

great debates in our time similar to those three of which I spoke earlier. This means that we need to think, and to think charitably and imaginatively. Theologians have not always played fair with science, nor have scientists always played fair with theology. But there is a new spirit abroad today. And if we really believe that the psalmist was right to cry that the 'earth is the Lord's, and all they that dwell therein', then we may even come to the place where we see that the scientist may be one of the messengers of God.

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PREVENIENT GRACE

IT MAY seem somewhat courageous of me to mingle my voice with well-trimmed systematic theologians, as my field is mainly practical theology—pastoral psychology and counselling. Nevertheless I take courage to do it for at least two reasons.

The first is that the time has come to realize that in the fields of pastoral psychology and counselling it is impossible for the minister to help persons in need without having a clear background of theological thinking. This fact has come more and more to my mind as I have been working on a recently-published book of mine in which I have tried to relate psychological procedure to theological thinking. Practical theology, especially pastoral psychology and counselling, has for the last twenty years been particularly concerned with psychology, psychiatry, social and anthropological sciences. Nothing should be said against this. It was necessary, and we have not yet come to the end of psychological investigations which will help us to give people ministerial help. We must not, however, as practitioners in spiritual healing, forget our background. We should be homeless and useless if we did not dig deep into systematic theology in order to help our fellow-men. We must know man, but that is not an excuse for not knowing our Bible and our theology. If we make it such an excuse, then as Dr Harold Roberts put it in the course of what he said at this conference, we shall be in danger of being psychological experts and theological charlatans. Here is a challenge which we have to face: How can we build pastoral care upon solid and clear theological thinking?

My second reason is that it sometimes seems as if theology can become an end in itself, more or less elevated from the areas of human problems and human needs. I refer to the Rev. Reginald Kissack's statement, in his opening address to the conference, that theology must be preachable. I would like to add that theology must be therapeutic, that it must give light and inspiration to men in their need and stress. The late Dr Theophil Spörri said in a paper

'Theological Emphasis of Methodism', read by him at the theological discussions at Reuti-Hasliberg, Switzerland, in 1954, that 'theology has meaning and justification only in the service of one's fellow-men, and can never be isolated from them, nor become an end in itself'. He went on to say that Methodist theology is entirely soteriological in its aims. Since salvation concerns man, Methodist theology must be anthropological in its setting, and here psychology enters into the picture. Here, then, is a second challenge which we have to face: How can theological thinking become more 'human', more efficient, more applicable to the needs of man in modern life with its stress and tensions? In what way can psychology enrich theological thinking?

The question of prevenient grace is one of the areas of theology in which the problems here stated converge.

I

The theological thinking on salvation, and we define 'salvation' here as all God's work to rescue and sanctify man, has always concentrated upon two aspects: the objective causes of salvation, i.e. what God has done and does for our salvation, and the subjective causes of salvation, i.e. what man can do and does in order to obtain salvation. Sometimes the emphasis has been laid on one side of the problem, sometimes on the other. Karl Barth, for example, emphasizes the objective view to such an extent that human abilities are pushed into the background, or even extinguished. On the other hand, it has been a temptation for natural theology, and for old and modern revivalists, to stress the human and subjective aspect of salvation to the extent that God's work is pushed into the background.

The theological problem which arises from the fact that salvation is on one side the work of God, and on the other side is dependent upon the attitude of man, is a very old problem. It will never be solved on this side of eternity. It is, however, our obligation to analyse this problem as far as our intellectual abilities permit.

Man's conception of the relationship between God's work and his own has varied with his psychological, cultural, and political state. In times of human arrogance, man thought he could do everything; if he thought of it at all, he thought he could even produce his own salvation. In time of human distress, man thought more in terms of God's action. The first trend of thought comes to the foreground in modern times; the second was common in the Middle Ages. Psychological thinking has sometimes ruled God out:

Are we culturally, and therefore also psychologically, on the verge of a new era? The possibilities of man are greater than ever; but a new way of thinking has emerged: man is afraid of his own works. He is no longer happy with what he produces. Does this new situation give God a new chance in the life of man? Barth's theology is based upon the assumption that man can do nothing, the assumption of disillusioned man, and this is God's opportunity. Modern trends in psychology open a new way for religion by emphasizing the global view of man.

II

But what of Methodist theological thinking? Our first impulse would be to say that, since Methodism stresses religious experience, the emphasis is laid upon

the human and subjective aspects of salvation, we might even say the psychological and anthropological aspects of it.

