

Wesleyan Theology: a Summary

The key concept that distinguishes Wesleyanism from Calvinism:
'prevenient grace'.

The fallen nature of man

Unlike historic Continental Arminians, Wesleyans (who used to be called Evangelical Arminians since they are less Pelagian) believe that man's nature is fallen, corrupt, in bondage to sin and requires divine grace.¹

I believe that Adam, before his fall, had such freedom of will, that he might choose either good or evil; but that, since the fall, no child of man has a natural power to choose anything that is truly good. Yet I know (and who does not?) that man has still freedom of will in things of indifferent nature.²

Wesley also taught that fallen man couldn't choose spiritual good and that his will was only to sin:

Such is the freedom of the will; free only to evil; free to 'drink iniquity like water;' to wander farther and farther from the living God, and do more 'despite to the Spirit of grace!'³

Thus far Wesley was united with Calvin.⁴

In fact, in 1745 John Wesley said that his theology was '*within a hair's breadth*' of Calvinism:

- In ascribing all good to the free grace of God.
- In denying free-will, and all power antecedent to grace.
- In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God.⁵

Note that Wesleyan theology differs from that of Charles Finney, which is more Pelagian. Finney believed that all people possess the natural ability to choose good and rejected the idea of original sin - that people are born morally depraved and spiritually unable because of Adam's sin. He even stated that men, '*regenerate themselves*'. Thus Finney denied the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace and was closer to Continental Arminians. See Jay. E. Smith, 'The Theology of Charles Finney: A System of Self-Reformation', *Trinity Journal*, 13:1, (1992): 75-77, 82-84.

Grace

The Calvinistic view of grace is that it is single, comes from the atonement and is applied only to the elect. The reprobate have no grace and cannot please God.

¹ Jacob Arminius' position was very similar to that of John Wesley and was less extreme than the Arminians that followed him. He held to total depravity and the need for grace. The Arminianism which followed the Synod of Dort was more unbiblical. See appendix.

² *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson, 14 vols. 1831; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 10:350.

³ *Works*, 5:104.

⁴ I am partly indebted to an article by Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner here [*Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?* (chapter 18 in the book, *Still Sovereign*)].

⁵ *Sic Works*, 8:284-85. In actual fact, Wesley was far from Calvinism in many other areas, especially in denying God's sovereign purpose and predestination.

Wesley adopted the idea of prevenient grace. This was a term originated by Augustine for the initial work of the Spirit in saints in bringing them to regeneration as opposed to the general grace of the Spirit in sanctification afterwards. The term was later adopted in the Semi-Pelagian controversy to imply two different types of grace, with prevenient grace being given to all men. The idea of prevenient grace was taken on by the Roman church, initially in its Semi-Augustinianism, but later its Semi-Pelagianism where it contributed (with Romanist church formalities) to meritorious works. Thus grace was infused in the sinner enabling him to perform good church works and merit salvation.

Prevenient grace had an important role in Wesley's theology and this is the crux of differences with Calvinism. For Wesley prevenient grace is for all men to help them believe in Christ. It is universal but it can be rejected; however, it cannot save. For Calvin grace is particular to the elect and irresistible; there is no common grace.

Wesley used prevenient grace to avoid predestination. Wesley's prevenient grace '*broke the chain of logical necessity by which the Calvinist doctrine of predestination seems to flow from the doctrine of original sin.*'⁶

Sometimes Wesleyans used the term 'prevenient grace' in the same way that some Calvinists use the term 'common grace'. There is some inconsistency because Wesley was no systematiser and did not define it. However:

