

2

God of Nature and of Grace Theological Foundations for the Doctrine of the Dispensations

FOR THE FIRST FIFTEEN hundred centuries of Christianity, the locus of the authority of Christian claims was principally within the Church due to the hierarchical system that developed as it reflected its cultural setting and responded to the various heresies that arose. However, during the Reformation, the locus of the authority shifted, for Protestants, from the Church to the Scriptures. In the early period of the Reformation the principal concern of Protestantism centered on soteriology; later, the central issue shifted to the doctrines of revelation and authority as the implications of Reformation thought eroded the religious authority of the Church.

Enlightenment rationalism orchestrated a crisis of the Christian faith as reason supplanted revelation in the enlightened mind. The Church, thus, grappled with the encroachment of rationalism. H. D. McDonald traces the Church's response to the first Boyle Lecture in 1692 by Richard Bentley under the title, *The Folly of Atheism and Deism even with respect of the Present Life*.¹ McDonald insists, "The idea of revelation was . . . the dominant one of the period."² Gerald R. Cragg states similarly, "[T]he history of eighteenth-century thought is largely concerned with the problem of authority."³

1. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation*, 3.

2. Ibid., 3.

3. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*, 2.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

McDonald typified the responses to Enlightenment rationalism with the rationalism of deism at one end of the spectrum and enthusiasm at the other.⁴ In an era when reason was considered the principal arbitrator of truth, philosophers, such as John Locke with his work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), endeavored to prove the rationality of the Christian faith. According to McDonald, the result was that “Locke robbed it [Christianity] of its worth, and consequently his work which was meant to be a sword against deism became a powerful weapon in its hands.”⁵ Matthew Tindal, influenced by Locke’s work, wrote *Christianity as Old as Creation* whose purpose was revealed in the subtitle, *The Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature*; it was referred to as “the deists’ Bible.” Tindal argued, “No special revelation can be claimed as enlarging or ennobling the revelation of nature, since this would call in question the perfection of what has been given by nature.”⁶ God has revealed in nature all that needs to be revealed, and rational human beings, through unaided reason, are capable of discerning truth through a study of nature and natural law. During the period, there was, thus, a heightened interest in the study of nature.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of opposing views on revelation from the rational-objective view of the deists was the mystico-subjective view of the Quakers.⁷ Among others, such as the Ranters, Seekers, and Shakers, the Quakers were labelled enthusiasts by the more rationalistic Christian apologists. Enthusiasm was a rejection of the dogmatic, rationalistic, faith of the established Church, its standards, and at times the Scriptures.⁸

During the seventeenth century, a small group of scholars, known as Cambridge Platonists, posited a middle way between Scylla and Charybdis on the doctrine of revelation; they responded to Enlightenment rationalism by stressing the rationality of Christian faith. While their roots were in Puritanism, they reacted to the anti-rationalism of the dogmatism of Puritan theology.⁹ Cragg describes them as follows: “They refused to divorce the rational from the spiritual. They admitted no boundaries between theology and philosophy, or between natural and revealed religion. The reason which they exalted was very different in quality from the pedestrian rationalism

4. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation*, 35.

5. Ibid., 41.

6. Ibid., 48.

7. Ibid., 35.

8. McDonald points out that enthusiasm arose, at times, as a rejection of the Calvinistic doctrine of particular election: “To stress the universal influence of Christ, emphasis was placed upon the Johannine declaration that, He was the light that lighteth every man that cometh in the world” (ibid., 63).

9. Hutton, “Smith.”

which satisfied the eighteenth century, but they taught their age to trust in the mind of man.”¹⁰ For them, reason and revelation were in harmony; Whichcote referred to reason as “the candle of the Lord” (Proverbs 20:27) by which he meant that the human mind was illuminated by God.¹¹ D.A. Rees emphasized that the seventeenth century Platonists stressed the inner life of the Spirit and demonstrated some affinities with the Quakers and their stress on an “inner light,” which is not necessarily limited to Christians.¹² Thus, the seventeenth century was marked by Christian apologists who endeavored to prove the reasonableness, reality and sufficiency of the Christian revelation.

