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Why I Reject the Arminian Doctrine of Prevenient Grace

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It is no secret to most that I hold strongly to the Reformed doctrines of grace. But it is equally no secret that I have deep respect for the godly character and scholarship of many of the Arminian persuasion that believe differently than I. The issues that unite us a greater and more substantial than those that divide us. In other words, the Calvinism/Arminianism divide is over *non-essential* issues in my opinion. What I am saying is that this article is in no way meant for to put an *essential* line of demarcation concerning the issues of Calvinism and Arminianism. However, just because something is not essential does not mean it is not important. Therefore, I continue to write on these about such.

Yesterday, I wrote that I believe that the doctrine of Prevenient grace is the Achilles heel of Arminianism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy (although, less so with Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism since they don't have such a strong stance on depravity). Prevenient grace literally means "grace that comes before." Prevenient grace is the Arminian counter to the Calvinistic doctrine of Irresistible grace.

It is important to note at the outset that both Calvinists and Arminians believe that people are born sinful. To make this a little more clear, both sides agree that all people are born with an inherent disposition of antagonism toward God. Both Calvinists and Arminians reject what is know as Pelagianism. Pelagius, a fifth-century British monk, taught that people are born neutral, neither good nor bad. Pelagius believed that people sin as a result of example, not nature. Augustine, the primary opponent of Pelagius, responded by teaching that people are not born neutral, but with a corrupted nature. People sin because it is in their nature to sin; they are predisposed to sin. Both Calvinists and Arminians agree with Augustine believing the Scriptures to teach that people are born with a totally (radically) corrupt spiritual nature, making their disposition toward God perpetually antagonistic. Therefore, according to *both* sides, people are *absolutely* helpless without God's gracious, undeserved intervention. This is an important mischaracterization of Arminian theology that adherents to my position often fail to realize. Arminians believe in the doctrine of total depravity just as strongly as Calvinists. In contrast, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics both hold out *some* sense of natural ability. Therefore, they don't believe that the will is as depraved as traditional Protestants.

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This adherence to total depravity makes the Arminian doctrine of Prevenient grace necessary. A former Wesleyan theology professor of mine who believed in Prevenient grace once called it the “ingenious doctrine.” Why? Because according to Arminians it allows them to hold to the biblical position of total depravity, yet also allow *true* free will. You see, according to Calvinists such as myself, if people are in such desperate condition, being inclined toward enmity with God from birth, and unable to change their condition on their own (as a leopard cannot change its spots – Jer. 13:23), having no “free will” to choose against this depraved nature, then the only way to answer the question, How is anyone saved? is to answer that the will of God saves them. In other words, if our will could not change our disposition, then *God* must have changed our will. Up to this point, both Calvinists and Arminians agree. But the Calvinist will say that God’s intervention is radical. In our depraved state, God comes into our lives and opens our eyes to His beauty. This intervention happens by means of saving or “irresistible” grace. In our helpless and antagonistic position, while shaking our fists at God, God *sovereignly* and *autonomously* regenerates us. Once regenerated, we trust and love the Lord because our nature has been transformed by Him. Therefore, God is the only one to credit for our salvation seeing as how we did not play *any* part in its genesis (this is sometimes referred to as monergism). But, according to Calvinists, God does not give this gift of saving grace to all people, only the elect. Otherwise, all would be saved.

How do Arminians deal with our depraved condition? Well, they reject the Calvinistic doctrine of “irresistible” grace believing that it does violence to the necessary freedom that must exist for God to have a true loving relationship with man. But something, nevertheless, must make belief possible. In comes Prevenient grace. This is an enabling grace that comes to the aid of all people so that their disposition can be made capable of receiving the Gospel. It does not save them as the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace, but it makes the savable. In essence, Prevenient grace restores people to a state of *ability*. As Adam before the fall was not predisposed toward a willful rejection of God, being able to make a true free will decision, so people, once affected by Prevenient grace are brought dispositionally to Garden of Eden type conditions. God’s grace comes to the aid of all fallen sinners restoring freedom of the will. Now, it is up to the individual to make an unbiased untainted choice for or against God. Voila! With the doctrine of Prevenient grace, total depravity and true freedom can be harmonized. Ingenious, right?

I agree with Calvinist commentator and theologian Tom Schreiner that “Prevenient grace is attractive because it solves so many problems [for the Arminian] . . .” but I also believe that it creates more problems than it solves. I am going to briefly list the two major problems that I see with the doctrine of Prevenient grace, but I, as always, want to remind you that there are many great men in the history of the church and in contemporary

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Evangelical philosophy and theology that do not see things the way I do. I encourage you to seek out their position from them in addition to reading my analysis.

1. Lack of Scripture: The biggest issue that Calvinists have traditionally had with the doctrine of Prevenient grace is its lack of biblical support. Tom Schreiner's quote above is incomplete; it concludes with this, ". . . but it should be rejected because it cannot be exegetically vindicated." While Prevenient grace may solve problems and allow Arminians to hold to a biblical understanding of depravity, the biblical support for the doctrine is very difficult to find. Most Arminians would agree that direct and explicit support from Scripture is not there, but they would say that the *concept* is necessitated from other explicit teachings. Most importantly, God commands and desires that all people are to repent of their sin (Acts 17:30, 2 Pet. 3:9, et al) and holds them responsible if they do not. This assumes that "all people" have this ability, otherwise God's desire is hopeless and His command is useless. While there may be some mystery in the fact that God desires the salvation of all and commands all to repent, this does not necessitate nor justify, in my opinion, the insertion of a fairly complected and even more mysterious doctrine of Prevenient grace. In other words, it could be conceded that God commands all people to repent because sin is at issue. People have violated God's law. This necessitates God to act as God in accordance with His righteous character and reveal the violation of sin, even to those who have no ability to change on their own. In this case, God's command is true and genuine. Even if no one were to respond, their sin is made manifest and God's righteousness is exposed through God's command. It can also be conceded that God does truly desire the repentance of all people, even if people do not have the ability to repent. God's desire in this case is mysteriously not going to be an active agent in bringing about the salvation of some. Why? I don't know. But my ignorance in this matter does not justify the implication of Prevenient grace. God can passively desire things that He does not actively will to come about.

