

**“Not All Roads Lead to God, but God Walks All
Roads to Reach People.”
The Doctrine of Prevenient Grace
as a Paradigm for Mission**

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Abstract

The doctrine of prevenient grace in the Wesleyan tradition has always played an important role in shaping the way we understand and participate in the mission of God (Missio Dei) and the role of the church in it. The doctrine of prevenient grace, in the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition, continues to shape the understanding of holiness as God's activity to restore broken relationships. Holiness, as it is often misunderstood, is not a physical separation between what we consider holy and unholy, churchy and worldly, pure and impure, but the redemption of broken relationships (God and humans, humans with each other, humans and creation and human with the self).

The goal of this paper is to further explore the theological and missiological bases of the doctrine of prevenient grace, as understood by Wesley, and the practical implication that this doctrine has in shaping the way the church fulfills its missiological call in the world. This paper is divided into three main sections: the first part of the paper will focus on defining prevenient grace and its relationship to the mission of God (Missio Dei); the second part will explore the missiological and theological implications of the doctrine of prevenient grace, and the last part will illustrate practically the theological

and missiological motivation of the work of the Church of the Nazarene with refugees in Zagreb, Croatia.

Keywords: *Prevenient Grace, Missio Dei/God's mission, John Wesley, Relational holiness, human cooperation, Grace*

1. The Doctrine of *Prevenient Grace*

Prevenient grace is a “metaphor to God’s reaching love” that is used mostly in the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition (Crofford 2013, 429). It refers to the grace of God that enables “people to respond to divine initiation with regard to salvation as well as other dimensions of Christian living” (Thorsen 2013, 72). It is God’s grace that initiates, sustains, and completes human salvation.

The term “prevenient” grace comes from the Latin word *praevenire*, which means the grace “that comes before” (Lat. *prae* = before; *venire* = to come). It is grace that is given by God to all creation to empower and lead it towards God’s *shalom*, “where all creation is one, every creature is community with every other, living in harmony and security, toward the joy and wellbeing of every other creature” (Brueggemann 2001, 13). While God’s activity in human life is present throughout the journey of faith, “prevenient grace is especially concerned with the period before conversion (Rom. 5:8)” (Crofford 2013, 430). To be clear, this grace is not different from “convincing grace,” justifying grace, or sanctifying grace. Grace is grace. The different terminologies simply refer to the different stages of salvation. Although John Wesley was not the first to talk about the concept of prevenient grace, he is the one who gave it a central stage in the theological discourse, especially regarding its soteriological role in the order of salvation. This reflection was primarily motivated by his opposition to the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination.

While the term “prevenient grace” is not found in the Bible, it is implied from various passages such as John 1:9; 6:44; 12:32. This grace is also observed in Luke’s stories of the vision of Cornelius and Saul’s encounter with Jesus (Acts 9-10). Romans 2:12-16 also talks about “conscience” in a way that describes prevenient grace (Crofford 2013, 430). However, the most notable verse in the Scriptures that refers to prevenient grace is John 1:9: “*This* was the true Light that, coming into the world, enlightens every person.” John opens his Gospel by identifying Jesus, the Logos, as the source of all things. This enlightenment of every person is God’s prevenient grace for humanity from the beginning!

2. Theological and Missional Implications

2.1 Theological Implications

Many theological considerations could be explored on the doctrine of prevenient grace, however, for this paper, I am focusing more on the theological considerations that connect to the missiological concept of *Missio Dei*.

Prevenient grace is universal and extended to all creation. The source of all goodness in creation is found in God. Paul recognizes this when he says in Acts 17:28a, “for in Him we live and move and exist.” Ray Dunning (1988, 158) puts it in the following terms: “This grace that goes before is universal in its extent and is the source of all good in man, and of feelings of right and wrong that are the result of the activity of conscience.” In the sermon, *Salvation by Faith*, John Wesley (1991, 40) himself explains the universality of prevenient grace by saying:

All the blessings which God hath bestowed upon man are of his mere grace, bounty, or favor; his free, undeserved favor; favor altogether undeserved; man having no claim to the least of his mercies. It was free grace that “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into him a living soul,” and stamped on that soul the image of God, and “put ll things under his feet.” The same free grace continues to us, at this day, life, and breath, and all things. For there is nothing we are, or have, or do, which can deserve the least thing at God’s hand. “All our works, Thou, O God, hast wrought in us.” These, therefore, are so many more instances of free mercy: and whatever righteousness may be found in man, this is also the gift of God.

