

The Light of God in Christ: Christology and Prevenient Grace in the Prologue of John

Nicholas Rudolph Quient

Abstract:

In what sense Prevenient Grace? For Wesleyans and other like-minded Christians, the grace of God is an apocalyptic reality that enables all of humanity to comprehend the risen Christ. While much has been written in favor of this doctrine (and against it), there has been little work done by Wesleyans in providing an exegetical basis for prevenient grace. Rather than engage in proof texting, the purpose of this article is to respond to criticisms and to offer a theological and exegetical reading of John's Prologue that helps clarify and support the Wesleyan doctrine of Prevenient Grace.

Keywords:

Prevenient Grace, Gospel of John, theology, Christology, revelation, apocalyptic, Wesleyanism, anthropology

Prevenient Grace is often seen as a theological citadel with minimal supportive foundation. Reformed theologian Thomas R. Schreiner once wrote, "The doctrine of prevenient grace should be accepted only if it can be sustained from a careful exegesis of the Scriptures. What was most striking to me in my research was how little scriptural exegesis has been done by Wesleyans in defense of prevenient grace."¹ William Combs offered a similarly constructive claim:

¹ "Does Scripture Teach Prevenient Grace in the Wesleyan Sense?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and*

Arminians offer very little actual hard exegetical support for prevenient grace, whether of the universal or individualistic variety,² and what they give is hardly convincing ... prevenient grace seems to be more a theological necessity in the Arminian system than a demonstrable teaching of Scripture.³

We will return to assess the claims made by Schreiner and Combs as we move through John's Prologue, but the impression given by many is that prevenient grace is a house of theological cards built upon sinking sand. While recent literature has assuaged several of these claims,⁴ the aim of this article is to demonstrate that a central exegetical pillar of prevenient grace is located in the incarnation of the Son of God as depicted in John 1:1-18. This exegetical pillar—among others—rests on the totality of a coherent theological-exegetical understanding of the prologue, not an isolated appeal to John 1:9. While other texts and theological axioms can be offered in defense of prevenient grace (c.f. Titus 2:11-14; John 6:44; 12:32; numerous Psalms of David),⁵ my

Grace. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 245-46.

² This is an odd claim, because the Wesleyan-Arminian doctrine of election is decidedly corporate, although it does not negate the individual. See Brian J. Abasciano, "Clearing Up Misconceptions about Corporate Election," *Ashland Theological Journal* 41 (2009): 59-90 and his specific engagement with Schreiner in "Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49.2 (2006): 351-371.

³ William W. Combs, "Does the Bible Teach Prevenient Grace?" *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 10.1 (2005): 1-13, 13.

⁴ For example, W. Brian Shelton offers a helpful survey of the biblical data. *Prevenient Grace: God's Provision for Fallen Humanity* (Anderson: Warner, 2014), ch1.

⁵ Indeed, one should not rest an entire doctrine on a singular text, especially when all of Scripture is profitable for instruction and the construction of theological formation. However, I believe there are sufficient reasons as to why John 1:1-18 (esp. John 1:9), when read as a theological whole, provide a sufficient and compelling pillar of exegetical support for the doctrine of prevenient grace. My goal is not the exclusion of other texts; rather, it is to show that John 1:18 (esp. 1:9) fits consistently within a

purpose in focusing specifically on the Prologue of John is based on two reasons: first, John 1:9 is perhaps the most cited text in favor of the doctrine of prevenient grace and thus one should interpret John 1:9 within John's initial discourse. Most of the positive and negative assessments of prevenient grace are located on the battlefield of John 1:9 (both Schreiner and Combs spend significant time and energy engaging the passage), and so it is fitting to see how John 1:9 relates to prevenient grace and the incarnation within the entire Prologue. Second, the prologue of John's Gospel remains a central text that has captivated the Christian imagination since the first readers within the early church—including John Wesley. Kenneth J. Collins rightly says, "in good Anglican fashion, Wesley supported his doctrine of prevenient grace by an appeal to both Scripture and tradition, that is by reference to the Gospel of John ("The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" [John 1:9])."⁶ Such a text has enormous implications for Christian theology and proclamation, and I believe this much-beloved text, when read in concert with Wesley's vision, provides an incarnational lens by which we see God's prevenient gracious activity.⁷

However, before one can make walk through our passage, one must consider the definition of prevenient grace as offered by the Wesleyan tradition and perhaps expand upon the classification if the need is there.⁸

Ascertaining Prevenient Grace: An Exercise in Clarity

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church defines prevenient grace as follows:

larger canonical and biblical framework, and be used legitimately as support for prevenient grace.

⁶ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 74.

⁷ Collins has also noted elsewhere that John 1:9 was among Wesley's chief texts. See his *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 39ff.

⁸ All translations offered are my own, except when noted otherwise.

We acknowledge God's prevenient grace, the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will, and our "first slight transient conviction" of having sinned against God. God's grace also awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us toward repentance and faith.⁹

God's "prompt[ing]" grace leads all human beings toward an understanding of God, which itself may or may not (conditionally) lead to right relationship with God. In his sermon "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," John Wesley sees this divine act of love as being a larger process, which

Includes everything from the very first wish a person has to please God, to the very first insights a person has concerning God's will, and through to the first sense – be it ever so shallow – the person has of acknowledging their participation in sin the great flaw common to all, i.e., human brokenness in which we all sin against God. Each one of these first human insights demonstrate that within that heart is an inclination to seek and to choose life. Some degree of salvation is present in all persons touched by prevenient grace. There is noticeable in them the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, a heart which formerly was quite oblivious to God, unaware at all of the things God values (II.1).