2. It does not *really* solve any problems: Lets assume that we could overcome the difficulties of the lack of Scriptural support of Prevenient grace. Let's say that I give the Arminians the benefit of the doubt and say that it is possible to interpret the biblical data in such a way that all people receive an enablement that neutralizes their antagonistic disposition toward God. God then would come to each person sometime in their lives and graciously restore their will to the point that they don't have any predisposed inclination toward rejection or acceptance of the Gospel. What would this look like?

First, this "balancing the scales" of the will makes any choice, good or bad, for God or against, impossible. Why? Because each person would be suspended in a state of perpetual indecisiveness. They would have no reason for choosing A rather than B. Even Arminian theologian Roger Olson admitted to this in a recent post: "One thing I wrestle

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with about Arminianism is the mystery of free will. I don't know how it works. There does seem to be an element of uncaused effect in it" ([source](#)). If there is no reason to choose one over the other, then all choices, if they were made, would be completely arbitrary ("uncaused effect").

You see, we make choices according to who we are. If "free will" of the Arminian variety is going to be responsible for making the choice, and this will is neutralized by Preventive grace, then there is nothing compelling *you* (character, upbringing, disposition, the Holy Spirit, genetics, etc.) to make any decision whatsoever. Who you are, the primary factor behind every choice, is taken away. There is no "you" to make the choice. It is arbitrary. It does not solve the "loving relationship" problem to say that God is pleased to have a relationship based upon the arbitrary decisions of people. Therefore, in order to hold to the doctrine of Preventive grace, one is left with either perpetual indecisiveness or an arbitrary choice. Neither of which solves any problems.

Not only this, but let's do the math. Preventive grace neutralizes the will, making the will completely unbiased toward good or evil. Therefore, this restored "free will" has a fifty-fifty shot of making the right choice. Right? This must be. The scales are completely balanced once God's Preventive grace has come upon a person. What would you expect to see if this were the case? Well, I can flip a coin and pretty much expect that the coin would land on heads just as many times as tails. The same should be the case with salvation. You should expect that just as many people to trust the Lord as those that don't. But just a cursory look through Scripture tells us that this is not the case. For the most part the number of unbelievers has been dramatically higher than that of believers. Take the time of the flood for instance. How is it that out of millions of people (probably much more), there was only one who was found to be righteous? That would be like me flipping a coin a million (or more) times and it landing on tails 999,999 times and only landing on heads once. Impossible. Christ even explicitly said that there will be and always have been many more people who don't believe than those that do (Matt. 7:14). How can this be if Preventive grace created a situation of equal opportunity for all people? It can't.

Now I don't want to be accused of building a straw man here so I will attempt to represent how Arminians would respond to this. They would say that the contributing factors that influence people's freedom are those in the *outside* world. As the snake came from the outside and influenced Adam's otherwise neutral will, so also outside influences such as culture and family influence people's will. Therefore, in the time of Noah, the reason why there was only one righteous person on the earth is because the culture had become so corrupt that God could not be found. This is why God destroyed everyone with the flood. This makes some sense, but in reality it simply re-introduces the same problem that Arminians are desperately attempting to avoid – divine unconditional election.

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Let me explain. If outside influences play such a large role in influencing Prevenient-grace-restored-people in their choice for or against God, doesn't that make God the determining factor in whether they are saved or not? If you had a choice, knowing that outside influences were going to play such a big role in the decisions you make, would you want to be born to a family of believers who teach and live the Gospel in a culture of believers that do the same, or would you rather be placed in a committed Muslim home in a Muslim country where the Gospel is unable to give a testimony of God? In other words, would you rather be placed in a Garden with the snake or without the snake? Of course you would say you want to be placed in the environment where the outside influences for belief in God would be most prominently exemplified. Why? Because you have a better chance. Maybe the odds are not perfect, but they would still be much better. Let's face it, if you were in the pre-flood world at the time of Noah, as nice a person as you are today, I seriously doubt that you would have followed Noah rather than the rest of the world.

The problem is that you do not decide where you live or when you will be born. You do not determine your outside influences, God does.

Acts 17:26, "And He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation."

This passage tells us that God determines the outside influences that are the ultimate influence, the determining factor, in our choice. God chose where you would be born, when, and to what family you would belong. Therefore, God's sovereign unconditional choice is still the ultimate and determining cause in our salvation. This is the very problem that Arminians seek to avoid with the doctrine of Prevenient grace.

If Arminians were to respond by saying that God gives more grace to those in the most depraved conditions, this would not explain why it is that people in cultures and families that are godly have a higher percentage of believers. We are back to flipping the coin. It does not work either way.

In conclusion, I don't believe that there is a reason for to entertain the doctrine of Prevenient grace outside of a presupposed view of what some believe must be in order for the truth to be palatable. More importantly, since it *really* does not solve any problems, it is, in my opinion, superfluous and confusing. Even if it may seem more palatable to say that all people have equal opportunity to accept the Gospel, the palatability of a doctrine does not determine its veracity. This is why I reject the doctrine of Prevenient Grace.

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Whether you agree with me or not, I hope that I have been able to give you an appreciation of why Calvinists such as myself have issues with the libertarian freedom inducted by Prevenient grace.

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