

Forms of Enabling Grace

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In my writings I have discussed various forms of enabling grace. This short article will serve as a pictorial summation of two spheres of enabling grace: one preconversional, the other postconversional. Common grace is common (i.e., shared) by both spheres of grace. To build our spheres, we will first need to define our terms.

Definitions

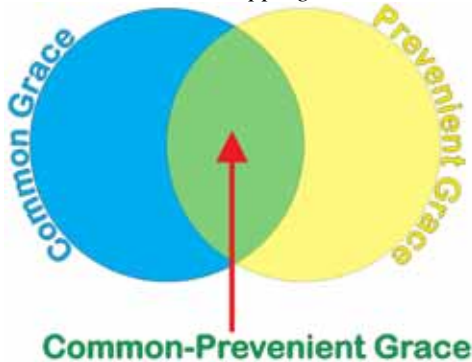
Common Grace is the universal enablement of God that enables human beings to exercise good will toward one another and perform socially good works. Its positive influence restrains evil and upholds civil justice. This universal level of grace is insufficient so as to enable the lost sinner to respond savingly toward God, much less to seek God or have stirring of good will toward God.

Prevenient Grace is a higher form of enabling grace wherein God may give special revelation with the explicit message of salvation that is sufficient for salvation. However, this general external draw effected by the explicit word of God is insufficient apart from the internal, cooperative, effective drawing of the Holy Spirit. One must have both in order to savingly believe the gospel.

Common-Prevenient Grace is the overlapping, intermediate form of enabling grace, bridging the gap between common grace and prevenient grace. Hence, it is appropriately called common-prevenient grace. It is a universal call to fallen humanity that begins as the individual's first stirring of good toward God in response to an internal, effective, general, supernatural call from God. This initiatory draw uses general revelation (i.e., nature, history, and conscience) as its instrument and enables the lost to respond positively toward God. This general call, however, is insufficient for salvation. If one responds to the initiatory stages of this lower form of prevenient grace, so as to begin seeking God through enabling grace, then God may give the higher form of prevenient grace denoted in yellow.

Preconversional Grace

Illustration 1. Overlapping Grace



Let's picture this overlap with a diagram. Blue and yellow make green, so the overlap, representing common-prevenient grace, is color coded as green. If you prefer baseball, think of common grace as first base, common-prevenient grace as second base, and prevenient grace as third base. The goal is to reach home base—saving grace—the grace that qualifies you for a home in Heaven. You have to get to first, second, and third base *before* you can get to home base, which is why these higher forms of grace are called *prevenient*, meaning *that which comes before*. Another way to picture this progress would be to think of climbing a mountain or layers.

Illustration 2. Levels of Preconversional Grace



The goal, of course, is to move up the levels of grace and not be content with the lower levels. God's enabling grace at one level enables us to move on to the next level. Unfortunately, some people choose not to advance on to the next level. Some people choose not to respond to God's draw so as to seek Him. Or some start seeking Him but then stop doing so. They move up a level or two and then stop or even regress. In fact, one can reach the upper level, that is, prevenient grace, and then reject this prevenient draw to saving grace and even reach a hardened state in which one could only grope for God in the level of *common-prevenient grace* without hope of finding Him—that is, without being able to ever enter (or re-enter) the level of *prevenient grace*. In other words, one could climb to the top level and choose not to go on to saving grace and as a result fall back down to the lower level or even the lowest level and never be able to reach the highest level of enabling grace in this sphere again. Therefore, it is best to move on to saving grace by simply trusting in Jesus for eternal life and thus be assured of having a home in Heaven. Don't put it off. One day you may find out that you have waited too late if you keep procrastinating.

Illustration 3. The Preconversional Sphere of Enabling Grace



If at any point you ever trust in Jesus for eternal life, so as to be assured of reaching Heaven apart from any performance on your part, then you are immediately moved from the preconversional sphere of enabling grace to the postconversional sphere of enabling grace. You are assured of having a home in Heaven. But now God wants to enable you to qualify for a mansion in Heaven, not merely a home in Heaven. Related statements might be made about the levels of grace in this postconversional sphere, however.

Postconversional Grace

Illustration 4. Levels of Postconversional Grace



After you become a believer you are still a human being, of course, and thus still able to experience God's universal enablement that enables all human beings—unregenerate and regenerate—to do good. But now, as a believer with the Holy Spirit residing within you, a higher form of grace is available to you, namely sanctifying grace, a grace that enables you to live the Christian life in a way that pleases God. Just as parents delight in helping their children learn to walk, so God delights in helping us learn how to live the Christian life. This level of grace is available to all Christians who are trying to learn how to walk in a way that pleases their Heavenly Father. As time passes, though, parents expect and delight in the more mature development of their children. God does also. This mature level of sanctifying grace is, unfortunately, not experienced by all believers. Time, desire, effort, obedience, Bible study, prayer, and Christian fellowship, among other things, are required to mature. But the rewards are worth it. Regrettably, some believers disqualify themselves from such rewards. They may reach the upper level but then fall back to the lower or lowest level. Nonetheless, they cannot leave this postconversional sphere of soteriological grace.

