are meant as invitations to salvation. Similar to

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86. Lane, *Concise History of Christian Thought*, 158. Lane points out that Luther goes even farther than Augustine in regard to the predestined human will having no choices, not just the inability to choose the good.

87. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 125–126.

88. *Ibid.*, 123.

89. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 454.

Augustine's use of prevenient grace, Arminius describes it as the initial steps in God's calling out to each person to allow Him to save that person. God, as Arminius sees Him, wants to be in a close relationship with humanity. That is starkly different from the scholastic view of God as timeless, and therefore, all knowing.<sup>90</sup> In this way Theodore Beza (1519–1605)<sup>91</sup> and other post-Calvin Calvinists explain how it is that God both predestines, elects, and knows the outcome at the same time. In their estimation, for God, all time is one. Arminius, also a post-Calvin Calvinist, trained by Beza, is trying to understand how predestination can be understood so as to not leave God responsible for both the sin of Adam and the sins of those predestined to eternal loss. In establishing “the final cause in predestination,” Arminius argues that it is fine if God foreknows and from that knowledge predestines:

But if you think that God, from eternity, without any pre-existence of sin, in His prescience, determined to illustrate His own glory by mercy and punitive justice, and, that He might be able to secure this object, decreed to create man good but mutable, and ordained farther that he should Fall, that in this way there might be a place for that decree, I say that such an opinion cannot, in my judgment, be established by any passage of the Word of God.<sup>92</sup>

Arminius is clearly more concerned with biblical truth and a correct view of God than only in the sovereignty of God. A few pages later he asserts: “For in that case, the fault could be justly and deservedly charged upon God, who would be the cause of sin.”<sup>93</sup>

### John Wesley, Sanctification Without Perfectionism

John Wesley (1703–1791)<sup>94</sup> took to heart this message of Arminius on prevenient grace allowing personal choice in salvation. John Wesley, along with

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90. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 457.

91. *Ibid.*, 456.

92. Jacob Arminius, “An Examination of Predestination and Grace in Perkins’ Pamphlet,” Part 1, quoted in John D. Wagner, ed., *Arminius Speaks: Essential Writings on Predestination, Free Will, and the Nature of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 97.

93. *Ibid.*, 104.

94. *Ibid.*, 510–511.

his brother Charles (1707–1788),<sup>95</sup> the great hymn writer, George Whitfield (1714–1770),<sup>96</sup> and others shared the pietism<sup>97</sup> of their time and first started a “Holy Club” at Oxford University. They later experienced an awareness of personal salvation and sparked the Great Awakening in England and the American colonies. Wesley expressed his experience of personal assurance of God’s grace and salvation in his journal:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.<sup>98</sup>

John Wesley’s stress on the converted life of holiness made him susceptible toward perfectionism; he even experimented for a while with the concept of instant perfection. What saved Wesley from a perfectionistic understanding of salvation was his twofold emphasis on prevenient grace and the love of God. For Wesley, Christian perfection is not “spiritual infallibility. Wesley made it plain that the Christian is still liable to sin, and does not possess absolute knowledge, absolute judgment, or absolute performance.”<sup>99</sup> As quoted previously, Wesley trusted “Christ, Christ alone,” for his salvation. This includes his stress on “the power to begin,” or prevenient grace, that Christ initiates salvation.<sup>100</sup> It also includes that Christ provides justification, “the turning point.”<sup>101</sup> It also includes the new birth experience, or

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95. Lane, *Concise History of Christian Thought*, 214.

96. González, *Christian Thought in One Volume*, 307.

97. Lane, *Concise History of Christian Thought*, 166–167. Pietism is a Christian religious attitude that stressed a personal, heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ and the need to be born again. Within this attitude it is not enough to be a baptized member or to believe a set of doctrines; one must “experience the Holy Spirit in conversion and new life.”

98 John Wesley, *Journal of John Wesley*, 24 May 1738, quoted in Lane, *Concise History of Christian Thought*, 213.

99. Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” in Steve Harper, *John Wesley’s Message for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 92.

100. *Ibid.*, 39–46.

