

# Do We Still Believe in Prevenient Grace?

*I see us doing too much of our mission and ministry as if it were simply our work.*

Minerva G. Carcaño

A few years ago I had the great opportunity to visit Wesley's Chapel. I confess that I went only out of a sense of historical inquiry. I expected no more than to fill some gaps in my knowledge of Wesleyan history, and as a visual person, to gain some images for my mind's eye. Something quite unexpected occurred, however. As I arrived at the doors to this small yet grand chapel, I began to experience a deep joy! A chamber orchestra was performing in the sanctuary. Volunteers warmly welcomed this American with the unusual last name, asking as many questions of me as they answered for me. I strolled into the small side chapel where sits an organ that Charles Wesley once played and heard in my soul the hymns that sprang forth as an expression of his faith so long ago. Finally, on that rainy afternoon I went and sat by John Wesley's tomb and had a lengthy conversation with him. When I left Wesley's Chapel I was very aware of a deep feeling of homecoming.



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I had truly not expected what I experienced at Wesley's Chapel. Though a third generation Methodist, what could a Hispanic woman from South Texas have in common with an English gentleman and Anglican priest from the 18th century? What I discovered on that day is that faith binds us together in ways that go deeper than the color of our skin, our gender, our economic standing, our political perspective, and even the time of our human existence. It was a lesson for me as I do my part to encourage The United Methodist Church to be a truly inclusive community of faith. I rejoiced at Wesley's Chapel that faith has persevered among the people called Methodist. I celebrated the growth of Methodism over these past three centuries. Most of all, I thanked God for powerfully stirring a warm heart within John Wesley so that he proclaimed words of good news with such a passion that he touched even me.

Leaving Wesley's Chapel that afternoon I had the clear sense that Wesley knew that God would be eternally faithful in redeeming and reclaiming God's own throughout the generations. Not only did Wesley have utmost confidence in God's redemptive work, he saw it happening all around him as expression of God's grace. Three hundred years later,

God continues to be faithful, grace is a daily gift, and all around us the Holy Spirit is touching hearts, planting seeds of faith, and leading all God's children home. The latter is what John Wesley called prevenient grace.

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As 21st century United Methodists I don't hear us speaking much about prevenient grace. I am not sure that we believe in it any longer. If we do, we have lost the focus of what prevenient grace truly is. Our *Book of Discipline* describes prevenient grace as a divine love that surrounds all humanity, prompting us to actions that are pleasing to God, convicting us of our sin, awakening within us a longing for redemption, and moving us to faith.<sup>1</sup> Why do I think we have lost our belief in prevenient grace? Because I see us doing too much of our mission and ministry as if it were simply *our* work.

Last summer the district I serve hosted an event of public celebration of faith. Held in the center of the city of Portland, Oregon, there was music, liturgical dance, balloons, free bibles, tables of information about the work of United Methodists in our district, and a marvelous master of ceremony who for four hours reminded all that The United Methodist Church is one with an open

heart, an open mind, and an open door. Hundreds of people came, but over the two years of planning that this event took to prepare, and even on that day as it became reality, many of us doubted that it would make any difference in the life of our community. Even weeks after the event, there was still discussion about its value. We were judging and evaluating this event of public witness as our work alone.

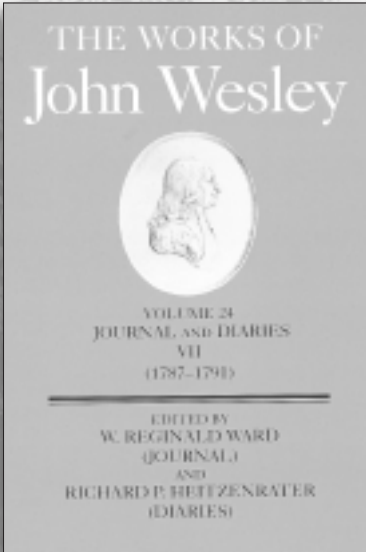
On the day of the event I took the metro to the city square where our event was being held. At the second stop on the way, a woman and a young man boarded and I moved to make room for them. The woman took the seat next to me while the young man chose the seat directly across from us. Thinking they might be Hispanic, I inquired if they spoke Spanish. The woman's eyes brightened and she moved closer to me as she confirmed that she and her son were from Latin America. Our conversation led me to tell her that I was going to a church event at the city square. She asked me about my church. I was pleased to be able to share with her that we had recently begun a Hispanic ministry in the community.

Tears began to flow down the woman's cheeks as she told me that God had been tugging at her heart, and that that very morning she had asked God for direction. Though she had begun the day doubting that God heard her, she now believed that God had brought us together as an answer to her prayer. It was a moment of seeing the fruits of prevenient grace and experiencing the justifying grace of Jesus Christ. My new friend joined me for our district event that afternoon, and now as I write, I am in prayer with this new sister in the faith as she prepares to become a member of the body of Jesus Christ through The United Methodist Church. She is right; it was God's prevenient grace that touched her and led her to her salvation and to a family of faith.

Mine was not the only experience of grace on that day. Did our mission and ministry event make a difference? Yes, it did; but it's a difference we can only see when we look for what God is doing among us and not merely for whether what we planned worked as we expected. Can we trust that divine love does indeed surround all of humanity, holding us close, loving us all, and willing us all towards holy communion with God and

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with each other? I wholeheartedly believe we can, by God's grace, as we reclaim the journey to Christian perfection grounded in God's sanctifying grace. As we pray, search the Scriptures, share in the Lord's Supper, enter into Christian conferencing with each other, and actively love our neighbors, God is able to affirm within our hearts that God's own grace is with us and all of creation. It is a gift. In the days and years to come, may

we open our hearts and our lives to God's daily gift of grace and, as good United Methodists, may we share the gift with all whose paths we cross. □

<sup>1</sup>*The United Methodist Book of Discipline* 2000, p. 46