Illustration 5. The Postconversional Sphere of Enabling Grace



We can retrogress to the previous levels in this sphere, but we cannot retrogress from this sphere to the previous sphere. Having a mansion in Heaven is what is at stake in the postconversional sphere. All believers will have a home in Heaven, but not all believers will have a mansion in Heaven. Mistological grace is the goal for this sphere. This grace pertains to rewards in Heaven. We should want to please God so that He will be pleased with us and say, “Well done.” So do well.

Preconversional and Postconversional Repentance

Three texts regarding repentance will suffice to illustrate these principles in regard to preconversional and postconversional grace. As Laurence Vance points out in his book, *The Other Side of Calvinism* (pp. 513-515), Calvinists are fond of claiming that repentance is a gift because it is given by God (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2Tim 2:25). But their position is refuted logically, lexically, exegetically, morally, and contextually.

Logically, we would deduce that if repentance is a gift, then we have a choice as to whether or not to receive it. If so, then repentance is not given by means of irresistible grace but by enabling grace. God gives us the ability and opportunity to repent. These abilities and opportunities are not gifts but gracious enablements. Biblical confirmation of this logical intuition is easily demonstrated in Rom 2:4-5, where we find that God’s kindness leads us to repentance; it does not drag us irresistibly to repentance. The context shows that we may stubbornly refuse to repent despite God’s kind leading to repentance. God’s gracious kindness makes repentance desirable, not inevitable. This argument demonstrates the logical and biblical fallacy of the Calvinistic position regarding the initial drawing toward repentance. The draw is not irresistible but enabling. Thus neither being led to repentance nor the initial granting of repentance are a gift.

For that matter, continuation of the opportunity or ability to repent is not a gift either. According to the Bible, the gifts of God were irrevocable (Rom 11:29). But the ability or opportunity to repent, so as to obtain the desired outcome, is certainly revocable. For instance, the nation of Israel tried to repent after they had sinned at Kadesh Barnea, but they were told that they could not enter the Promised Land. Even so, they repented and attempted to go in and take the land, but their attempted repentance was too late. This repentance was not God-given but self-induced, or at best it was not a God-given repentance at the third level, the level that would have been necessary to obtain the desired outcome. God already had sworn that they would not be able to enter His rest in the Promised Land (Num 14:1-45; Heb 3:16-19). Esau is another example of someone who repented but at a level too low to obtain the outcome he desired (Heb 12:16-17). Believers today can be examples of such inability as well (2Tim 2:25; Heb 6:4-6; 2Pet 2:20-22). From such examples, it is obvious that the opportunities that God gives us to repent are not expressions of His irresistible drawing; rather, they are manifestations of His gracious enabling which may be withdrawn.

Lexically, we know that just because something is given does not mean that it is a gift. Rewards are also given, for example. *Didomi* is the Greek word used for *grant* in Acts 5:31; 11:18; and 2Tim 2:25. To be sure, the word can be used in reference to giving a gift (e.g., Jn 4:10; Acts 11:17; Eph 4:8; Rev 21:6). But it can mean to pay, to give payment, to render in response to merit (e.g., Mt 20:4; 26:15; Lk 22:5; Rev 2:7,10,17,23,26,28; 3:21; 6:11; 11:18; 20:4). Whether it means to give something as a gift or as a payment is determined by the context. *Didomi* is also used in Mt 25:15 for the giving of talents: “And to one he *gave* [*didomi*] five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each **according to his own ability**; and he went on his journey” (Mt 25:15). What he *gave* were opportunities to serve according to one’s ability. These talents are not irrevocable; thus they are not gifts (cp. Rom 11:29). God rewards us for how we use what He has given us. He is not rewarding us for His gifts, but for our work.

Exegetically, we know that God gives us the ability to believe but also to suffer (Phil 1:29). Suffering is given but requires our cooperation. If we suffer with Him, we will reign with Him (2Tim 2:12). Rulership is a reward given to those believers who choose to suffer with Christ. Suffering with Christ is not a gift but a work for which we are rewarded. What is given is not a gift but the ability and opportunity to earn a reward. But not all believers choose to suffer with Christ. Some choose to deny Him instead, as the second half of the verse goes on to suggest.