101. *Ibid.*, 49–59.

transformation: “Wesley called it God’s activity of ‘renewing our fallen natures.’”<sup>102</sup> Wesley was a strong proponent of God-empowered sanctification. However, he did not move to a semi-Pelagian understanding that somehow humans can do without grace and forgiveness after renewal. In fact, Wesley charged those who felt they had experienced Christian perfection to “go on to perfection,” referring to growth in Christian love. “Christian perfection is like that. There is a sanctifying grace that may operate in one’s life ‘in a moment.’ The experience can be noted and described. But the experience loses its full significance when it is divorced from the larger activity of grace before and after. God’s grace leads us to the place of Christian perfection (narrowly viewed), and it leads us on after the experience itself.”<sup>103</sup>

John Wesley placed God’s love at the center of his preaching and teaching,<sup>104</sup> which enabled him to place trust in God at the center of his understanding of salvation. This emphasis on God’s trustworthiness, along with prevenient grace, allowed Wesley to evade Pelagian tendencies and to depend on God for his salvation, from start to finish, every step depending on God.

### Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*: God-Empowered Synergism

Along with Joseph Bates (1792–1872)<sup>105</sup> and James White (1821–1871),<sup>106</sup> Ellen White (1827–1915)<sup>107</sup> was a founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>108</sup> She played a prophetic role in the shaping of Adventism as well as a theological role as she confirmed the biblical theological choices of the denomination, guided the application of policies, and led in nuancing how to

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102. Wesley, “The New Birth,” in Harper, *John Wesley’s Message for Today*, 65.

103. *Ibid.*, 94.

104. Olson, *Story of Christian Thought*, 512.

105. George R. Knight, ed., *Autobiography of Joseph Bates*, Adventist Classic Library (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2004), viii, xiv.

106. Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches: Ancestry, Early Life, Christian Experience, and Extensive Labors, of Elder James White, and His Wife, Mrs. Ellen G. White* (Battle Creek, MI: Steam Press, 1880), 9.

107. Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years, 1827–1862* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), 9.

108. George R. Knight, *Joseph Bates: The Real Founder of Seventh-day Adventism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), ix.

live the Christian life as an Adventist. She wrote prolifically both on the personal level as well as articles and books for the corporate church. Her most read and bestselling book is her 1892 book titled *Steps to Christ*.<sup>109</sup> It contains thirteen chapters that are mostly easy to see as following a path of steps to a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ as savior. At each step she shows how God initiates the interaction and empowers the step. Starting with God's love for humanity and the sinner's absolute inability to even recognize his or her lack and need of God, White shows that the very desire to have something better is an empowered gift from God to each sinner who allows the thoughts to continue. The same can be said of repentance: "We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken the conscience than we can be pardoned without Christ."<sup>110</sup> Confession also is an empowered gift from God: "Unless he yields to the convicting power of the Holy Spirit he remains in partial blindness to his sin. His confessions are not sincere and in earnest."<sup>111</sup> Faith does not come from the sinner, but it is empowered within the sinner who is willing to let God work.

In the work of salvation, the sinner isn't cooperating with God so much as allowing God to work in him or her. God does the work of calling, wooing, enabling repenting and confessing, forgiving, and changing. The sinner's role in White's description of the saving relationship is a willingness to let God work in each step as God moves the sinner through prevenient grace to forgiving grace and saving grace and on to changing grace, repeating steps and moving on as needed.<sup>112</sup> This is no semi-Pelagian cooperation between God and sinner to share the work of salvation. This is salvation from God's side and willingness to be saved on the sinner's side. It is synergistic, but all the work is initiated and empowered by God:

The heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death. In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift. The Saviour's life and death and intercession, the ministry of

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109. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Chicago, IL: F. H. Revell, 1892).

110. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1908), 26.

111. *Ibid.*, 40.

