THE REDISCOVERY OF PENTECOST IN METHODISM

LAURENCE W. WOOD

"God may, and ... does, instantaneously so baptize a soul with the Holy Ghost and with fire, as to purify it from all dross, and refine it like gold, so that it is renewed in love, in pure and perfect love ... yet ought not those who have experienced this, to be repeatedly told ... that there is a further, and still further renewal to be experienced day by day." — Joseph Benson in The Arminian Magazine (1781) and published by Wesley

THE ANTI-CALVINIST DECLARATION OF THE 1770 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

On August 7, 1770, Wesley gathered his preachers for their annual conference. These conferences gave Wesley the opportunity of meeting with his preachers on a yearly basis to discuss specific issues and to receive reports on their progress in promoting the cause of Methodism. This was a time of spiritual reflection and accountability. There did not seem to be any unusual circumstances which would have marked this twenty-seventh annual conference as being any different from previous ones. Even the official appointment of the first preachers to America seemed rather routine, perhaps because these first preachers (Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman) had left a year earlier. Wesley was sixty-seven years old and despite his arduous life he was enjoying remarkably good health. In fact, the best and most productive years of his life lay ahead of him to span a period of time which Outler has called "the later Wesley."

Wesley invited his preachers at this conference to ponder this question with him, "What can we do to revive the work of God?" These types of questions were a routine part of each of his annual conferences, but the answer given to this question launched Methodism into proclaiming the message of Pentecost with an emphasis which had largely been neglected since the Early Church Fathers. This is

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because John Fletcher, the vicar of Madeley, rose to the occasion. This conference declared that the Methodists were “leaning too much toward Calvinism.” This sparked a controversy among the Calvinist Methodists who were disciples of George Whitefield. Whitefield was one of the original Oxford Methodists along with John Wesley when they were university students. Whitefield, along with Wesley, proclaimed the possibility of attaining Christian perfection in this life. Fletcher, who knew Whitefield very well, reports that at this stage of his life he embraced the doctrine of Christian perfection. Fletcher reported that Whitefield’s preaching called believers to Christian perfection. Fletcher specifically cited Whitefield’s sermon on “The Marks of the New Birth” where he encourages those believers “who have received the Holy Ghost in all its sanctifying graces, and are almost ripe for glory.”

After his student days, Whitefield had become a convinced Calvinist, and he influenced a larger part of the Methodists to embrace Calvinism. The Methodists were thus divided between Wesleyan Methodists and Calvinist Methodists, though both groups continued to work together. In spite of the differences between Wesley and Whitefield, they remained dear friends.

Prior to this 1770 conference, Whitefield had gone in 1769 for his seventh and last voyage to America as a missionary. Due to his frequent absence, the leadership of the Calvinist Methodists in Britain had largely fallen upon one of Whitefield’s wealthy benefactors of royal descent, the Countess of Huntingdon. She too was a close friend of John Wesley and only four years younger than he. She had attended Wesley’s society at the “Foundry Chapel” after Wesley separated from the Moravians in 1740 because of their “quietism” and neglect of the sacraments. When Wesley and Whitefield had separated over the dispute on predestination in 1741, she had been largely instrumental in restoring their personal friendship—even though she sided with Whitefield’s Calvinism.

She was present at Wesley’s first conference in London in 1744. She invited this first conference to her London mansion on Downing Street, and Wesley preached on the text, “What hath God wrought.” This was the first household service conducted in her home. The Countess later choose Whitefield as her chaplain and beginning in 1748, Whitefield preached in her home twice a week. For all practical purposes, her aristocratic mansion was converted into a chapel where numerous dignitaries and intellectuals (such as David Hume) heard Whitefield preach, but apparently Wesley had the honor of being the first preacher in her home. And Wesley’s preachers had the honor of being invited to her home during their first annual conference.

When Wesley met with his preachers in London on that eventful day on August 7, 1770, little did he realize how enormously offended the Countess would feel with their declaration that they had been too tolerant of Calvinist theology. After all, Wesley was meeting with his preachers who agreed with him, and it probably never occurred to him that she would be surprised about their discussion on Calvinism. Besides, she already knew that he disagreed with her views. His 1744 Conference (which she attended) had already stated twenty-six years earlier that he and his preachers had made too many concessions to their Calvinist friends. Besides, it was through her efforts almost thirty years ago that the friendship between him and Whitefield was restored, allowing them at the same time the freedom to retain their own doctrinal differences over Calvinism.
Ever since the resolution of that original dispute in 1741, Wesley and Whitefield had formed separate societies, but they often preached for each other. Wesley regularly preached in many of the chapels of the Countess of Huntingdon scattered throughout Great Britain. She also served as one of his advisors. On one occasion she persuaded him not to preach a sermon which he had intended to deliver at Oxford University on July 25, 1741, on Isaiah 1:21: "How is the faithful city become a harlot?" The sermon would have been an outspoken attack on deism and the practices of the university, but the Countess advised him that it could have a counterproductive effect. When Wesley seemed to be terminally ill in 1753, she prayed earnestly for his recovery, noting that despite their theological differences she dearly loved him as a Christian brother.

This time, however, Wesley's criticism of Calvinism clearly unnerved her. She took it personally as if it were an attack on her. There were extenuating circumstances which contributed to her final break with Wesley. Two years earlier she had been offended by the dismissal of some of the Calvinist Methodist students whom she had supported at Oxford University. The authorities had expelled them because they allegedly had been seduced by her Methodist teaching and were being supported at her expense in order to carry out her religious agenda. This had inspired her to form a college on the site of an old castle in South Wales which she named Trevecca College. The purpose of the college was to train preachers to promote Methodism with its message on justification by faith.

Now it appeared to her that one of her long-time friends had also become one of her enemies, and what made it worse was that it was the founder of original Methodism, John Wesley himself. It was understandable that he would break with the Moravians in 1740, because they downgraded the importance of the means of grace; it was understandable that he would attack deism and the dead formalism of the Church of England as he had once intended to do in his university sermon of 1741; it was even understandable that he would have a different opinion from hers about predestination; but what apparently was not understandable to her is why Wesley would think that an attack on Calvinism was necessary in order to revive the work of God.

The two main points of dispute which erupted out of the London declaration centered on the related doctrines of absolute predestination and sanctification. The Calvinist Methodists believed God unconditionally foreordained certain ones to salvation. They further believed that one's justification by faith was grounded in this divine election process. This implied that the believer is accepted with God despite any change in one's character. This means one is justified because one is considered to be as righteous as Christ though in actual fact the believer may not be holy at all. Wesley said this implies that justification by faith produces an illusion of righteousness and a disregard for the law of obedience. This tendency toward Antinomianism is why Wesley believed that a revival of the work of God required a repudiation of Calvinism.

**John Fletcher Becomes the Apologist of Methodism**

Over the next few years, from 1771 to 1775, John Fletcher, while serving as the vicar of Madeley, answered the criticisms of the Calvinists, and in this process he developed a theology of the Holy Spirit which became as important in history as Luther's recovery of
the meaning of justification by faith and John Wesley's recovery of the meaning of sanctification by faith. For his emphasis on the baptism with the Holy Spirit has penetrated deeply into Protestant and Roman Catholic thinking even though Fletcher's name is hardly recognizable and the significance of his writings are little known even among his own twentieth-century Methodist descendants.

Fletcher was himself aware of the historic significance of his defense of Wesley's theology, noting that "we stand now as much in need of a reformation from Antinomianism, as our ancestors did of a reformation from Popery." Fletcher believed the need to "check the rapid progress of so enchanting and pernicious an evil ... inspires me with fresh courage ... to face ... my new, respectable opponent." Fletcher specifically cited Wesley as initiating a new reformation which brought into balance the over-reaction of Luther and Calvin to the Roman Catholic notion of sanctification by good works with their one-sided emphasis on the doctrine of justification by faith through grace.

Fletcher perceived that a true religious understanding of universal grace and practical piety had reached a climax in the Calvinist controversy in which he and Wesley were engaged. Fletcher (along with Wesley) believed that his Checks to Antinomianism had successfully defended Wesley's own reformation of the Church's theology begun with Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer. Fletcher understood the historical significance of what he was about, and without any false modesty he placed himself and Wesley in the same category of a reformer as Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer.

Fletcher's theology was no less scholarly and he was no less a creative genius than the previous Protestant and Anglican reformers. One biographer of Fletcher appropriately called him, "a genius in the great company of the saints." John Wesley said Fletcher had written with more clear understanding on this theme of "pardon and holiness" than "scarcely any one has done before since the Apostles." Wesley further believed that God had specifically "raised him up" to make the history of salvation culminating in the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost clearer than ever had been previously understood in the history of the Church. Wesley further showed that Fletcher's motivation for living was to be "filled with the fulness of his Spirit." Wesley further says that Fletcher's life exemplified his preaching and that he did not expect to find another person like him "this side of eternity." Wesley wrote:

Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within fourscore years, but one equal to him I have not known—one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblemishable a character in every respect I have not found either in Europe or America. Nor do I expect to find another such on this side of eternity.

