

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

**Communicating the Gospel
in a Pluralistic World**



SESSION 8

A Wesleyan-Holiness Response to Non-Christian Religions

CLT Bible Study

A Wesleyan-Holiness Response to Non-Christian Religions

Certificate of Lay Ministry
Communicating the Gospel in a Pluralistic World
Dr. David Ackerman, editor
First printing 2025

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A Wesleyan-Holiness Response to Non-Christian Religions

SESSION OVERVIEW

THE UNIVERSALITY OF PREVENIENT GRACE

A REMINDER: THE UNIVERSALITY OF PREVENIENT GRACE

THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

APPLICATION

EXAM

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

INTRODUCTION

The foundation has been set to return to the topic of religious pluralism. In this session, we will build on the ideas discovered in previous sessions about the Wesleyan-Holiness way of salvation. We will explore how we should respond to religious pluralism from this Wesleyan-Holiness orientation.

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- discuss the Wesleyan-Holiness response to religious pluralism as well as the nature and importance of positive responses to prevenient grace by persons in non-Christian religions;
- possess a Wesleyan-Holiness theological rationale that equips you for ministry in a religiously pluralistic world;
- explain how Wesleyans assess the relationship between the Christian gospel and non-Christian religions; and
- develop a basis for ministering as a Wesleyan in a world marked by religious pluralism and be prepared to engage a communicant of a non-Christian religion in a manner that is distinctly Wesleyan-Holiness.

A Wesleyan-Holiness Response to Non-Christian Religions

INTRODUCTION



The foundation has been set to return to the topic of religious pluralism. In this session, we will build on the ideas discovered in previous sessions about the Wesleyan-Holiness way of salvation. We will explore how we should respond to religious pluralism from this Wesleyan-Holiness orientation.

Runyon (*The New Creation*, 215) asks difficult questions we need to think about in this session about whether being open to other religions would lessen the truth claims of the gospel. How can we, as believers in the ultimate truth claims of the gospel, still be respectful to other religions? We must not compromise our convictions to reach non-Christians with the gospel. Can we somehow maintain these convictions and respect these religions?

THE UNIVERSALITY OF PREVENIENT GRACE



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Different branches of Christianity respond to religious pluralism in ways guided by their theological convictions. There are many different responses and approaches to the questions stated above. Wesleyans also have a distinctive way of looking at religious pluralism because of our specific beliefs. These beliefs also guide how they share their faith. Our interpretation of God's salvation guides our response. Our theology should guide the way we engage in evangelism and missions.

Unlike some Christians who accept the belief that all religions are equal, Wesleyans strongly and clearly believe in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Our Christology (doctrine of Christ) is firmly rooted in the orthodox teachings of the church. Even so, Wesleyans still respect people of other religions and stand against any form of religious bullying, oppression, manipulation, or unfairness. We can draw upon the resources of our theology for respecting other religions. In a time when some extreme religious people are quick to fight with those who disagree with them, verbally or physically, Wesleyans choose a different path.

In his sermon called "Against Bigotry" (Mark 9:38-39), Wesley said that even if he saw someone from a different religion casting out demons, he would not stop them. If he did stop them, he would be a "bigot," someone who hates or does not tolerate others' views. He would not stand in the way of people doing any good. He wrote, "In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument be, acknowledge the finger of God. And not only acknowledge, but rejoice in his work, and praise his name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomsoever God is pleased to employ, to give himself wholly up thereto. Speak well of him wheresoever you are; defend his character and his mission. Enlarge, as far as you can, his sphere of action; show him all kindness in word and deed; and cease not to cry to God in his behalf, that he may save both himself and them that hear him." ("Against Bigotry," Sermon 38, IV, 4-5.)

As noted before, Wesley affirmed the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. He believed salvation for God's creation is in Christ alone. Without doubt or hesitancy, for Wesleyans, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). He is humankind's only way home to the Father.

But Wesley did not think these beliefs meant forcing others to believe the same. He thought the way we share the good news of Jesus should show what God and the good news are like. Our evangelism should match how God came to us in grace in the human form of Jesus. We become incarnate in our message like God became

 **NOTES**

incarnate in his grace. Our sharing of the gospel should show a God who is humble and peaceful, not warlike. What we proclaim and what we do must show the same incarnate God who rode into Jerusalem on the back of a lowly donkey, not the back of a horse of war.

Wesley warned against bigotry and the unfair dislike of others. He believed that God's Spirit is already working in everyone through prevenient grace. Wesleyans work with God, who is already present. They do not bring God to people or make sure God is working in a situation. God is free and fully in charge as sovereign. The Holy Spirit will use whatever and whoever he chooses and whenever he chooses.