112. "God's work of grace upon all human beings prepares them to receive His offer of salvation" (*The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia*, ed. Denis Fortin and Jerry Moon [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2013], 250. For a fuller conversation of Ellen White's understanding of prevenient grace, see the section titled "Wesleyan Methodism," pp. 248–255).



angels, the pleading of the Spirit, the Father working above and through all, the unceasing interest of heavenly beings,—all are enlisted in behalf of man's redemption.<sup>113</sup>

Ellen White talks boldly of human effort in working for God and for the salvation of others. She speaks of Christ's life on earth being one of effort, not ease, and is an example for all believers: "He toiled with persistent, earnest, untiring effort for the salvation of lost mankind. . . . So those who are partakers of the grace of Christ will be ready to make any sacrifice, that others for whom He died may share the heavenly gift."<sup>114</sup> For Ellen White, the efforts and works of humans, then, are not to gain salvation, but are in loving response to the free gifts of salvation bestowed in love by God.

## CONCLUSION

In the history of the interpretation of grace, from the Apostle Paul to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there has been a constant struggle between depending on the church and depending on the self for salvation, rather than depending on God. For those who do depend on God for their salvation, there has been a struggle between seeing God's choice to save as either selective and irresistible, or universal and resistible. Within the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there have been these same kinds of struggles. Fortunately, *Steps to Christ* was written and is widely read. Unfortunately, it was sorely needed by an Adventist denomination that was so intent on restoring a correct understanding of God's law that it was tending toward a view of salvation that depended far too much on the sinner's abilities and not enough on God. Bluntly, there were many semi-Pelagians in the ranks that needed the message that salvation is from God alone, not from cooperation with God. Cooperation with God in salvation has been far too prevalent throughout the history of the Christian church, both in terms of humans having a part of the works, or operations, in salvation (as was apparent in John Cassian), and in the operations of the church being the guarantor of salvation (as became the norm in the medieval church as summarized by Peter Lombard).

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113. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1956), 21.

114. *Ibid.*, 78.

The problem with the concept of human cooperation in salvation is that only God has the power to operate in the context of sin. The sinner has no abilities to operate his or her way out of sin; the sinner is dependent on God's operations on his or her behalf. Yet if salvation were a complete monergism, as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin asserted, there would be no freedom to choose. Worse yet, freedom to choose is precisely what the sinner lacks, without prevenient grace. The strand of the history of grace that runs through Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and Ellen White restores human choice in the context of God's empowering invitations through prevenient grace. Prevenient grace also logically allows for God to invite all to accept salvation without making these invitations irresistible. With the God-empowered choice restored through prevenient grace, the sinner's role in salvation is to allow or reject the gracious gifts of God's saving operations on behalf of each and every sinner, empowering the saved sinner to will and act in accordance with God's law in response to God's love.



## **THE GRACE THAT COMES BEFORE SAVING GRACE**

*George R. Knight*

Grace has many flavors. There is *justifying grace* by which God counts individuals righteous, *transforming grace* through which He makes them into new creatures, *empowering grace* by which He energizes them to walk the new life, and *forgiving grace* when they fail in the Christlike walk. And those are just a few of the flavors.

Grace is absolutely central to the whole plan of salvation in the Bible, and in the context of a sinful humanity, living on a sinful planet, all grace is intended by God to lead to salvation. However, the nature of grace doesn't get much air time apart from its definition as unmerited favor or God giving sinners what they don't deserve. A more accurate and helpful definition is "grace is an overarching term for all of God's gifts to humanity, all the blessings of salvation, all events through which are manifested God's own self-giving. Grace is a divine attribute revealing the heart of the one God, the premise of all spiritual blessing."<sup>1</sup> Again, "grace is the favor shown by God to sinners. It is the divine goodwill offered to those who neither inherently deserve nor can ever hope to earn it. It is the divine disposition to work in our hearts, wills, and actions, so as actively to communicate God's self-giving love for humanity (Rom. 3:24; 6:1; Eph. 1:7; 2:5–8)."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 33.

2. Ibid.

From those definitions it is clear that the topic of grace is much more inclusive than most people imagine it to be. The topic for this chapter is “the grace that goes before.” But the question that needs to be asked is, Before what? And the answer is *before saving grace*. Here is an absolutely essential form of grace that has been all but ignored in Adventist discussions of salvation and even in most of the denomination’s teachings on salvation. Yet it is central to the biblical understanding of God’s saving work.