As it is possible we all may be such as he was, let us endeavor to follow him as he followed Christ.

These words, "let us endeavor to follow him as he followed Christ!" show the profound feeling which Wesley had for Fletcher. These final words coming from Wesley at the end of Fletcher's life indicated his complete imprimatur upon Fletcher's theology as a standard for Methodism.

In a letter from John Wesley to Fletcher, dated October 11, 1783, Wesley wrote: "I
am quite satisfied about your motives and you had from the beginning my Imprimatur.””

This term, “Imprimatur,” comes from the New Latin *imprimatur* which means “let it be printed.” It is a technical term used to show official approval and a license to print especially under conditions of censorship. It implies that what is printed is by the directive of the highest officials. This is the most absolute term which Wesley could have used to show his complete and unqualified approval of Fletcher’s writings. The term indicates Fletcher’s official status as speaking for Wesley *ex officio* and with Wesley’s sanction. There is not a stronger term which Wesley could have used to show his total identification with Fletcher’s thoughts.

Wesley believed that Fletcher’s intellectual abilities were superior to anyone whom he knew, including George Whitefield. Wesley admired “the purity of the language,” “the strength and clearness of the argument,” and “the mildness and sweetness of the spirit” which typified Fletcher’s writings. His familiarity with the Scriptures, his knowledge of Church history and theology, his competence in ancient and modern languages, his understanding of world literature and world history, his comprehension of philosophy and the science of his day, “his artful and clear style of writing, and his saintly life provided the resources for him to articulate a theology of the Holy Spirit which arguably has done more than any other writings to revive the work of God in the world—next only to John Wesley.

Fletcher was recognized among all Methodists in the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century as the joint-interpreter with John Wesley of Methodist doctrine. He was dearly loved and highly respected among Wesley’s preachers who affectionately referred to him as “the great and good man, Mr. Fletcher.” John Watson, the first academic systematic theologian of Methodism, described Fletcher as “a man eminent for genius, eloquence, and theological learning.”

One of Fletcher’s admirers was Mr. Joshua Gilpin, a scholarly priest of the Church of England. His description of Fletcher’s writings and preaching was based on an intimate acquaintance with him. He also edited and translated Fletcher’s posthumous and highly influential work, *A Portrait of St. Paul*. Gilpin wrote:

Had he aimed at celebrity as a public speaker, furnished as he was with the united powers of learning, genius, and taste, he might have succeeded beyond many, who are engaged in so insignificant a pursuit. But his design was to *convert*, and not to *captivate* his hearers; to secure their eternal interests, and not to obtain their momentary applause. Hence, his *speech* and his *preaching* were not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the *Spirit*, and of power. He spake, as in the presence of God, and taught, as one having divine authority. There was an energy in his preaching, that was irresistible. His subjects, his language, his gestures, the tone of his voice, and the turn of his countenance, all conspired to fix the attention and affect the heart. Without aiming at sublimity, he was truly sublime; and uncommonly eloquent without affecting the orator.”

It is generally known that Fletcher was a saintly person, but he was equally known as a genius. One of his more recent biographers, George Lawton, has said that it is more
appropriate to call him "a genius in the great company of the saints." Lawton believes that Wesley had greater organizational skills, but Fletcher's "writings reveal him as Wesley's intellectual equal." More recently, United Methodist theologian Albert Outler has compared Fletcher's intellectual abilities as next only to Wesley's abilities and attainments. The significance of this connection between Fletcher and Wesley is symbolized in a monument erected in the honor of John Fletcher in the City Road Methodist Chapel in London, which Wesley built in 1777. Fletcher's monument is located to the right side of the communion table and immediately beneath John Wesley's monument. At the top of Fletcher's monument is a sculpture of the Ark of the Covenant. On one side is a sculpture of books entitled, "Checks" and "Portrait of St. Paul." On the other side is a scroll with the theme, "With the meekness of wisdom." Located at the bottom is a sculpture of a dove flying above pens and a roll of paper. The following epitaph composed by Richard Watson was inscribed on the tablet:

Sacred to the Memory of
THE REV. JOHN WILLIAM DE LA FLECHERE,
Vicar of Madeley in Shropshire;
Born at Nyon, in Switzerland, The XII. of September
A.D. MDCCXXIX; Died the XIV. of August, MDCCLXXV.
A MAN EMINENT FOR GENIUS, ELOQUENCE, AND THEOLOGICAL LEARNING;
STILL MORE DISTINGUISHED FOR SANCTITY OF MANNERS, AND THE VIRTUE OF PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY,
ADORNED WITH 'WHATEVER THINGS ARE PURE, WHATEVER THINGS ARE LOVELY,'
AND BRINGING FORTH 'THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT,' IN SINGULAR RICHNESS AND MATURITY.
THE MEASURE OF EVERY OTHER GRACE IN HIM WAS EXCEEDED BY HIS DEEP AND UNAFFECTED HUMILITY.
OF ENLARGED VIEWS AS TO THE MERIT OF THE ATONEMENT,
AND OF THOSE GRACIOUS RIGHTS WITH WHICH IT Invests All Who Believe.
He had 'BOLDNESS TO ENTER INTO THE HOLY PLACE BY THE BLOOD OF JESUS,'
AND IN REVERENT AND TRANSPORTING CONTEMPLATIONS,—THE HABIT OF HIS DEVOUT AND HALLOWED SPIRIT,—
THERE DWELT AS BENEATH THE WINGS OF THE CHERUBIM,
BEHOLDING 'THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST,' AND WAS 'CHANGED INTO THE SAME IMAGE,'
TEACHING HIS OWN ATTAINMENTS, MORE THAN EVEN BY HIS WRITINGS, THE FULLNESS OF EVANGELICAL PROMISES,
AND WITH WHAT INTIMACY OF COMMUNION MAN MAY WALK WITH GOD.

He was the friend and coadjutor of the Rev. John Wesley,
whose apostolic views of the doctrines of general redemption, justification by faith, and Christian perfection, he successfully defended,
leaving the future age an able exposition of 'the truth which is according to godliness,'
and erecting an impregnable rampart against pharisaic and antinomian error,
in a series of works distinguished by the beauty of their style, by force of argument,
and by a gentle and catholic spirit; affording an edifying example of 'speaking the truth in love,'
in a long and ardent controversy.

For twenty-five years, the parish of Madeley was the scene of his unexampled pastoral labours,
and he was there interred, amidst the tears and lamentations of thousands,
the testimony of their hearts to his exalted piety,
and to his unwearyed exertions for their salvation;
but his memory triumphed over death;

For twenty-five years, the parish of Madeley was the scene of his unexampled pastoral labours,
and he was there interred, amidst the tears and lamentations of thousands,
the testimony of their hearts to his exalted piety,
and to his unwearyed exertions for their salvation;
but his memory triumphed over death;
Certainly this monument and the commemoration written by Richard Watson eloquently speak of the towering influence of John Fletcher upon the development of Methodist doctrine and practice. This monument and its location directly under Wesley's monument reminds us that Methodist history will never be appreciated and understood adequately without reference to the saintly, scholarly influence of John Fletcher.

A significant part of Fletcher's effectiveness as an apologist for Methodism was his saintly life. Much could be written about the Christ-like impression which he made upon his world, but the following comments by James Ireland are typical. Ireland was one of Fletcher's most beloved friends. He was a wealthy merchant who contributed heavily to the Methodist cause. After Fletcher's untimely death, he wrote the following words to Fletcher's widow, Mary Fletcher, October 6, 1786:

I never saw Mr. Fletcher's equal. On him great grace was bestowed. What deadness to the world! What spiritual mindedness! What zeal for souls! What communion with God! What intercourse with heaven! What humility at the feet of Jesus! What moderation towards all men! What love for the poor! In short, he possessed the mind which was in Christ Jesus.14

Before Fletcher's writings had come to be so widely read by the religious world in Britain in the 1770s, it was estimated that the majority of English Evangelical believers were Calvinists.15 At the Methodist school at Trevecca it was estimated three out of every four students were Calvinist.16 Undoubtedly as a result largely of Fletcher's pen, Wesley could say in 1778 that "not one in ten, not one in an hundred, if we look through the nation, have the least esteem for Absolute Predestination."17

In 1805, Joseph Benson wrote his biography of John Fletcher and noted that Methodists "are almost universally great admirers of Mr. Fletcher."18 In 1882, Luke Tyerman wrote a significant work on the life of John Fletcher. He noted that "Fletcher's 'Checks' are as much read to-day as they were a hundred years ago. The demand for them increases almost every year, both in England and in America; and they are found in every land where Methodism has been founded."19

Abel Stevens in The History of Methodism said essentially the same thing, except even stronger:

No polemical works of a former age are so extensively circulated as these 'Checks.' They are read more to-day than they were during the excitement of the controversy. They control the opinions of the largest and most effective body of evangelical clergymen of the earth. They are staples in every Methodist publishing-house. Every Methodist preacher is supposed to read them as an indispensable
part of his theological studies, and they are found at all points of the globe whither Methodist preachers have borne the cross. They have been more influential in the denomination than Wesley's own controversial writings on the subject."

