

LETTERS FROM JOHN FLETCHER TO JOHN WESLEY

JOHN FLETCHER

4TH JULY 1774

Addressed as The Rev. Mr. Charles Wesley at the Foundery, Moorfield, London.

I have these two months waited to hear whether you were in Bristol or London. I wrote, I think, to Mr. Oliver to know it: but he forgot to give me an answer. My Printer has also been treading upon my heels, and calling for copy, which has made me drop all correspondence, but with him. I have not yet got clear of him, he has entered on my Scales which I hope will puzzle the antinomians, benefit some pharisees, and confirm some of our friends in the good ole scripture-way. The first volume of the equal check is printed; I suppose you will soon have it in London. I do not expect to please, I am afraid this new step will rob me of some of our own friends. I believe it will not be of you. The Essay on truth, will offend some Aminians as the Essay on the rewardableness of works will offend some Calvinists. I could wish to be zealously moderate. I shall expect your friendly and yet severe criticisms. This, in the mean time, I assure you of; I shall recall all that I shall discover to be false.—With respect to my soul I wait for deep humiliation: some of your deep, mourning-hymns suit me exactly. I am not in the Christian dispensation of the Holy Ghost and of power. I wait for it, but not earnestly enough: I am not sufficiently straitened till my fiery baptism is accomplished. I fear that dispensation is upon the decline among us. I see few people deeply mourning for the kingdom in the Holy Ghost: foretastes of it and enlargements of soul are take for it. These pass away, and from thence we slide back into the world, singing to ourselves a pharisaic, a Laodicean, or an antinomian requiem. What are your thoughts on this subject? Do you see many

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that live in the kingdom with power; many do not seem to me even to understand what I mean. When I speak my thoughts, I am an alien unto some of my mother's children. If you stand to what you once wrote to me *[the text is cut-ed.]* I shall be sure to agree, whoever disagrees on *[text is cut-ed.]* Christian perfection is nothing but the full kingdom in the Holy Ghost. Upon this rock and upon no other would I defend the doctrine:

I have not heard from MeLady since I wrote last to her. I have dedicated to her my essay on truth. Mr. Hilton tells me the dedication will not please. I cannot help that, I took that step, not to flatter, or ingratiate myself, but to do justice to her private sentiment, concerning faith working or a working faith. Before any of the Equal Check are sold, read the two last tracts, send me word what you object to them, and I shall either recant, or explain myself; as I have done twice. I may add a third explanation upon your criticisms or objections. Lady Itant *[looks like preac' brack-ed.]* us round, they came to the next parish and to three places where we preach; being called in by the baptists whose hands they strengthen. But no matter if they strengthen people's hearts in the Lord. Be that as it will, I am glad Christ is preached; tho' it should be out of contention. The opposition of my parish is sturned by the death of two of the greatest enemies I had: one our great Habal who was killed as he came home from a midnight revel but fell from his horse. The other who was shot with a mortification through the bowels by drinking a cup of sherry: The very man who puts his bottle to the other.

J. Fletcher

14TH AUGUST 1774

My dear brother, I hope you have by this time perused the First Part of the equal check, and will soon give me your friendly severe remarks upon it. To this day I do not wish it recall'd *[by which Fletcher means he does not want to have recant anything he might have already published-ed.]* because I think still it is scriptural. I am sure I had as clear a conviction of light from heaven when I wrote, as ever I had. The only doubt I have about the contents of that piece, is about my making the dispensation of the Holy Ghost (contradistinguished from the dispensation of the Father and the Son) to be the grand characteristic of Christian perfection. I think that by maintaining the doctrine of Christian perfection, as connected with the perfection of the Christian dispensation in its fullness, or with the accomplishment of the promise of the Father, you can make the doctrine more intelligible to and defensible against all opposing friends.—My views of the subject can never be wrong, if what you wrote to me once is right, "Christian perfection is nothing but the full kingdom in the Holy Ghost." You and I will not disagree. This is but a circumstantial after all. I go on with the second part which will be printed before winter. I hope, nothing will clash there.