## THE PROBLEM AND THE NEED

The problem is that most people have confused free will with free grace. But do sinners in their unrenewed state really have free will? The Bible’s answer is an unequivocal no. As was noted in chapter 8, individuals are born with a sinful nature, or what Ellen White calls “a bent” to sin.<sup>3</sup> The scriptural teaching on sin and total depravity means that every part of human life has been infected by sin, including the heart, mind, and will, so much so that Paul refers to unrenewed individuals as being enslaved to sin, living in darkness, hard of heart, and alienated from God (Rom. 6:12–17; Eph. 4:18).

How is it that people in such a condition can choose God? The short answer is that they can’t. Only divine aid makes such a choice possible.

At this juncture there needs to be an examination of the three arguments against free will in unrenewed individuals and in favor of their need of the grace that goes before saving grace. The first argument, foundational to the discussion, is that Jesus flatly denied the idea that unrenewed people could choose to follow Him. “No one,” He asserted, “can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).<sup>4</sup> Again, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). According to Jesus, it is not free will but His grace-filled power that draws individuals to Him. Free-will turning to God is not even a possibility. But why?

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3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 29.

4. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Italics in Scripture quotations represent emphasis added by the author.

That question leads to two other biblical reasons against the initiation of salvation through free will. One is, as noted previously, the Bible's teaching on depravity and the enslavement of the human will. Paul puts the matter bluntly when he writes that people are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1, NKJV). With that passage in mind, one thinker on the topic has suggested that a sinner can no more turn to God than corpses can turn themselves in their graves.<sup>5</sup> Romans 3:9–20 repeatedly drives that thought home when it demonstrates that "no one seeks for God" (v. 11). And Jesus affirms it when He claims that "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). And those dead in sin cannot understand spiritual things (Rom. 8:7–8; 1 Cor. 2:14), so how could they turn to God? They will remain in that dead condition until God's grace makes them alive (Eph. 2:1–5).

While before the Fall Adam had free will, since that time humans in their unrenewed state have twisted wills that are unable to choose God. John Wesley summarizes the Bible position on the topic succinctly when he writes that "the condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God."<sup>6</sup>

That conclusion leads to another important scriptural reason as to why humans cannot initiate the salvation process by choosing to follow God: salvation is one hundred percent by grace alone from beginning to end. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).

The problem with the idea that sinners can initiate the process of salvation in their lives through free will is that this very teaching not only contradicts Jesus and Paul, but it also makes that free-will choice a work of human merit and gives credit to some humans who have made better choices than others. Thus by a misunderstanding of free will, many have trucked in works righteousness and will indeed have something to boast of throughout all eternity. Yet the Bible gives all the credit for all of salvation to God alone. Salvation is by grace alone. Period. The Bible has no conditional statements that

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5. John W. Fletcher, *The Works of the Rev. John Fletcher*, vol. 1, ed. Abraham Scott (London: Thomas Allman, 1836), 229.

6. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 5, ed. John Emory (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 39.

might allow for human free will to initiate the process. “No one,” Jesus claims, “can come to me unless the Father who sent me *draws* him” (John 6:44). Ellen White is fully in harmony with that position:

Many, are confused as to what constitutes the first steps in the work of salvation. Repentance is thought to be a work the sinner must do for himself in order that he may come to Christ. . . . While it is true that repentance must precede forgiveness, . . . yet the sinner cannot bring himself to repentance, or prepare himself to come to Christ. . . . *The very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent. Repentance is no less the gift of God than are pardon and justification, and it cannot be experienced except as it is given to the soul by Christ.*<sup>7</sup>

This genuine theological problem has been solved in two basic ways. The first is absolute predestination, in which the will is basically annihilated as God decrees that some individuals will be saved. The second is that God's grace goes into operation before saving grace, thus restoring free will and giving individuals the possibility of choosing to follow the drawing of Christ. Theologians have given the name of *prevenient grace* to that grace which precedes and prepares the way for saving grace.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PREVENIENT GRACE

Before exploring the characteristics of prevenient grace, the term needs to be defined and its relationship to common grace must be examined. The term *prevenient* comes from Latin and means “to come before.” In terms of salvation, it comes before everything else in the process of redemption. In relation to Jesus's statement in John 6:44, it can be viewed as the beginning of the process by which Jesus “draws” a person to Himself. As such, it prepares the heart of the non-believer to respond to the good news of salvation in Christ.