In the same vein John Fletcher Hurst in 1902, expressed the judgment that "Fletcher's masterpiece remains to this day a really valuable contribution to the literature of an age-long dispute" and that "every Methodist preacher reads the Checks as an indispensable part of his studies." Hurst was a noted scholar, author, and did post-graduate studies in Germany, where he became well informed of the latest developments in philosophy and theology at a time when traditional Methodism was beginning to be swept away by the tide of the newly emerging Liberalism associated with Borden Parker Bowne. He became a professor of historical theology at Drew Seminary in 1871, and then became its president in 1873. Eventually, he became the thirty-second bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880. Hurst supported Fletcher's interpretation of holiness and he believed that Fletcher's writings were more influential in countering Calvinism than Wesley's own writings. He said that Fletcher's writings "constitute the greatest prose contribution to the literature of the Methodist awakening as do Charles Wesley's hymns to its poetry."

This assessment of the importance of Fletcher for original Methodism has been reaffirmed in the *History of American Methodism* (in three volumes) which was commissioned by action of the General Conference of the Methodist Church in 1956 and published in 1964. This study pointed out that the "origins of Wesley's Methodism in America are not clearly known by contemporary research." As an example of this lack of understanding, this study shows that it was Wesley's idea to ordain the American preachers, not Coke's. Fletcher's role in this ecclesiastical decision was particularly noted, namely, that he encouraged Wesley to establish American Methodism as an independent denomination and that he had wanted to come to America to take an active role if his health had permitted.

Fletcher's role as an authoritative source of Methodist doctrine was also affirmed in this official study, placing his *Checks to Antinomianism* alongside the *Discipline*, Wesley's *Notes upon the New Testament*, and several editions of Wesleyan hymns. This officially authorized history of Methodism also noted that just as soon as *The Arminian Magazine* was successfully established as a continuing literary journal in America in 1813, "the experiences and insights of John Wesley and John Fletcher were repeated time and again within early American Methodism." This study cited the editors of *The Arminian Magazine* in America as especially wanting to promote a wider understanding of Methodist doctrine as taught by John Wesley and John Fletcher. This study quoted Bishop Asbury as highlighting Fletcher's and Wesley's most excellent parts. This study further showed that "many an early American Methodist" "read himself full of Fletcher's *Checks* and Wesley's *Sermons*, which besides his Bible, were the only books within his reach." This study pointed out that Bishop Asbury's dependence upon Fletcher and Wesley was typical of all Methodist preachers. Even more recently it has been observed in *The Historical Dictionary of Methodism* (1996) that Fletcher's *Checks to Antinomianism* was regarded in Methodism as "one of its principal textbooks in both Britain and
The Rediscovery of Pentecost in Methodism

It has been pointed out by the editors of the recent edition of *The Works of John Wesley* that the "the Sermons—the Notes—the Hymns ... are the standard books of Wesleyan doctrine. Only the Sermons and Notes are 'official documents'; but it is highly doubtful whether without the Hymns there could have been a Methodist revival." As the official study of the history of American Methodism (commissioned in 1956 and published in 1964) has pointed out, Fletcher's writings were also decisive and functioned as one of the standards of Methodist doctrine.

**Fletcher's Preaching and Theology Shaped Early Methodism**

Fletcher's influence in American Methodism (as well in Britain) was profound. His *Checks to Antinomianism* were reprinted for the Methodist Episcopal Church eight different times in the nineteenth century alone. The last two editions were published by the printing agency for the Methodist Episcopal Church in New York in 1889, and for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1898. His complete *Works* were reprinted twenty-two times throughout the nineteenth century with the last edition being in 1883.

*The Life of John Fletcher* was first written by John Wesley, and then it was rewritten by Joseph Benson in 1804 at the request of the British General Conference. It was subsequently published twenty-seven times with the 1898 edition being the last one. Seventeen of those editions were for The Methodist Episcopal Church, and ten editions were for British Methodism. Sixteen thousand copies were printed for the 1837 edition published in New York.

*Christian Perfection, An Extract from John Fletcher* was published and reprinted in 1796, 1837, 1844, 1852, 1855, 1857, 1861, and 1875, by the publishing agency for the Methodist Episcopal Church. *Portrait of St. Paul* was reprinted nine times, mostly in New York for the Methodist Episcopal Church. According to *The National Union Catalog*, which lists all publications prior to 1956, there were 174 different printings of Fletcher's various books in the nineteenth century. This remarkably large number of reprints of Fletcher's writings shows that his views of Methodist doctrine formed the thinking of American and British Methodism from its inception. It further proves that Fletcher's writings in the nineteenth century did in fact "control the opinions of the largest and most effective body of evangelical clergymen of the earth." It further shows that Methodist preachers everywhere were accustomed to speaking of full sanctification in terms of the Pentecostal baptism with the Spirit since that was Fletcher's key category, as Wesley also noted in his original biography of Fletcher.

Fletcher's Pentecostal view of full sanctification characterized American Methodism from its very beginning, including Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke. We have in the B.L. Fisher Library Archives at Asbury Theological Seminary examples of how early Methodist preachers used Pentecostal nomenclature for describing Wesley's view of full sanctification. Simply browsing through *The Arminian Magazine* will also show how extensively language such as 'filled with the Spirit' was used to define the meaning of being perfect in love.

Wesley's later sermons, like "The General Spread of the Gospel," "The Mystery of
Iniquity," and "The Signs of the Times," show that Wesley explicitly linked perfection with Pentecost. Reading these sermons of the later Wesley in The Arminian Magazine (where they were first published), alongside other writings such as Fletcher's and Benson's which linked Pentecost and perfection, generates an overwhelming sensation of Wesley's agreement with that emphasis.

According to Clarke's autobiography, while he was attending the Bristol annual conference, early in the morning on August 3, 1783, he heard "Mr. Bradburn preach on Christian perfection, from 1 John iv.19." (It should be noted that Bradburn also felt especially indebted to John Fletcher, and he too equated Pentecost with Christian perfection). Then at 10 a.m., Clarke heard Wesley preach on the text Acts 1:5, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost." Later during the day, again he heard Wesley preach on the text, "Let us go on to perfection," (Heb. 6:1). Clarke also noted that when Wesley came into his district of Norwich in October 1783, he heard Wesley preach a sermon on the text, "They were all baptized with the Holy Ghost." Within the space of one month, Clarke heard Wesley preach two sermons on the baptism with the Holy Ghost. We know from Clarke's writing that he also linked Pentecost and Christian perfection.

In his Commentary on the Book of Acts, Clarke writes: "John baptized with water, which was a sign of penitence, in reference to the remission of sin; but Christ baptizes with the Holy Ghost, for the destruction of sin [=entire sanctification]."

The term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" was thus an encoded phrase for Christian perfection, which Fletcher had crystallized in the preaching and thinking of Methodists through his Checks to Antinomianism. But Fletcher's preaching throughout the Methodist movement further influenced the wide acceptance of this interpretation. For this was a prominent theme in his preaching. At the Leeds annual conference in 1781, Fletcher preached on his doctrine of dispensations according to a letter written by Joseph Pescod to his wife while he was attending the conference. He reported that Fletcher's second point in his message was "the promise of the Holy Ghost, whom our Lord told His disciples He would send after His ascension. The dispensation of the Spirit is to renew us after the image of God; which implies light, and power, and love. ... I think I never heard a sermon to be compared with it. I wish I could tell you every word." Pescod then added this comment to his wife: "I had, also, the happiness to receive from his hand the bread in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The ordinance was administered in the old church, by Mr. Wesley, Mr. Fletcher, and nine other Clergymen."

We also have Wesley's favorable response and positive evaluation of this specific sermon. After listening to it, Wesley recorded in his diary that he was not at all surprised that Fletcher was such a popular preacher among the Methodists. Wesley's preachers used Pentecostal nomenclature freely, and Wesley did too. Joseph Benson wrote an essay on "Thoughts on Perfection" which Wesley published in The Arminian Magazine in October 1781. This was only two months after Fletcher had preached on this same subject at the Leeds Conference. In his essay, Benson highlighted the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the means of attaining Christian perfection: "God may, and ... does instantaneously so baptize a soul with the Holy Ghost and with fire, as to purify it from all dross, and refine it like gold, so that it is renewed in love, in pure and perfect love." Benson also published a treatise on sanctification two years later which also linked being filled with the
Spirit and holiness.