Another characteristic of the era of the Enlightenment was an emphasis on a more optimistic view of history. Coupled with such optimism was a belief in the inevitable progress of history. The emphases on reason and the idea of the progress of history could not be bifurcated. Immanuel Kant is representative of Enlightenment thinkers who viewed the goal of history as “an approach, typical of the Enlightenment that describes history as the story of humanity’s progressive development from barbarism and superstition to a life of reason.”¹³

While many evangelicals considered themselves exempt from its influence, Enlightenment thought affected theology in England.¹⁴ Evangelicals too were enamored with the Enlightenment assumption of the progress of history. Due to the inextricable link of the Christian faith to history, it was impinging upon the apologists of the Church to defend the historicity of divine revelation. They viewed history as redemptive and linked the doctrines of divine providence and revelation with the idea of the progress of history. Bebbington writes, “Evangelicals reflected the later Enlightenment in their optimistic temper. The eighteenth century, and especially its second half, characteristically believed that humanity enjoyed great potential for improvement. It was the later eighteenth century that witnessed the emergence of the idea of progress, the conviction that human beings are steadily becoming wiser and therefore better.”¹⁵ John Wesley himself held to an optimistic view of the providence of God despite his pessimism of sin; God was

10. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*, 66.

11. D. Edwards, *Christian England*, 2:369.

12. D. A. Rees also stated that neo-Platonism has exerted a profound influence in the field of poetry, an observation that will have significance in a later discussion (D. A. Rees, “Platonism and the Platonic Tradition”).

13. Nash, *Meaning of History*, 72.

14. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 50ff. See also Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 32.

15. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 60.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

working in history to bring about the divine redemptive end. This optimism becomes more evident as the revival spread, and is particularly evident in his late sermon, *The General Spread of the Gospel* (1783).¹⁶

Questions arose in this era regarding the authority of Scripture. The principles of the Reformation had undermined the Church as the religious authority and replaced it with the Scriptures. The Reformers and their successors held to the veracity of God's Word and to its centrality and authority within the Church as the rule of faith and practice. However, a problem arose: the Scriptures disclose the inconsistent, inequitable ways that God has dealt with God's people and in particular the dissonance between the Old and New Testaments. When the consistency of the established Church was replaced with the inconsistencies of Scripture, it was impinging upon the Reformers to prove the veracity of Scripture. How could they hold to the veracity of the Scripture given inherent inconsistencies? Their conviction caused them to grapple seriously with the contradictions of Scripture and to develop a theology of history that underscored the unity of God's revelatory activity. Their response to the question was a doctrine of progressive revelation, which assumes an incremental increase of the knowledge of God throughout history and attempts to explain the different ways that God dealt with humanity.

Butler's Analogy

Eighteenth century thinkers were also enamored with the idea of nature. Cragg writes, "The authority claimed by natural religion and the universal respect accorded it were among the most characteristic features of eighteenth-century thought."¹⁷ Locke's emphasis upon reason and Sir Isaac Newton's emphasis upon the uniformity of the universe gave rise to an "assured and self-confident period" in which "it seemed clear that man's intelligence had traced God's handiwork in creation, and had detected the divine purpose both in the structure of the universe and in the operation of man's mind."¹⁸ As noted above, Matthew Tindal posited the continuity between natural religion and the religion of the Gospel. For Tindal, natural and revealed religion were in fact "different aspects of the one rational religion."¹⁹ Deists ennobled the revelation of nature to such a degree of perfection that

16. BiCentWJW, 2:485ff. Another late sermon (1787), "The Signs of the Times," reflects this same tone (BiCentWJW, 2:521ff.).

17. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*, 9.

18. Ibid., 9. Cf. ibid., 119.

19. McDonald, *Ideas of Revelation*, 48.

special revelation could add nothing to it.²⁰ Orthodox theologians reacted to the naturalism of the deists and reasserted the necessity of revelation. Fletcher found the anti-deistic writers to be allies in his polemical writings against the deists. Representative among them is Bishop Butler.

Joseph Butler (1692–1752) wrote to refute the deists among whose works Tindal's *Christianity as Old as Creation* was the most recent publication. His work, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, “was addressed to those who conceded order and regularity in nature but were sceptical about the claims of Christianity.”²¹ Butler countered “[T]he deist critique by arguing both that the investigation of nature can show us more than the deists allow—such as the existence of a future life and that this life is a time of moral probation—and that the difficulties apparent in Christian revelation are analogous to the difficulties apparent in the account of natural religion offered by the deists.”²² Christianity, according to Butler, is the authoritative promulgation of the law of nature “with new light, and other circumstances of peculiar advantage, adapted to the wants of mankind.”²³ However, Christianity is greater than a mere republication of the law of nature; it involves revelation: “[I]t contains also a revelation of a particular dispensation of Providence, carrying on by his [the Father's] Son and Spirit, for the recovery and salvation of mankind, who are represented in Scripture to be in a state of ruin.”²⁴ Bishop Butler posited a Trinitarian unfolding of revelatory history and an epistemological order of divine revelation. This Trinitarian unfolding of revelation history is the foundation for the Trinitarian formula of Christian baptism. Moral obligations, which are (or morality is) the very essence of religion,²⁵ are revealed in the subsequent dispensations through the offices of the Trinity as well as through the relation of Persons of the Trinity to human beings:

