

Prevenient Grace

Some Lutherans espouse a doctrine called *prevenient grace*. The doctrine is not distinctly Lutheran. Its discussion is found in churches of varying theologies, including Wesleyan Methodists. The word *prevenient* means preceding, implying grace that God sends before the conversion of a person. The approach of dividing grace into parts is suspect, since the Bible does not clearly do that, and Luther did not divide grace, even though others before him did. It is suspect because the Bible is clear that salvation through grace is entirely the work of God, so those who differ must split hairs on the subject of grace to find some way that salvation, or the lack of it, can be the result of a decision or a resistance of man.

The variation of this doctrine that is being promoted by some Lutherans today states that even though the fall has left man bound by sin and unable to accept grace, the message of the gospel itself carries with it the power to enliven the will to choose and respond to the gospel. The proponents of this doctrine also teach that the individual has veto power over this action, and it can be resisted. Therefore, they teach that this solves the problem of explaining how God can receive all the credit for salvation, since it not our will that chooses (it is the power of the gospel), while still preserving the blame for those who go lost, since if grace is resisted, it is the fault of the individual. It is this teaching that will be discussed in this essay and referred to as *prevenient grace*.

Unfortunately, this doctrine has many serious negative ramifications that will fester and eventually damage the message of the cross. The biblical teaching of the total depravity of man states that man will always choose to resist the gospel. If I am presented with a teaching that salvation is all God's work, but I am taught that I must not resist or I will not have true salvation, the result is that I will have no assurance of salvation. I know that I will resist and not be a partaker of eternal life.

The supporters of prevenient grace feel that they have found a way to differentiate themselves from those modern day evangelicals who espouse a decision theology that says that God does part of salvation, but man must do his small part also in choosing or accepting Christ. However, the difference between prevenient grace and decision theology is really one of words only. Christians who espouse decision theology could feel that others around them are in the troubled condition they are in because they haven't made the choice to accept Christ, and it is their own fault. Christians who espouse prevenient grace could feel that others around them are in the troubled condition they are in because they resisted the grace of God that came to them through the gospel, and it is their own fault. The difference there is one of semantics rather than substance.

If a handicapped person was not able to help his neighbor out of his burning house, but did not refuse to allow another neighbor to come into his garage and take his ladder to help, I would still consider the action to carry some merit and be deserving of praise. It would elevate the person in value above another neighbor who refused to allow the ladder to be used.

If a person is bound by sin and unable to choose Christ, but allows the message of the gospel to save him, it will elevate the person in value above anyone who refused to allow the gospel to save him.

Another reason that this doctrine is faulty is that it could prevent the correct prayer for the salvation of others. Paul stated, "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1). If the resisting is left up to the individual and God will not interfere with that action, then our prayers should be limited to praying that others will just be exposed to the gospel. We cannot pray that God will stop a person from resisting the message of the gospel since that decision of whether to resist the gospel is left up to the individual. That idea is incorrect. We should ask God to perform whatever we feel is in His will.

The character of the church through the ages has been dramatically shaped by its individual members. If salvation is wholly of God, then He alone receives the credit and praise. However, prevenient grace would certainly alter that outlook. The resisting or lack of resisting of the gospel by certain individuals would certainly have a dramatic effect upon the direction that the church has taken through the ages. In the view of prevenient grace, God provides the salvation, but whether it is resisted or not has a huge effect. If a baker makes wonderful pastries, certainly God designed the world to provide good ingredients, such as flour, to make the pastries, but much of the praise will go to the baker, since his abilities will determine whether the pastries are good or bad. If God provides the salvation, but the resisting or non-resisting is left the individuals, much of the character and direction of the church will be the result of this resistance or lack of it.

The purpose of making clear to us that God predestined the elect before the world was created is to remove it from any possibility that it is our doing. Those who try to place importance upon the choice made say that this predestination is only dependent upon God's foreknowledge of who would not resist the gospel. Certainly the teaching that God is all knowing is important and is also used in connection with the teaching about predestination. But, the teaching concerning elections occurs several times in the bible, and not always in connection with the foreknowledge of God, indicating that the real purpose of these writers was to indicate that the choice (which occurred before we were even born) was God's, not ours.

