

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

SIN, GRACE, AND THE SPIRIT IN PROSPER OF AQUITAINE

Aaron D. Matherly

Questions about sin and grace in the time of Augustine were heavily debated in relation to the saving work of the Spirit. Through various controversies, Prosper maintained a consistent position that the Spirit alone could bring salvation and perseverance.

Although the Council of Carthage (418) officially condemned Pelagianism, Augustine's teachings on sin, grace and predestination continued to ignite controversy throughout the rest of his career.¹ Reactions against Augustine's views were not limited to Pelagius's successors, and even those who shared Augustine's condemnation of him voiced serious misgivings over the moral laxity they perceived as inherent in Augustine's insistence on the gratuity of grace and predestination.² Following Augustine's death in 430, the torch of his theology was carried on by an unlikely successor: a layman from Gaul determined to defend Augustine's views on grace, Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 388–ca. 455). Little is known about his early life, but by the 420s Prosper had emerged as Augustine's staunchest defender against those he saw as dangerously conceding too much ground to Pelagianism.³

Later in his career, Prosper softened his views concerning the extent of the atonement and reprobation, and scholars have documented this

¹ For a helpful summary of the controversy surrounding the Council of Carthage and the Pelagian controversy, see Donato Ogliaari, *Gratia et Certamen: The Relationship Between Grace and Free Will in the Discussion of Augustine with the So-Called Semipelagians* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 21–26.

² For a survey of the development of Augustine's views on grace and predestination, refer to Donato Ogliaari, *Gratia et Certamen*. See also James Wetzel, "Snares of Truth: Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York: Routledge, 2000), 124–141. We may surmise Augustine's theology on grace and predestination into a few brief points relevant to this essay: 1) The reality of Original Sin and the will's predisposition to sin (humanity as a *massa damnata*); 2) Grace *precedes* a move towards God; 3) God's mysterious election of some to receive the gifts of faith and perseverance.

³ For a discussion of Prosper's life, see Alexander Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace: The Life and Thought of Prosper of Aquitaine* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 37–51, which is a revision of "Prosper of Aquitaine: A Study of His Life and Works" (PhD diss., Fordham University, 2006).

shift.⁴ The goal of this article, therefore, is to concentrate on the work of the Holy Spirit in Prosper as it relates to his understanding of God's gratuitous grace. This article seeks to refute the view that a definite shift took place in Prosper's pneumatology in his later writings.⁵ Instead, it maintains that Prosper's understanding of the Spirit's work remained consistent throughout his career. Specifically, from early on Prosper linked the work of the Spirit to God's grace in transforming sinners. Although he shifted his view of the extent of the atonement and reprobation, Prosper never forfeited his emphasis on the need for God's gratuitous grace and the work of the Spirit for salvation.

Early Period: *De providentia Dei*

Prosper's earliest-known work is the poem *De providentia Dei*. Writing in 416, Prosper offered an explanation of why God would allow Christians to suffer in the wake of the barbarian invasions.⁶ As an exile, Prosper had witnessed the brutality of the raids, and in his poem he describes the tragic scene:

For the flocks are gone altogether, and so are the seeds of the fruits;
there is no ground left for vines and olive trees.
The force of fire and rain has taken away the houses of the farms;
Worse yet, some of them still stand here empty.
If we must endure the blows of misfortune, alas, for ten full years
of slaughter
we have been cut down by the swords of the Vandals and the Goths.⁷

⁴ Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, offers a survey of Prosper's works and traces the evolution of his thought and its impact on the fifth-century Semi-Pelagian controversy.

⁵ Notably, Thomas Humphries, "Prosper's Pneumatology: The Development of an Augustinian," in *Grace for Grace: The Debates after Augustine and Pelagius*, ed. Alexander Hwang, Brian Matz, and Augustine Cassiday (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 97–113.

⁶ For a discussion of the context and writing of *On God's Providence*, see Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 51–65.

⁷ Prosper of Aquitaine, *De providentia Dei: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, 10 (New York: Brill, 1989), 7. Both the poem's format in Marcovich's translation and the Latin title are retained. Here, and in future references to primary works, the title of the published work will be used.

Although primarily concerned with consoling suffering Christians, Prosper's poem offers glimpses into his theology of sin, grace, and the work of the Spirit.

First, Prosper invokes the concept of original sin in order to explain how people can be capable of the destruction witnessed in Gaul:

Introduced by such a guile and born of such a crime,
 death subjugated man, and the fault spread to all his descendants.
 Once men were driven from their original citadel of virtue,
 death got them under her grip; and not merely by the transmission of the
 one sin of the forefathers,
 but rather while increasing with the birth of the multitude of peoples,
 she spreads her manifold destruction to become a vast massacre.⁸

Death and sin were not due to any defect in God's original creation of the soul, but were handed down to Adam's progeny through his wilful transgression in the Garden.⁹ Prosper indicates that the Fall entails more than just physical death, but also carries a spiritual dimension that now affects the human will.¹⁰ After recalling humanity's original creation, Prosper says:

But if a man deprived of sense thinks that my account [of man's creation]
 is sheer exaggeration,
 and did not yet recognise himself in it,
 let me tell him that the human race is very distant from our first parents,

⁸ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 21–23.