- He attributed the conscience to prevenient grace. This is not a natural gift but is supernaturally given by God.⁷
- He attributed the moral good works of sinners in the world to it, even amongst pagans. This suggests a similarity with Natural Theology.⁸
- It leads a person to salvation. '*The Wesleyan teaches that the prevenient grace leads on to saving grace, prepares for it, enables a person to enter into it.*'⁹
- It can lead a pagan to salvation who has never heard the Gospel.¹⁰
- It provides the ability to choose salvation, an ability that was surrendered by Adam's sin. The freedom, which was lost in Adam's sin, is sufficiently restored to enable people to choose salvation. Prevenient grace provides people with the ability to choose or reject God. Prevenient grace operates through the law and conscience to bring conviction of sin and despair of ever pleasing God. People have the freedom to resist the conviction of sin that comes from the law and conscience. Prevenient grace leads one to the very brink of salvation if one responds positively to the means of grace that precedes saving faith. Prevenient grace provides the power to respond positively to God and gives free will to every man; but it does not guarantee that the good will be chosen; it simply provides the freedom to choose salvation.

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) prevenient grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some

6 Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p44. Note agreement with Robert V. Rakestraw, *John Wesley as a Theologian of Grace*, *JETS* 27 (1984) p197 and Arthur Skevington Wood (The Contribution of John Wesley to the Theology of Grace, in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H Pinnock, Minneapolis Bethany Fellowship, 1975) p215.]

7 *Works*, 7:187-88.

8 John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, New York: Eaton and Mams, (1894), 2:244, 246.

9 Leo G. Cox, 'Prevenient Grace-A Wesleyan View,' *JETS* 12 (1969): 144.

10 H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 1988), 161-70) for a helpful discussion. See also Charles A. Rogers, *The Concept of Prevenient Grace in the Theology of John Wesley* (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1967), 243-47. See also Paul Fahy, *The Problem of John Wesley*.

tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.¹¹

Contrary to this, Calvinists believe that natural man has no ability at all to choose salvation. His will is dead and he has no ability to do good. Only election enables a man to receive irresistible grace, which always saves. Wesleyans believe that God has given prevenient grace to all people; they were born with no ability or desire to choose God, but God has counteracted this inability by the gift of prevenient grace. Such a scheme is illogical and foolish; why not just prevent all men from being affected by Adam's sin in the first place?

This scheme also, as with continental Arminians, makes the final decision about salvation a human one, not God. Man chooses to be saved or not.

The problem is that there is no clear and adequate basis in Scripture for this concept of universal enablement. The theory, appealing though it is in many ways, simply is not taught explicitly in the Bible."¹²

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¹¹ *Works*, 6:509.

¹² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 925.

Appendix

The theology of original Arminianism

Jacob Arminius initiated Arminianism, which was a re-formulation of historic Semi-Pelagianism; he had also been deeply influenced by Roman Catholicism. However, Arminius greatly admired John Calvin and instructed his disciples to read his works. After his death, his followers took his theology further and their tenets, after the Synod of Dort [1618-1619], were as follows:¹³

- *God's knowledge of the future is mediate (Scientia Media¹⁴) i.e. dependent upon circumstances and man's free will.* [Scripture shows us that God works all things according to his own will; the future is determined by God: Eph 1:11; Phil 2:13; Acts 2:23; Rm 9:16.]
- *The decrees of God are conditional and are not absolute.* (E.g. election is based upon God foreseeing a person's future faith.) [Scripture shows us that God's decree is absolute, his purpose fixed and tied to his predestinating will. Ps 93:1, 148:6; Eph 1:9-11, 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9; Rev 17:17.]
- *God did not create Adam as holy but as innocent. His will was not positively inclined to good but was balanced between good and evil.* [Scripture shows us that Adam was created holy. Gen 1:26, 31; Eccles 7:29.]
- *Sin only consists in actual acts of will (as in Pelagianism).* [Scripture shows us that all men are guilty through the imputation of Adams' guilt; the race is corrupt and men are born in sin (original sin). Rm 5:12, 18-19]
- *The guilt of Adam's sin is not imputed to his descendants, only the pollution of being human.* [See above.]
- *Man's depravity is not total; he is able to incline his will toward God and do good works (as in Pelagianism); i.e. he is sick with sin but not dead in sin.* [Scripture shows us that depravity is total; it affects his whole being to some degree and makes him unable to any good work.¹⁵ Ps 51:5, 58:3; Eph 2:1; Col 2:13.]
- *The atonement was not necessary but was a means of God showing his love to all men; (as in later errors like Socinianism or Example Theory of atonement).* [Scripture shows us that the atonement was required to be a penal propitiation for sin and enable reconciliation between God and man. This is only for the elect; God hates the reprobate. Isa 53:11; Matt 1:21, 20:28; Rm 5:10-11; Ps 5:6, 11:5.]
- *The atonement only makes salvation possible.* [Scripture shows us that the atonement actually saves those it is intended for. Lk 1:68; Jn 10:14-15, 26-28; Acts 20:28.]
- *Salvation only becomes effectual when a sinner choose by free will to accept it. Repentance and faith precede regeneration.* [Scripture shows us that salvation only