Wesley presumes the initiating and benevolent activity of God toward humankind, thus grounding the entire salvation process outside of the human person while not *excluding* their

⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 52.

agency (or free will) from the process: “the person has of acknowledging their participation in sin the great flaw common to all.”¹⁰ Thomas Oden defines prevenient grace as “the grace that begins to enable one to choose further to cooperate with saving grace. By offering the will the restored capacity to respond to grace, the person then may freely and increasingly become an active, willing participant in receiving the conditions for justification.”¹¹ Roger Olson is more to the point: “the material principle of classical Arminian thought is prevenient grace. All of salvation is wholly and entirely of God’s grace.”¹² As such, numerous Arminian and Wesleyan scholars affirm this definition.¹³ One might summarize prevenient grace as follows: *God, acting preemptively in response to the universal effects of the Fall, has offered Christ to all persons as the light of the world for the purpose of displaying the Son as the enabling object of faith.* This divine act of grace precedes the creation of humanity, especially since Christ is actively and personally involved in the creation of all things (Col. 1:16).¹⁴ God-in-Christ is the light that enlightens all human beings. As John Wesley himself noted,

Every one has, sooner or later, good desires;
although the generality of men stifle them before
they can strike deep root, or produce any

¹⁰ For discussion on the “broad” and “narrow” aspects of Wesley’s utilization of prevenient grace, see Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 84ff.

¹¹ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 243.

¹² Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 158.

¹³ C.f. Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism & Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 153ff. Shelton, *Prevenient Grace*. Leo G. Cox, “Prevenient Grace—A Wesleyan View,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12.3 (1969): 143-149.

¹⁴ “For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or sovereignties or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him” (author’s translation).

considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world (III.4).¹⁵

Wesley's point is representative. This belief is simply the conclusion concerning Scripture, which teaches consistently about God's prevenient activity in creation—namely, his gracious disposition toward humankind. This includes *enablement* and *formation* through the means of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ The historical pedigree of prevenient grace has been well documented by W. Brian Shelton in his work *Prevenient Grace*, where he summarizes the definitional point as follows: “the doctrine of prevenient grace explains how the Christian God precedes his gracious, early activities in various venues.”¹⁷ God’s divine activity is not salvific per se, but is rather enabling.¹⁸ This is to be distinguished from Reformed theology’s view of common grace, which is not seen as salvific.¹⁹

Therefore, the purpose of this article is simple: to demonstrate the theological and exegetical viability of prevenient grace in Christian theology through a theological-exegetical analysis of the prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18), where the incarnation grounds the means of God’s universal²⁰ revelatory

¹⁵ *On Working out Our Own Salvation*. Sermon 85. Wesley is clearly citing John 1:9.

¹⁶ This notion of enablement is also noted by P.V. Joseph who writes, “Wesley is convinced that God’s sovereignty is never undermined by human participation. In fact, it is God’s sovereignty that empowers human participation in the redemptive work of God” in his article “An Appraisal of Prevenient Grace in John Wesley’s Soteriology,” *Doon Theological Journal* 7.2 (2010): 135-153, 153.

¹⁷ Shelton, *Prevenient Grace*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁹ C.f. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (GLH Publishing, 2017), 363ff. Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 76-77.

²⁰ Carlos Raúl Sosa Siliezar, *Savior of the World: A Theology of the Universal Gospel* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), xiv, rightly differentiates

power toward all of humanity. This incarnational revelatory power exists as such because Christ is presented as the *object* of faith as well as the expressed revelation (“light”) of God. Prevenient grace is, as I will argue, grounded in the incarnation of Jesus as exemplified in John’s exalted hymn-like prologue.

Incarnational Prevenient Grace : John 1:1-5.

1 In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 Through him all things have come into being, and not one thing that was made has come into being apart of him. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of humanity 5 and the Light shines into the darkness, and the darkness could not overpower it.

John begins with a fundamental assertion about the nature of the Word: he “was” (ἦν) before²¹ creation in the beginning (Ἐν ἀρχῇ).²² The imperfect ἦν suggests a previous indefinite point of existence before the “beginning/cause” (ἀρχῇ). Philo’s use of ἦν specifies the previous reality that “darkness was” (ἦν) before creation was fully formed (Opif. 1:32, alluding to Gen 1:2 LXX); in the same way, the Word “was” (ἦν) before “the beginning.” The tripartite description of the Word corresponds to his timelessness (*before* creation),²³ his personality (*with* God),²⁴ and his status (*as* God). Not only has the Word been present with God from before the beginning, but also “the

among the differences between soteriological universalism and “universalism.”

²¹ If one takes ἀρχῇ as “causal” (BDAG 138 s.v.), the logical priority consists of the Word existing *before* the initial cause.

²² Philo’s utilization of this expression corresponds to God’s own creational activity (Opi. 1:26).

²³ Wesley expressly refers to the Word existing “without any beginning.” *Explanatory Notes*, 212.

²⁴ The corroborative πρὸς τὸν Θεόν in v.1 and v.2 suggests spatial proximity and perhaps intentional relationality.

Fourth Evangelist insists that ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (1:1-2) has told the story of God (1:18).²⁵ John 1:2 confirms the antecedent notion where the Word is in close proximity to God: where God is before creation, the Word is also.²⁶ The Word *shares in* the divine characteristics of God, while being differentiated *from* God, as the prepositional πρὸς τὸν θεόν confirms (John 1:1-2). This status and divine characteristic of the Word suggests that it is proper and fitting that the Word will be involved in the creation of all things—as the universal creator, the Word has the status and character to operate with creative power. This notion of the universal creator (the creator of all things) will be an important aspect of the argument of John as it relates to the doctrine of prevenient grace.

After describing the divine presence and status of the Word, John moves on to portray the *creative power* of the Word in v.3: “*Through him all things have come into being, and not one thing that was made has come into being apart of him.*” The Word is at the center of all of God’s innovative creational activity. John’s use of γίνομαι (“to be,” “become”) with the Word as the subject affirms this universal creator’s capacity to generate and create. Philo’s use of ἐγένετο to refer to the “light” (φῶς) coming into being (Opif. 1:35) mirrors John’s own perspective that God’s creative supremacy results in the taming of the cosmos and in the birth of creation. John’s use of the language of “life” (ζωή) in 1:4 is rather intricate. The prepositional phrase “in him was life” (ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν) might denote “life” as the imputation of biological creation, where the giving of life to the previous “all things” (πάντα) is centralized. This is a possible meaning, and it is certainly not an exclusive reading of the text. If we accept that John is echoing the creation account in Genesis 1:1, then all things—including biological life—are under the creative direction of the Word.