By *reason* is revealed the revelation, which God the Father stands to us. Hence arises the obligation of duty which we are under to him. In *Scripture* are revealed the relations, which the Son and Holy Spirit stand in to us. Hence arise the obligations of duty, which we are under to them. The truth of the case, as one may speak, in each of these three respects being admitted: that God is the governor of the world, upon the evidence of

20. Ibid., 48, 53.

21. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*, 114.

22. Cunliffe, “Butler.”

23. Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 191.

24. Ibid., 104.

25. Matthews, “Reason and Revelation Joined,” 96.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

reason; that Christ is the mediator between God and man, and the Holy Ghost our guide and sanctifier, upon the evidence of revelation.²⁶

Human knowledge of God, according to Butler, progresses from knowledge of the Father, a knowledge revealed through reason, to knowledge of the Son and Spirit, which is revealed through further revelation. Cragg points out that the language of Butler on reason is reminiscent of the Cambridge Platonists; Butler “spoke of ‘the faculty of reason, which is *the candle of the Lord within us*.’”²⁷ Parallels of Butler’s epistemological claims to Fletcher’s thought will become evident.

The word “analogy” in the title of Butler’s work refers to the analogy between “the principles of divine government, as set forth by the biblical revelation, and those observable in the course of nature, [an analogy which] leads us to the warrantable conclusion that there is one Author of both.”²⁸ According to McClintock and Strong, the central analogy developed in Butler’s work is between “the system of nature and the system of grace.”²⁹

FLETCHER ON GRACE AND NATURE

Fletcher reflects a profound interest in the doctrines of revelation, nature, providence, and history. These doctrines are foundational for his theological system and the doctrine of dispensations and must be considered here.³⁰

One of the most mature and comprehensive expressions of Fletcher’s theology appeared under the title *La Grâce et la Nature*; originally it was written and published in Switzerland under the title *La Louange*, but was later significantly expanded and published in England in 1785 under the new title.³¹ The genre of literature portrayed in the poem is reminiscent of the poetry of the Cambridge Platonists. The poem with its corresponding notes forms a descant on creation based upon Psalm 148.³²

26. Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, 194; emphasis original.

27. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*, 120.

28. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. “Butler, Joseph,” 885.

29. McClintock and Strong, eds., *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, s.v. “Butler, Joseph,” 937.

30. B. Gregory wrote, “Fletcher’s doctrine of the dispensations was in perfect harmony with his view of the revelations of nature and grace” (“John Fletcher, the Theologian,” 180).

31. Fletcher-Grâce, iv. The preface was dedicated and signed on “le 6 de Sept. 1784.”

32. *Ibid.*, xxxii–xxxiii.

Wiggins gives a sustained treatment of *La Grâce et la Nature* and provides an analysis of the structure of the work that contains a total of twenty-four “chants” or cantos. The first division comprising Cantos I through X “are addressed to men in various stations of life and each is implored to praise God.”³³ The second division including Cantos XI through XIV presents “animal life with the lessons of natural praise which each category offers to its creator.”³⁴ The third division of cantos, Cantos XV through XVIII, is drawn from Fletcher’s previous work, *Essai sur la Paix de 1783*, and describes the peace between France and England. “Cantos XIX through XXIV deal with a group of natural phenomena, each of which in its own being has a lesson to offer to man about the vocation of praising God.”³⁵

Wiggins emphasized the significance of *La Grâce et la Nature* for Fletcher’s thought and its neglect in studies of Fletcher’s writings: “[O]ur contention is that the poem offers an entrè [sic] into the full spectrum of Fletcher’s thought and talent.”³⁶ In giving his rationale for the new title, Fletcher exposed a concept that is key to his theological system: “If grace causes us to praise the God of all grace, Nature does not invite us any less to celebrate its invisible Author.”³⁷ Fletcher cited from the French translation of Romans 1 to show that unbelievers failed to recognize God’s glory in nature, did not glorify (“rendu grâce”) God and live like atheists.