H. Orton Wiley offers a helpful definition when he describes prevenient grace in this way:

. . . that grace which “goes before” or prepares the soul for entrance into the initial state of salvation. It is the preparatory grace of the Holy Spirit

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7. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 1:390–391, emphasis added.

exercised toward man helpless in sin. As it respects the guilty, it may be considered mercy; as it respects the impotent, it is enabling power. It may be defined, therefore, as that manifestation of the divine influence which precedes the full regenerate life.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Oden's definition is also insightful and helps fill out the picture. Prevenient grace, he writes, "antecedes human responsiveness so as to prepare the soul for the effective hearing of the redeeming Word. This preceding grace draws persons closer to God, lessens their blindness to divine remedies, strengthens their will to accept revealed truth, and enables repentance. Only when sinners are assisted by prevenient grace can they begin to yield their hearts to cooperation with subsequent forms of grace."<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that *prevenient grace* is not a biblical term. On the other hand, it is a scriptural concept that is consistently evident in the biblical presentation of salvation. Examples are found in John 6:44 and 12:32, in which Jesus makes clear the limitations of human ability and speaks of His drawing power; John 1:9, which speaks of Jesus enlightening every person coming into the world; and Romans 2:12–14, which presents God's work in the hearts of pagans.

Another preliminary topic in the discussion is the relationship of prevenient grace to common grace. Common grace is defined by Millard Erickson as "grace extended to all persons through God's general providence" in such things as "his provision of sunshine and rain for everyone."<sup>10</sup> Common grace provides for not only God's sustaining of a sinful world but also furnishes the theological foundation for an awareness of God and consciousness of right and wrong, even for secular people (Rom. 1:19–2:15), and for civil justice in secular societies in spite of human depravity.

Still, those in the Arminian/Wesleyan theological tradition "did not believe common grace alone was sufficient for willing the good." Rather, Roger Olson points out, "a special infusion of supernatural grace is

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8. H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1952), 2:345–346.

9. Oden, *Transforming Power of Grace*, 47.

10. Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 69.

required for even the first exercise of a good will toward God.”<sup>11</sup> That special infusion is prevenient grace.

But what is prevenient grace? What are its general characteristics? A first is that it is universal. Just as the results of Adam’s sin are universal, so in the justice of God is the gift of prevenient grace through the Holy Spirit a universal gift to every person. Thus just as Christ died “as a ransom for *all*” (1 Tim. 2:6), so also “the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of *all* men” (Titus 2:11). It was with that universal perspective in mind that Christ claimed that “when I am lifted up from the earth,” I “will draw *all* men to myself” (John 12:32). And John 3:16 proclaims that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” so “that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” “All” and “whoever” include everyone who has ever been born and not merely those who were fortunate to be born in a Christian nation or near a mission station. Christ is the “true light” who “enlightens *every* man” (John 1:9, NASB).

Adventist author Ellen White recognized the universal nature of the grace that comes before saving grace when she wrote that “wherever there is an impulse of love” that “reaches out to bless and uplift others, there is revealed the working of God’s Holy Spirit. In the depths of heathenism, men who have had no knowledge of the written law of God, who have never even heard the name of Christ,” have performed actions demonstrating “the working of a divine power. The Holy Spirit has implanted the grace of Christ in the heart of the savage.” She goes on to point out that the “‘Light which lighteth every man that comes into the world’ (John 1:9), is shining in his soul; and this light, if heeded, will guide his feet to the kingdom of God.”<sup>12</sup> The universal gift of prevenient grace is a fact of God’s justice in His desire that not “any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

One of the unfortunate aspects of Christian history is that some have confused universal prevenient grace with universal justification. The first is a scriptural teaching but the second is not.

A second major characteristic of prevenient grace is that it is irresistible grace even though its work in the human heart can be resisted. It is

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11. Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 42.

12. Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1941), 385; cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 638.



irresistible because the Holy Spirit works with every person who comes into the world whether that person wants His ministration or not. Still, simply because God provides prevenient grace to each person born into the world does not mean that he or she must respond positively to it. Since one aspect of prevenient grace is the restoration of freedom to choose for or against God, the work of that grace may be resisted (Matt. 23:37; John 5:40; Acts 7:51; Heb. 10:29). Thus while prevenient grace is irresistible, its work in a person's life may be resisted. Wiley notes that a person "may resist it, but he cannot escape it."<sup>13</sup> As a result, prevenient grace provides universal possibility but not universal salvation. It opens the way to saving grace, but that further provision must be accepted or rejected.

That thought brings the discussion full circle—back to the topic of free will. In chapter 8 it was noted that since the Fall the human will has been damaged and has a bent toward evil. In short, unrenewed humans do not have a free will but a will biased toward evil and away from God. On the other hand, the Bible portrays individuals as being free to choose for God or against Him and His ways (Josh. 24:15; Matt. 23:37; John 5:40; 7:17; Rev. 22:17).

It is not difficult to see how people can choose to resist God if their wills are corrupted and bent toward evil. But how is it that they can choose for God? The answer is a "freed will, one which, though initially bound by sin, has been brought by the prevenient grace of the Spirit of Christ to a point where it can respond freely to the divine call."<sup>14</sup> Oden refers to that freed will as "grace-enabled freedom."<sup>15</sup> Adam Clarke, in commenting on Philippians 2:12, highlights the process when he notes that "God gives *power* to will, man wills through that power."<sup>16</sup> With these facts in mind, and with the teaching of the New Testament on the will in view, it should not be said that people who have responded to God have free will, but rather that they have *freed will*, which is the third major characteristic of the work of prevenient grace.

The fourth characteristic is that conversion is the hinge that ties the work of prevenient grace to that of saving grace. When reacted to positively, prevenient grace results in saving grace. Grace clearly has a progressive nature:

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13. Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 2:355.

14. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 164.

15. Oden, *Transforming Power*, 95.

16. Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (New York: Abingdon, n.d.), 2:497.

Prevenient grace is the stage of grace that enables a positive response to God, but it does not forgive sin or save. Rather, it leads to the conviction of sin and enables faith to develop, but it does not compel a faith response. However, it does position a person to make a positive faith choice for God through the freed will. It is at that point that grace progresses to saving faith in terms of justification, sanctification, and eventual glorification. In the process freed will comes to act as free will in making spiritual decisions and choosing to cooperate with God, who is active in the life “both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). Or as Oden phrases it, “prevenient grace is the grace that begins to enable one to choose further to cooperate with saving grace,” it is “that grace that helps us to receive more grace.”<sup>17</sup>

Finally, prevenient grace is responsible grace, because it positions a person to make a faith choice for God, which leads to ongoing responsibility throughout a person’s post-conversion life. The alternative, of course, is the predestination understanding of the fallen will which places all of the responsibility and choice upon God and theoretically could lead to a passive Christianity that sees no compulsion to choose to continue to live according to God’s will. From the perspective of prevenient grace, the power for responsible choices and living exists from the dawn of moral life. Those choices move right into the post-conversion life as individuals live in line with saving grace.

## THE FUNCTION OF PREVENIENT GRACE AS THE HOLY SPIRIT OPENS UP THE POSSIBILITY OF CONVERSION

Roger Olson highlights the various functions—or what might be thought of as sub-graces—when he writes that “prevenient grace is simply the convicting, calling, enlightening and enabling grace of God that goes before conversion and makes repentance and faith possible.”<sup>18</sup> The Bible presents the Holy Spirit as the active agent in each of those processes, drawing human beings toward God and conversion.

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17. Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 243–244.

18. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 35.

In regard to conviction, Jesus told His disciples shortly before His crucifixion that He would send the Spirit who “will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). A part of that convicting process is to bring individuals to an awareness of their personal sinful status. That function is absolutely crucial in the process of conversion, since without an awareness of personal sinfulness, people will feel no need for something better. Conviction of sin, and the accompanying hope for a fuller life, leads to confession and desire for that life.