Prevenient grace leads to salvation. Prevenient grace is God’s gracious response concerning total depravity, the total inability of humans to initiate a restoration of the relationship with the divine. The results of the *Fall* are the breaking of the relationship between God/human, human/human, human/creation, and human/self. The only way for humanity to restore these relationships into the *image of Christ* is by a gracious act of God. It is only God who enables humans to respond to his saving activity so that they can choose the path to repentance and salvation. This saving activity is done through “the presence and work of the Holy Spirit” (Leclerc 2014, 64). According to Wesley (1991, 491), after the Fall, man lost any ability to relate to God, but through God’s prevenient grace, “who works in us, both to will and to do” (Philippians 2:13) “no man is in a state of mere nature [...]. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called ‘natural conscience.’” While the mechanics of this grace remain a mystery, “Prevenient grace creates conscience (awareness of God’s moral law) illumination (the beginning of our awareness of God) and awakening (the first awareness of our sin)” (Powell

2013, 479). So according to Wesley (1991, 488), God's saving activity in people starts from birth, preceding what it is called evangelical conversion:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing¹ grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterward we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, "through grace," we "are saved by faith;" consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification.

It is important to make a distinction between "common grace" and "special grace" as held by Reformers and prevenient grace as held by Wesley. According to Louis Berkhof (2018) with "common grace," it is understood:

(a) those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby He, without renewing the heart, exercises such a moral influence on man through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted; or (b) those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to Him.

While Wesley will include all of these characteristics in prevenient grace, he disagrees with it on the purpose of grace. According to Wesley, prevenient grace has a soteriological purpose, and it is not there just to keep sin in check. Common grace tries to answer the question of why can fallen people do good things, while prevenient grace answers the question of how fallen man can answer freely to God's grace. Furthermore, prevenient grace also differs from 'special grace' because it is not irresistible, but requires a response from the human side. John Wesley explains this in strong terms in his sermon *On Working Out our Own Salvation*, "God worketh in you; therefore, you must work: you must be workers together with him, [...] he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves" (Wesley 1991, 491).

Therefore, in the Fall, humans lost the ability to make any good choices through their nature. Man "is free but free only to do evil and to follow on in

1 The terms 'preventing' and 'prevenient' grace come from the same Latin root, "to come or go before". Wesley himself define the term 'prevent' as 'to come or go before' in his own dictionary: *The Complete English Dictionary Explaining Most of those Hard Words which are found in the Best English Writers* (1777). Although in the modern English the interchangeable use of these two terms might create confusion, in the Wesleyan theological circles these two terms represent the same theological meaning from Wesley's time.

the way of sin” (Cox 1969, 147). The ability for humans to make a move towards salvation is a gift of God, but it requires a human response. “This grace, as with all grace, can be resisted. But if it is allowed to do its work, prevenient grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit will bring a person to the place of ‘awakening” (Leclerc 2014, 64).

2.2 Missional Implications

The doctrine of prevenient grace has several missiological implications, but before moving to those implications, we need to first define what is the mission of God in the world² and our role in it. The way we understand such activity deeply shapes the identity and the role of the church in the mission of God (*Missio Dei*). By *Missio Dei* we understand that God is a missionary God; he is a sending God “in the sense of the Father’s sending of the Son and their sending of the Holy Spirit” (Wright 2006, 63). Therefore, God’s mission flows out of the “agapic” nature of the triune God who is concerned with the restoration and renewal of his image in us. Henry Spaulding II and Henry Spaulding III (2014, 41) go even further when saying:

The church cannot understand itself in isolation from the world but is always being sent into the world as God has done in the Trinitarian procession. Furthermore, as God seeks the redemption and sanctification of the world through the sending of the Son and the Spirit, the church is sent into the world as an analogy for God to help the world by inviting the world into communion with God.

Such understanding affects the church’s identity, motivations, responsibilities, and methods, and it requires her to reflect the Triune identity of God. This includes participation in the mission of God in all the layers of society. In the words of Dean Flemming (2013, 333), “The cosmic sweep of the *Missio Dei* implies that mission is holistic, embracing such matters as evangelism, social and economic justice, care for creation and compassion for the needy.”

Consequently, the implication for the church is that mission is not an activity or a program we do, it is not limited to the sending of missionaries to other countries or establishing mission departments in our churches. The mission of God is God-centered, God-led, and God-empowered. Therefore, the role of the church is not to *do* mission but to *participate* in it and “bear witness to his kingdom” (Flemming 2013, 333). The church does not only have mission programs or send missionaries; the church is a missionary. As David Bosch (1991, 372) puts it, “Missionary activity is not so much the work of the church as simply the church at work.”