⁹ Hwang interprets Prosper to exclude infants from original sin, referencing two passages that deal with the death of infants during the barbarian invasions, notably: "But what crime have committed innocent boys and girls; when their short life span had given them no time to sin?" (Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 7). Thus Hwang finds in Prosper, at least in this early stage, a "view of humanity that is incomplete, and not completely coherent" (*Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 59). Surely, if this is Prosper's view the charge of incoherency is appropriate. Nevertheless, it seems more accurate to interpret Prosper as making a general statement about excluding the actual sins of infants as the cause for the current disaster in Gaul, which, it may be noted, Prosper does partly attribute to the sins of the nation. Thus the argument Prosper must be countering, given Hwang's understanding, is that Gaul is being judged in part for the inherited *guilt* of infants, which is unlikely.

¹⁰ Contra Hwang: "[The fall] was a crime according to Prosper, but it does not seem to carry any practical consequences other than death" (*Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 60).

being driven through so many sins, and that only a seed of poor strength had survived, corrupt by the moral turpitude.¹¹

Here, Prosper rhetorically assumes that his readers would not recognise his account of humanity's original creation, given a context in which invading armies put human wickedness on full display as they razed Christian villages and churches. Thus, Prosper directs readers to the "first roots of the Holy People" that they may see the contrast between humanity before and after the Fall. Whereas Adam and Eve were "the Holy People," now the human will is capable of the destruction witnessed in Gaul.

Furthermore, Prosper warns his readers of committing idolatry by seeking answers and peace during the current crises in the movement of the heavenly bodies:

Why do you search for a useless shelter?
 against an old crime of the Chaldean astrology?
 For no matter how often you approach the celestial phenomena with
 solicitous cares,
 no matter how deeply you explore the hidden causes of the universe,
 you cannot deny that God possesses a greater knowledge of the nature.¹²

Prosper rejects the claim that people may attribute their wicked deeds to the power of the stars, which God himself created. If God binds our fates to the stars, argues Prosper, then he would be inconsistent "to demand guiltless actions from men, [and] to apply punishment."¹³ Thus, according to Prosper, external forces do not hold human free will captive. The real source of sin lies within the human heart:

As a matter of fact, if something hinders our virtue and impedes our souls,
 it is not caused by the celestial bodies, nor does it emanate from heaven,
 but rather arises out of our own hearts.¹⁴

Thus Prosper identifies the "civil war" and "internal strife in ourselves" as the cause for evil.

Elsewhere, Prosper describes his own condition after the Fall:

¹¹ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 21.

¹² Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 45.

¹³ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 45.

¹⁴ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 47.

Indeed, if left alone, I have no chance of living, and death holds me as a slave
 under its sway. Once I have been overcome, there is no way for me to be able to overcome,
 unless the true Power of God is joined to me,
 or the savior receives me in His real human flesh.¹⁵

In this passage, Prosper highlights both physical and spiritual death and the redemption wrought by Christ. Redemption occasions a present and a future reality, and here Prosper blurs the lines between the two:

His immutable majesty suffers no harm in the act of my redemption, nor is His greatness diminished by the fact that I change into Him. Since life cannot be held captive by death, He submits to my mortality, so that death may perish for me, and that no longer I live in myself, but rather Christ, who has united Himself with me in Himself.¹⁶

Furthermore, continues Prosper:

[Christ] made a new beginning
 for mortal men in Himself. While taking on every aspect of human flesh, He both brought the dead to life by partaking in their nature,
 And recreated the living by exchanging His life for death.¹⁷

While Christ's redemption entails an eschatological hope of conquering physical mortality, for Prosper it also results in a new life in the present in which people live in Christ.

Because of Adam's sin, people now need grace in order to overcome death. Although *De providentia Dei* contains only three references to the Spirit, each occasion speaks to the need for the Spirit's transforming power. Following the aforementioned discussion on redemption, Prosper writes:

And just as, in old times, grace extended only to those
 who had seen Christ through their faith, so in our times
 Christ renews no man unless he has been received in His heart.

¹⁵ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 35.

¹⁶ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 35.

¹⁷ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 35.

Man, look now what a great power has been freely bestowed upon you!
 You can be a Son of God if you wish. For the omnipotent Spirit
 has recreated you as you were overshadowed by the power of the Word.
 You should no longer consider yourself as being born of the bodily seed
 of your fathers! Let the captive origins of your flesh perish!
 Join nothing of the old to the new!¹⁸

Here, Prosper argues that the Spirit brings about a new birth necessary to overcome sin and live a godly life, and this itself is a result of grace.

Furthermore, whereas sin formerly held the flesh captive, now the power of the Spirit frees the human mind to live a life of obedience:

This is not to ask you to obey a harsh law
 submitting you to cruel yoke. But rather let the free mind of man
 exercise its holy obedience in accordance with the rule which the
 Holy Spirit
 writes down on the tablets in the human heart with the blood of Christ.¹⁹

Similarly, Prosper argues that salvation awaits those “renewed by the Spirit in the holy river”²⁰ and “cut off from the mortal stock.”²¹ Thus Prosper further emphasises the transforming power of the Spirit. Prosper alludes to both the present reality of the Spirit’s work, namely, a new life transformed and cut off from its former self, and the future hope of “the heavenly abode,” which those in the Spirit enjoy now. The evidence, therefore, supports the notion that early in his career—and most likely before any influence of Augustine—Prosper realised the necessity of grace and the work of the Spirit to transform sinners. Although Prosper develops in greater detail the work of the Spirit in subsequent works, *De providentia Dei* already contains the important themes on grace and the Spirit: the human will is bound to sin, and only by the gracious work of the Spirit can anyone hope for salvation.²²

¹⁸ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 35.