But is it right to label Methodist theology as mainly empirical? John Wesley does indeed emphasize more the practical than the theoretical aspects of religion, more the things to be done in order to obtain the sonship of God than the metaphysics of the nature of God, more the implications of salvation in a sanctified life than speculations about how it is brought about. All this is true. But it is even more true that, as Harald Lindström puts it: 'several of his [Wesley's] publications are devoted exclusively to the treatment of problems of central importance in theology'.¹

Truly, Wesley stressed, first, experience and then theological thinking. Sometimes theologians do it in the opposite way. This does not, however, expel theological thinking. It only gives a firm empirical basis for it, and makes it possible for theological thinking to give a wider contribution to Christian life.

Wesley's starting point is always 'What God has wrought in man's heart'. Let me quote from his sermon 'On working out our own salvation'. 'We are to observe that great and important truth which ought never to be out of our remembrance: "It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." The meaning of these words may be made more plain by a small transposition of them: "It is God that of his good pleasure worketh in you both to will and to do." This position of the words, connecting the phrase *of his good pleasure* with the word *worketh*, removes all imagination of merit from man, and gives God the whole glory of his work. Otherwise we might have had some room for boasting, as if it were our own desert, some goodness in us, or some good thing done by us, which first moved God to work. But this expression cuts off all such vain conceits, and clearly shows his motive to work lay wholly in himself, on his own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy.'

Wesley goes on in explanation of this: 'First. God worketh in you; therefore, you *can* work; otherwise it would be impossible. If he did not work, it would be impossible for you to work out your own salvation. . . . Seeing all men are, by nature, not only sick, but "dead in trespasses and in sins", it is not possible for them to do anything well till God raises them from the dead. It was impossible for Lazarus to come forth, till the Lord had given him life. And it is equally impossible for us to *come* out of our sins, yea, or to make the least motion toward it, till He who hath all power in heaven and earth calls our dead souls into life.'

So far the emphasis has been laid upon the objective aspect of salvation, but Wesley continues: 'Yet this is no excuse for those who continue in sin, and lay the blame upon their Maker, by saying, "it is God only that must quicken us; for we cannot quicken our own souls"'. For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural; it is more properly termed, *preventing grace*. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. . . .

"Therefore, in as much as God works in you, *you are now able to work out your own salvation*."² Since he worketh in you of his own good pleasure, without

any merit of yours, both to will and to do, it is possible for you to fulfil all righteousness. . . . We know indeed, that word of his to be absolutely true: "Without me ye can do nothing." But, on the other hand, we know, every believer can say, "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me." . . .

'Secondly, God worketh in you; therefore you *must* work: You must be workers together with him.—otherwise he will cease working. . . . Even St Augustine, who is generally supposed to favour the contrary doctrine, makes that just remark. . . . "He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves."'

When John Wesley discusses the 'faculty' in us to which God's calling is directed, he says that it is the conscience. In his sermon 'On Conscience' he says: 'Conscience . . . is that faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions; and of their merit or demerit, of their being good or bad; and consequently, deserving either praise or censure. . . .

'This faculty seems to be what is usually meant by those who speak of natural conscience; an expression frequently found in some of our best authors, but yet not strictly just. For though in one sense it may be termed natural, because it is found in all men; yet, properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift of God, above all his natural endowments.'

These are clear statements which give us one solution of the theological problem of the subjective and objective aspects of salvation. The working out of our salvation is a result of a co-operation of God and man. This co-operation, however, is not a fifty-fifty per cent. work. It is not a co-action in that sense. It is a process of action-reaction. God acts; man reacts. God has always the initiative. We react to God's work for our salvation. If the reaction does not take place, salvation cannot be worked out. But even our reaction is based upon God's work, so far as the power to react is from God. Here we are at the main point of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace means that God's relationship to us is that of giving and forgiving, and that He has empowered us with abilities to react to His calling. Prevenient grace makes it possible for God to have a point of contact in the soul of man for the benefit of his salvation.