The teaching of prevenient grace seeks to remove the difficulty of understanding why God did not just predestine everyone, and not just the elect by throwing the blame upon individuals resisting the gospel. However, this difficulty cannot and should not be resolved with innovative teachings. If it could have been resolved this way, the writers of the bible would have done so. Instead, the question is left as troubling and a stumbling block by Paul. Romans 9: 15 - 21:

For He says to Moses, "I will have Mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in

all the earth.” Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. **One of you will say to me: “Why does God still blame us? For who resists His will?”** But, who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ ” Does not the potter have a right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”

The teaching of prevenient grace would not lead to that question, because it seems to answer the question by saying the blame for not being a member of God’s elect belongs upon man for resisting the gospel. Also it seeks to place the dependence upon man again as to who will be a partaker of God’s mercy, or who will choose to reject it. But this passage clearly states it depends upon God, not man.

Paul’s words are echoed by Luther:

And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished that I had never been made a man. (That was before I knew how health-giving that despair was, and how close to grace.) This is why so much toil and trouble has been devoted to clearing the goodness of God, and throwing the blame on man’s will. (The Bondage of the Will)

It is clear that Luther would see the teaching of prevenient grace as part of this toil and trouble, and he would oppose it as strongly as he did the attempts of his day to accomplish this goal because all attempts will lead to salvation being viewed as a partnership between God and man. Luther knew that to gain the ability to explain why some people are not part of the elect without having to blame God, we give up the utter reliance upon God’s choice in salvation. It was not a trade he would make.

It appears that the proponents of the doctrine of prevenient grace also do so as a defense of evangelistic practices that place a lot of emphasis upon a conversion experience for assurance of salvation. The practice has been to have evangelists who will present a message, and then ask the listeners to decide whether they can remember a time when they decided to receive Christ. Those who don’t are invited to come forward, raise a hand, or some other gesture to indicate that they want to receive salvation. This action becomes the chief source of assurance of salvation. For those Lutheran churches who practice this type of evangelism, it becomes the central focus of their fellowship. These Lutheran churches find easy fellowship with Baptists or other modern evangelicals and tend to ignore important differences of doctrine. Christians should be trying to find others whose only hope is in the cross. Instead, today modern evangelicals look to find others who have had the same experience as them.

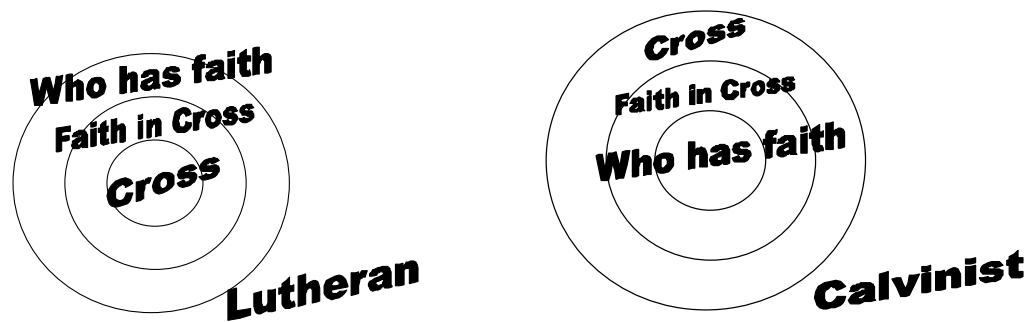
In addition, if the proponents of prevenient grace do not believe in eternal security, then it would be possible to start resisting the gospel an hour, a day, or a year after the conversion experience. How do we know we haven’t done this? Generally, the evidence will be a personal relationship with Christ, which is another name for a good Christian life. This is troubling because it relies upon our own behavior for assurance of salvation.

Proponents of prevenient grace are critical of churches that place a great importance upon the sacraments, accusing them of sacramentalism. True Lutherans will place a great importance upon the sacraments for assurance of salvation. The Bible has several passages that indicate that forgiveness of sins results from the sacraments. The proponents of prevenient grace do not have one clear-cut verse indicating that we should use the conversion experience for assurance of salvation.