²⁵ Francis J. Maloney, “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67.3 (2005): 454-468, 462.

²⁶ The pronoun οὗτος is tied to the previous clause where ὁ λόγος is used, suggesting a continuation of thought where ὁ λόγος is at center stage.

However, there is an additional shade of meaning here: the preposition “in” (ἐν) could denote agency or instrumentality—“by” or “through him was life” (Louw-Nida 90.10; LS 14342). These options need not exclude the other, and John most likely intends both. The self-generative power of the Word to construct and design something in himself *as* the divine mediator is a complementary notion that might reconcile the prepositional either/or. Another aspect of “life”²⁷ in John 1:4 is explicitly tied to the creation of humanity in the next clause: *and the life was the light of humanity* (καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων). The dual singular nouns “life”²⁸ and “light” (ἡ ζωὴ ... τὸ φῶς) have a dual meaning. While they are distinct notions, they nevertheless operate with a specific and united purpose: to describe the activity and ontic reality of the Word. “Life” was already present in the Word (1:4a) and “light” is an extension of God’s revelatory power through the Word.²⁹ Taken at their most basic meaning, “life” and “light” are twin ideas that express a single reality: that is, the Word *sustains*³⁰ all things (biological and non-biological) with the dissemination of divine *self-disclosure* and *creative power*. But how does this function in relation to “humanity” (τῶν ἀνθρώπων), especially as it concerns what we might call the “life-light?” For the righteous, “their life [will be] in the Lord’s light (καὶ ἡ ζωὴ αὐτῶν ἐν φωτὶ) and it will never cease” (Psalms of Solomon 3:12). The light of the Lord’s presence is perhaps life itself. The relationship between τῶν ἀνθρώπων and ἡ ζωὴ ... τὸ φῶς is

²⁷ This “life” might extend beyond material creation (if one is inclined to draw a sectarian line between natural and supernatural realities in our cosmic realm) to include an apocalyptic or eschatological element, but the notion of the creative giving of biological life-birth is most certainly included in this “life.”

²⁸ It is intriguing that John does not specify “life” as “his life” (i.e. the Word’s own life). Perhaps the language of “light” is meant as a metonymy for his own presence in the incarnation.

²⁹ Sirach 22:15 seems to view “light” as a metonymy for life itself: “Weep for the dead, for he has left the light behind; and weep for the fool, for he has left intelligence behind. Weep less bitterly for the dead, for he is at rest; but the life of the fool is worse than death.”

³⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*. Word Biblical Commentary Volume 36. Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 11.

somewhat ambiguous but it seems probable that John sees the concept of ἡ ζωὴ ... τὸ φῶς as the generative or creative *source* of τῶν ἀνθρώπων. This makes good sense of how John uses “life” here. Life, after all, is the generative key to the creation of humanity (Gen 2:7). However, this does not seem to adequately explain John’s use of “the light” (τὸ φῶς). How can the “light” be the *source* of humanity? One way is to correlate “life” and “light” as operative components of sequence: ἡ ζωὴ is generative (source) and *because* of the life (sequence), the light can therefore “shine into the darkness” (ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει). John’s use of ἡ ζωὴ requires an object (τῶν ἀνθρώπων) that can *accept* what is being established—light, as we shall see. A final point that begs for exploration is John’s first use of τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Does John intend for this articular genitive noun to encompass the totality of (fallen)³¹ humanity? Does John have a restricted perspective on which persons in God’s cosmos are capable of accepting this light (i.e. the elect)? It seems most plausible—given the universal and cosmic scope of John’s Prologue—to see τῶν ἀνθρώπων as universal and as cosmic as πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο. Indeed, “all things” (πάντα) as created by the Word would surely include τῶν ἀνθρώπων within its scope.³² Hence, one might even gloss τῶν ἀνθρώπων in John 1:4b as “all of humanity.”³³

John’s demarcation of the created cosmos as subjugated in “darkness” (σκοτία) affirms an apocalyptic epistemology. Darkness is a corrosive reality, much like Death and Sin. Philo speaks of the wicked person as follows: “In the wicked man the true opinion concerning God is overshadowed and kept out of sight, for he is full of darkness (σκότους), having no

³¹ Wesley conceived of τῶν ἀνθρώπων as “fallen man,” *Explanatory Notes*, 212.

³² One might find a notion of distinction between cosmos and humanity, although John’s use of “world/ cosmos” does not seem to easily fit inside such a view.

³³ John is rather emphatic on this point: καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν—“and not one thing that was made has come into being apart of him.” This would certainly include τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

divine irradiation, by means of which he may be able to contemplate things as they are” (Leg. 3:7). As such, for John, “darkness” suggests estrangement and hostility. The use of the negated verb “overpower” (κατέλαβεν) suggests agency and viciousness on the part of the “darkness,” acting against “him” (αὐτὸ). This verb is used to refer to the actions of a violent demoniac (Mark 9:18), which is contextually and theologically applicable to John’s use. Similarly, Jesus applies a verbal warning to his disciples not to cease from their walk, “so that the darkness does not overpower (καταλάβῃ) you” (John 12:35). Other uses of καταλαμβάνω in Jewish literature denote a king being “seized” and killed (Jos 11:10 LXX) as well as the killing of others (Josephus, Wars 4:540).³⁴ The world is characterized as an oppressive and shadowy territory, and the incarnation is the initial assault on the kingdom of darkness. Darkness was the reality that hovered over the deep (Gen 1:1-3; Philo, Opi 1:29-30) before creation was ever envisioned, shaped, and enlightened.³⁵ While one might think that all of humanity is entrenched in this kingdom—and they are—their agency has not been utterly removed, as we shall see. They are in desperate need of the glory of God’s light and that is what God will grant to them in the incarnation of his beloved Son.