Wesley recognized that the non-Christian world has more darkness than light. He knew that even as God "dwells and works in the children of light, so the devil dwells and works in the children of darkness. The god and prince of this world still possesses all who know not God."

But Wesley was not quick to put all so-called Christians in the first category and all non-Christians in the second. He knew the devil influences and has captured many who call themselves Christian. He wrote, "The god of this world holds his English worshipers full as fast as those in Lapland." He knew there are those in non-Christian religions who try to do God's will as best they know how with the limited light they have received ("Against Bigotry," Sermon 38, I.1). Wesley's openness to what God might do in the lives of people in other religions was all about trusting in God's grace, not about believing in religious pluralism or humanistic optimism.

A REMINDER: THE UNIVERSALITY OF PREVENIENT GRACE

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The key idea for creating a Wesleyan-Holiness answer to religious pluralism is the belief in the doctrine of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is available to all people and is very important for understanding John Wesley's understanding of Christian redemption.

FOR THE WESLEYAN-HOLINESS TRADITION, ALL GRACE IS “CHRISTIC”



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Through the Son and with the power of the Spirit, the Father creates and saves everything. God’s loving actions are for everyone and are based on Jesus Christ. Even when we look at God’s creating and saving work in the Old Testament, we actually are talking about how Jesus is needed and anticipated. Like many Bible scholars today, Wesley correctly believed that there is only one covenant of grace. God has made this promise to all people, both before and after Jesus came to earth. For Wesley, God through Jesus Christ has “established [one covenant of grace] with men of all ages—as well as before, and under the Jewish dispensation, as since God was manifest in the flesh” (Matthew 2:23; Luke 1:70; 18:31; John 1:45; 8:52; Acts 2:14-36.)

Wesley was clearly in line with the apostles Peter and Paul. Peter wrote, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Paul wrote, “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

Also, as we saw in the previous lesson about the continuity of grace in creation and redemption, the Spirit’s presence and work in all creation is Christic. “Christic” is a term that indicates something is related to Christ. All revelation comes through Christ. Just as the Father took the first step in sending his Son, so the Triune God—from the Father, by the Son, and through the Holy Spirit—takes the gracious first step in his many efforts to bring all people to reconciliation in Christ. God does not leave any person without grace. Wesley wrote that no one anywhere is completely without what is commonly called “natural conscience.” But this conscience is not natural but is the influence of what Wesley called “preventing grace,” or what is termed today “prevenient grace.” Even though we are dead in our sins without

 **NOTES**

God's grace, because of the prevenient movement of the Spirit, no person is a stranger to God's efforts to save.

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S UNIVERSAL FAITHFULNESS

No one can know ahead of time how God's grace will begin to stir one's hunger for God. We cannot guess how the Spirit will draw people to the point of meeting Christ in faith. But we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is working to wake people up to their need for God's mercy. The Spirit will draw them to God and attract them to salvation. Fully understanding Christ's claim on us might happen suddenly, clearly, or slowly without us realizing that God has been working in us.

God's prevenient grace can be helped by hymns, Scripture, the sacrament of infant baptism, child dedication, godly parents, Sunday School teachers, and so on. It might be so subtle that we can only see it when we look back. God's grace does not lessen our awareness of spiritual death, our total need for God's mercy, or the important change of the new birth. But when or how such a meeting will happen is up to the Sovereign God. We only know it happens because of God's mysterious grace working in a mix of religious, psychological, social, and many other factors, many of which we may never know.

The final goal of prevenient grace is to meet Jesus Christ in Christian holiness. He will be fully revealed through the Holy Spirit in preaching and witness. All the Holy Spirit's activity is aimed at saving people and creation. This is a Wesleyan-Holiness understanding of "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

THE POSSIBILITY OF RESPONDING POSITIVELY TO PREVENIENT GRACE

God gives prevenient grace to all people. It does not matter when or where they were born or their cultural or religious background. God's grace reaches Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. Prevenient grace is the real presence of the Spirit of Christ in creation. So it is unsurprising that people from different religions can feel God's love in their own way. They can respond positively to the light God has given them. Wesley believed that when people respond positively to prevenient grace, positive changes begin to happen in their lives.