One of the first preachers Wesley sent to America was Joseph Pilmore. His diary notes show that he too regularly preached on the baptism with the Holy Spirit.17 We know that Pilmore preached, along with John Fletcher and Henry Moore, at Wesley's annual conference in Leeds in 1784.18 Henry Moore was also greatly influenced by Fletcher, and Fletcher referred to "the pious &c learned Dr. Henry Moore" as one who specifically affirmed the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (See Fletcher's essay on the new birth in this issue of the journal.)

One of Asbury's preachers, Elijah R. Sabin, preached a sermon on Christian Perfection and later published it under the title, "Christian Perfection Displayed and the Objections Obviated: Being the Substance of Two Discourses Delivered at Warwick, Rhode Island, September 13, 1807." It explicitly located the basis for full sanctification in Pentecost, highlighting Acts 2 and being filled with the Holy Spirit.

In the imprints of The Life of the Rev. John Fletcher following the first edition of 1804, Benson added an appendix in order to answer the charge that Fletcher's concept of the Pentecostal baptism with the Spirit was an unrealistic aspiration for human beings and that Fletcher himself never professed to experience it for himself. The significance of this appendix shows how deeply established Fletcher's concept of the baptism with the Spirit was and that even his non-Methodist detractors understood its significance for Methodism. Benson writes:

Speaking of "the Promise of the Father," or the gift of the Holy Spirit, including that rich blessing of union with the Father and the Son, mentioned John xvii.21, they the reviewers of The Christian Observer observe, "Upon this sublime and important subject, much occurs in the course of this volume (The Life of the Rev. John Fletcher). But though we think that in the present day it is not sufficiently considered, even by religious persons, we are clearly of opinion that, both as to his expectations and expressions, relative to the gift of the Holy Spirit, Mr. Fletcher exceeded the boundaries which are prescribed to us in Scripture. It appears also, in fact, that he never did experience that fullness of manifestation which he seems to have looked for so earnestly for so many years. Indeed, to expect another Pentecost, as Mr. Fletcher evidently did, is, as we conceive, wholly unscriptural, and can tend only to spiritual delusion."

Benson's reply to this criticism was a lucid explanation of Fletcher's view of Pentecost and its importance for Methodists everywhere. He showed that Fletcher was not the fanatic and literalist which his critics imagined him to be. Benson noted that he particularly knew Fletcher intimately and consequently he knew the importance of this subject and its meaning.

As the subject is of peculiar importance, I must be allowed to dwell a little upon it. This is a point which I can speak upon with assurance, having very frequently conversed and corresponded with Mr. Fletcher upon it, so that I know his views thereon perfectly. Now the questions are, What did he expect himself? What did he
teach others to expect? And what did he himself experience? "He expected," say the conductors of that Miscellany, "another Pentecost." In some sense he did; but not in the sense they imagine. He expected a Pentecost, not literally, but figuratively speaking. Did he expect clavens or distinct tongues of fire to rest upon him, or the gift of tongues, or that of prophecy, so called, or of healing? Did he expect to be enabled to raise the dead with a word or a touch? by no means: he looked for nothing of this kind. He expected only those ordinary operations and graces of the Spirit in a full and mature state which the holy Scriptures declare to be essential to the character of a true and perfect Christian. He expected "the spirit of wisdom and revelation, in and by the knowledge of Christ, that the eyes of his understanding being enlightened, he might know what was the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his (God's) inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of his power towards those that believe." He expected that his "faith should grow exceedingly," that his "love should abound more and more in knowledge, and in all grace," even the love of God, of his people, and all mankind, "shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him." He expected to be "filled with joy and peace through believing, and to abound in hope, by the power of the same Holy Ghost." He expected to be stamped with that divine image of God which he had lost by the fall, to be a partaker of a divine nature, to be sanctified wholly, to "grow up into Christ his living head in all things," and to arrive at the measure of the stature of his fullness, being "filled with all the communicable "fullness of God," and "conformed to the image of his Son." And what he expected himself, he taught others to expect, and urged them continually to press to this "mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Benson defended Fletcher's link between Pentecost and perfection, and he showed that Fletcher encouraged others to experience this baptism for themselves. He also affirmed that Fletcher was himself a recipient of this experience.

Now who will take upon him to say that Mr. Fletcher was in an error in this, and that we have no authority from Scripture to look for such things? But, say these Christian Observers, "It appears, in fact, that he never did experience that fullness of manifestation which he seems to have looked for so earnestly, for so many years." No! I think, on the contrary, it appears that he did experience it, at least in a very high degree.

Benson engaged in a lengthy account of the evidence that Fletcher did receive his Pentecostal experience, while at the same time noting that Fletcher insisted that one must always continue to grow in grace and experience yet more and more of God's love. Perfect love is a quality of pure love which increases in quantity daily as one grows in grace. Benson further noted, that though the Checks to Antinomianism were written in a controversial setting, Methodists owe to Fletcher their "vindication" as a religious group of people. He further noted that Fletcher formed the thinking of Methodists everywhere
and that "thousands have received so much edification" from his writings. He concluded this appendix encouraging Methodist laypeople and preachers to embrace Fletcher's theology and piety, "that they should be followers of him, as he was of Christ."

If Benson could say in an appendix in this second edition that thousands had read Fletcher and were shaped in their thinking by his writings, then certainly many more thousands of Methodists had read him by the time Benson's biography of Fletcher had been reprinted twenty-seven times in the nineteenth century, along with the many other imprints of his works. Also Fletcher's personal testimony to having experienced the baptism with the Holy Spirit and being made perfect in love was written down by Hester Ann Rogers shortly after she had heard him give it, and it was distributed widely. Thomas Coke quoted it in the funeral sermon of Hester Ann Rogers. It was included in the *Life of Bramwell*, another prominent Methodist preacher. It was also quoted in the widely-read *Guide to Christian Perfection* in 1845.

UNDERSTANDING WESLEY MEANS UNDERSTANDING FLETCHER

Fletcher's life and personal experience of holiness were universally known and respected until the end of the nineteenth century. Today he is scarcely known. The demise of Fletcher's influence coincided with the demise of Wesley's influence toward the end of the nineteenth century when theological Liberalism literally swept through official Methodism. The newer generation of Methodist scholars at the end of the century considered Fletcher's relevance to be confined to his own day because he was considered uninformed by modern critical scholarship. Few, if any Methodist-related preachers, have today ever read anything written by this scholar. This is in large part the reason why early, classical Methodist doctrine (especially the emphasis on Pentecost) is so misunderstood and unappreciated by twentieth-century Wesleyans. This is, in part, the reason why Wesley's later thinking is relatively unknown, as Albert Outler has noted. Fletcher placed the ideas of Wesley in their larger context of church history and theology and gave them an intellectual penetration unequaled in Methodist history, and his interpretation of Wesley became the standardized view of Wesley and his thoughts—until the end of the nineteenth century.

One of Wesley's hand-picked men as a leader of Methodism was Henry Moore, who lived in Wesley's home for a time as his assistant. He predicted in 1817, that Fletcher's "admirable writings will live while piety and learning are honoured in the earth" and that those who never had the opportunity to know him personally will "acknowledge his great superiority." Assuming that "piety and learning" are still present "in the earth," it is obvious that Moore was not altogether accurate in thinking that future generations would self-consciously benefit from Fletcher's writings. What is particularly evident is that Fletcher's interpretation of Wesley which shaped early Methodism has been bypassed, resulting in a misunderstanding of the real, historical Wesley. If Jesus could only be properly understood through his closest friends and disciples, this is also generally true of any religious leader. Certainly "the whole Wesley" cannot be reconstructed by Wesley scholars today—without looking through the lens of John Fletcher.

From the very beginning of their friendship, Wesley was deeply attached to John Fletcher like no one else—except Charles Wesley. In his biography of Fletcher, Wesley
noted: "Nor was ours a slight or ordinary acquaintance; but we were of one heart and of one soul. We had no secrets between us for many years: we did not purposely hide anything from each other. From time to time he consulted me, and I him, on the most important occasions." Wesley further mentioned the deep affection that they had for each other: "He told me in one of his letters, (I doubt not from his heart,) ... With thee I gladly would both live and die." Wesley's biography was prompted by "the strongest ties" which they felt for each other.