In summation, John 1:1-5 is asserting the divine attributes and character of the Word in making all things, including all of humanity. John carefully but powerfully identifies the entire created realm as having retreated back into darkness (Gen 1:1-2 LXX) and is in need of God’s invasive power to illuminate

³⁴ Philo speaks of “a great darkness spreading over all persons” (καὶ πολὺ σκότος πάντων κατεκέχυτο τῶν σωμάτων), adding an apocalyptic and oppressive flair to his understanding of the cosmos (Cher. 1:59), which includes the “seizing of bodies” (καταλαμβάνεσθαι σώματα) by the darkening of the mind.

³⁵ The glosses offered by other English translations (like, “overshadow”) are legitimate, and I would argue that they even corroborate my basic point, but they do not address the apocalyptic reality tied to John’s prologue. Furthermore, the active tense-form of κατέλαβεν suggest agency and intentionality on the part of Darkness in John 1:5, and so demands a sense of activity on its part in translation and interpretation. Hence, “overpower.”

and annihilate the darkness. The universal-cosmic scope of John 1:1-5 attests to the seeds of Christological prevenient grace, and we will see this more fully formed in John 1:6-8 and 1:8-18.³⁶ Similarly, the anthropological vision is seen in terms of oppression and darkness, enshrined in Sin and Death.

Witness of Faith: John 1:6-8.

⁶ There was a man sent from God—John was his name. ⁷ He came as a witness so that he might bear witness about the Light in order that all might believe through him. ⁸ He was not the Light, but he bears witness to the Light.

As mentioned above and paraphrased here, prevenient grace simply concludes, based on prior exegetical and theological commitments, that God acts in a gracious and empowering manner toward all of creation. A key example of God's divine initiatory grace toward humanity can be seen in his sending of John the Baptist.³⁷ John is explicit in the divine calling of John the Baptist's life: "to bear witness about the light" (v.7). The purpose (ἵνα)³⁸ is equally explicit: to provide an object of faith for all people so that they might believe in the Son (πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ).³⁹ Taking John's previous use of the adjective πάντα (v.3) as illustrative, we can already see the same universal-cosmic scope of πάντες in v.7: "all" persons are

³⁶ See Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 30-31.

³⁷ Other historical figures in Scripture that match this paradigm surely include the prophets like Jonah, Lot (Genesis 19:29), Joseph (Genesis 45:5), and Moses (Exodus 3) just to name a few.

³⁸ It is common to take ἵνα as indicating purpose or intentionality, and it seems quite appropriate to understand the preposition in this manner here.

³⁹ C.f. Craig Koester writes, "the evangelist would say that "in the beginning was the Word," which evoked responses to Jesus that were confirmed by signs, lead to proper perception of signs, and could grow into genuine faith even without signs." See his "Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Biblica* 70.3 (1989): 327-348, esp. 348.

given the Word as the object of faith for the purpose of faith (πιστεύωσιν). The prepositional δι' αὐτοῦ provides the grounding object: because of Christ and his work, faith in his name can be a reality *given* to all.⁴⁰ Jesus Christ (the Word) is the object of faith for all of humanity, and John the Baptist is the one testifying to this new reality. Faith is the exclusive component of this new participatory reality. There is a clear distinction at play here between soteriological universalism and the universal-cosmic accessibility of the Word. The active tense-form of πιστεύωσιν suggests both agents (the Word and humanity) are co-operative, although one cannot draw an equal measure of equality between the two. Nonetheless, the activity and agency of humanity in responding to the revelatory *object* of faith is clear.

To summarize: the universal-cosmic scope of this revelatory Word of God is accessed by faithfulness, and the typology set by John the Baptist corresponds nicely to the doctrine of prevenient grace, especially as we see the agency (perhaps via psychagogy, where the Word is unassuming and unintimidating⁴¹) of humanity in responding to the Light who casts away the darkness.

The Light that Enlightens All Coming Into the World: John 1:8-18.

⁸ [John the Baptist] was not the Light, but he bears witness to the Light. ⁹ The true Light illuminates all human beings coming into the cosmos. ¹⁰ He was in the cosmos, and the cosmos came into being through him, and the cosmos did not acknowledge him. ¹¹ He came to his own, and his own did not

⁴⁰ The Word as the generative source of all is affirmed by this identical use in John 1:3 and 1:10. This phrase occurs elsewhere in John to express the location and instrumentality of the Word (John 3:17).

⁴¹ See the intriguing proposal by Jason S. Sturdevant, "Incarnation as Psychagogy: The Purpose of the Word's Descent in John's Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 56.1 (2014): 24-44.

accept him. ¹² But to those who did accept him, he gave them the right to become children of God—the ones believing in his name. ¹³ The ones who are not born from blood nor the will of the flesh nor the will of a man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and made his home among us, and we have gazed upon his glory, the glory as the unique one from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ John testified about him and cried out saying, “This was the one about whom I have spoken—the one coming after me is beyond me because he was before me.” ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have obtained grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses—grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God—the unique God who is at the father’s side has made him known.

There are two specific exegetical and theological issues we must address in this section of John’s Gospel. First, we must look at how v.9 should be understood. Second, we must look at how the verb “to enlighten” functions in the passage as it relates to revelation. We will tackle these two broad points through this unit in order.

The grammatical relationship between v.8 and v.9 does not decide the issue of prevenient grace. Based on the exegetical material presented above (vv.1-5, vv.6-8), one could reasonably conclude the veracity of prevenient grace with little difficulty. As previously mentioned, one does not need an explicit citation or text in order to conclude that an idea or concept is taught in Scripture; most theologians grant this point, and are capable and content to reason *out* of the Scriptures. V.8 offers us very little by way of new information: it simply repeats and concludes what was previously articulated. John the Baptist is not the light. The Son is the light. However, because v.9 is considered to be a *crux interpretum* for the prevenient grace debate, we must spend some time on it. There is some dispute over the nature of the

various translational understandings of v.9, although they can be compressed to two basic interpretive options. They are listed as follows:

- Interpretive option **A**: the Light is the one “coming” into the world, hence the subject of the verb ἐρχόμενον.
- Interpretive option **B**: the human race receives illumination as they “are coming” (ἐρχόμενον) into the world.