I trust God will always keep me from positiveness or obstinacy in things doubtful. I should be unworthy of the name of enquirer after truth, if I were not open to argument and representation. Your Brother is better and better, and gave us four excellent sermons in a day and a quarter. He will probably outlive me, ten to one. When he

was here Mr. Collins a preacher from Gloster [*Dr. Peter Nockles tells me that in those days the spelling of towns was free and not set. Today it would be Gloucester.—ed.*] came to expostulate with me before him (Mr. Wesley) for having advanced in the essay on Truth things subversive of the old methodist doctrine. Mr. Hilton had laid the thing to me and Mr. Collins who had not read the book wanted to know the truth. I explained my self, and both Mr. Wesley and Collins seemed satisfied. The difference consists, (if there is any) in my thinking, that those who were justified as Christians, and baptized and sealed with the Holy Ghost on the day of pentecost, and were made of one heart and mind, or were perfected in one, etc., were in the state of christian perfection, or under the dispensation of the Holy Ghost: At least in the infancy of it. And that (genuine Christian faith of assurance as contradistinguished from the faith of babes, or carnal believers, which the apostles had before the day of pentecost) introduces us into perfect Christianity, or the full kingdom of God, which we must learn to stand and to be established on. Your light reproofs, etc., will greatly oblige your affectionate obliged brother.

J. Fletcher

THURSDAY AFTERNOON, AUGUST 1, 1775

Rev. and dear Sir:

This is the day, your conference with the Methodist preachers begins. As I pray'd early in the morning that God would give you all the spirit of wisdom and love to consult about the spread of the power of godliness, the motion made by Mr. Benson in the letter I sent you came into my mind: And I saw it in a much more favorable light than I had done before. The wish of my soul was that you might be directed to see, and weigh things in a proper manner. About the middle of the day, as I met with you in spirit, the matter occurred to me again in so strong a manner that I think it my duty to put my thoughts upon paper, and send them to you.

You love the Church of England, and yet you are not blind to her freckles, nor insensible of her shackles. Your life is precarious; you have lately been shaken over the grave. You are spared; it may be to take yet some important steps which may influence more generations yet unborn. What, Sir, if you used your liberty as an Englishman, a Christian, a divine, and an extraordinary messenger of God? What, if with lots of modesty you took a farther step toward the reformation of the Church of England. The admirers of the Confessional, and the gentlemen who have petitioned the parliament from the feather's tavern, cry aloud that our church stands in need of being reformed, but do not they want to corrupt her in some things, while they talk of reforming her in others. Now Sir, God has given you that light, that influence, and that integrity which many of these gentlemen have not. You can reform, so far as your influence goes, without perverting; and indeed you have done it already: But have you done it professedly enough? Have you ever explicitly born your testimony against all the defects of our church? May you not do this without departing from your professed attachment to her? Nay, might you not, by this means, do her the greatest of services. If the mother who gave you suck were yet alive, could you not reverence

her, without reverencing her little whims, and sinful peculiarities, if she had any. If Alexander's good sense had not been clouded by his pride, would he have thought that his countries honoured him when they awkwardly carried their head upon one shoulder as he did, that they might look like him? I love the Church of England, I hope, as much as you do. But I do not love her so as to take her blemishes for ornaments. You know, Sir, that she is almost totally deficient in discipline, and she publicly owns it herself every Ash-Wednesday. What are here spiritual counts in general, but a catch-penny? As for her doctrine, altho' it is pure upon the whole, you know that some specks of Pelagian, Calvinian, and Popish dirt cleave to her articles, homilies, liturgy, and rubrics. These specks could with ease be taken off, and doing it in the circle of your influence might, sooner or later, provoke our superiors to godly jealousy and a complete reformation. In order to this it is proposed:

(1) That the growing body of the Methodists in Great Britain, Ireland and America be formed into a general society—a daughter church of our holy mother, the Church of England.

(2) That this society shall recede from the Church of England in nothing but in some palpable defects about doctrine, discipline, and unevangelical hierarchy.

(3) That this society shall be the methodist-church of England, ready to defend the as yet unmethodized Church of England against all the unjust attacks of the dissenters—willing to submit to her in all things that are not unscriptural—approving of her ordination—partaking of her sacraments, and attending her service at every convenient opportunity.

(4) That a pamphlet be published containing the 39 articles of the Church of England rectified according to the purity of the gospel, together with some needful alterations in the liturgy and homilies—such as expunging the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian creed, etc.