Among others, Fletcher found an ally for his views on nature in Monsieur Jean-André du Luc (1727–1817), who was a geologist, meteorologist, and author of *Lettres Physiques et Morales sur Histoire de la Terre*, which Fletcher quoted at length in *La Grâce et la Nature*. Du Luc who was, during his youth, challenged by philosophers to reconsider his belief in divine revelation decided to devote himself to the study of nature. The geologist studied the structure of the earth and found evidence for the world-wide deluge of Noah’s day and for Mosaic cosmology.³⁸ Du Luc was surprised at the audacity of the unbelievers’ attacks on and their scornful attitude toward Christianity because his study of nature led him to the conclusion: “Religion has its Basis in Nature.”³⁹ This geologist/philosopher concluded that there was a basis for divine revelation and morality that was evident in nature

33. Wiggins, “Pattern of John Fletcher’s Theology,” 60.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 35.

37. “Si la Grace nous porte à louer le Dieu de toute grace, la Nature ne nous invite pas moins à célébrer son invisible Auteur” (Fletcher-Grâce, x).

38. Ibid., 341–43.

39. “[L]a Religion a ses Bases dans la Nature” (ibid., 343).

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

and argued for a continual admiration of the universe on the part of human beings and of the intelligent Cause behind it. Upon quoting du Luc, Fletcher commented, “To follow the advice of this Doctor is to pass by the Beauty of the Universe to the knowledge of its Author; making devotion walk hand in hand with Philosophy: it is to unite Nature and Grace: Sweet Union which is the basis of this Poem.”⁴⁰ A holograph draft letter reveals the connection that Fletcher felt with his compatriot, Monsieur du Luc.⁴¹ Fletcher identified himself to his addressee whom he did not know personally as “an author who follows your footsteps in conducting men on the path of nature and piety.”⁴²

Foundational to Fletcher’s theology is the concept that grace and nature are one because God is both the Author of nature and of grace.⁴³ In this work, nature serves two useful purposes: it announces God and instructs human beings.⁴⁴ Both the minutia of nature and the holistic view of nature reveal the attributes of God and God’s grace in divine-human relations. Birds that dart under the water reveal how baptized righteous believers detest their sins.⁴⁵ The sun, as the principal source of the earth’s light, indicates the Primary Cause of the Universe, and the moon reminds believers that they reflect the light of God.⁴⁶ The fruit of trees demonstrates good works, and the sap demonstrates the faith that are worthy of heaven.⁴⁷ Water in the natural world is a symbol for grace in the spiritual world.⁴⁸ In an obvious allusion to Jacob’s declaration, “How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:17), Fletcher extolled the whole universe as Bethel, the house of God:

May the Universe be for us a vast Bethel;
And may even our rocks glorify the Eternal God! ⁴⁹

40. “Suivre le conseil de ce Physicien c’est aller par le Spectacle de l’Univers à la connaissance de son Auteur; c’est faire marcher la Dévotion d’un pas égal avec la Philosophie; c’est unir la Nature et la Grace: Douce Union qui fait la base ce Poème” (ibid., x–xi).

41. Streiff, *Reluctant Saint?*, 15.

42. JF→[Monsieur du Luc], n.d [“before 19 Dec. 1782,” RS, 15].

43. Fletcher-Grâce, 261.

44. Ibid., 140.

45. Ibid., 126.

46. Ibid., 221–23.

47. Ibid., 240.

48. Ibid., 256.

49. “Que l’Univers pour nous soit un vaste Béthel;
Et jusques sur nos rocs bénissons l’Eternel!” (ibid., 228).

The universe announces the various attributes of God even in the midst of humanity's indifference:

If God has showered Humans with his blessings,
Object of his love, Masterpiece of his hands:
Unique Orators on the wave and the earth,
It is up to us to praise the Master of the thunder.
But if for our responsibilities we are full of cowardly fear,
Ungrateful, we forget our great Benefactor,
Nature, in all places, by its beautiful harmony,
Sings to God of His infinite Greatness:
Of lifeless bodies the lightening or the virtues
Announce to us the divine attributes of God
Everywhere shine these names: Goodness, Magnificence,
Order, Beauty, Light, Love, Glory & Power.⁵⁰

Fletcher's position is not materialistic or pantheistic. In advising the philosophers to glorify God by avoiding false philosophy, Fletcher encouraged the philosophers to distinguish between nature and its Author.⁵¹ The key correlation between nature and spiritual things is analogy. Jesus' use of the simple things of nature to illustrate spiritual things validated Fletcher's use of analogies, drawing connections between natural things and spiritual things.⁵² The portions of Scripture that contain mystical elements cannot be understood accurately by a literal reading; one must penetrate beyond the literal reading for an accurate spiritual understanding.⁵³ In the "Discours