We can talk about positive change in this way as long as we remember that the change is because of God's grace in Christ. The change is not something people can create on their own or get from their own religion. It is a gift from God that prepares us for a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Responding positively to


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o prevenient grace is the first step to full faith in Jesus. A person must respond with a personal experience with God that changes us. But to fully understand who Christ is and how he saves us, we need to read or hear the Bible and listen to the message about Christ that comes through the Holy Spirit.

PROTECTING THE GOAL OF PREVENIENT GRACE

God showed himself most fully to us through Jesus. He is the Word who came in human flesh. The Bible bears witness to the incarnated Word from God. The Holy Spirit helps us understand that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. We cannot fully hear, understand, and thus receive Jesus without the testimony of the Bible. The goal of the Bible is reached when the Holy Spirit transforms us into Christlikeness. Only the Spirit can open our minds and help us hear and obey what the Bible says about Jesus. The Spirit points the way in the Bible to how we should repent, be born again, and experience the holy life. God's grace guides us towards a personal relationship with God. Prevenient grace points and leads to experiencing transformation and a deeper relationship with God. Only then can one cry "Abba! Father!" with love and devotion.

THE FAITH OF A SERVANT

John Wesley frequently used two images about faith in his sermons: the faith of a servant and the faith of a son. One difference between the two is how a person responds to God's prevenient grace. Responding positively to prevenient grace shows a difference between the faith of a servant, who fears God, and the faith of a son, who has the witness of the Holy Spirit within him.

Those who love God and their neighbor because of God's transforming grace show the faith of a son. The faith of a servant is believing in God, but at the beginning stage of an infant. Such a person fears God and has a sense of what is right. Wesley believed, "And whosoever, in every nation, believes thus far, the Apostle declares, is 'accepted of him.' He actually is, at that very moment, in a state of acceptance. But he is at present only a servant of God, not properly a son. Meantime, let it be well observed, that 'the wrath of God' no longer 'abideth on him.'" A person with the faith of a servant has responded to God's prevenient grace. This is shown with reverence for God, avoiding evil, and doing all things well to the best light he or she has.

The faith of a servant is what Wesley calls the "almost Christian." He uses the phrase "heathen honesty" to describe those who act like Christians but have not


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yet become believers. Prevenient grace has led them to love and follow truth and justice even though they have never heard about Christ. They are almost Christians. They do not do unjust things, steal from their neighbors, take advantage of the poor, cheat, and extort anyone. They try to be fair in all things. If possible, they do not owe anyone anything. Wesley identifies many more characteristics of the almost Christian. Some of these qualities are specific to people associated with Christianity but who are not inwardly Christians (“The Almost Christian”).

As the apostle Paul wrote about Abraham in Romans 4 and in other places, being accepted by God never comes through works. It is not because of what we do but because of our faith. The “altogether Christian” is one changed on the inside. By God’s grace and through faith alone, this person has become a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). This person has met Jesus Christ in a transforming way. The old has gone, and through the Holy Spirit, all things have become new. Love for God and love for one’s neighbor in the image of Christ indicate the altogether Christian.

Wesley asks: What more than “almost” is meant by “altogether”? He answered that first is the love of God. The Bible says, “You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” This kind of love takes over the whole heart, stirs up all the feelings, fills the whole soul, and uses all its abilities to the fullest. Those who love God like this are always rejoicing in God their Savior. They delight in the Lord, their Lord, and their All. They thank God for everything. All they want is God and to remember his name. The second thing that makes a person a real Christian is “the love of one’s neighbor.” These people are true, inward, scriptural Christians. This change lets them say with love and devotion, “Abba! Father!” (“The Almost Christian,” II:1).

One support from the Bible for Wesley’s idea about the almost Christian is the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. When Peter spoke in Cornelius’s house, he said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34-35). Wesley commented on Peter’s statement and said, “He that, first, reverences God, as great, wise, good, the cause, end, and governor of all things; and secondly, from this awful regard to him, not only avoids all known evil, but endeavours, according to the best light he has, to do all things well, is accepted of [God].”

It is important to realize that God accepted Cornelius only through Christ, even though Cornelius did not know him. Cornelius’ righteous works were done through the grace of Christ. Cornelius shows that a person can believe that God is real and obey God’s ways in anticipation of faith in Christ. A person who responds positively to Christ will finally be eternally saved. Wesley believed that God’s anger

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no longer stays on such a person.

Wesley said that God is not just the God of Christians but also the God of non-Christians. He is “rich in mercy to all that call upon him” based on the light they have. Wesley believed we should leave the final salvation of people in other religions to God. We should not act as if God left that decision to us. We will be wise to leave to God the question of how God will judge the results of his prevenient grace.