The point of the interpretive options (A and B) lies in how John is using ἐρχόμενον. The verb can refer to the Light or every person, but it does not seem appropriate that it has a dual referent. While either option is compatible with the doctrine of prevenient grace,⁴² I believe option B fits best contextually and theologically. I will list two key reasons, although more could be named.

First, the “true light” is already the subject of a verb (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν ὃ φωτίζει): “the true light who illuminates.” The articular nouns are paired together (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν), suggesting a singular entity is in view: “the true light.” The imperfect ἦν (“was”) is included in this clause as well, modifying the Light in terms of space and placement: “the true light *was*...” and this Light acts to “illuminate” an object. In Luke 11:36, Jesus speaks concerning the illuminating power of a lamp in a parabolic discourse, and this “lamp” (ὁ λύχνος) works “to give light” (φωτίζει) to “you” (σε). For Paul, this light will “enlighten” (φωτισεῖ) the “things hidden in darkness” (τὰ κρυπτὰ τοῦ σκοτός) in 1 Corinthians 4:5, indicating the human need for an object of faith to embrace what is being done. An object of faith requires an agent’s response. That *agent* is πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον: “every person coming into the world.” The indefinite nature of the

⁴² This point is affirmed by Shelton, *Prevenient Grace*, 25-26.

true Light (ἦν) as the one who “illuminates” (φωτίζει) requires a recipient—an object. Hence, the use of ἦν with ἐρχόμενον misses the *function* of the true Light’s *agency*. The additional inclusion of ἐρχόμενον as being related to the true Light would be redundant and unresolved, and thus the use of φωτίζει works to illuminate a specific object: “every person.” An additional point that supports the B reading is parallel uses of similar lexemes in corresponding Jewish literature. Philo of Alexandria argues that an interlocutor “has not brought anything into the cosmos, not even yourself” (τὸν μηδὲν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἀλλὰ μηδὲ σαυτὸν εἰσενηνοχότα), suggesting that the person is limited in power to survive apart from the divine creative power of God (Spec. 1:294). The agency of a person is demeaned, but Philo presupposes their inability to bring anything into the world, implying their creation, and hence the anthropological element. Wisdom of Solomon 2:24 asserts, “Death entered into the cosmos (θάνατος εἰσηλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον) implying spatial movement and perhaps origination from one sphere of reality into another (Wis. 2:24).

However, given Death’s placement, it makes good sense to see the parallel εἰς τὸν κόσμον in reference to the entrance of death “into the cosmic order” in a similar manner as a human birth. “Human vanity” also acts in a similar manner to Death, as it “enters into the cosmos” (εἰσηλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον), acting in a disruptive and corrosive manner (Wis. 14:14). While Beasley-Murray points out that “the expression ‘all who come into the world’ was common among Jews to denote everyone...but it did not include the generic term ‘man,’”⁴³ he is mistaken if we take Philo’s usage above into account. One does not need to draw such a narrow line, especially when these parallel texts confirm the notion of an agent or an entity or even a concept entering into the cosmic realm, which confirms the B reading quite nicely.⁴⁴ D.A. Caron makes much of the fact the fact that

⁴³ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 12.

⁴⁴ The fact that the Son also comes into the world (John 3:16-19; 6:14, etc.) confirms both the incarnation and the point: the divine agent comes into

“every man” is singular here (1:9), but this misses on the rather obvious adjectival πάντα ἄνθρωπον (“every person”), which does not correspond at all to Carson’s argument.⁴⁵ The singular is modified by a universal adjective that individualizes *and* universalizes the object in question. Carson’s larger point is that the phrase “coming into the world” is about the Son (1:28; 2:6; 3:23; 10:40; 13:23; 18:18, 25),⁴⁶ and Carson interprets this to mean “the Word, the light, that is coming into the world, in some act distinct from creation.”⁴⁷ But this point does not follow at all: John has already explicitly designated the Son as creator, which forcefully implies his *distinction* from creation (1:1-5) as well as from the Father.⁴⁸

Second, “the true light” is already present in the world through the use of ἦν in 1:10: “he was in the world.” The Word/Light has already brought the world into existence (καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο; 1:10) as the one who is before all things (Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος; 1:1-2), and he is the creator of all things (πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο; 1:3). It makes no theological or contextual sense to tie the “true Light” to ἐρχόμενον because the Word is *already* present and active in the world that he *created*. Jesus-as-Creator has already brought all things into existence, driving the darkness away (1:5). Hence, creation already exists, making sense of the subsequent sequence of all

the world in the same manner as all of humanity, through the process of human birth.

⁴⁵ Carson, *John*, 121.

⁴⁶ Carson, *John*, 121-122.

⁴⁷ Carson, *John*, 122. This point, however, is irrelevant if we consider the contextual factors involved. A specific phrase can be used largely for a specific purpose, but not exclusively so. The points offered above, in conjunction with the parallel Jewish texts, support my reading as opposed to Carson’s.

⁴⁸ It is also not obvious to me what Carson’s reading actually *accomplishes* in the passage: was the Word/Light not *distinct* before? The Creator-creation distinction is a fundamental Jewish epistemological axiom (c.f. Romans 1:20-25). It seems to me that John was remarkably clear about the universal creative power of the Word, and so to posit Carson’s reading is simply unnecessary.

people being illuminated by his presence in 1:9: πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Therefore, we should understand John 1:9 as referring to the brightening power of the Son that illuminates “every person coming into the world,” i.e. human birth and the promise of divine self-disclosure. This point is reinforced in the following verses rather explicitly, especially as it relates to the Son as the object of faith to be accepted or rejected (1:10-11). J. Ramsey Michaels concedes, “The traditional interpretation [option B] that ‘coming into the world’ goes with ‘every human being’ remains the most natural.”⁴⁹ While not assured, this reading appears to me to be contextually appropriate. However, there are detractors. In his article, “Does the Bible Teach Preventive Grace?”⁵⁰ Combs counters

If “coming into the world” refers to Christ, this would seem to present a special problem for the preventive grace interpretation of John 1:9 since this preventive grace would only have been available since the coming of Christ into the world. What about the salvation of OT saints and their need for preventive grace?⁵¹

The Gospel of John has already answered such a question quite concisely and thoroughly already: “for the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came into existence through Jesus Christ” (ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο; 1:17). The Law was sufficient for the people of God until the incarnation of the eternal Son of God (Rom 10:4).⁵² Nevertheless, Combs candidly asserts that the Wesleyan reading of John 1:9 as

⁴⁹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 63.