¹⁹ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 37; cf. 2 Cor 3:3.

²⁰ I.e., baptism, which Prosper includes as part of God’s act of predestination. For a brief mention, see P. de Letter, “Introduction,” in *Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine*, ACW 32 (New York: Newman Press, 1963), 11.

²¹ Prosper, *De providentia Dei*, 49; cf. Titus 3:5, a verse Prosper will employ again in his later writings. For example, see below n. 100.

²² Hwang notes on Prosper’s early theology in *De providentia Dei*: “Prosper’s understanding of grace is dominated by his emphasis on human free will. God’s grace is relegated to a secondary role in the order of salvation. Salvation is the result

Contra Massilium: The Spirit and Prosper's Defense of Augustine

Significant backlash against Augustine's doctrine of predestination arose out of Marseilles in southern Gaul, a safe haven during the barbarian raids and political unrest in the early-fifth century.²³ Prosper, who also sought refuge in Marseilles, refers to Augustine's Gallic opponents as the *doctores Gallicani*, or more commonly to modern scholars, the "Massilians."²⁴ Although not an official spokesperson for the movement, John Cassian, who arrived in Marseilles around 415, looms large over the debates.²⁵ Although emphasising the need for divine grace, Cassian still allowed for some capacity of the human will to initiate the process of salvation.²⁶ God wills all people to be saved, but each one has the power to resist this will.²⁷ Following *De providentia Dei*, Prosper wrote nothing for a period of ten years.²⁸ His "silent years" were not completely inactive, however, and during this time Prosper apparently came under the influence of Augustine. The challenges presented by Cassian and others to Augustine's doctrines on grace and predestination subsequently prompted Prosper to take up the pen in defence of Augustine.

of human decision, followed by a movement of God" (*Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 62). What is presented here is not a denial of *any* theological development in Prosper; rather, contra Hwang and Humphries, Prosper presents the themes of the necessity of grace and the transforming work of the Spirit as crucial in his soteriology even early on. This essay argues, therefore, that Prosper's evolution is less drastic than elsewhere presented.

²³ See Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 66–67.

²⁴ The designation "Massilian" (sometimes "Massalian") is preferred over the term "Semi-Pelagian." See Ogliari, *Gratia et Certamen*, 5–9.

²⁵ Hwang, *Intrepid Love of Perfect Grace*, 84.

²⁶ For summaries of Cassian's views on grace, see Alexander Hwang, "Manifold Grace in John Cassian and Prosper of Aquitaine," *SJT* 63 (2010): 93–108; Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 2nd ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 110–136.

²⁷ Cassian says in his thirteenth Conference: "It cannot be doubted, therefore, that the seeds of virtue exist in every soul, having been placed there by the kindness of the Creator... Consequently there always remains in the human being a free will that can either neglect or love the grace of God," (*John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, ACW 57 (New York: Newman Press, 1997), 480).

²⁸ See Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 67–68.

Letter to Rufinus

P. de Letter describes Prosper's *Letter to Rufinus* (c. 426) as the "first document of the Semi-Pelagian controversy."²⁹ Addressed to a certain Rufinus, the letter reveals Prosper's staunch allegiance to the North African bishop during the Massilian Controversy. In it, Prosper defends the absolute gratuity of grace, perseverance, a limited salvific will, and reprobation. Importantly, Prosper links the work of the Spirit to his theology of grace.

Prosper's first mention of the Spirit follows a discussion of Cornelius.³⁰ Since Acts describes Cornelius as fearing God and praying "before he had received grace," Prosper's opponents maintained the account of Cornelius "as a good example of what free will is able to do."³¹ Prosper rejects any notion that anyone, by their own power, can initiate a move towards God: "Who can doubt that free will obeys the invitation of God calling only when grace has aroused in him the desire to believe and to obey?"³² According to Prosper, God's grace had already worked in Cornelius prior to his baptism. At this point, Prosper invokes the work of the Spirit:

*For all men have not faith. All do not obey the gospel. Believers are led by the Spirit of God; unbelievers turn away of their own free will. Accordingly, our turning to God is not our own doing but God's gift; as the Apostle says, By grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, for it is the gift of God. Not of works, that no man may glory.*³³

Thus Prosper explicitly links the Spirit to the faith that leads to salvation, and describing the Spirit in terms of a "gift" is a recurring designation throughout his works.

Prosper describes the reality of humanity's inherited corruption in sobering terms. When Adam sinned, "man lost his native innocence" and "became an exile and a lost man, walking without knowing whereto, straying into ever-deeper error."³⁴ Consequently, Prosper invites readers

²⁹ P. de Letter, "Introduction," in *Defense of St. Augustine*, 4.

³⁰ Cf. Acts 10.

³¹ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, trans. P. de Letter, in *Defense of St. Augustine*, 26 [de Letter's pagination].

³² Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 25–26.

³³ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 26–27. Italics are from de Letter unless otherwise noted; cf. 2 Thess 3:2; Rom 10:16; Eph 2:8.

