

Methodist Theology

The key emphasis of Wesley's theology relates to how Divine grace operates within the individual. Wesley defined the Way of Salvation as the operation of grace in at least three parts: Prevenient Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace.

Prevenient grace, or the grace that "goes before" us, is given to all people generally but particularly to those chosen of God. *And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.* (Acts 13:48)

It is that power which enables us to love and motivates us to seek a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This grace is the present work of God to turn us from our sin-corrupted human will to the loving will of the Father. In this work, God desires that we might sense both our sinfulness before God and God's offer of salvation. *Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.* (Romans 7:7b) Prevenient grace allows those tainted by sin to nevertheless make a truly free choice to accept or reject God's salvation in Christ. *And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* (Joshua 24:15)

Justifying Grace or Accepting Grace is that grace, offered by God to all people, that we receive by faith and trust in Christ, through which God pardons the believer of sin. It is in justifying grace we are received by God, in spite of our sin. In this reception, we are forgiven through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The justifying grace cancels our guilt and empowers us to resist the power of sin and to fully love God and neighbor. Today, justifying grace is also known as conversion, "accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior," or being "born again". Jesus answered him, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* (John 3:3)

John Wesley originally called this experience the New Birth. This experience can occur in different ways; it can be one transforming moment, such as an altar call experience, or it may involve a series of decisions across a period of time.

Sanctifying Grace is that grace of God which sustains the believers in the journey toward Christian Perfection: a genuine love of God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and a genuine love of our neighbors as ourselves. Sanctifying grace enables us to respond to God by leading a Spirit-filled and Christ-like life aimed toward love.

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

Wesley never claimed this state of perfection for himself but instead insisted the attainment of perfection was possible for all Christians. Here the English Reformer parted company with both Luther and Calvin, who denied that a man would ever reach a state in this life in which he could not fall into sin. Such a man can lose all inclination to evil and can gain perfection in this life.

Wesleyan theology maintains that salvation is the act of God's grace entirely, from invitation, to pardon, to growth in holiness. *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* (Eph. 2:8,9)

Furthermore, God's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace interact dynamically in the lives of Christians from birth to death. According to Wesleyan understanding, good works were the fruit of one's salvation, not the way in which that salvation was earned.

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (James 2:17-19)

Faith and good works go hand in hand in Methodist theology: a living tree naturally and inevitably bears fruit. Wesleyan theology rejects the doctrine of eternal security, believing that salvation can be rejected. Wesley emphasized that believers must continue to grow in their relationship with Christ, through the process of Sanctification.

A key outgrowth of this theology is the United Methodist dedication not only to the Evangelical Gospel of repentance and a personal relationship with God, but also to the Social Gospel and a commitment to social justice issues that have included abolition, women's suffrage, labor rights, civil rights, and ministry with the poor.