2 Here the word “world” includes all creation, not only humanity.

3. *Missio Dei* and *Prevenient Grace*

The Wesleyan view of prevenient grace has several missional and practical implications in the understanding of the mission of God. Wesley believed that the Spirit of God is active in the world among all people with no discrimination. This means that when the church goes into the world to proclaim the good news, the Spirit of God has already been present and active before “the church” arrives.

God is the center of his mission. Whether it is his initiation to restore humanity by providing his free and prevenient grace, or inviting and empowering, and leading the church through his Spirit, God remains at the central stage of his mission. Wesley’s doctrine of prevenient grace emphasizes the loving character of God, out of which flows his activity of enablement of human freedom. This view of the God-human relationship provides the foundation of a more collaborative relationship with God which is based on a mutual choosing of each other, with God being the first to initiate such a relationship and humans choosing to respond to it through the empowerment of God’s loving grace. When humans welcome such activity, “a grace-empowered relationship of co-operative and progressive transformation sets forth” (Maddox 1994, 90). This universal presence and activity of God in the life of every human reveals the infinite value that he sees in every human life.

The necessity of human participation and cooperation. God requires human cooperation and collaboration in the fulfillment of his mission. His prevenient grace actively operates in peoples’ lives to lead them closer to Christ; however, such grace requires human acceptance. The church, on the other side, is enabled by the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ in the world and in tune with God’s activity in a specific time and space. He guides and enables the body of Christ on where and how to participate in his mission. Such collaboration requires the church to constantly be in a close relationship with God and actively listening for his guidance.

Furthermore, the relationship between the church and those outside the Christian community of faith, including other religions, requires collaboration and two-way, honest and open dialogue. Mark Maddix (2014) explained this clearly when he says: “We need to affirm that those outside the community of Christian faith may also have insights and therefore be important dialogue partners.” The story of Cornelius and Peter is a great illustration of this point. Cornelius needed Peter to receive the full revelation of Christ just as much as Peter needed Cornelius to understand the extent of the new kingdom of God that is interested in the redemption of all humanity, not only a single nation (Acts 9 and 10).

The doctrine of prevenient grace also emphasizes the relational nature of holiness. If the purpose of God’s mission is to redeem the relationships of God/hu-

man, human/human, human/creation, and human/self into the image of Christ (*Christlikeness*), and if God's activity through grace is in all creation, then the gap between the traditional way of understanding sacred and secular takes a new perspective, moving from a more physical "set apart" meaning to "relationally closer" meaning. It is God's relationship with his creation that defines the "sacred." God's presence is in all creation, redeeming and restoring, regardless of a person's explicit awareness of it. As Maddix (2014) explains:

Human existence is not separated between the sacred and the secular. This approach reflects a Wesleyan perspective that is Trinitarian rather than exclusively Christological. The Spirit is wider-ranging than the explicit knowledge of God through Christ and goes where Christ is yet to be known. But the Spirit is not independent of Christ. The God who acts through the Spirit is the God whom Christ reveals as loving, who seeks out human beings wherever they are.

3.1. *Practical Implications*

So far, we have talked about the theological and missiological implications of the doctrine of prevenient grace in the context of the mission of God. However, the question is raised: How does this work in practice? How do we translate these concepts into the everyday life of the church? To illustrate some of these concepts, I will analyze the case of the Nazarene Church in Croatia and its work with refugees, and how the framework of prevenient grace has motivated and guided the way we have participated (and continue to do so) in the mission of God in this specific context.

3.1.1. It Started with a Need

The Church of the Nazarene has been present in Croatia for many years. However, its wider impact has taken place in the last five years with the refugee crisis.³ As the number of refugees coming from different parts of the Middle East and Africa increased, the Church of the Nazarene, through the work of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries (NCM),⁴ identified the main locations on the different Balkan routes to answer to the basic needs of people in need.⁵ While these locations were to provide basic needs, they were also spaces to provide hospitality to people on a journey, listen to their stories, provide official and reliable information, and

3 In the Nazarene church we talk about this less as a 'crisis' and more as an 'opportunity' to share God's love.

4 This is the charity arm of the Church of the Nazarene.

5 This work was led by Jay and Teanna Sunberg, Fieald Strategy Coordinators for Central Europe in the Church of the Nazarene and their team, which I was part of.

answer their questions. As relationships were built with refugees passing through central Europe, the church drew from its European Network of communities and tried to connect people with local communities around Europe so they could offer assistance and help with integration.