³⁴ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 27.

to recall that their own salvation is due to a work of God and is not based upon any merit in the person:

When he was ungodly, blind, dead, it was from the Saviour that he gratuitously received justice, light, life. He did not practice justice already and then receive an increase in justice; nor did he walk towards God and get strength to continue his course; nor did he love God and receive an increase in the fervor of charity.³⁵

Prosper cannot overemphasise the gratuity of God's grace. People do nothing to invite, seek, or spur on God's grace; rather, God freely bestows it to whom he chooses. Once again, Prosper highlights the role of the Spirit in granting faith: "When, as yet without faith, and hence ungodly, [man] received the Spirit of faith and was made just."³⁶ Thus, fascinatingly, Prosper notes the Spirit's role in both the giving of faith and in one's justification.³⁷ The gift of the Spirit reveals God's gracious love towards those hopelessly lost in sin, and while people may exhibit some admirable works, apart from God's charity revealed in the gift of the Spirit "they have the semblance of holiness, not the reality."³⁸

Prosper further includes the Spirit in a discussion on the doctrine of predestination. No person merits salvation, says Prosper, and because of Adam's sin all deserve condemnation.³⁹ According to Prosper, "the impeccable justice of God would come down on all [of Adam's progeny], did not His merciful grace take a certain number unto Himself."⁴⁰ The reason for God's manner of predestination, says Prosper, is "hidden in God's secret counsel" and "above the ken of human knowledge."⁴¹ Unlike his opponents, Prosper is not troubled by God's secret decree: "Our faith suffers no harm from not knowing it, provided we confess that no one is lost without his fault, and no one saved for his own merit ... Save for His call, His teaching, His salvation, no man comes or learns or is saved."⁴²

³⁵ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 27.

³⁶ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 27.

³⁷ Contra Humphries: "[Prosper's] earliest defense of Augustine, the *Letter to Rufinus*, shows an emphasis on grace with no connection to a doctrine of the Holy Spirit.... The early categories for Prosper are divine grace and human will with no mention of the Holy Spirit" ("Prosper's Pneumatology," 106–107).

³⁸ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 28.

³⁹ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 31.

⁴⁰ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 31.

⁴¹ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 31.

⁴² Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 31.

As proof of his position on predestination and God's limited salvific will, Prosper points to the book of Acts:

At the very moment that the preachers of the gospel were sent out to all the nations, the apostles were forbidden to go to certain regions by Him *who will have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth*, with the result, of course, that many detained and going astray during this delay of the gospel, died without having known the truth and without having been sanctified in baptism.⁴³

Although Prosper's opponents championed 1 Tim 2:4 as a favourite proof-text against a limited salvific will, here Prosper demonstrates the inconsistency of such an interpretation from the account in Acts.⁴⁴ Prosper continues by identifying the agent of God's hindering:

Let, then, Holy Scripture say what happened: And when they had passed through Phrygia and the country of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia. And when they were come into Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithnyia, and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not.⁴⁵

Prosper, therefore, links the Spirit with God's will to save—and not to save—those whom he predestines. Prosper repeats his argument, and makes special reference to the Spirit:

Is there any wonder that at the very beginning of the preaching of the gospel the apostles could not go except where the Spirit of God wanted them to go, when even now we see that many of the nations only begin to have a share in the Christian grace, while others have not yet got a glimpse of that divine gift?⁴⁶

⁴³ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 32; cf. Acts 16; 1 Tim 2.

⁴⁴ For the use of this verse during the Massilian Controversy, see Roland Teske, "1 Timothy 2:4 and the Beginnings of the Massalian Controversy," in *Grace for Grace: The Debates after Augustine and Pelagius*, ed. Alexander Hwang, Brian Matz, and Augustine Cassiday (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 14–34.

⁴⁵ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 32.

⁴⁶ Prosper, *Letter to Rufinus*, 32.

Prosper's reference to the Spirit, therefore, is intentional. The Spirit gives faith, makes people holy, and furthermore, argues Prosper, plays an active role in God's work of predestination.

Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese

Most likely writing around 430, Prosper responds to two priests, Camille and Theodore, who apparently looked to him to provide clarification on passages from Augustine's *On Predestination of the Saints* that struck them as "being novel and not very clear."⁴⁷ Although the work contains few explicit references to the Spirit, those included in the work further speak to the Spirit's role in conversion. Prosper divides the work into nine segments, each addressing a particular question about Augustine's views on grace and predestination. As in his *Letter to Rufinus*, the third excerpt describes the Fall and its subsequent effect upon the human will:

It was by giving credence to the devil's words that Adam ceased to believe in God. Allowing himself to get drunk with the spirit of pride, he turned his heart away from the Lord when seeking to free himself from the law of justice, and he became the slave of the apostate angel.⁴⁸

Unlike the Pelagians who "refuse to say that faith is a gift of God," Prosper maintained that "faith is the first gift we all lost, it is also the first gift we have to receive again."⁴⁹ Specifically, Prosper identifies the Spirit as the source of faith:

Just as we should not have continence did not God *give it*, nor should we love with a saintly love were not *the charity of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given us*, nor finally should we have *wisdom and understanding counsel and fortitude, knowledge and godliness, and fear of the Lord* did not the Holy Spirit grant these gifts: how could the faith which Adam lost be found in any of his sons unless it be imparted to them by the same Spirit who *worketh all in all*?⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Prosper, *Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese*, trans. P. de Letter, in *Defense of St. Augustine*, 49. For a helpful treatment of this work, see José Pedrozo, "A Fifth Century Controversy on Grace: The Theology of Grace in Prosper of Aquitaine" (MA thesis, Loyola University, 1989), 35–38.