William R. Cannon states: 'Thus, though man is active in his response to justifying faith, he is active not because of any inherent natural ability or willingness of his own, but merely as the instrument of the grace of God housed within him. Wesley, therefore, in his insistence on grace discards, it seems, any notion of mere human co-operation.'³

Further, after having discussed the fact that man can resist the grace of God, and even kill it, Cannon states: 'Granting, therefore, man's ability to stifle and to kill the grace of God within him, have we the right to ascribe to him the positive role of a co-operator with God? We have. For in the very act of not killing grace and of listening to the voice of natural conscience, even though at times very inattentively, man is actually co-operating with God in God's effort on behalf of his salvation. This must be the case; it cannot be otherwise. Once you grant to man a power great enough to make itself felt as a deciding factor in the acceptance or rejection of the means necessary for the bestowal of saving faith, you lift him, whether you will or not, out of a state of mere passivity into one of activity and co-operation or non-co-operation with the grace of God.'

Here is a major point: The emphasis upon God's work does not abolish the

work of man, even though the work of man is in its source a work of God. And a further main point is this: The stressing of personal, empirical and experiential religion is not subjective in the sense that such religion only depends or mostly depends upon human activity, feelings, and experiences.

III

Methodist theology stands on firm ground when stressing prevenient grace as the basis for human action (reaction) and emphasizing the possibility of working out one's own salvation. But how is this thought in detail?

Sin brought man away from God. Man lost his *justitia originalis*, his original state of righteousness. How far from God did sin lead him? The Roman Catholic Church thinks that man was created ethically indefinite, but in addition received the so-called *donum superadditum*, a special gift that made it possible for him to control his passions. This special gift was lost in the Fall; but there is still a remnant of God or a God's image that gives the natural basis for man's contact with God. Protestantism, on the other hand, teaches that man totally lost his original righteousness in the Fall. There was nothing left in man that could serve as the contact-point for God's saving work on him. Man is totally depraved. John Wesley agrees whole-heartedly with the reformers on this point.

If this is accepted, it seems an impossible task for God to have contact with men; the point of contact is not there. Well, this is true so far as creation goes. The contact-point is not there as a rescued gift from creation. The contact point is a question of atonement, of salvation and grace. From the Cross grace goes out to all men, building up the basis for acceptance of salvation. Even the contact-point is a result of grace—prevenient grace.

The basis for our return to God is grace—both when we speak of God's work for us, and when we speak of our work in coming to God. There is no 'natural' contact-point for salvation in the human heart. Even the contact-point is grace: 'For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2₈).

But how is this worked out? Lutheranism bases the thought of *gratia preveniens* basically upon baptism. In baptism the child receives the prevenient grace which makes him a child of God. But to say that prevenient grace is bound only to baptism is to misinterpret it in two dangerous ways. First, it means a limitation of prevenient grace. In our opinion prevenient grace goes farther back in the child's life than baptism. We think it goes back to the birth of the child. The child, when he enters this world, enters not only a world of sin; this world is by the grace of God also a redeemed world. The child is not only in the succession of Adam and his sin; he is also in the succession of Christ and His grace. 'That was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world' (John 1₉). 'Therefore as by the offence of one judgement came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life' (Rom. 5₁₈).

Second, by limiting prevenient grace only to baptism. Lutheranism does not make a distinction between prevenient grace and saving grace. It is also questionable whether Lutheranism distinguishes between saving grace and sanctifying grace.

What does Methodism teach about prevenient grace? We quote Harald

Lindström:⁵ 'Wesley believes that in natural man the image of God was completely lost. This applies to the moral image in which Adam was created and which constituted the essence of his relation to God. It is chiefly this that Wesley has in mind. On the other hand man's natural and political images have not been entirely lost, although in these respects too he has undergone severe depravation. Consequently man has retained his character as a personal being and certain of his features incidental to this character. He still has "the spiritual nature and immortality of the soul" and also "a degree of dominion over the creatures".' Lindström continues: 'He has fallen but still retains "an immaterial principle, a spiritual nature, endued with understanding, and affections, and a degree of liberty; of a self-moving, yes, and self-governing power", without which he would be "a mere machine or stock or stone". In this respect Wesley finds a certain continuity between man's life before and after the Fall. Yet it is a circumstance which in no way alters his idea of natural man. From the point of view of salvation natural man has no resources of his own whatsoever. He is sinful through and through, has no knowledge of God and no power to turn to him of his own free will.'