¹³ I acknowledge some thoughts from Alan Cairns, *Dict of Theological Terms*, here.

¹⁴ I.e. 'middle knowledge'. A theory regarding God's knowledge of men. It was first introduced by Jesuits and then adopted by Lutherans and Arminians. It was in the middle of supposed views of God's knowledge; i.e. between knowledge of simple intelligence (by which God knows all things actual and possible) and the knowledge of vision (God's knowledge of what actually occurs). The essence of the matter is to avoid the eternal purpose of God predestinating all things and suggests that his eternal knowledge is based upon his foresight of a person's free choice in the future; this foresight is *Scientia Media*. Thus it seeks to reconcile God's knowledge of the future and man's freedom of will. What comes to pass is due to human freedom not God's sovereignty.

¹⁵ A good work is only one that is inspired by God, based upon selfless love and faith and directed to the glory of God alone.

occurs when God draws a person to Christ by the Spirit and regenerates him, enabling him to have the power to believe and repent. Both faith and repentance are clearly stated to be gifts. Rm 9:16, 19 actually states that salvation is not by human willpower but by God's will. Jn 6:44; Acts 5:31, 14:27, 18:27; Eph 2:8-9;]

- *The human will is one of the causes, or the chief cause, of regeneration (as in Pelagianism and CG Finney).* [Scripture shows us that regeneration is by the Spirit. Ezek 36:27; Jn 1:13, 3:6, 8; 1 Jn 3:9, 5:4.]
- *Human faith is a good work and the ground of acceptance with God.* [Scripture shows us that man cannot do any spiritual good at all. Rm 3:9-23.]
- *There is no common grace and a separate saving grace. There is a single, universal grace in the Gospel, which may be resisted.* [Scripture shows us that there is a single grace but it is not common to all but particular to some and this grace cannot be resisted but always secures the elect. Rm 8:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Tim 1:9; Heb 9:15]
- *The righteousness of God is not imputed to the believer.* [Scripture shows us that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer and that this is the basis of justification. Rm 4:6, 10:4; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9.]
- *The believer is able to perfectly conform to the law of God in this life by self-effort (Pelagianism and Perfectionism). However, the believer may also fail and fall from grace. (At Dort this was less certain than later.)* [Scripture shows us that the genuine believer is preserved by God's grace to the end. Jn 10:28; 2 Tim 1:12; Heb 7:25]

In time the views of the Remonstrants (as they were called at Dort) worsened and became rationalistic. Some went into Grotianism;¹⁶ others denied inspiration and the Trinity and became Socinians.

Wesleyanism differs from Continental Arminianism, chiefly in two areas: it is more Biblical on original sin and total depravity and it adheres to a prevenient grace followed by saving grace.

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¹⁶ Grotius developed the 'Governmental Theory' of the atonement. Thus the cross showed God's displeasure at sin but God does not demand justice for lawlessness; it just affirmed God's moral government. The lawbreaking of sinners does not require strict justice (death); God sets the penalty aside and there is no satisfaction for sin (atonement). This theory is riddled with inconsistencies and errors.