⁴⁸ Prosper, *Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese*, 52.

⁴⁹ Prosper, *Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese*, 53.

⁵⁰ Prosper, *Answers to the Extracts of the Genoese*, 52–53; cf. Rom 5:5; Isa 11:2; 1 Cor 12:6.

Here, Prosper highlights the interchangeable role of the Spirit as both the gift and the giver of gifts. God grants the Spirit, and in turn the Spirit imparts faith. Notably, Prosper's description reveals other gifts of the Spirit including wisdom, godliness and fear of the Lord, all which characterise and perfect the faith of the elect. Hence for Prosper, without the gift of the Spirit and the Spirit freely bestowing his charitable gifts, salvation remains impossible.

Against Cassian

In 431, Prosper travelled to Rome in order to seek Celestine's favour for the pro-Augustinian party in Gaul.⁵¹ Although Celestine issued a letter generally commending Augustine, it lacked any definite pronouncement concerning his later works on predestination, nor did it include any formal condemnation on Prosper's Gallic opponents.⁵² As a result of Celestine's ambiguity, both sides of the debate could appeal to the letter in support of their positions.⁵³ In Gaul, the resistance to Augustine grew in strength due in large part to the publication of Cassian's *Conferences*. Although the work itself is not exclusively devoted to the growing controversy on grace and predestination, the thirteenth Conference, published in 432, specifically counters Augustine's theology. Prosper would have read the work upon his arrival in Marseilles, and in turn he wrote his response to Cassian in defence of Augustine. As in his earlier works, the Spirit figures prominently in Prosper's views on God's gratuitous grace.⁵⁴ In this work Prosper further explores the Spirit's role in perfecting the believer's faith and keeping the law.

Here, Prosper reemphasises the necessity of the Spirit for conversion in response to Cassian who maintained that each person retained a capacity for faith "at the sole prompting of their own wills."⁵⁵ Prosper

⁵¹ For a summary of events and helpful overview of Prosper's response to Cassian, see Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 142–167; de Letter, *Prosper of Aquitaine*, 7–9; Rebecca Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, Patristic Monograph Series 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 120–131.

⁵² De Letter, "Introduction," in *Defense of St. Augustine*, 8.

⁵³ Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency*, 121.

⁵⁴ Humphries views this work as signalling "the first transition in Prosper's pneumatology" ("Prosper's Pneumatology," 107). Of course, if the interpretation of Prosper in this essay is thus far correct, his view of the Spirit was closely linked to God's grace and the will from early on.

⁵⁵ Prosper, *On Grace and Free Will, Against Cassian the Lecturer*, trans. P. de Letter, in *Defense of St. Augustine*, 88.

offers the pagan philosophers and biblical figures of Matthew, Paul, Zacchaeus, and the thief crucified with Christ as evidence of the power of the Spirit to illumine hearts apart from any initiative or power in the persons themselves. The philosophers of Greece and orators of Rome, despite their “keen study and excellent minds” and “with all their labor,” achieved nothing in their search for the supreme Good. Instead, their thoughts became vain and their hearts darkened.⁵⁶ For those ensnared by the “deceitful illusions” of human wisdom, their own strength cannot succeed in attaining the beginning of salvation: “It is the hidden and powerful grace of God the wrought this change. This grace, sweeping aside the embers of worldly opinions and dead works, rekindles the dead log and of his heart and sets it aflame with the desire of the truth.”⁵⁷

Furthermore, Prosper describes how the Spirit illumined the hearts of Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax collector, and of Paul, the former persecutor of the church.⁵⁸ Similarly, Prosper considers the conversion of the thief on the cross, who “before had been blaspheming Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ Prosper asks:

From where arose in this man this new confession so different from his former speech? Let St. Paul tell us: *No man speaking by the Spirit of God saith anathema to Jesus. And no man can say the Lord Jesus but by the Holy Ghost.* We should have no doubt, therefore, that in the free behavior of one and the same man, his former blasphemies sprang from his own nature and his faith from the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰

Thus Prosper finds nothing in these figures themselves that could be a source of saving faith. For the unbeliever, “what looks like virtue is vice, just as what looks like wisdom is foolishness.”⁶¹ Therefore, “only the Spirit of God can bend their proud arrogance and by the power of His grace shatter the reasonings in which like mad dogs they bark against the truth which they do not know.”⁶²

Further discussion of the Spirit in *Against Cassian* comes in the context of a larger conversation on God’s predestination and calling. According

⁵⁶ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 103.

⁵⁷ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 103.

⁵⁸ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 87; cf. Luke 19:10.

⁵⁹ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 88.

⁶⁰ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 88.

⁶¹ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 108.