A second function of prevenient grace is the calling of people by the Spirit, a process identified by some as “summoning grace.”<sup>19</sup> At its most nebulous and universal level, this calling is what Jesus refers to as His drawing of all people to Himself (John 6:44; 12:32). At a more concrete and specific level, this calling function of the Spirit is directly related to the Word of God and the preaching of the good news of salvation in Christ. In that vein Paul can write to the Thessalonians that God “called you through our gospel” (2 Thess. 2:14). That same relationship between the Spirit and the human agent in calling is also illustrated in 2 Corinthians 5:20, in which Paul writes: “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” Because of the calling effect of prevenient grace, Christians are defined as those who God “called out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

A third function of the Holy Spirit in prevenient grace is enlightenment, or illumination, of the minds of individuals so that they can better see the truth of God. The importance of enlightenment in the calling/convicting process that leads to conversion becomes evident in light of the fact that unspiritual persons cannot grasp spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:14). Part of the difficulty is that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). Thus if clear understanding is to be developed, it must be at God’s initiative.

Illumination, it should be noted, comes on two levels. At its broadest level it is through that general revelation that God has given to all people in the natural world (Rom. 1:19–20). On a narrower front it refers to the added advantage of special revelation provided by God in scripture (2 Tim. 3:15–17). The Spirit works through both of these agencies in His work of illumination. Thus every individual has some witness to God when it comes to the drawing work of prevenient grace.

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19. Oden, *Transforming Power*, 49.

A fourth function of prevenient grace is to enable sinners to respond to God's call. It is one thing to hear the truth, to be convicted, and to feel the call of God, but without the power to respond, it is all for naught. It is the energizing power of the Holy Spirit that makes repentance and faith possible. Because of the bondage of the will and human enslavement to sin (Rom. 6:12–16), people lack the necessary power to respond to God's call. Sinners must be enabled if they are to respond to God's drawing and conviction.

Stanley Grenz illustrates the dynamics in the enabling process when he writes that “whereas the primary focus of the Spirit's illuminating work is the mind, he directs enablement toward the human will. The task of the Spirit is to woo and strengthen the will, in order that the individual both desires and is able to respond to God's call.”<sup>20</sup> Other descriptions of the enabling process state that “grace works to enable the will to will the good”<sup>21</sup> and “it breaks the bondage of the will to sin and frees the human will to decide against sin and submit to God.”<sup>22</sup>

While prevenient grace is not the stage of grace which forgives sin or saves, it is the stage that enables the will to respond to God's call so that people can be saved. The end result is that the good news is at every stage of the salvation process. It is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16) that leads men and women who have responded to the Spirit's work of convicting, calling, illumination, and enabling the will to choose the way of faith. Thus faith is the proper response of the sinner to prevenient grace, but even that faith must be viewed as a gift of the Spirit. That faith choice leads to the new birth (John 3:3, 5) which is of itself a divine experience, rather than natural, as God provides “power” for individuals “to become children of God” (John 1:12–13).

## RESULTING BENEFITS OF PREVENIENT GRACE

Beyond exploring the major work accomplished in humans through prevenient grace, it is important to appreciate some of its theological “side benefits.” A first is that it helps people make sense of Bible teachings that are

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20. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 541.

21. Oden, *Transforming Power*, 95.

22. Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 172.

problematic or seem contradictory. Thus it is that prevenient grace helps people make sense of both divine sovereignty and human freedom.<sup>23</sup> Without an understanding of prevenient grace, a person is forced to choose between those two concepts, predestination (i.e., human will has no part) on one hand, or Pelagianism (i.e., works) on the other. Kenneth Collins highlights the fact that the doctrine of prevenient grace helps people “to hold together, without any contradiction, the four motifs of total depravity, salvation by grace, human responsibility, and the offer of salvation to all.”<sup>24</sup> That is quite an accomplishment—one quite beyond alternative theological approaches to those biblical teachings.

A second theological benefit of prevenient grace is that it provides a logical understanding for the justice of God. Its teaching that God is drawing all to Him through His grace presents a God who loves all of His created beings, not just some of them. Those opting for the predestinarian alternative are stuck with an inescapable dilemma—namely, “if salvation is in no way conditioned by human response, then why does God not save all?”<sup>25</sup> How just is a God who condemns eternally a portion of the population who had no ability to respond to divine truth or, alternately, lived too far away from Christianity to hear the gospel message preached?

