

Abstract

Broadening the Perspective: Prevenient Grace in Contemporary Methodist Theology

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The notion of prevenient grace is a pivotal part of Methodist theology and is, in this tradition, traced back to its founder, John Wesley. The main aim of the dissertation is to explore how contemporary theologians in the Methodist tradition express the notion of prevenient grace, connect it to other fields of theology such as the image of God, salvation, the means of grace and ethics, and thus contribute to systematic theology. Randy L. Maddox has contributed to the understanding of prevenient grace, mainly in his book *Responsible Grace* from 1994. The dissertation analyzes and discusses his theology as the base, and other contemporary theologians in the Methodist tradition as they confirm, adjust, contradict, or expand on Maddox's understanding.

The main research question reads as follows: *How can contemporary understandings of prevenient grace within the Methodist tradition contribute to developing a consistent overarching theology?*

The first step in the dissertation is to explore how the theologians understand the notion of prevenient grace. The analysis in this part is based on the four categories of prevenient grace as pardon, power, presence, and as creation and humans being created in the image of God. Pardon and power are Maddox's categories of grace, and the other two are displayed in the material and added in the current research. In the discussion of Part 1, a definition of prevenient grace is provided:

Prevenient grace is the pardoning and empowering presence of the triune God, embracing all human beings and all of creation universally, creating and renewing the image of God in humans and by all means inviting to salvation and continued relationship, providing their ability to respond to grace and agency to participate in God's mission in the world.

The second step, in Part 2 of the dissertation, is to relate the theologians' understandings of prevenient grace to their understandings of God, salvation, means of grace, and ethics. These four fields of theology are chosen because of distinctions displayed in the material. The dissertation demonstrates that differences in the theologians' understandings of the

notion of prevenient grace are connected to differences in their understandings of other theological fields.

One contribution of the research is the distinctions between a narrow understanding of prevenient grace, a broad understanding in the horizontal direction, and a broad understanding in the vertical direction. The distinction between narrow and broad is found in the material, the further distinction of the horizontal and vertical directions is a constructive contribution to the research. A narrow understanding of prevenient grace is connected to the notion of the fall and limited to the period on the way of salvation in a human being's life before conversion, justification, or a conscious faith. A broad understanding of prevenient grace in the horizontal direction is a broadening along the way of salvation. At the one end, prevenient grace is considered relevant from creation, not just from the fall. At the other end, prevenient grace understood as God's grace always being a step ahead of human response is relevant all along the way of salvation, that is all through Christian life and even the eternal life of a human being. A broad understanding of prevenient grace in the vertical direction is a broadening to fields of theology other than salvation, or a broadening of the notion of salvation itself. The thesis documents that such a broadening of the notion of prevenient grace includes nature, a corporate understanding of grace and human abilities as grace-given, with implications for ethics.

The third step is the concluding discussion of what a contemporary understanding of prevenient grace contributes to systematic theology, and how it contributes to the understanding of what it means to be human in the world. The conclusion of the dissertation is to broaden the notion of prevenient grace in both a horizontal and vertical direction without diminishing a narrow understanding, and that a narrow understanding works best within a broader perspective. Further, prevenient grace is considered a useful and necessary notion within contemporary Methodist theology. The notion is not necessary in the same way in other theological traditions, but can be a meaningful contribution to the ecumenical dialogue and further systematic theological work on a general contemporary level. The notion of prevenient grace contributes to systematic theology by holding together the understanding of humans constantly being embraced by God's grace, always being invited and to be in relations with God, creation and each other, and universally to be empowered and given agency.