⁵⁰ Combs, “Preventive Grace,” 1-13.

⁵¹ Combs, “Preventive Grace,” 7.

⁵² Such a problem asserted by Combs is not limited to Wesleyans—indeed, the Reformed tradition had numerous ways of answering such a question, with no specific theological concept clearly winning out.

incompatible with the doctrine of general revelation.⁵³ He approvingly quotes Schreiner (and Carson) and continues his criticism:

Such a view [prevenient grace in John 1:9] is unpersuasive⁵⁴ given Paul's estimation of general revelation in Romans 1:18–32."A study of this passage [Rom 1:18–32 but related to John 1:9] shows that while there is a revelation of God to all people in nature, it is universally rejected. Also, as Carson observes, a reference to general revelation is unlikely since that theme has already been dealt [sic] with earlier in the prologue (i.e., John 1:3–4).⁵⁵

As with my responses to Schreiner below, it seems that Combs has missed the point. Paul, in his discourse in Romans 1:18–32, surely does not have a universal aspect in mind, unless he plans to include *himself*, his *readers*, and the universal church in with those who have “universally rejected” his gospel. Additionally, asserting a passage in such a way to demonstrate that another reading is inconsistent is not itself a skilled move, as it essentially puts my interlocutor in the position of having to choose which text is more important theologically. I believe my reading of John 1:9 (and 1:1–18 as a whole) is quite compatible with Romans 1:18–32, as the people in John 1:12 (who have accepted the Word) are not the same people we find in Paul's extended vice list in Romans 1:18–32/John 1:10–11. Even though Jesus created all things, the cosmic realm “did not recognize him” (οὐκ ἔγνων; 1:10). Despite his work as creator, the cosmos remains intentionally ignorant

⁵³ Combs does not take into account contextual factors, as I have shown through this article.

⁵⁴ I do find it intriguing that many theologians are keen to use subjective language (unwittingly I'm sure) in their disagreements: one is left wondering *why* Combs and others are not convinced, especially when they are not clear about their epistemological criteria.

⁵⁵ Combs, “Prevenient Grace,” 7–8.

of his creative power and divine self-disclosure (1:11). John explicitly states in 2:24-25 a powerful and coordinate point

αὐτὸς δὲ Ἰησοῦς οὐκ ἐπίστευεν αὐτὸν αὐτοῖς διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν γινώσκειν πάντας καὶ ὅτι οὐ χρείαν εἶχεν ἵνα τις μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐγίνωσκεν τὴν ἑν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ.

But Jesus did not entrust himself to others because he knew all people and because he needed no one to testify concerning humankind, for he knew what was in humanity.

Even though all people were granted his incarnational presence, they did not respond to him or to his mighty signs and deeds. His “own people did not accept him” (αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον; 1:10-11), which testifies to the egregious nature of their refusal to welcome him as their Creator, Lord, and King. God’s work in revealing himself to all of humanity was ignored even by those who should have seen what God had planned to do. Darkness is an apocalyptic and oppressive force that works on the hearts of humankind, confounding the work of the Son.⁵⁶

The second point of substance that must be addressed in 1:9 is the nature of the verb φωτίζει (“to illuminate”). Lexically the verb can denote something like “cause to be bright with light,” “transcendent illumination that reveals or exposes bring to light; personal behavior,” “Pass., of being the beneficiary of divine illumination for appropriate response to God, be enlightened.”⁵⁷ In the LXX the verb often denotes the visible

⁵⁶ Indeed, the activity of the demoniac is not only “oppressive” but also “possessive,” thus demarcating the human race as in need of liberation from bondage and sin. My thanks to Dr. Dale Wayman for making note of this point to me.

⁵⁷ BDAG, s.v. φωτίζω [φῶς].

glory of the Lord (Isa 60:1; Sir 50:7),⁵⁸ and to the enlightening power of the Lord God who “enlightens the eyes” (φωτίζων ὀφθαλμούς; Sir. 34:17). Similarly the Psalmist rejoices over the God who φωτίζουσα ὀφθαλμούς (Ps. 18:9) and Wisdom 17:5 utilizes the infinitive to demonstrate the inability of stars to “enlighten” (φωτίζειν) the entire night sky,⁵⁹ suggesting the illumination is a proper activity that can be thwarted.

The entire cosmic order—which includes humankind— is enmeshed in “darkness” (1:5) and is need of the illuminating power of the light of the Son.⁶⁰ The incarnation, as an apocalyptic event, displaces the darkness and this Christological activity is itself to be categorized as prevenient grace.

Buttressing the ferocious hostility of the cosmic order, John then depicts the Son as coming “to his own” where his own do “not accept him” (οὐ παρέλαβον).⁶¹ The verb παραλαμβάνω is used in the context of eschatological cordiality (John 14:3), and often depicts an agent being “taken” by another (Acts 21:26). In John 1:11 the verb suggests a willful and intentional rejection of the Son. Rather than welcome him, “his own people” rejected him. However, not all did so: the phrase “but to those who did accept him” (ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν) is quite powerful (1:12). Instead of being concerned with later formulations of soteriological determinism, John’s sequence is clear: the acceptance of the Son leads to them being given the right “to become children of God.” Human

⁵⁸ φωτίζου φωτίζου Ἱερουσαλημ ἥκει γάρ σου τὸ φῶς καὶ ἡ δόξα κυρίου ἐπὶ σὲ ἀνατέταλκεν; specifically the initial redundancy of the φωτίζου as it relates to the parallelism of “light” and “glory.”

⁵⁹ The sun performs a similar function in Sir 42:16; 43:9 and in Philo (Decal. 1:49).

⁶⁰ Most of the objections to my conclusions here center on Reformed distinctives, and as such, will be countered at the end of this work.