Fletcher had emigrated to England from Switzerland in 1752 at the age of twenty-three. He was employed as the tutor for the two sons of a wealthy merchant, Mr. Thomas Hill. Because of his mystical inclinations, Mrs. Hill once jokingly remarked that she would not be surprised "if our Tutor does not turn Methodist by-and-by." Fletcher had never heard of Methodism, but when Mrs. Hill told him "the Methodists are a people that do nothing but pray: they are praying all day and all night," he was determined to get acquainted with them. And shortly after this incident when he was twenty-five years old he joined a Methodist society. In 1755, through the preaching of the Methodists, Fletcher felt the assurance of his justification by faith.

Fletcher received his college education from the academy in Geneva (later to become the University of Geneva), where he pursued "the usual course of study." He also pursued further studies in languages (including Hebrew) and mathematics. One of his special areas of studies was divinity. Since he was seven years old, he desired to be a minister, but he abandoned those plans temporarily when he decided to come to England. He soon resumed his intentions to enter the ordained ministry and began to prepare for the priesthood in the Church of England.

Since John Wesley became his "spiritual guide," Fletcher sought Wesley's advice in a letter of December 13, 1756, about entering the ordained ministry. Within three months of seeking Wesley's advice, Fletcher received his deacon's orders and his priest's orders. Immediately on the same day of his ordination as a priest he hurried to West Street Chapel to assist Wesley in serving Holy Communion. Fletcher observed how quickly Holy Communion had to be served because Wesley lacked help, and as a consequence the work of God's grace was being hindered. For these early Methodists, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was a primary means of receiving the converting and sanctifying grace of God. As an example, Charles Wesley records in his journal for September 1740, that while receiving the Lord's Supper, he experienced the perfection of love. So the very day that Fletcher was ordained as a priest he went immediately to help Wesley serve this sacrament because of its evangelistic usefulness.

In his Journal of 1757, Sunday, February 27, Wesley wrote: "Finding myself weak at Snowfields, I prayed (if he saw good) that God would send me help at the chapel. And I had it ... As soon as I had done preaching, Mr. Fletcher came, who had just been ordained priest, and hastened to the chapel on purpose to assist in the administration of the Lord's supper, as he supposed me to be alone." On Sunday, March 20, Wesley entered this note in his Journal: "Mr. Fletcher helped me again. How wonderful are the ways of God! When my bodily strength failed, and none in England were able and will-
ing to assist me, He sent me help from the mountains of Switzerland; and an help mate for me in every respect: where could I have found such another?"

For the next three years after his ordination, Fletcher worked closely with John Wesley. He preached for him in his chapels in the London area from 1757 to 1760. Fletcher developed a highly respected reputation and was well-liked by Methodists everywhere. He quickly became the most influential person in Methodism next to John Wesley. He became known as a "saint" without ever pretending to be one. Wesley noted that he was endowed with a talent for courtesy "in which there was not the least touch either of art or affectation. It was pure and genuine, and sweetly constrained him to behave to everyone (although particularly to inferiors) in a manner not to be described, with so inexpressible a mixture of humility, love, and respect. This directed his words, the tone of his voice, his looks, his whole attitude, his every motion."

A typical comment about the saintliness of Fletcher was made by Sarah Crosby, one of the devout Methodist women leaders. She wrote down her early recollections of him shortly after his death in 1785. She wrote:

It is eight or nine and twenty years since I was first favoured with his heavenly conversation, in company with Mr. Walsh and a few other friends, most of whom are now in the world of spirits. At these seasons, how frequently did we feel 'The o'erwhelming power of saving grace!'

How frequently were we silenced thereby, while tears of love our souls o'erflowed! It sweetly affects my soul, while I recollect the humility, fervour of spirit, and strength of faith, with which dear Mr. Fletcher so often poured out his soul before the Great Three One, at whose feet we have lain in holy shame and silence, till it seemed earth was turned to heaven...

I heard him preach his first sermon at West-street chapel. I think his text was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His spirit appeared in his whole attitude and action, though he could not well find words in the English language to express himself; but he supplied that defect, by offering up prayers, tears, and sighs, abundantly.

If Fletcher quickly developed the admiration of Methodists everywhere, he never felt a competitive spirit with John Wesley. Fletcher's admiration for John Wesley was sincere and profound. In a letter of May 6, 1757, Fletcher wrote to him:

There is generally upon my heart such a sense of my unworthiness that sometimes I dare hardly open my mouth before a child of God; and think it an unspeakable honour to stand before one who has recovered something of the image of God, or sincerely seeks after it. Is it possible that such a sinful worm as I should have the privilege to converse with one whose soul is besprinkled with the blood of my Lord? The thought amazes, confounds me; and fills my eyes with tears of humble joy.

Fletcher then expresses his sincere feeling that in spite of his own inadequacies he must "presume to write to you, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear."
The intimate love and friendship which Fletcher felt for John Wesley was mutual. Fletcher also won the admiration of George Whitefield and Charles Wesley. Fletcher preached for Whitefield in London, and Whitefield sought for him to be his curate, but Fletcher was unable because of his heavy commitments which he had already made.20 Charles Wesley proved to be an invaluable friend to Fletcher. Nearly everything which Fletcher wrote "passed under the eye and hand of Mr. Charles Wesley before it was given to the world," as Thomas Jackson reports.21 At the age of twenty-eight, he also met the Countess of Huntingdon. In her diary of March 19, 1758, she wrote: "I have seen Mr. Fletcher, and was both pleased and refreshed by the interview. He was accompanied by Mr. Wesley, who had frequently mentioned him in terms of high commendation, as had Mr. Whitefield, Mr. Charles Wesley, and others, so that I was anxious to become acquainted with one so devoted, and who appears to glory in nothing, save in the cross of our Divine Lord and Master."22

Fletcher at this time was twenty-eight years old and Wesley was fifty-five years old. Two years after this interview, the Countess of Huntingdon asked Fletcher to preach in her chapels as time permitted him to do so since he was already so heavily committed to preach for John and Charles Wesley.23 Fletcher also became a close advisor to the Countess as she made preparations for opening up her college at Trevecca.24

On October 17, 1760, Fletcher accepted the position of vicar at Madeley,25 and this limited his time involvement in helping Wesley oversee the Methodist cause, but he never relaxed his support of the Methodist movement. Wesley's admiration for Fletcher continued to be passed on to Methodists in general. His reputation as a Christlike man, a capable preacher, and a respected scholar increased over the years. He often attended Wesley's annual conferences, and he was warmly received and was showed the highest respect by the Methodist preachers. His attendance at the 1777 annual conference at Bristol was a remarkable event. A letter written by David Lloyd, a Church of England priest, addressed to Adam Clarke on November 7, 1821, reveals the depth of affection and respect shown to Fletcher.

Rev. and Dear Sir,—At the conference of the Methodist preachers, held at Bristol in the year 1777, an interview took place between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and the Rev. John Fletcher, of Madeley. I was both an eye- and ear-witness to the facts I here relate. The Rev. Mr. Fletcher had for a long time laboured under the effects of a deep-rooted consumption, which was then adjudged to be rapidly advancing to its final crisis. He was advised by the faculty to make the tour of the Continent, and to breathe his native air. He resided, at that time with Mr. Ireland, a gentleman of known celebrity for the exercise of catholic love towards all such as possessed the essential attributes of great and good men. On the forenoon of a day, when the sitting of the Conference was drawing to a close, tidings announced the approach of Mr. Fletcher. As he entered the vestibule of the New Room, supported by Mr. Ireland, I can never forget the visible impulse of esteem which his venerable presence excited in the house. The whole assembly stood up, as if moved by an electric shock. Mr. Wesley rose, ex cathedra, and advanced a few paces to receive his highly respected friend and reverend brother, whose visage
seemed strongly to bode that he stood on the verge of the grave; while his eyes, sparkling with seraphic love, indicated that he dwelt in the suburbs of heaven. In this his languid but happy state, he addressed the conference, on their work and his own views, in a strain of holy and pathetic eloquence, which no language of mine can adequately express. The influence of his spirit and pathos seemed to bear down all before it. I never saw such an instantaneous effect produced in a religious assembly, either before or since. He had scarcely pronounced a dozen sentences before a hundred preachers, to speak in round numbers, were immersed in tears. Time can never efface from my mind the recollection and image of what I then felt and saw. Such a scene I never expect to witness again on this side eternity. Mr. Wesley, in order to relieve his languid friend from the fatigue and injury which might arise from a too long and arduous exertion of the lungs through much speaking, abruptly kneeled down at his side, the whole congress of preachers doing the same, while, in a concise and energetic manner, he prayed for Mr. Fletcher's restoration to health and a longer exercise of his ministerial labours. Mr. Wesley closed his prayer with the following prophetic promise, pronounced in his peculiar manner, and with a confidence and emphasis which seemed to thrill through every heart, "He shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord." The event verified the prediction. Mr. Fletcher lived for eight succeeding years, exerting all the zeal of a primitive missionary, and enjoying all the esteem of a holy patriarch.