To totally corrupt men God gives, and He gives to all of them, prevenient grace. Lindström states that this is a doctrine that appears in Wesley's writings only in passing, and seldom in the years immediately after 1738. Wesley's concern was absorbed by the distinction between natural man, dead in sin, and man vitalized by faith. His attention was, therefore, devoted to the saving grace operative in justification and the new birth. 'With time; however,' says Lindström, 'prevenient grace acquires increasing importance, and concurrently his divergence from Calvinistic doctrine of election and his acceptance of Arminianism becomes more evident.'

The idea of prevenient grace is in Wesley logically bound up with the Arminian view of election. Although natural man is devoid of free will, all men have been endowed with a measure of free will and some power of discernment. As Wesley states in *Predestination Calmly Considered*, 'Natural free will, in the present state of mankind, I do not understand: I only assert that there is a measure of free will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which "enlightens every man that cometh into the world".' 'The liberty thus given to man is a liberty founded on grace,' says Lindström. 'Wesley believes that God redeems man as freely acting being. Grace is not irresistible. Man can either co-operate with it or oppose to it.' 'In the last resort the doctrine is based upon his [Wesley's] conception of God. Such free will harmonizes better to Wesley's mind with God's wisdom, justice and mercy than the reprobation which he says is the alternative.'

In Wesley's opinion, according to Lindström, the first effect of prevenient grace, is that it confers some discernment on everyone, although natural man as such lacks all knowledge of God. Here Wesley concurs with St Paul's statement in the Epistle to the Romans that even heathens are not without knowledge of God and His law. This discernment does not derive from the natural image of God (*imago Dei*), in which Wesley does not believe. Neither does it stem from so-called natural theology (*theologia naturalis*).

Secondly, Wesley thinks that the light given to all men through prevenient grace is particularly associated with conscience and its workings. But Wesley

sees conscience not as something 'natural', but as an expression of prevenient grace. Although everyone by nature is dead in sin, no one is in a purely natural state. No one is quite without God's grace, unless he has stifled it. To Wesley, therefore, conscience is a manifestation of prevenient grace. Wesley did not completely succeed in distinguishing between the so-called natural conscience and conscience as a manifestation of divine grace, but he has pointed out an important truth: God is working through prevenient grace in the conscience of man.

Thirdly, Lindström states that Wesley's doctrine of salvation is dependent upon his view of prevenient grace, saying that, on one side, man becomes entirely dependent upon God for salvation, and on the other side, the individual is responsible for the gift granted upon him through prevenient grace.

IV

It has been a joy to me to recognize the importance of the doctrine of prevenient grace in Methodist theological thinking. The basis of Methodist theology is the grace of God through Jesus Christ. That grace goes back to the very beginning of human life, and starts in the human heart as soon as it begins to beat. It prepares man to receive full salvation, and it is the basis for the Methodist doctrine of Christian Perfection or Perfect Love. It places the responsibility for the acceptance of salvation upon man himself, but it states also that salvation is a gift of God, and the work of salvation, both historically and personally, is God's work. And, most important for me, it gives me a basis of sound theological thinking for the fact that when I am counselling a person in stress and tension, I can depend upon God's work, both in me and in him whom I make a humble attempt in God's name to help. I can depend upon the fact that God is working graciously in man; therefore I can work.

For my psychological thinking, as well as for my practice as a counsellor and helper in the spiritual and emotional needs of man, this line of thought has been a bridge between two areas of science which makes it possible to unite theological thinking and ministerial practice in a new way for the practical benefit of souls in need. I agree with Dr Harold Roberts's statement in this conference that 'The main roots of our maladjustments are spiritual'. If so, we have a duty to express our theological thinking, which we must make as clear as possible, in ministerial service among our fellow men, and we have a duty to make that service as gentle and efficient as possible by the help of all we can learn about human life and reactions. This is not a question of semantics or linguistics, of translating theological terms of words into psychological or psychiatric language. That is of no help. It leads astray. We have not solved a single problem by translation of languages. We have only puzzled ourselves by thinking that we have made a contribution to the solution of man's deep needs when we only have got hold of some superficial expressions of these needs. This is a question of communicating the will of God and the power of God to man in his very practical and deep-felt needs. That is our obligation. The problems of man, emotional and rational, are not unsolvable. Through the grace of God and by insight into the will of God and the problems of man, there is hope for all. That is sound Methodist theology, and it is good psychology.

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¹ *Wesley and Sanctification* (Epworth Press), p.1.

² The italics are mine.

³ *The Theology of John Wesley* (Abingdon Cokesbury, 1946), p.114.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.115. ⁵ *Op. cit.* pp.44ff.