⁶¹ The active tense-form of the verb denotes agency in response to the prevenient incarnational Christ-event: we are not given any specific notion of metaphysical concepts concerning anthropology—only that darkness reigns over the cosmic order and that humanity is enveloped in such Darkness. See also John 1:5.

agency is strongly enforced here, despite the world being mired in darkness. The light of the Son in God's prevenient sovereign activity is enough to bring those enslaved by the night into the glorious light. As such, it seems fair and reasonable to conclude that John 1:9—within John's literary and theological context—is a legitimate theological pillar for the doctrine of prevenient grace.

However, some have doubts about this overall conclusion. In his response to the Wesleyan-Arminian understanding of prevenient grace based on John 1:9, Tom Schreiner makes several key responses. First, he asserts: "The word enlighten (*phōtizō*) refers not to inward illumination but to the exposure that comes when light is shed upon something."⁶² Second, Schreiner posits, "The specific context is not general revelation but the response of people to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ."⁶³ Both assertions, which he presents as defeaters to the doctrine of prevenient grace, are not in fact strongly substantiated—they are merely asserted, as if their rhetorical power is obvious to all. Schreiner also begs the question in his first assertion, for we must ask *how* people respond and to *whom* the people respond. Schreiner's claim is grounded in *anthropology*, not *Christology*. The answer to this is clearly Christ, who is the object of revelatory faith for all of humanity. Schreiner asserts, "The word enlighten (*phōtizō*) refers not to inward illumination but to the exposure that comes when light is shed upon something." However, this objection suffers from two major problems. First, Schreiner offers no lexical support for this position. BDAG does offer the definition that I presented above: "Pass., of being the beneficiary of divine illumination for appropriate response to God, be enlightened."⁶⁴ Further lexical sources like Friberg substantiate this point.⁶⁵ Additionally, Schreiner's assertion is

⁶² Schreiner, "Prevenient Grace," 240.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

⁶⁴ BDAG, s.v. φωτίζω [φῶς].

⁶⁵ Friberg Greek Lexicon: 28428 φωτίζω fut. φωτίσω; 1aor. ἐφώτισα; pf. pass.

contradicted by how the Lord God “enlightens the eyes” of humankind (φωτίζων ὀφθαλμούς; Sir. 34:17).⁶⁶ Ezra 9:8 LXX speaks of the Lord giving “enlightenment to our eyes” (τοῦ φωτίσαι ὀφθαλμούς ἡμῶν), which surely goes beyond the notion of passive light being “shed upon something.” While other Jewish texts could be cited,⁶⁷ there is a moral dimension to this lexeme and Schreiner has not sufficiently dealt with the evidence concerning φωτίζω and the unnecessary distinction offered concerning revelation on this point. Perhaps Schreiner’s main criticism of the doctrine of prevenient grace in John 1:9 is this:

The light that enlightens every person does not entail the bestowment of grace, nor does it refer to the inward illumination of the heart by the Spirit of God. Rather, the light exposes and reveals the moral and spiritual state of one’s heart... salvation...The purpose of the verse is to say that

ptc. πεφωτισμένος; 1aor. pass. ἐφωτίσθην; (1) intransitively; (a) *shine, give light*; (b) figuratively *give guidance or understanding* (RV 22.5); (2) transitively; (a) literally *give light to, light (up), illuminate* (LU 11.36); (b) figuratively *make clear, cause to fully know, cause to understand*; used of God’s enlightenment through revelation (EP 1.18) or his making known what is hidden (1C 4.5; 2T 1.10). The same is with Liddell-Scott 46178 φωτίζω

φωτίζω, f. Att. ἰῶ, *to enlighten, illuminate: to instruct, teach*, N.T.

2. *to bring to light, publish*, Ib.

3. *to enlighten spiritually*, and then *to baptize*, Ib. Hence φωτισμός

⁶⁶ As such, a larger biblical-theological framework for prevenient grace can begin to surface here as we see how thoroughly saturated the broader vision of Scripture is with the divine agency of a benevolent and good God toward a mired and lost humanity. John’s cosmic vision also might open up the possibility of creatures and entities that exist (live?) in the cosmic order *beyond* humanity.

⁶⁷ Psalm 12:4 LXX: ἐπιβλεπων εισάκουσόν μου κύριε ὁ θεός μου φώτισσον τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς μου μήποτε ὑπνώσω εἰς θάνατον. Psalm 18:9 LXX: τὰ δικαιώματα κυρίου εὐθεῖα εὐφραίνοντα καρδίαν ἢ ἐντολή κυρίου τηλαυγής φωτίζουσα ὀφθαλμούς. Baruch 1:12: καὶ δώσει κύριος ἰσχὺν ἡμῖν καὶ φωτίσει τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς ἡμῶν.

the coming of the true light exposes and reveals where people are in their relationship to God.⁶⁸

Schreiner seems to be trading on a wooden understanding of what one might mean by *grace*.⁶⁹ Grace, in the prevenient sense I am defending, simply refers to the disposition and activity of God-in-Christ in how they act in their created world. Thompson rightly points out earlier about the incorporative nature of both conviction and revelation: “Shining in the darkness and shedding light on all, this light makes it possible for all to see, while simultaneously exposing or convicting those who do not come to the light.”⁷⁰ Schreiner has presented us again with an either/or understanding, which should be immediately rejected. This is not an either/or conception of God’s apocalyptic activity. Rather, we should be more inclusive in our understanding of God’s divine self-disclosure and that requires us to take seriously *both* the revelatory and convicting power of the Word to both bestow grace *and* illumination by the Word.

Finally, Schreiner offers a summarizing comment: “John 1:9 is not, therefore, suggesting that through Christ’s coming each person is given the ability to choose salvation.”⁷¹ This, however, seems to run directly against the natural meaning of the text. In response to this given illuminating revelatory power by God-in-Christ, the cosmos acts in willful ignorance toward Jesus (1:10) to the point they refuse to welcome him (1:11).⁷² The very next clause is informative: ὄσοι δὲ ἔλαβον

⁶⁸ Schreiner, “Prevenient Grace,” 240.