⁶² Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 108.

to Prosper, Cassian argued that some people may “come to grace without the help of grace.”⁶³ Furthermore, Cassian also seems to have held that Augustine’s doctrines of grace and predestination entails that God forces people to believe in him involuntarily and against their wills.⁶⁴ As before, Prosper maintains that any impulse towards God comes from the Spirit, and challenges Cassian’s claim that grace necessitates a loss of freedom:

As though the many effects of divine grace in the souls of men did not precisely mean that it makes them willing from unwilling! Or as though anyone who has the use of reason could come to faith in any other way than voluntarily! And so, it is no less absurd to say that someone may strive to have a share in divine grace against his own will than to assert that anyone comes to it without an impulse of the Spirit of God.⁶⁵

Contrary to the accusations of Cassian, Prosper holds that in his understanding of gratuitous grace, the Spirit gives freedom:

The grace of God does not endanger free will nor take away its volition when it produces in the will a good desire. For if our wills were no longer ours when they are perfected and ruled and guided and animated by grace, then we should have to say that the sons of God *who are led by the Spirit of God* are deprived of their freedom.⁶⁶

The subsequent appeal to Isaiah 11:2 in reference to the gifts of the Spirit put to rest any claims that the Augustine’s theology encourages moral laxity. As far as Prosper is concerned, Cassian’s attacks on this point only serve to “stir the ashes of a dead doctrine” and to “rekindle the flame in a dying smoke,” namely, Pelagianism.

Prosper further explores the relationship between the Spirit and works in a discussion of the law. Appealing to Romans 2, Cassian held that natural judgment remains in all people such that they may still do good. Prosper, however, offers a correction: only by the work of the Spirit can people obey the law of God:

⁶³ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 75.

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that Prosper was not entirely charitable in his response to Cassian, if not downright disingenuous in his presentation of Cassian’s views. See Augustine Cassidy, “Rehabilitating John Cassian: An Evaluation of Prosper of Aquitaine’s Polemic Against the ‘Semipelagians,’” *SJT* 58 (2005): 270–284.

⁶⁵ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 75.

⁶⁶ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 84.

If, I say, St. Paul speaks of the Gentiles in whose hearts God with his finger, that is, with the Holy Spirit, writes the new covenant that they may fulfill the entire law and the works of charity by nature, namely, by a reformed and renewed nature: then, what argument can the new and proud doctrine [of Cassian] draw from these texts, since we must attribute the reconciliation of these enemies of God to no other cause than the grace of the Mediator?⁶⁷

Unbelievers cannot follow the law apart from the work of the Spirit, and Prosper further links the Spirit to God's gratuitous grace: "Men who are dead can do no good works, nor can infidels do the works of justice. Their salvation is entirely gratuitous, and for that reason it is the glory of God, that he who glories may glory in Him whose glory he was in need of."⁶⁸ Neither the natural gifts that remain in humanity after the fall nor the law itself can make us love God, argues Prosper, and there is no good act of the human will "that is not aroused by an inspiration of the charity which is poured forth in us by the Holy Spirit."⁶⁹

Prosper continues by exploring the role of the Spirit in the book of Job. For Prosper, the story of Job stands as a paradigm of the Spirit's power of perseverance. Whereas Cassian held that Job endured the devil's attacks "without the help of God," Prosper attributed Job's victory over Satan to the work of the Spirit.⁷⁰ Here, Prosper confronts Cassian head-on:

For you say that Job's free will gained the victory in his combat by its own powers. I ask you, therefore, do you think that this holy man, when tried by the torments we read of in Holy Scripture, had within himself the Holy Spirit? If you say he had, then it is certain that God, whom he did not forsake, did help him.⁷¹

Prosper proceeds to offer numerous verses demonstrating that the Spirit provides the strength to endure tribulations and applies them to Job. It

⁶⁷ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 96–97.

⁶⁸ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 97.

⁶⁹ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 98; cf. Rom 5:5.

⁷⁰ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 114–115; cf. Cassian, *Conferences*, 482–483. For Cassian, attributing Job's victory against the devil to grace alone would seem to render Satan's challenge to God a charade. Thus Cassian emphasises Job's own strength in combatting Satan, and notes that grace "only provided that the raging enemy would not drive him mad and overcome him in his weakened condition by the unequal and wicked burden of the struggle" (483).

⁷¹ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 115.

was not Job's own wisdom on display when he answered his friends, but that of the Spirit.⁷² Likewise, Job's own strength did not provide victory against the devil, but by the gift of the Spirit he could glory in his tribulation.⁷³ For Prosper, it is "*The Lord who preserves the souls of His saints,*" and in his response to Cassian, the work of the Spirit plays a vital role.⁷⁴

Grace and the Spirit in Prosper's Later Writings

Shortly after penning his treatise *Against Cassian*, Prosper shows signs of softening his views on double predestination and God's salvific will. De Letter terms this development in Prosper's thought his "second period," which he dates from 433 to 435.⁷⁵ Whereas before Prosper held to a limited salvific will, now he advances that God desires the salvation of all people. Furthermore, Prosper now argues that the predestination of the non-elect is based upon God's foreknowledge of their evil actions.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Prosper maintains that God predestines the elect solely by his gratuitous grace. Consequently, Prosper's understanding of the work of the Spirit remains consistent despite the shifting views elsewhere in his theology.

Answers to the Gauls

Although defending Augustine against his unidentified Gallic opponents, Prosper's *Answers to the Objections of the Gauls* signifies a shift away from his earlier views on reprobation and God's limited salvific will. Concerning God's predestination to destruction, Prosper writes, "God does not withdraw from any man the grace of living in obedience to His will because He did not predestine him, but rather He did not predestine him because He foresaw he would swerve from obedience."⁷⁷ Although he softens his stance on reprobation, Prosper retains his earlier

⁷² Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 115; cf. Matt 10:19.