When the different countries along the Balkan route closed their borders to the refugees, refugee camps were established all over the Balkans, including Croatia. The main refugee camps in Croatia are Kutina and Hotel Porin in Zagreb. Moved by the Holy Spirit and recognizing their need for more help, the Church of the Nazarene approached these centers to offer help with specific needs. The church did not know the specifics of how they would be asked to help or what they would be able to offer, but they felt compelled by the Spirit to be present in those spaces and made themselves available to the activity of God in the life of the refugees that God called them to serve. The church went with the theological awareness that God has been working in these people's lives since they were born, through the work of prevenient grace. The church was also aware that God was going to empower the church with what is specifically needed to accomplish in these ministries. This motivated and encouraged the church throughout its engagements with the refugees. With this in mind, the church entered these two locations knowing that it already was holy ground and they needed to take their shoes off and listen to the voice of God.

While in this case, the interaction with this community started with a need, this is not always the case. Sometimes, the starting point is evangelism campaigns or other activities led by the church. The starting approach depends on the culture we are present in as well as in the leading of the Holy Spirit. In the Western world, evangelism initiatives are not always well received, but in other parts of the world, such as South Asia or Africa these can be very effective approaches.⁶

It is also important to understand that the purpose of helping people is not so we can sneak Jesus in between sandwiches. As a church, we help people because God's love in our lives compels us to do so, independently of their understanding or acceptance of Jesus. Manipulative evangelism with vulnerable people is dehumanizing and is contradictory to the free love and grace God gives. A genuine approach to any relationship builds trust, which in turn, allows the church to be invited to speak into people's lives. As my friend and humanitarian worker Kate

6 While traveling in Bangladesh for some projects, one night I joined a group that was traveling into the jungle to show the Jesus Film. At the end of that event, more than half of the town came forward to express a commitment to follow Christ. After that, the church planting team started a discipleship group, established a church, a school, and a Compassionate Ministry Center to meet the most practical needs of the community. Regardless of the starting point or the method, it is about the church being present at the right time and the right place, led by God's invitation and empowerment.

Bowen-Evans (2015) say, “The credibility of the message depends most on the credibility of the messenger.”

3.1.2. Relationships with Other Religions

The work with refugees has brought the church in contact with people from different religions and theological backgrounds. The relational aspect of God’s grace and cooperation helped the church to see its relationship to other people through God’s existing presence in their lives, rather than compartmentalizing them within the box of their system of beliefs. In this way, the dialogue is not apologetic but relational. It also encourages the church to listen better and to learn what God has been doing on the other side of the story. Some of the most incredible insights of the church have been through a mutual and loving dialogue with people of other faiths.

Certainly, there is value in knowing the system of beliefs of others, but this becomes important primarily in the process of discipleship, as the people go through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of their faith in Christ. At the heart of the relationship with other religions is the awareness that not all roads lead to God, but God walks all roads to reach people. The doctrine of prevenient grace helps the church to see people first as loved by God, independently of their religious background, nationality, or ethnicity.

3.1.3. Holy Encounters

As the church positioned itself in places where God was calling it to be, it met several people of Christian faith who left their countries because of persecution. They became partners in living and proclaiming the Gospel with other people. Four of them are now in the process of ordination in the Church of the Nazarene and they pastor two different language groups, Persian and Arabic, in Zagreb.

We also met many people who had positive interactions with Christians in Turkey or Greece. God has used these encounters to stir their hearts. By the time they arrived in Croatia, they had already read through the Gospels and had many questions about Jesus and the Christian faith. Their refugee journey had become not only about finding a safe place for them and their families, but a journey to come closer to God through his prevenient activity and the participation of the church in his mission. Mohamed⁷ is one of those people who was given a Bible in Greece. He read the book for the first time on his way to Croatia and had written down many questions in his notebook. Mohamed came from a very religious background, but he had never read the Bible. In the refugee camp, he approached one of the pastors with all his questions and, after months of engagement, he ac-

7 The name has been changed to protect the privacy of the person.

cepted Christ. Other people encountered Jesus through their dreams while others acknowledged having always known Christ in their hearts, but they had not known his name. All of these stories confirm the belief that God is active in the world, that he is present even in the most lost places in the world, and he continuously works to renew people to his *image*.

3.1.4. A Welcoming Community

Soon the church became a safe space for people to come and find community, independently from their beliefs. It became a table where all were welcomed to eat, reflecting God's gracious hospitality in the world, through his Great Banquet (Lk. 14:15-24). In this way, the church embodies and enacts the "means of grace," "outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace" (Wesley 1991, 160).