Wesley said he had no authority from God’s Word to judge those outside the Christian faith. He did not think anyone living has the right to say that all non-Christians and Muslims are condemned. It is much better to leave them to God, who made them. He is “the Father of the spirits of all flesh.”

Wesley’s comments about Cornelius show that obeying the prevenient work of Christ marks a person as accepted by God through Christ (Acts 10:34-35). The witness of the New Testament is clear about this, and the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition is in full harmony with it.

However, a warning needs to be given and listened to. As important as the teaching of God’s grace is for the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, we cannot collapse the whole gospel and the new life the Spirit brings into prevenient grace. While the faith of a servant is recognized and confirmed, it is qualitatively different from the faith of a son.

Without a clear meeting with Christ through hearing the gospel, people will not know Christ. They have not experienced the change of new birth and adoption by the Spirit. They also have not experienced the Spirit living within them, helping them cry, “Abba, Father!” The work of Christ through prevenient grace is important, but it is just the start and anticipates full salvation. Peter recognized that “from every nation the one who fears [God] and does what is right” (Acts 10:35). But Peter did not stop there. He saw the need for prevenient grace to be completed by openly proclaiming Christ (Acts 10:42-43).

THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS



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WESLEYANS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

With all orthodox Christians, Wesleyans believe Jesus is the only way to God. They do not accept the idea that other religions have different paths to God. Any belief that says there are other ways to God, apart from Jesus, goes against what Wesleyans believe. There is no compromise in the key confession that Christ is God incarnate and the only Redeemer of the world. The Wesleyan belief about Christ is firmly based on the Bible, the Apostles' Creed, and the Creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon. The same is true for any idea about redemption that lessens the importance of meeting Jesus through hearing the gospel as proclaimed in the Bible and following it in obedience.

AN UNRESOLVED QUESTION

So far in this session, we have focused on God's prevenient grace for everyone and how people respond to it. We have said that a positive response to prevenient grace anticipates a relationship with God. This relationship is not a matter of the good works we do. The goal of this grace is to come to full and personal faith in the gospel. We have seen how Wesleyans believe people should respond to prevenient grace like Cornelius responded to the gospel in Acts 10:1-48.

We believe our view is true to the idea that Jesus' atoning sacrifice was for everyone. We believe we align with the testimony of the New Testament and affirm that the Holy Spirit gives witness to Christ even at the simplest levels. The doctrine of prevenient grace affirms the work of the Spirit before people fully know Christ and the possibility that they can respond to this work. At the same time, this doctrine clearly distinguishes between this anticipation and the full revelation of Christ as Savior and Redeemer that comes through hearing the gospel. As important as it is, prevenient grace does not replace the need to believe in the gospel as proclaimed in the Bible.

So far, we have not addressed the question, "What is the relationship between prevenient grace and the non-Christian religions?" Let's do that now. This question has several implications:

- What part, if any, do those religions play in the Spirit's work to bring people to repent of their sins and have a new life in Christ?


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- Are non-Christian religions' paths to God filled with grace?
- Are they ways God purposely uses, and to some extent lives in, in anticipation of hearing and accepting the gospel?
- Does God (can God) work by prevenient grace through non-Christian religions?

CHRISTIANITY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Before we clearly state a Wesleyan-Holiness answer to the question, "What is the relationship between prevenient grace and the non-Christian religions?" we need to make something clear. Neither the kingdom of God nor the gospel of Jesus Christ is the same as the Christian religion. John Wesley saw many wrong versions of the Christian gospel and wrong representations of Jesus Christ. He knew that people and nations that call themselves Christian can be as far from God as obvious pagans.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christianity can become a way to proclaim the gospel. It can serve as a vehicle of relation like no other religion can. But it always needs reform through the Spirit. Sadly, many times, Christianity, in some of its forms, has blocked the gospel and has stood against the kingdom of God. The quality of its witness depends on its faithfulness to the Lord it names. This idea does not lessen the importance of the church and the sacraments. But it does recognize a vital difference between the Christian religion and a vibrant life in Christ.

A WESLEYAN-HOLINESS ASSESSMENT OF NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

What, then, is the connection between the Christian message of salvation and other religions? To begin with, it is difficult to separate people from their religion. The beliefs of a religion can influence how people react to prevenient grace. However, these beliefs do not necessarily determine this reaction. Sometimes, people can see problems or shortcomings in their religion and overcome them. For example, Abraham left his father's polytheistic religion. Also, the Old Testament prophets criticized Israel's corrupt worship and practice and warned of God's judgment. Buddha was dissatisfied with his religion and left his privileged life. Confucius was a reformer. Muhammad rejected the polytheism and superstition in which he was raised and called his people to worship one God.