⁷³ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 116; cf. Rom 5:1–5.

⁷⁴ Prosper, *Against Cassian*, 117; cf. Ps 97:10.

⁷⁵ P. de Letter, "Introduction," in *Prosper of Aquitaine: The Call of All Nations*, ACW 14 (New York: Newman Press, 1952), 10–11. Similarly Hwang, who dates this "second period of reflection" from 435 to 440 (*Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 183).

⁷⁶ For more on Prosper's theological development during this period, see Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 171–179.

⁷⁷ Prosper, *Answers to the Objections of the Gauls*, trans. P. de Letter, in *Defense of St. Augustine*, 153.

view on the predestination of the elect. Prosper further highlights the desperate situation of humanity prior to a work of grace:

[Man] lies in the depth of the abyss in which he threw himself headlong through his own free will. He then loves his weakness and, because he is unaware of his disease, he fancies he is in good health. The beginning of the cure of this sick man is that he realizes his sickness and is enabled to desire the help of the Physician who will cure him.⁷⁸

As Prosper's views on the need for unmerited grace remain consistent, so too does his understanding of the Spirit's role in conversion. Only by regeneration can people be united to Christ and be freed from sin and death, and once again Prosper links the Spirit to this transformation:

Accordingly, just as it is not enough that Jesus Christ was born for men to be renewed, but they must be reborn in Him through the same Spirit from whom He was born...And he is not a member of the Body of Christ who does not put on Christ through water and the Holy Spirit.⁷⁹

Unsurprisingly, given Prosper's bleak assessment of fallen humanity apart from grace, he continues to emphasise the essential role of the Spirit in transforming sinners.

The Call of All Nations

By 440, Prosper left Gaul in order to serve as an advisor to Leo, the newly-minted bishop of Rome.⁸⁰ While in Rome, Prosper wrote his most substantial work, *The Call of All Nations*, around 450. In effect, Prosper hoped to settle the controversies on grace that "he had helped to begin and maintain."⁸¹ Prosper's views continue to shift and concede ground to those whom he earlier criticised, especially concerning God's salvific will. Here, Prosper argues that God wills the salvation of all people.⁸² Similarly, concerning Christ's sacrifice Prosper notes:

⁷⁸ Prosper, *Answers to the Gauls*, 145.

⁷⁹ Prosper, *Answers to the Gauls*, 149–150; cf. John 3:5.

⁸⁰ For a discussion of Prosper's move to Rome and relationship with Leo, see Hwang, *Intrepid Love of Perfect Grace*, 187–198.

⁸¹ Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 208.

⁸² Prosper, *The Call of All Nations*, trans. P. de Letter, in *The Call of All Nations*, 89; cf. 1 Tim 2:4.

There can, therefore, be no reason to doubt that Jesus Christ our Lord died for the unbelievers and the sinners. If there had been any one who did not belong to these, then Christ would have not died for all. But he did die for all men without exception.⁸³

Despite his emphasis on God's universal salvific will, Prosper acknowledges the reality that God "does not in fact save all."⁸⁴ Thus Prosper maintains the need for a special kind of grace required for salvation. Although God grants to everyone a measure of general grace, only the elect receive this special grace that includes the gifts of faith and perseverance.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Prosper attributes the bestowal of this saving grace to God's mysterious will and denies that human merit or goodness influences God's decision to elect some for salvation: "He condemns no one without guilt and saves no one for his merits."⁸⁶

For Prosper, nothing good abides in anyone by which God would choose to save some over others. As in his earlier writings, Prosper assesses the dire situation of mankind following the fall using the categories of the animal, natural, and spiritual wills. Those with an animal will are those who are "insane and remain deprived of the use of reason."⁸⁷ The animal or carnal will, writes Prosper, "does not rise above the impulse that is born of the bodily senses, as in the case of infants."⁸⁸ Although the natural will rises above its animal impulses, Prosper argues, it cannot free itself from the bondage of sin. Those with a natural will may be gifted with the use of reason and even apply that will towards noble causes in the arts and sciences, but they still fail to give glory to the true God despite their quest for wisdom and the supreme good.⁸⁹ The natural will may not give into bodily pleasures, but for Prosper it is nevertheless characterised by self-love:

Such men, therefore, return to self-love. They are so pleased with themselves, that whatever they judge praiseworthy in their own persons,

⁸³ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 118.

⁸⁴ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 89.

⁸⁵ See Hwang's helpful discussion of degrees of grace in *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace*, 210–220.

⁸⁶ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 89.

⁸⁷ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 28.

⁸⁸ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 28.

⁸⁹ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 29; cf. Rom 1:20–21. See also n. 54 [?] above for a similar discussion.

they do not refer to God's gifts; they claim it as their own merit and attribute it to the efforts of their own wills.⁹⁰

Importantly, although according to Prosper the natural will is not subject to the carnal passions that typifies the animal will, persons in this category “possess in themselves nothing to lead them on to eternal life, for they actually begin to spoil in their own hearts those very natural gifts of God, and they pass from a rightful use of them to the practice of unnumbered vices.”⁹¹

In contrast, instead of self-love the spiritual will gives glory to God: “For this is the chief characteristic of the devout, that they glory in the Lord and do not love themselves except in God.”⁹² Given the inability of people to reach the heights of the spiritual will by their own volition, Prosper maintains the necessity of grace. Put succinctly, “no one can please God without God.”⁹³ Specifically, Prosper repeatedly emphasises the gift of the Spirit and his work of transforming the fallen will. Although *The Call of All Nations* includes Prosper's most extensive treatment of the work of the Spirit, in effect Prosper explores themes already covered elsewhere throughout his writings. Thus one may view *The Call of All Nations* as a summation of Prosper's pneumatology.