Morally, Calvinists do a grave injustice when they picture God as limiting the possibility of repenting to the elect. Seemingly, the Calvinistic God rolls the heavenly dice and elects to give the abilities to repent and believe the gospel to a select few. The rest never had a chance to repent or believe; nevertheless, God condemns them for not repenting or believing. This would be like criticizing a paralytic in a wheelchair for not walking. Never mind that the paralytic is paralyzed from the waist down. Picturing God in such terms is morally reprehensible. The Calvinistic position is indefensible.

Contextually, the Calvinistic argument fails badly. As to the first of the three texts that Calvinists cite in this capacity, consider the context in which Peter and the apostles spoke these words: “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, **to grant repentance to Israel**, and forgiveness of sins” (Act 5:31). Both John the Baptist and Jesus came preaching repentance to Israel. As a result, Israel had the opportunity to repent. Did Israel repent? As Vance points out, all the Jews did not repent. Thus this call to repentance was not irresistible. By and large, the people of Israel did not repent. Most of Israel failed to repent even though the opportunity to repent was granted to Israel as a whole. In fact, on the occasion that Peter spoke these words, the Jewish leaders wanted to kill him. Nevertheless, they had been granted the opportunity to repent, though they refused to do so.

This granting of repentance to Israel cannot be limited to spiritual Israel because it is juxtaposed in the context of the book of Acts with the second Calvinistic proof text: “Well then, God has **granted to the Gentiles also** the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). The point is that just as God had given the nation of Israel the opportunity to repent, He was now giving those who were not a part of the nation of Israel to repent. God has granted this opportunity both to the Jews and Gentiles. It is given universally, in other words, not selectively or irresistibly.

What about those Jewish leaders who heard the message of repentance and then blasphemed the Holy Spirit so as to be guilty of an eternal sin? When they first heard the message of repentance from John and Jesus, they could have repented. Many of them surely were at the preconversional level of common-prevenient grace. Some of them perhaps moved to prevenient grace. But most of them refused to be persuaded. They hardened their hearts so as to attribute Jesus’ works to the devil rather than the Holy Spirit, and in doing so they reached a hardened state, where God judicially made it impossible for them to reach or remain at the prevenient-level. At most, they could only attain the common-prevenient level, trying to live lives in harmony with God’s revealed will, but they were incapable of reaching true harmony with God thereafter. It is possible for a similar type of thing to happen to a believer after conversion. The last of the three texts is such an example.

In this third example, Paul instructs Timothy how to deal with these opposing men: “With gentleness *correcting* [*paideuo*] those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the *knowledge* [*epignosis*] of the truth, and they may *come back to their senses* [*ananepho*] and escape from the snare of the devil, having been *captured alive* [*zograeo*] by him to do his will” (2Tim 2:25-26). *Paideuo* is not used of disciplining false believers. Consequently, those in opposition to the truth in 2Tim 2:25-26 are genuine believers who have not yet come to this *mature knowledge* (*epignosis*). Contextually, this passage refers to genuine believers, such as Hymenaeus and Philetus, who had gone astray from the truth (2Tim 2:17-18; TM). They now need to be brought back to the truth.

Paul had turned the theologically erring Hymenaeus “over to Satan” earlier, just like he did the morally erring brother in 1Cor 5:5, so that God could use Satan as His whip to *discipline* [*paideuo*] Hymenaeus (1Tim 1:20). God child-trains His children, not the devil’s children. The fact that God (as the ultimate agent) uses Satan as an intermediate means of discipline does not mean that they are Satan’s children. When a father takes a belt to his son’s bottom, this does not mean that the belt becomes the son’s father! Such a description could be very well descriptive of those believers who are caught in Satan’s snare. They proceed from “bad to worse” (2Tim 3:13), a description Peter applied to believers (2Pet 2:20). They always are learning and never able to come to this *mature knowledge* (*epignosis*) of the truth (2Tim 3:7).

Such a fate would apply more readily to believers who have committed the sin of Kadesh Barnea, than to unbelievers who have not yet come to experience the saving knowledge of the gospel. Those believers who start off bad may come to a worse state in which it becomes impossible for them to ever come to an experiential knowledge of what it means to be one of God’s kingdom rulers. Paul holds out hope that maybe some of these believers had not yet committed the sin of Kadesh Barnea but may regain their previous openness to the kingdom truth and become kingdom rulers—if they repent (2Tim 2:25-26). But once the Kadesh-Barnea line is crossed, the level of sanctifying grace leading to misthological grace is no longer possible. At that point, the highest level of grace left for a believer is common-sanctifying grace.