I am, dear, Sir, with high regard and esteem, your sincere friend and humble servant,

David Lloyd

The description of Fletcher as "exerting all the zeal of a primitive missionary, and enjoying all the esteem of a holy patriarch" indicates the extent which his influence in Methodism was destined to reach as a co-leader with Wesley as a result of his presidency of Trevecca College and his subsequent defense of Wesley's theology against the Calvinist Methodists.

In his memorial sermon for Fletcher, Wesley expressed his deep affection and genuine appreciation for Fletcher and his contribution to Methodism. Wesley wrote:

I was intimately acquainted with for above thirty years. I conversed with him morning, noon, and night, without the least reserve, during a journey of many hundred miles; and in that time, I never heard him speak one improper word, nor saw him do an improper action. To conclude. Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within fourscore years. But one equal to him I have not known—one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblamable a character in every respect I have not found either in Europe or America. Nor do I expect to find another such on this side of eternity.

As it is possible we all may be such as he was, let us then endeavour to follow him as he followed Christ.
"LET US THEN ENDEAVOUR TO FOLLOW HIM AS HE FOLLOWED CHRIST!"

The early Methodists sensed their indebtedness to Fletcher as one who helped them understand Wesley's doctrines and who modeled Wesley's idea of Christian perfection. However, an unfortunate historiographical misrepresentation of Fletcher has developed only in the past twenty-five years—that he and Wesley were at odds with one another over the issue of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. This is clearly not true, though there was a brief period of a few months in 1771, when Wesley did misunderstand both Joseph Benson and John Fletcher. I have just completed a manuscript which will be published in the next few months which shows the historical timeline from the beginning of this brief controversy to its resolution. Recently uncovered information demonstrates that the basic misunderstanding was located in Wesley's fear that Benson and Fletcher had restricted the witness of the Spirit to the experience of those fully sanctified, denying that "babes in Christ" also had the witness at least "sometimes." Once he began writing his _Checks to Antinomianism_, Wesley was satisfied that Fletcher fully supported his theology. Indeed Fletcher insisted that his writings were only synthesizing the various aspects of Wesley's _Standard Sermons_ into a larger unity. Wesley was fully persuaded by Fletcher's accomplishments in doing that very thing, and Wesley's later sermons more explicitly connected Pentecost and Christian perfection. Most Wesley scholars today only know his _Standard Sermons_. Consequently, they often miss the real Wesley whom the early Methodists knew from reading _The Arminian Magazine_ which contained Wesley's later sermons. _The Arminian Magazine_ also placed Wesley's later sermons in the context of other interpreters of Wesley who gave the doctrine of holiness a Pentecostal framework.

The clearest indication that Wesley approved of Fletcher's use of the baptism with the Holy Spirit as a designation for full sanctification is his special abridged edition of Fletcher's _Equal Check to Antinomianism and Phariseism_. Wesley highlighted the portions of that book which he thought most useful, and the very first paragraph which he marked was Fletcher's use of the baptism with the Holy Spirit as the essence of Wesley's distinctive doctrine. The fact that Wesley required his preachers to read Fletcher's writings further shows his approval of Fletcher's Pentecostal emphasis. For that Pentecostal emphasis was Fletcher's primary means of explaining the doctrine of holiness, as Wesley also reported in his biography of Fletcher—the only biography which Wesley ever wrote! Wesley said that he chose Fletcher to be his successor of the Methodists because he understood so clearly Methodist doctrine and because he was so well-liked universally by all Methodists. Unfortunately Fletcher died at the age of fifty-five, but his widow, Mary (Bosanquet) Fletcher, carried on his work. She was Wesley's favorite person, and she often "preached" with Wesley throughout England. Henry Moore, one of Wesley's most important assistants and an influential preacher, wrote _The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher_. It formed one of the most important sources of devotional literature for Methodists. Throughout her diary, Mary (Bosanquet) Fletcher used the phrase "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" to describe the essence of Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection.

In my forthcoming book on this subject, I will show that there was a very small number of Methodists who at first resisted Fletcher's Pentecostal emphasis. I will also show
that Wesley discounted that opposition, and it soon ceased. The documents included in this special issue of *The Asbury Theological Journal* reflect some of that opposition.

**RECENT UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS OF JOHN FLETCHER**

In February and March of 1997, I went to the John Rylands Library of Manchester University to do some research in the archival collection of John Fletcher. I learned from the archivists that Fletcher’s collection of manuscripts is the largest one in all of their archival holdings, including John Wesley. These manuscripts are mostly just sitting there waiting to be discovered and made available to the public. I also discovered that his wife, Mary (Bosanquet) Fletcher, left quite a collection of letters and writings of her own. She was the first woman Methodist preacher and a lay theologian as well. Her writings are now in the process of being published under the auspices of the John Rylands Library.

What I came across were some significant unpublished manuscripts which were overlooked by Wesley’s own friends, as well as his wife. Perhaps because of their unfinished condition these manuscripts were judged to be unready for publication or perhaps it was thought that they were already incorporated in Fletcher’s other writings. In one instance, a manuscript on the new birth (included in this issue of *The Asbury Theological Journal*) may have been intentionally suppressed by his wife because she had once told Fletcher that she disagreed with his larger use of the concept of “birth of the Spirit.” She agreed with his idea of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the means of being perfected in love, but she seemed to want to preserve “the birth of the Spirit” as a designation for all justified believers. However, Fletcher used the concept of the birth of the Spirit (as distinguished from birth of water) as another term for Christian perfection in his latest writings, including his masterpiece *The Portrait of St. Paul*, though it was not prominently featured as such. One could speculate that if this essay had been published, it is very likely that “birth of the Spirit” as distinct from “birth of water” would have become an encoded phrase for Christian perfection throughout Methodism.

This previously unpublished manuscript explains Fletcher’s latest views on this subject, and it shows that he particularly believed he was in agreement with John Wesley on the distinction between the birth of water (justification) and the birth of the Spirit (full sanctification). The concept of being born again has generally been used exclusively in the Wesleyan tradition to refer to being justified by faith, but a more careful reading of Wesley will show that he used it in a variety of ways, and not just for the moment of one’s justifying experience.

We are also publishing several other manuscripts for the first time ever with the permission of the John Rylands Library and the British Methodist Archival Committee. These documents will certainly provide additional light on Fletcher’s most recent thinking before his untimely death in 1785, especially in regard to his doctrine of dispensations. One document is a letter outlining Fletcher’s proposal to Wesley concerning the special connection between Methodism and the Church of England, which was published in part by J.F. Hurst in his *History of Methodism*. You will want to notice that in this letter Fletcher appealed to him to seek permission from the archbishop to perform the rite of confirmation for Methodists. Wesley never did this apparently, but the rite of confirmation is one of the things which linked Wesley’s doctrine of holiness to the Early
Church Fathers.

In fact, Wesley's neglect of this rite was also typical of the so-called Macarius (fourth century A.D.) whose *Fifty Homilies* highlighted the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the perfection of love, cleansing from sin, and the full assurance of faith through the witness of the Spirit without making any reference to the initiation rites (such as water baptism or the laying on of hands). Macarius' writing reflected the theology of the greatest of the Early Church Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa. Macarius' influence on Wesley was also significant. John Fletcher quoted extensively from Macarius to show that a Pentecostal interpretation of Christian perfection represented the views of the Early Church Fathers.

George A. Maloney, a Roman Catholic patristic scholar, made available in 1992 a new and quite readable edition of the writings of Macarius. These writings clearly show that Fletcher's interpretation of the Early Church Fathers as believing that the baptism with the Holy Spirit was the means of Christian perfection was accurate. Maloney writes: "The preponderant accent is placed on the personal and intimate experience of fire and baptism in the Holy Spirit that effects a mystical oneness with the indwelling Jesus Christ." Maloney further writes:

Macarius is one of the first witnesses of what modern Christians would call the baptism in the Holy Spirit. He conceives this to be an ongoing process of surrendering to the indwelling guidance of the Holy Spirit to the degree that the individual cries out for the Spirit to heal the roots of sinfulness that lie deeply within the soul. When one begins consistently to give himself or herself over entirely to seeking the love of Christ in all things, then, according to Macarius, that person is receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. The sign of the true progress in the baptism of the Spirit is the continued desire to surrender to the Spirit's gifts, especially faith, hope, and love. Maloney further writes:

After one has read these manuscripts of Fletcher, it would be quite instructive to read *The Fifty Homilies* of Macarius to see and compare the striking similarities. The manuscript entitled "The Language of the Father's Dispensation" was the most difficult one to decipher. The other manuscripts are written in beautiful, artistic handwriting (though some smudges made it at times difficult to read), but this particular one was still in a very rough draft format. Fletcher referred to this manuscript in a letter to Joseph Benson, where he mentioned that he was in the process of putting it together, but his ill health and untimely death prevented him from finishing it. For the first time, this essay in its rough draft format is available for the public to read.