As before, Prosper links the work of the Spirit to regeneration. Whereas Adam existed without blemish, “by his willful disobedience [he] incurred many evils and transmitted them to his posterity in whom they were to multiply more and more.”⁹⁴ According to Prosper, people possess an “enslaved heart,” and only by a work of the Spirit can people's wills be directed towards God: “Mortal man, born according to the flesh from a source that was cursed in Adam, cannot come to the spiritual dignity of the new birth except through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁵ Repeatedly, Prosper speaks of the Spirit in terms of a gift, and furthermore emphasises the gracious nature of the will's transformation: “Merit begins with grace, which itself was received unmerited. If merit could be gained without grace, we would not have these words, *Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.*”⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 29–30.

⁹¹ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 30.

⁹² Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 32.

⁹³ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 34.

⁹⁴ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 35.

⁹⁵ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 36.

⁹⁶ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 63; cf. John 3:5.

Likewise, apart from the Spirit, no one can call the Father “Abba,” no one can call upon the Lord, and no one can become a son of God.⁹⁷

Furthermore, Prosper highlights the ongoing work of the Spirit in the lives of the elect that ultimately leads to eternal life. Whereas before, the will was powerless to keep the law, the Spirit gives people new hearts to obey God’s commandments. In a beautiful passage describing the transforming work of God, Prosper expresses the contrast between the old and new self:

In all is implanted the fear that makes them keep the commandments of God. A road is opened in the desert, the parched land is watered with streams. They who formerly did not open their mouths to praise God but like dumb and irrational animals had taken on the ferocity of beasts, now, having drunk at the fountain of the divine pronouncements, bless and praise God and recount the power and wonders of his mercy, how He chose them and adopted them to be his sons and made them heirs of the New Testament.⁹⁸

More directly, Prosper says, apart from the work of the Spirit, “we can do nothing that is right.”⁹⁹

Finally, for Prosper the Spirit is the source of the believer’s good gifts. Once living according to the sinful desires of the flesh, through the “laver of regeneration” people’s hearts are filled with love for God and his commandments.¹⁰⁰ So great is the “fire of love kindled in the hearts of the faithful by the Holy Spirit” that persecution and tribulation can do nothing to quell the flames.¹⁰¹ By the love of the Spirit, believers have confidence in their perseverance, and Prosper uses the persecution of the church under Nero and Domitian as the supreme example of the Spirit’s power to keep the saints: “With this charity diffused in [believers’] hearts by the Holy Spirit, the world of the faithful overcame the world ... Christ bestowed on His followers through the persecution of rulers the wreaths of their eternal crowns.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 41–42; cf. Rom 8:5; 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 8:14.

⁹⁸ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 43–44.

⁹⁹ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 64; cf. Titus 3:5.

¹⁰¹ Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 117.

¹⁰² Prosper, *Call of All Nations*, 118.

Conclusion

Prosper's pneumatology rings familiar in one of his latter works, *The Call of All Nations*. Here, Prosper employs similar arguments used elsewhere in his writings. Prosper never forfeits his views on the condition of humanity and God's gratuitous grace. Consequently, his views on the work of the Spirit likewise remain consistent throughout his writings. Hopelessly enslaved to sin, each one must receive a special work of God's grace to have any hope of salvation. For Prosper, God's gift of the Spirit prominently reveals his unmerited grace.

In 529, the Second Council of Orange hoped to end the controversies that had persisted beyond Prosper's death around 455. Canon 5 resembles Prosper's own views on grace and the Spirit articulated some seventy years prior:

If anyone says that [faith] belongs to us by nature and not by a gift of grace, that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit amending our will and turning it from unbelief to faith and from godlessness to godliness, it is proof that he is opposed to the teaching of the Apostles.¹⁰³

Writing in the ninth century, Gottschalk (ca. 802–ca. 868) quotes from no less than eight of Prosper's works in his writings. In his treatise *On Predestination*, Gottschalk held that apart from grace the will is "altogether powerless," and like Prosper he described the Spirit as a gift "given to us by God the Father gratuitously."¹⁰⁴ Thus although often overshadowed by Augustine, Prosper's voice nevertheless rings out in the perennial debates on grace and free will. For Prosper, by the pen of the Spirit writing on the hearts of humanity, God frees people from their bondage to sin, directs their affections towards God, and preserves them until they at last receive their heavenly crowns.

AARON D. MATHERLY is a PhD candidate at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, USA.

¹⁰³ In John Leith, *Councils of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 39.

¹⁰⁴ Gottschalk, *On Predestination*, in *Gottschalk and a Medieval Predestination Controversy: Texts Translated from the Latin*, ed. and trans. Victor Genke and Francis Gumerlock, *Medieval Philosophical Texts in Translation* 47 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2010), 110–111.