(5) That Mr. Wesley, the preachers, and the most substantial methodists in London, in the name of the societies scattered thro' the kingdom, would draw up a petition and present to the Archbishop of Canterbury informing his Grace, and by him the bench of the Bishops, of this design; proposing the reformed articles of religion, asking the protection of the Church of England, begging that this step might not be considered as a schism, but only as an attempt to avail ourselves of the body of English men, and Protestants, to serve God according to the purity of the gospel, the strictness of primitive discipline, and the original design of the Church of England, which was to reform, so far as time and circumstances would allow, what ever needed reformation.

(6) That this petition contain a request to the Bishops to ordain the methodist preachers which can pass their examination according to what is indispensably required in the canons of the Church.—That instead of the ordinary testimonials, the Bishops would allow of testimonials signed by Messr Wesley and some more clergymen who would make it their business to enquire into the morals and principles of the candidates for orders. And that instead of a title, their Lordships would accept of a bond signed by twelve stewards of the Methodist societies, certifying that the candidates for holy orders shall have a proper maintenance. That if his Grace, &c, do condescend to grant this request, Messr Wesley with will be obligated to take an irregular

(not unevangelical) step, and to ordain upon a Church of England—independent plan such and to lay preachers as appear to them qualified for holy orders.

(7) That the preachers so ordained be the assistants in their respective circuits. That the helpers, who are thought worthy be ordained deacons. And that doubtful candidates be kept upon trial as they now are.

(8) That the Methodist preachers assembled in conference shall have the liberty to suspend and degrade any methodist preacher ordained or unordained, who shall act the part of a Balaam or a Demas.

(9) That when Messrs Wesley are dead, the power of Methodist ordination be lodged in three or five of the most steady methodist ministers and on the title of Moderators, who shall overlook the flocks, and the other preachers as Mr. Wesley does now.

(10) That the most spiritual part of the common prayer shall be extracted and published with the 39 rectified and the minutes of the conference for the methodist canons which (together with such regulations as may be made at the time of this establishment) shall be, next to the Bible, the vade mecum of the methodist preachers.

(12) That the important office of confirmation shall be performed with the utmost solemnity by Mr. Wesley or by the Moderators and that none shall be admitted to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but such as have been confirmed or are ready to be confirmed.

(13) That the bound plan upon which the Methodist preachers shall go, shall be to preach the doctrine of grace against the Socinians—the doctrine of justice against the Calvinists, and that the doctrine of holiness against all the world: And that of consequences three such questions as these be put to the candidates for orders at the time of ordination.

i. Wilt thou maintain with all thy might the scriptural doctrines of grace especially the doctrine of a sinner's free justification merely by a living faith in the blood and merits of Christ.

ii. Wilt thou maintain with all thy might the scriptural doctrines of justice, especially the doctrine of a believer's remunerative justification by the good works, which ought to spring from justifying faith.

iii. Wilt thou preach up Christian perfection, or the fulfilling of the law of Christ, against all the antinomians of the age; and wilt thou ardently press after it thyself, never resting till thou art perfected in humble love?

Perhaps to keep the work in the Church it might be proper to add,

iv. Wilt thou consider thyself as a son of the Church of England, receding from her as little as possible: never railing against her clergy, and being ready to submit to her ordination, if any of the bishops will confer it upon thee.

(14) And lastly that Kingswood school be entirely appropriated (1) To the reception and improvement of the candidates for methodist orders: (2) To the education of the children of the preachers: and (3) to the keeping of the wornout Methodist preachers, whose employment shall be to preserve the spirit of faith and primitive christianity in the place; by which means alone the curse of a little unsanctified learning may be kept out.

TUESDAY EVENING

P. S. The preceding pages contain my view of B. Benson's proposal. I wrote it immediately after dinner and was going to send it to you, thinking that now is the best time to deliberate upon this plan. But when my servant was gone to look for a messenger to go to Leeds, my heart failed, as not having had time enough to consider what I had wrote, or to pray over it. So I called her back. This evening the young man whom I mentioned to you in my last (letter) being come to me: I asked him if he would carry a letter to you; And, as I had some mind of sending him, barely as one that might labor on trial, if you accepted of him, as I had need of help, upon his consenting to go, I send you my scrawl, that, if there is any thing therein worth your attention, you may have it, while you can yet consult with the preachers. That the God of all grace may preside over your every deliberation is, I can sir, the ardent prayer of your affectionate Son & servant in the gospel

J. Fletcher