Certainly there are many places in the Bible where people are asked to repent and turn from sinful practices. Sometimes only a certain type of sin needed to be turned from (David might be an example here). Other times, there involved a life that was full of many types of sin that involved a radical change in the person's outlook. The change produced a better communication and fellowship with God. But, the choice to change was never looked as for assurance of salvation. Indeed, even after the change of heart and repentance, the person is still full of pride and other sins that are repugnant to God.

Proponents of prevenient grace also make faith into a work. God's purpose of declaring faith as essential to salvation was not to reduce God's requirement of keeping the ten commandments down to just having faith, (which is a part of the first commandment) but to use faith as an indicator that the person had come to the realization that his condition is so repugnant to God that his only hope is that Christ can stand in his place before God.

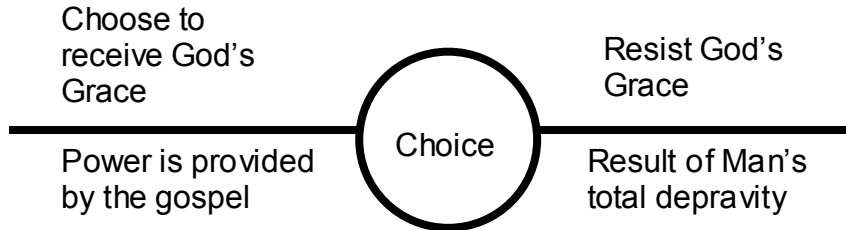
The reformed church makes predestination the center or deepest level of their theology. This is not correct. It should be the cross.



However, the problems that prevenient grace create are still so closely related to the message of the cross that if this doctrine is held, damage will be done. If salvation is presented as choices made by mankind, inevitably the focus will shift to these choices, and the cross will become not much more than a tool in support of these evangelistic efforts, just as it has become with modern evangelicals today. Proponents of prevenient grace do not believe that the message of the cross (included in the preaching of the law and gospel), along with receiving the sacraments, can produce true faith without basing assurance upon a choice made during a conversion experience. That is a mistake. The

gospel is radical and powerful because it does not rest upon our ability to choose.

An illustration of the teaching of prevenient grace would look something like the illustration below.



Both God's grace and man's resistance are tied together in the event of conversion and on one level.

However the Bible seems to present these on two different levels.

Resist God and His Grace

Gladly Receive His Grace

It is true that the fault that men go lost is because of their hard hearts and resistance to God's grace. We have no one to blame but ourselves. However, the partakers of salvation are so because of the choice of God, and not because of our own distinguishing actions (or lack of resistance). The lower level is more mysterious to us, and no reason is given in the Bible why God chose some and not others.

The proponents of prevenient grace do not understand this, and seem to imply that their opponents teach that God uses compulsion to draw men to salvation. We do not believe that God drags people to salvation or uses torture until they submit. To do so would be to try to understand election by a single level as shown in the first graphic. However, we believe that by means unknown to us, God's elect are attracted to the message of the gospel and they gladly receive its message of grace and forgiveness. It is our commission to make this message known, so that they can be freed of the guilt and power of sin, and come to the assurance of eternal life.

C.S. Lewis once used an illustration of 2 levels. He said that when we look at a rose, we see its beauty. However, when we try to discover what makes up its beauty, and study its color reflection properties, curvatures, textures, etc. that while we do so we cannot at that level or moment still comprehend its beauty. But both the level of the beauty, and the level of the underlying properties that create the beauty have their place. The same is true of the teachings of man's responsibility and God's choice.

Proponents of prevenient grace are not trying to assert some doctrine that is arcane and unimportant. The attempt to break grace down in to small components opens the door to the division of the work of salvation into a dependence upon both God and man, in one form or another. By raising the issue, they have allowed those of us who oppose it to make our crucial doctrines crystal clear. This teaching is dangerous to the message of the cross. Any inclusion of the reliance of our will in the discussion of salvation will cause us to focus upon our decision and not the cross. The message of the cross is what we must guard at all costs.

[Home:](#)