Some significant views of Fletcher are expressed in it, especially regarding his interpretation of Wesley's Aldersgate experience. Though Fletcher does not specifically mention it, he does identify Wesley as a justified believer before he ever went to Georgia. The clear implication of Fletcher's view is that Wesley's sanctifying experience was his Aldersgate experience when he received the strong witness of forgiveness of sins. Since Wesley linked Christian perfection to the abiding witness of the Spirit, the full assurance of faith, and the clear perception that one's sins were forgiven, it could be argued that Fletcher's interpretation is convincing. In his sermon on "The Almost Christian," Wesley
identified himself as an "almost Christian" before his Aldersgate experience, and then he described being a real Christian in terms of being made perfect in love, which he implies was his own experience after Aldersgate. Of course, the discussion about Wesley’s experience of holiness has been often addressed, and we probably can never be sure about his own perception. We know that he was often ridiculed in the media of his day for his doctrine of Christian perfection, and being such a well-known public figure, Wesley undoubtedly kept a low profile of his own private experiences, though he did insist that others give testimony to being made perfect in love. We thus do not know what Wesley thought of Fletcher’s interpretation since this essay was never published and since Wesley probably never read this very rough copy. However, it is highly likely that Fletcher talked personally to Wesley about this matter because of their frequent and intimate life together. I personally think that Fletcher may well be correct on this issue.

In this essay on “The Language of the Father’s Dispensation,” Fletcher clearly articulates the many advantages of his doctrine of dispensation. It portrays a spirit of inclusiveness and Christian charity toward others whose theological understanding and spiritual development may be different from one’s own. His unfinished and brief essay “A Charimeter” is an interesting way of using a spiritual thermometer.

Reading these manuscripts will certainly not replace the value of reading his published works, especially his Checks to Antinomianism. These manuscripts are in a fragmentary and incomplete condition, and thus they do not represent Fletcher’s more polished style of writing. They will, however, furnish significant information to the current discussion regarding the role of Fletcher as Wesley’s chief apologist.

THOMAS COKE BORROWED SIGNIFICANTLY FROM FLETCHER’S ESSAY ON THE BIRTH OF THE SPIRIT

You will want to pay close attention to the last paragraph of Fletcher’s essay on the new birth. One of Thomas Coke’s scholarly writings was his Commentary on the New Testament, published in 1803. In his commentary on Acts 2, Coke notes that the baptism with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost meant five things: the beginning of the Christian Church, power to witness, strength to live the Christian life, miraculous gifts as proofs of Christianity, and full sanctification. Coke particularly noted the changes in the lives of the disciples after Pentecost as they were no longer influenced by carnal passions. He highlights the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit given on the day of Pentecost. He writes:

To wash, cleanse, baptize with the Holy Ghost, and sanctify are commonly synonymous in Scripture; hence the phrase of being baptized with the Holy Ghost, which is elsewhere called being baptized with fire, to signify the universal and intimate purification of the inmost springs of action thereby. With this view the prophet Malachi compares the Spirit to a refiner of gold or silver, destroying the dross, and separating all heterogeneous particles from those metals by force of fire, till they are reduced to perfect purity. Thus the Spirit sanctifies the soul, by abolishing all sordid inclinations, by purging away the multiplicity of carnal desires, and reducing all the powers of the mind to one simply constant pursuit, viz. that of
God's glory. This renders the soul holy, that is to say, pure, all of a kind, concentred in the end of its creation, even the glory of its Maker."

When I came across the word, "concentered," in Coke's commentary, I realized that I had recently seen that same word somewhere else. I went back to my "Fletcher notes" taken in the John Rylands Library, and I discovered that Coke had borrowed extensively from Fletcher's unpublished manuscript on the new birth. Fletcher had written an earlier "sermon" on the new birth in French before he had developed his doctrine of dispensations. Henry Moore translated it in 1795, perhaps thinking it was the "essay" which Fletcher once referred to in his letters to Mary Bosanquet before they were married.

But the later "essay" was not the same in emphasis as his earlier "sermon." Fletcher talked about this essay to Mary Bosanquet in a letter on March 7, 1778:

Your letter did not reach me till after it had lain here, at the post office, several days [in Marseilles].

I cannot be answerable for what the person you mention thinks of Mr. Wesley or me, or our sentiments. Nothing is more common than to see people drawing rash inferences from premises which are partly false and partly true. I can only answer for myself, and for what I deem to be the truth.

If you ask me what I think to be the truth with respect to Christian perfection, I reply, my sentiments are exposed to the world in my essay on 'Christian Perfection,' and in my essay on 'Truth,' where I lay the stress of the doctrine on the great promise of the Father, and on the Christian fullness of the Spirit. This I have done more particularly in a treatise on the 'Birth of the Spirit,' which treatise is not yet published. I do not rest the doctrine of Christian perfection on the absence of sin—that is the perfection of a dove or a lamb; nor on the loving God with all one's power for I believe all perfect Gentiles and Jews have done so; but on the fullness of that superior, nobler, warmer, and more powerful love, which the Apostle calls the love of the Spirit, or the love of God shed abroad by the Holy Ghost, given to the Christian believers, who, since the Day of Pentecost, go on to the perfection of the Christian dispensation.

You will find my views of this matter in Mr. Wesley's sermons on Christian Perfection and on Spiritual Christianity [Tyerman probably miscopied this; it should say "Scriptural Christianity"]; with this difference, that I would distinguish more exactly between the believers baptized with the Pentecostal power of the Holy Ghost, and the believer who, like the Apostles after our Lord's ascension, is not yet filled with that power.

I own to you, Madam, that I have been much surprised to see the gross inattention to, and unbelief of, the promise of the Father among believers of various classes. It is the sun among the stars, and yet some can hardly distinguish it. When I preached it to the Calvinists in Wales at Treveccal, they called it Mr. Wesley's whim. When I have spoken of it to our brethren, some have called it Lady Huntingdon's whim; and others have looked upon it as a new thing; which to me is the strongest proof that this capital Gospel doctrine is as much under a cloud...
now as the doctrine of justification by faith was at the time of the Reformation.

Should you go back by way of London, my essay on the Birth by which we enter into the Kingdom in the Holy Ghost is in the hands of Miss Thornton, Mrs. Greenwood’s sister, who will give it you if you think it worth while to look into it. I build my faith not on my experience, though this increases it, but upon the revealed truth of God.

Luke Tyerman in his classic biography of Fletcher, Wesley’s Designated Successor, mistakenly thought that Fletcher’s reference in this letter was to his earlier sermon on the new birth translated by Henry Moore,10 but Fletcher referred to it as “treatise” and not as a sermon. It was also one he was preparing to have published, which would hardly been a reference to a sermon he had preached possibly twenty years earlier.

When he wrote this letter to Mary Bosanquet (later to be his wife), Fletcher was fifty years old and in Switzerland (from December 1777 to April 1781) where he was currently writing another work, The Portrait of St. Paul.11 Fletcher died before he was able to publish this treatise on Paul, though it was later published and included in his Works. The Portrait of St. Paul circulated widely among Methodists as a supplement to Wesley’s A Plain Account of Christian Perfection. Francis Asbury was especially deeply affected by it.12

For whatever reason, his treatise on the birth of the Spirit was overlooked and never published. It is understandable that it would seem to be too incomplete to be published at first glance because written on the first page of the manuscript is “page 52, Section V.” Yet it was in that form circulated around London while Fletcher was visiting Switzerland. I noticed that the manuscript had a number of wax seals (which were used to seal a letter) applied to it as if it had been passed on from person to person. At the bottom on the outside of the manuscript was written the name, “Mary,” which would obviously have been a reference to Mary Bosanquet.

In a follow-up letter three years later, Fletcher again wrote to Mary Bosanquet, on May 1, 1781. This time he had already returned to England. He noted in this letter that Dr. Coke was in possession of his “Essay” (and not a sermon) on the new birth. Fletcher wrote:

I have sincerely aimed at truth in writing the Essay on the new birth mentioned in his letter to her on March 7, 1778! you have been so kind as to peruse. If I am not mistaken, Dr. Coke told me, when I passed through London, that he had it but I went out of town in such a hurry that I had not time to take it with me.

This manuscript which I found in Fletcher’s box of manuscripts is a treatise whose exact title is, “The doctrine of the new birth, as it is stated in these sheets, is directly or indirectly maintained by the most spiritual divines, especially in their sacred poems.” It makes a clear distinction between “birth of water” (justification by faith) and “birth of the Spirit (full sanctification), and it shows that this distinction is an amplification of Wesley’s distinction between those who are partially born again (the justified believer) and those who are fully born again (the sanctified believer).
Indeed Coke did have that manuscript in his possession. I discovered that the above quotation taken from Coke’s comments on Acts 2 in his *Commentary on the New Testament* is a word-for-word copy of the last paragraph in Fletcher’s essay on the new birth. The only difference in these 149 words which Coke quoted from Fletcher (without any footnote reference!) is that Coke adds “with the Holy Ghost” after the word “baptize” in the first sentence. This is a remarkably revealing essay which shows that this founding bishop of American Methodism used Fletcher’s Pentecostal categories.