But mostly, people are influenced by the religions they grow up with. These religions, including their beliefs, rituals, and practices, shape how people see their world, understand reality, and see right and wrong. They may not even realize


NOTES

consciously how much religion may influence how they think and behave. For example, Buddhists and Christians have different views of the self. A Muslim might think Christians are idolaters because they believe Jesus is divine. They wonder how you can say a human is God without breaking the first commandment. Because Christians believe in the Trinity, Jews find it hard to see them as faithful to the Old Testament Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). A Hindu or Sikh who strongly believes in the law of Karma would explain bad events in a person’s life differently than a Methodist would.

Next, let’s answer the question directly. Two key points are important to remember. First, it is clear that the grace of Christ is for everyone. Romans 5:15 states, “For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” This point is sometimes called the “scandal of particularity.” Second, faith that trusts in salvation through Christ is essential. Based on these two points of grace and faith, is there a Wesleyan-Holiness way to evaluate non-Christian religions? Yes. This answer comes in the form of a question: “How much does the religion help the purpose of prevenient grace? How does it promote a ‘righteousness’ that is like the ‘faith of a servant’?” Some religions, or some versions of religions, have similarities to important aspects of the Christian faith. These features may better serve prevenient grace.

Here is the conclusion: The value of a non-Christian religion is found not in what it claims for itself but in how it can serve as an instrument of prevenient grace. Anything positive about this religion has come about through the Holy Spirit and as a result of the prevenient Christ. Any similarities between the Christian faith and a non-Christian religion result from prevenient grace working in the culture and religion. It does not matter how ancient the culture or religion is. The similarities do not mainly come from the religion itself but from God’s grace.

From this perspective, we can say good things about some parts of certain religions. But we need to remember that these parts are temporary and secondary. They point towards and anticipate the grace of God found in Jesus Christ. They are secondary and only point the way to Jesus. We should never forget the ways in which religions, including Christianity, go against the God who became human in Jesus of Nazareth.

We should remember that only God, who is sovereign and full of holy love, can judge people based on their response to Jesus Christ. In all ways and at all times, he will always be true to himself, his word, and his world. Furthermore, anything that John Wesley or his theological followers teach about the relationship between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions must be checked with the New

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Testament. The Bible is the final authority. If Wesley is found to be not in line with God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, then Wesley and his followers need to be corrected.

Let's also remember that while the church is the first sign of God's kingdom, the church and the Christian religion are not the same as the Kingdom. Only when the Son has completed everything the Father has given him to do will we be able to see the Kingdom clearly and perfectly. "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. . . . When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:24-25, 28).

APPLICATION

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1. Write a reflection paper based on the following questions. Be prepared to share that paper with your mentor.
 - How does the doctrine of prevenient grace help us relate to non-Christians?
 - Is there any positive role or contribution for non-Christian religions in responding to Christ? If so, what might those be?

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1. Our theology does not affect the way we engage in evangelism and missions.
A. True
B. False
2. Wesleyans unambiguously affirm the historic Christian faith.
A. True
B. False
3. Wesleyan-Holiness understanding of prevenient grace assures us that God is already working in persons outside the Christian faith.
A. True
B. False
4. God's gracious activity is universal.
A. True
B. False
5. There is only one covenant of grace — through Jesus Christ.
A. True
B. False
6. Prevenient grace can work in many ways, through different means, to bring us to an encounter with Christ.
A. True
B. False
7. Revelation of Christ as the Redeemer is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit.
A. True
B. False
8. Jesus is God's definitive revelation of Himself.
A. True
B. False

EXAM

**NOTES**

9. Wesley understands the faith of a servant as an initial response to prevenient grace that could only be found in the church.
 - A. True
 - B. False

10. Wesley recommends that we leave the matter of the final salvation of those in other religions to God.
 - A. True
 - B. False

11. Prevenient grace is only complete when it leads to Christ.
 - A. True
 - B. False

12. For Wesleyans, the notion that there are many different paths to God (outside Christ) is compatible with our understanding of the gospel.
 - A. True
 - B. False

13. Prevenient grace is universal; salvation requires a human response.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Review the exam questions and answers. Discuss any issues or questions the participant raises for you.
2. How does the doctrine of prevenient grace help us relate to non-Christians?
3. Is there any positive role or contribution for non-Christian religions in responding to Christ? If so, what might those be?