⁶⁹ Schreiner also, perhaps, has a form of *irresistible* grace in mind—which is an assumption I do not share. Again, this seems to locate the question in anthropological terms, whereas John’s prologue is overtly centered on Christological questions.

⁷⁰ Thompson, *John*, 31. Thompson is herself Presbyterian, which might suggest that God’s act of prevenient grace ought not be necessarily excluded from Reformed thought.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 240.

⁷² Rudolph Bultmann perceptively notes: “the φωτίζειν of the Revealer is an act which also impinges on the unbelievers; but only in the sense that

αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ. John explicitly ties the sequence of God’s prevenient gracious activity to the following sequence:

1. God-in-Christ is revealed as the creator God of all things—
 - a. Much of humanity has rejected their creator God—
 - i. But those who do not reject instead accept what is offered to them—
 - b. Instead they operate with trusting faith toward God-in-Christ
2. They are then given the right to become God’s children.

The final clause emphasizes the participatory and uncoerced activity of humanity as “those who are acting in faith in his name” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ). The text itself—to quote Schreiner— seems rather clear that at “Christ’s coming each person is given the ability to choose salvation.”⁷³

The radical incarnational nature of the Christ-Event in 1:14 is expressed in a beautiful way: “we have seen” (ἑθεασάμεθα).” The emphasis on this verb (θεάομαι) is centered on the human person and the capacity to comprehend what has been revealed. As such, “the invisible God is thus made visible in the Johannine Jesus...making possible the *visio Dei*.”⁷⁴

as a result they become completely ‘blind.’” *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. The Johannine Monograph Series (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1971), 54.

⁷³ Prevenient grace is not itself salvific, but if heeded, will lead to salvation.

⁷⁴ Dorothy Lee, “The Gospel of John and the Five Senses,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129.1 (2010): 115-27, 117.

Because of the pre-activity of the Son in creation, we have his “home being made” (ἐσκήνωσεν) among humankind (1:15), and the Son has fully revealed the Father to us (1:17-18). This is bookended perfectly by the activity of the Son who makes God “known” (ἐξηγήσατο; 1:18), amplifying the unseen God through the light of his life to those mired in darkness.⁷⁵ God’s preemptive act of graciousness in his “unique Son” (1:14, 18) is the divine apocalyptic climax of God’s plan for redemption. As such, the doctrine of prevenient grace does not center on an isolated proof-text (1:9). Rather, it is a doctrine that flows naturally and coherently from a unified reading of the entire prologue of the Gospel of John, from the creative power of the Word (1:1-5) to the Word’s enlightening presence for all humanity (1:9) to the Word’s enlightening activity in revealing the Father (1:14-18). John’s emphasis on the cosmic darkness that has plagued the world is then overridden by the incarnational creative power of God-in-Christ, who has enlightened all people without exception. Those who respond in faithfulness to the Son (ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι’ αὐτοῦ; 1:7) and accept his calling (1:12) are given the right to be found in God’s family. As Thompson has noted, “Shining in the darkness and shedding light on all, this light makes it possible for all to see, while simultaneously exposing or convicting those who do not come to the light.”⁷⁶ Therefore, the doctrine of prevenient grace also demarcates the character of God as being *for* humanity and *for* our rectification. From the beginning of creation, God has acted in favor toward creation, and is working to bring the forces of darkness to nothing. Prevenient grace is, thusly, grounded in the greatness of the goodness of God as a defense of his eternal character, manifested in the self-sacrificial life of Jesus for the sake of all of humankind.

⁷⁵ Acts 21:19 speaks of Paul “explaining” (ἐξηγήσατο) the mighty “deeds of God” (ἔργοισεν ὁ θεός), which suggests coordination with the Johannine sequence: God acts—an agent/mediator clarifies—humanity responds.

⁷⁶ Thompson, *John*, 31.

In summation, much of the critical responses to the doctrine of prevenient grace as often articulated in John 1:9 are not compelling for the following reasons. 1) Such critical responses erroneously bifurcate between general revelation and the incarnational revelatory power of the incarnation. 2) They often engage in logical fallacies (c.f. either-or, special pleading) at the expense of contextual factors. 3) They do not take the entire argument and logic of John's entire discourse into account, instead focused on answering atomistic claims about a single verse. However, the reading I have attempted to offered above—while limited to a single pericope—has endeavored to show how the doctrine of prevenient grace rises naturally from John 1:1-18 and is not found exclusively in an isolated exegetical realm.

Conclusion

The doctrine of prevenient grace, contrary to the conclusions of some, is a profoundly *biblical* teaching that can be arrived at through a consistent theological and exegetical methodology. For John, the incarnational power of the Son in illuminating all of humanity is a central theological teaching that is grounded in the equality of the Son with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Prevenient grace properly understood and articulated in John's prologue is a fundamentally *Christological* doctrine that respects the horrific capacity of the human person to engage in sin and darkness. Yet, God was not content to leave humankind in darkness. This Light shines and illuminates every person "coming into the world," and every person is given enough light to recognize the creator of the universe, who is the only way to the Father (John 14:6).

While Schreiner is free to conclude, "Prevenient grace is attractive because it solves so many problems, but it should be rejected because it cannot be exegetically vindicated,"⁷⁷ I believe the arguments and exegesis of this article in favor of

⁷⁷ Schreiner, "Prevenient Grace," 246.

the doctrine of prevenient grace stand vindicated.⁷⁸ The skepticism toward prevenient grace is unwarranted via a theologically informed reading of John 1:1-18 and, perhaps now, theologians might be even press beyond John and into the whole of Scripture via biblical theology, philosophical and analytic theology, and especially in ‘practical divinity’ as the Church journeys into perfect holiness by the power of the Spirit for the life of the world.⁷⁹

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⁷⁸ Schreiner’s concession of the interpretive usefulness is perhaps unintentional, but nonetheless, such a concession reveals the persuasive theological necessity of the doctrine.

⁷⁹ My sincere thanks to Dr. Dale Wayman, Brian P. Roden, and others who read and critiqued earlier drafts.

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