Coke had graduated from Oxford University and was an ordained presbyter in the Church of England and became a curate at South Petherton, England, at the age of twenty-eight. When he was a curate at South Petherton, England, he heard about Fletcher and began to read his *Checks*. On August 28, 1775, Coke wrote Fletcher a year before he met John Wesley. Here is part of the letter he wrote:

> Rev. Sir,—I take the liberty, though unknown to you, but not unacquainted with your admirable publications, of writing you a letter of sincerest thanks for the spiritual instruction, as well as entertainment, they have afforded me; and for the spirit of candour and Christian charity which breathes throughout your writings ... You are indubitably, Sir, a sincere friend of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I also am an humble admirer of the blessed Jesus, and it is on that foundation only I would wish, and it is on that only I am sure I can recommend myself to you. Your excellent *Checks to Antinomianism* have revited me in an abhorrence and detestation of the peculiar tenets of Calvin ... Your *Essay on Truth* has been more particularly blessed to me ... O, Sir, I have frequently prayed to my God that He will make you a great pillar of His Church.

It is to be noted that Coke mentioned Fletcher’s *Essay on Truth* which he said was a particular blessing to him. One can see that Coke liked Fletcher’s emphasis on the baptism with the Holy Spirit since that was his dominant motif in that essay. Coke said that reading Fletcher was “the blessed means of bringing me among that despised people called Methodists, with whom, God being my helper, I am determined to live and die.” Coke was twenty-eight years of age when he wrote his first letter to Fletcher. Coke was destined to become one of the most important leaders of Methodism whom Wesley valued next to Fletcher. Fletcher’s influence was thus determinative in the formation of American Methodism, through his personal friendship with Coke as well as through his writings which literally shaped the theology of every Methodist preacher both in England and in America.

**NOTES**

3. Fletcher specifically traced his emphasis on the Holy Spirit back to the Early Church Fathers as seen in his essay on the new birth included in this issue of *The Asbury Theological Journal*. 
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6. Fletcher, Works, 2:550, "Last Check to Antinomianism." Cf. George Whitefield, Twenty-
10. Ibid., 2:567-568, 629.
13. The Countess particularly advised Wesley to be cautious in his "attack" on the religious
16. Donald Dayton has traced the influence of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition upon the emergence
of modern-day Pentecostalism, though his understanding of its deep roots in Wesley himself
is not sufficiently recognized. Cf. Donald Dayton, The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism.
18. Fletcher, Works, 1:442.
20. George Lawton, Shropshire Saint, p. xii.
23. Outler, Sermons, 3:622, "On The Death of John Fletcher." 
24. Ibid., 3:628, "On The Death of John Fletcher."
26. Ibid.
27. Outler, Sermons, 3:617, "The Death of the Rev. Mr. John Fletcher."
29. Outler, Sermons, 3:617, "The Death of the Rev. Mr. John Fletcher."
30. Fletcher's "Eulogy on the Christian Philosophers, Pascal, Newton, Bonnet, De Luc, Bacon, Boyle, and Newton," is an example of his breadth in reading science and philosophy. He also
engaged in personal discussions with some of the leading minds of his day, such as Samuel Clarke, the friend and colleague of Newton. It was Samuel Clarke who was Newton's spokesperson for
Newton in his controversy with G.W. Leibniz. In one of his several personal conversations with
Clarke, Fletcher noted Clarke spoke of God with "the most marked respect. I acknowledged to
him the impression which his manner made upon my mind, and he informed me that it was from
Newton he insensibly learned this manner, which indeed ought to be that of all men." Cf. Fletcher, Works, 4:15.
31. Cf. Samuel Bradburn, God Shining Forth from between the Cherubim: a sermon preached at
the opening of the Methodist Chapel, Bridge Street, Bolton, on Sunday, September 30, 1804, and
the opening of the Methodist Chapel in Wrexham, on Tuesday, January 1, 1805, (two publication
32. Inscribed on the Fletcher monument in Wesley's City Road Methodist Chapel in London.
33. Mr. Gilpin, "The Character of Mr. Fletcher," The Arminian Magazine 16 (February 1793): 60.
35. Ibid., p. ix.
32 Wood

Stoughton, 1887), p. 569
40. Fletcher, Works, 4:342, A letter to Mr. Sellon, October 7, 1769.
43. Tyerman, Wesley's Designated Successor, pp. 329-330.
44. Abel Stevens, The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century, Called Methodism
(London: George Watson, 1864) 2:55.
48. John Fletcher Hurst, John Wesley the Methodist (New York: The Methodist Book Concern,
1903), pp. 204-205.
51. Abel Stevens, The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century, Called Methodism
(New York: Carlton and Porter, 1859), II, p. 213. Stevens observed: "That good man's interest for
American Methodism should endear his memory to the American Church. He had thoughts at
one time of going to the New World and of giving himself to its struggling societies, but his feeble
health forsook him" (II, 213).
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid. 1:332.
56. Ibid.
57. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., and Susan E. Warrick, Historical Dictionary of Methodism (Lanham, Md.:
58. The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7, A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called
Methodists, eds. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge with the assistance of James Dale
59. Cf. The National Union Catalog Pre-1956 Imprints (London: Mansell Information/Publishing
Limited, and Chicago: The American Library Association, 1971), Volume 175. There are only
twenty-six editions of Benson's biography of Fletcher listed in this catalog, but I discovered that
another edition was included in a book by I. Kingston, Fletcher's Appeal to Matter of Fact & Common
Sense (Baltimore: J. Robinson, Printer, 1814).
60. Cf. Wesley, Works (Jackson), XI, pp. 350, 361, "A Short Account of the Life and Death of the
Reverend John Fletcher."
62. Clarke's autobiography, p. 162
63. Ibid., p. 171.
64. This letter was published by Henry Turner, "Mr. Fletcher's Preaching," The Wesleyan
Methodist Magazine, A Continuation of the Arminian or Methodist Magazine 8 (August 1829): 527-528.
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of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1969), pp. 47, 81, 156.
71. This was the viewpoint of one British layman, Isaac Taylor, who was among the earliest writers to distinguish between Wesleyanism and Methodism and who called for a newer development of Methodism which would be updated by newer forms of liberal thought. Isaac Taylor, Wesley, and Methodism (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1852). Abel Stevens observed that it is not likely that Isaac Taylor actually studied Fletcher's writings.
73. Hurst, History of Methodism 3:1251.
75. Wesley, Works (Jackson), 11:327-328, "A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Reverend John Fletcher."
76. Ibid., 11:327.
78. Ibid., pp. 24ff.
79. Wesley, Works (Jackson), 11:331, "The Life and Death of Mr. John Fletcher." Cf. Outler, Sermons 3:614n, "On The Death of John Fletcher."
81. Fletcher, Works, 4:368, (a letter to John Wesley, November 24, 1756).
86. Ward & Heitzenrater, Journal and Diaries, 21:88 (February 27, 1757); Davies, Societies, 9:466, "Short History of People Called Methodists."
88. Wesley, Works (Jackson) 3:342, "A Short Account of the Life and Death of the Reverend John Fletcher."
89. Ibid., 1:1415.
91. Ibid., p. 43.
92. Ibid.
95. Life and Times of the Countess of Huntingdon, 1:231; cited in Tyerman, Wesley's Designated Successor, p. 31.
100. Outler, Sermons, 3:627-268, "On the Death of John Fletcher."
104. Ibid., p. 19.
105. Benson, The Life of the Rev. John W. De La Flechere, p. 188.
107. Ibid., 2:592.
108. Ibid.
110. Ibid. Robert M. Fraser makes the same historiographical mistake, p. 353ff. Influenced by the articles in The Wesleyan Theological Journal 13 (Spring, 1978), Fraser also fails to see that the baptism with the Holy Spirit as a designation of entire sanctification dates back to the earliest days of Fletcher's ministry. One of his earliest sermons was "The Test of a New Creature." In it he writes, "There is a day of pentecost for believers; a time when the Holy Ghost descends abundantly. Happy they who receive most of this perfect love, and of that establishing grace, which may preserve them from such falls and decay as they were before liable to." Fletcher, Works 4:270. Melville Home, Fletcher's editor, dates this sermon as one of his earliest (Ibid., 4:273). 111. "Portrait of St. Paul," The Arminian Magazine 13 (January, 1831): 108.