A third theological benefit of prevenient grace, one closely related to the justice of God, is that it uplifts the kinds of human responsibility taught in the Bible. In contrast to the temptation to passivity and antinomianism (i.e., lawlessness) encouraged by predestination or other theologies that imply that it doesn't make any difference how people live because God makes all the important decisions unilaterally, the doctrine of prevenient grace reflects the biblical position that every human being is responsible to God at some level for the choices he or she makes. It is only in line with such an understanding of human responsibility that God could possibly be viewed as a just judge.

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23. See Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 1:28.

24. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 45.

25. John B. Cobb, Jr., *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 36.

## ADVENTISM AND PREVENIENT GRACE

Prevenient grace stands at the heart of Seventh-day Adventist theology, even though most church members probably have never heard the term before reading this book and even though the majority of them have an inadequate view of free will. Adventist concerns with the justice of God, human responsibility, and the tension between the sovereignty of God and the importance of human response make insights related to prevenient grace important to the denomination.

Adventism's current statement of fundamental beliefs reflects both depravity and prevenient grace even though neither term is used. Article 7 notes that Adam's "descendants share" his "fallen nature and its consequences. They are born with weaknesses and tendencies to evil."<sup>26</sup> That statement implicitly sets forth the effects of sin as pollution, depravity, and spiritual inability (see chapter 8) even though they are not defined explicitly using that terminology.

In a similar manner, the core ideas of prevenient grace are set forth in article 5, on the Holy Spirit, even though the terminology is missing. The key sentence is "He draws and convicts human beings; and those who respond He renews and transforms into the image of God." Article 10, on the experience of salvation, also reflects a definite understanding of prevenient grace: "Led by the Holy Spirit we sense our need, acknowledge our sinfulness, repent of our transgressions, and exercise faith in Jesus. . . . This faith which receives salvation comes through the divine power of the Word and is the gift of God's grace."

Some twentieth-century Adventist theologians presented clear understandings of prevenient grace and a few even used the phrase itself,<sup>27</sup> but by and large they were clearer on depravity and inability than they were on the

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26. All editions of the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* and the denomination's *Yearbook* since 1980 contain a complete copy of the current statement of the church's "fundamental beliefs."

27. Irwin Henry Evans, *This Is the Way: Meditations Concerning Justification by Faith and Growth in Christian Graces* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1939); Edward W. H. Vick, *Let Me Assure You of Grace, of Faith, of Forgiveness, of Freedom, of Fellowship, of Hope* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1968); Hans K. LaRondelle, *Christ Our Salvation: What God Does for Us and in Us* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1980); George R. Knight, *Sin and Salvation: God's Work for Us and in Us* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2008).

initial starting point of salvation. For many there was confusion regarding free will being the point of origin, since they had demonstrated the fallenness of that very will.<sup>28</sup>

The clearest writer on the topic for most of the denomination's history has been Ellen White. She was quite explicit on both depravity and spiritual inability and prevenient grace, even though she never used those specific terms. Regarding the effects of sin, she states that "through sin the whole human organism is deranged, the mind is perverted, the imagination corrupted. Sin has degraded the faculties of the soul."<sup>29</sup>

With her explicit understanding of the corrupting effects of sin, it is not surprising that she also held a well-defined view of prevenient grace. Consider her statement that "many are confused as to what constitutes the first steps in the work of salvation." She went on to note that "the very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent."<sup>30</sup>

Another very explicit statement on spiritual inability and prevenient grace is found in *Steps to Christ*, in which she notes:

... it is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin. . . . Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart. . . . There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ. His grace alone can quicken the lifeless faculties of the soul, and attract it to God, to holiness.<sup>31</sup>

That is about as clear a statement as could be desired when contemplating an Adventist understanding of the grace that comes before saving grace.

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28. George R. Knight, "Seventh-day Adventism, Semi-Pelagianism, and Overlooked Topics in Adventist Soteriology: Moving beyond Missing Links and toward a More Explicit Understanding" (paper, Arminian and Adventism Symposium, Andrews University, October 2010).

29. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 451; see also Woodrow W. Whidden II, *Ellen White on Salvation: A Chronological Study* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1995), 41–46.

30. White, *Selected Messages*, 1:390.

31. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, n.d.), 18.