As people participate in the life of the church, they can listen to God's story, see the embodiment of it in daily life and find their place in it. The role of the church, then, is to become "poets of the ordinary," as Alan Roxburgh (2011, 172) would say:

Help people reflect on what is happening in their neighborhood encounters. The poet is one who listens to the stories that lie beneath the stories people tell and gives voice to the music beneath their words. The poet is the one who, in such listening, offers ways in which people can connect this music to a larger movement, to a bigger story.

By no means this has been an easy or always joyful ministry. Ministry with ethnic groups who have had conflicts for centuries is anything but romantic, nevertheless it is holy. Every day, we see God's activity of healing in the lives of our people. We see his healing of the traumatic events people have gone through in the past and the ones that they have had to endure in a new, and sometimes, hostile environment. The Holy Spirit continues to show up in all the people's lives that are part of this community by empowering, healing, persuading, transforming, and leading.

3.1.5. A Missional Church

Hundreds of people of other faiths came to know Christ through the participation of the church in God's mission. Many of the refugees in Croatia do not intend to stay in Croatia but will try to seek asylum in a different country. Due to the lack of opportunities for work and the high cost of living in Croatia, most of the refugees prefer to migrate to the Northern European Countries. As people have come and left, we understood that our primary mission to this group is not to grow the Church of the Nazarene in Croatia but to work with God in restoring his relationship with people. Our role for many has been to disciple, baptize, and

send them, knowing the grace of God is not limited by our presence in people's lives. God will continue to provide for their needs holistically and lead them to where they need to be as they are sensitive to his voice. Most of the people who came to know Christ in Croatia are now active members in other churches all over Western Europe.

We see that the missional approach to the church is not just limited to the salvation of the individual, but we also see the hope that Christ will establish a stronger presence in their country of origin in the years to come when some eventually return to their countries of origin or have an influence on family and friends they left behind. His salvation is always holistic not only individual. It is through his people that God wants to deliver and heal the brokenness of our world.

Conclusion

The doctrine of prevenient grace in the Wesleyan tradition provides a clear framework in the way we view humanity and God's activity in it. This is the grace of God given freely to enable humanity to respond to God's initiative for the restoration of all creation. While this grace is given it is resistible and it requires human acceptance and collaboration.

This view of prevenient grace continues to help the local churches to engage within the communities where God has placed them. It invites them to be in tune with the Holy Spirit as he enables, empowers, transforms, leads, and redeems. It also helps the church to be aware that the saving activity in the world is God's activity, in which the church joins to participate with God. In the same way, the church is welcomed by the Triune God in communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so the church welcomes humanity into this holy communion.

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Cezarina Glendenning

**„Ne vode svi putovi do Boga, ali Bog ide svim putovima do ljudi“:
Doktrina prethodne milosti kao paradigma misijskog djelovanja**

Sažetak

Doktrina o prethodnoj milosti u veslijanskoj je tradiciji uvijek igrala važnu ulogu u oblikovanju načina na koji razumijemo Božju misiju (*Missio Dei*), naše sudjelovanje u njoj te pripadajuću ulogu Crkve. Ta doktrina nastavlja oblikovati razumijevanje svetosti kao Božjeg djelovanja na obnavljanju narušenih odnosa, napose u crkvama veslijansko-arminijanske tradicije. Svetost, kako se često pogrešno razumije, nije fizičko odvajanje svetog i nesvetog, crkvenog i svjetovnog, čistog i nečistog, već iskupljenje narušenih odnosa (između Boga i ljudi, ljudi međusobno, ljudi i Stvorenja te pojedinaca sa samima sobom).

Cilj je ovog rada dalje istražiti teološka i misiološka polazišta doktrine o prethodnoj milosti, kako ju je razumijevao sam Wesley, kao i praktične implikacije njezine primjene u oblikovanju načina na koji Crkva ispunjava svoje poslanje u svijetu. Rad je podijeljen u tri glavna odjeljka: prvi se dio usredotočuje na definiranje prethodne milosti te u kakvom je odnosu prema Božjoj misiji (*Missio Dei*); u drugom se dijelu razmatraju misiološke i teološke implikacije doktrine o prethodnoj milosti, dok se u posljednjem dijelu rada iznose praktični primjeri teološke i misiološke motivacije Crkve Isusa iz Nazareta u radu s izbjeglicama u Zagrebu, u Hrvatskoj.