50. "Si Dieu de ses faveurs a comblé les Humains,
Object de son amour, Chef-d'œuvre de ses mains :
Uniques Orateurs sur l'onde et sur la terre,
C'est à Nous de louer le Maître du tonnerre.
Mais, si pour nos devoirs pleins de lâche tiédeur,
Ingrats, nous oublions notre grand Bienfaiteur,
La Nature, en tous lieux, par sa belle harmonie,
Chante de l'Eternel la Grandeur infinie ;
Des Corps inanimés l'éclat ou les vertus,
Nous annoncent d'un Dieu les divins attributs :
Par-tout brillent ces noms, Bonté, Magnificence,
Ordre, Beauté, Lumière, Amour, Gloire & Puissance" (ibid., 219–20). .

51. Ibid., 74. Loyer argues correctly that Fletcher's understanding of utter transcendence of God provides a basis in Fletcher's thought for safeguarding against inappropriate language about the divine: "Fletcher teaches that in reference to God, whatever ideas or images associated with these and other words need to be evaluated on the basis of God's utter transcendence" ("Adoring the Holy Trinity in Unity," 4).

52. Fletcher-Grâce, xi–xii.

53. Knickerbocker has noted neo-Platonic strains ("Doctrinal Sources and Guidelines in Early," 190).

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

Préliminaire: Sur le Mysticisme évangélique,” Fletcher provided a key to understanding the analogical relation that he perceived between grace and nature:

St. Paul has given us a key to evangelical mysticism, when he assures us, “that the invisible things of God are clearly seen by the things which he has made,” that is, by the visible creation. And he gives the reason, saying, “That things which are seen were not made of things which do appear;” and when he declares, “that the things on earth are copies of those in heaven:” as though he had said, that all the visible and sensible objects are only dross and material copies, whose originals are spiritual and invisible. This is the foundation of that mysticism which runs through the Gospel.⁵⁴

The influence of neo-Platonism is evident in Fletcher’s hermeneutics and fundamental to his analogy between grace and nature.⁵⁵ While the influence of neo-Platonism seems implicit in the above quotation, Fletcher made it explicit by a lengthy quote from Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, only cited here in part: “[T]he whole universe is one great emblem, or symbolic sign of the truths which are most interesting for us.”⁵⁶ The goal of the poem is to emphasize the spiritual truths that natural things represent and to cause the readers to glorify the God of nature and grace.

Fletcher was quite a master at making spiritual analogies not just in his writing, but in everyday life.⁵⁷ In Fletcher’s thought, the analogy between grace and nature is possible because God is Source of both as the Creator and Redeemer. Next under consideration will be the theological foundations for analogical predication.

54. “St. Paul nous donne la clef du mysticisme évangélique, lors qu’il nous assure que *Les choses invisible de Dieu, se voyent comme à l’oeuil dans les choses créées et matérielles*: Rom. 1.20. Et il en indique la raison, quand il nous fait entendre que *Les choses qui se voyent, ont été faites de choses qui ne paroissent point* : Heb. xi.3. Et quand il déclare, que les choses qui sont sur la terre, *représentent celles qui sont dans les cieus* : Heb. ix.23. Comme s’il disoit, Tous les Objets visible et sensible, ne sont que des copies grossières et matérielles des choses dont les Originaux sont invisible et spirituels. C’est ici le fondement du mysticisme de l’Evangile” (Fletcher-Grâce, xxx).

55. English “discussed the correspondence and differences between John Wesley and the Cambridge Platonists by exploring Wesley’s editing of these writers for the Christian Library” (“Cambridge Platonists in Wesley’s ‘Christian,’” 161–68).

56. “[T]out l’Univers n’est qu’un grand emblème, ou un signe symbolique des vérités les plus intéressantes pour nous” (Fletcher-Grâce, xxxi).

57. WJW, 11:307–8; “Rev. John Fletcher and the Rev. C. Simeon,” 326. See Tyerman, *Wesley’s Designated Successor*, 551–52.

**“I FIND TRUTH IN THE WORLD OF NATURE”:
ANALOGICAL PREDICATION IN FLETCHER’S
THOUGHT⁵⁸**

John Fletcher wrote to Joseph Benson on 20 March 1774: “There is undoubtedly truth in the world, tho’ what I have seen and felt from a variety of professors, has sometimes stunned my faith for half a minute, and almost made way for the hellish snare of skepticism: But I find truth in the world of nature, I see it in the starry world, I read it in the scripture, I enjoy it in a few holy souls, and I trust that I can testify to the glory of God there is a spark of it in my own breast.”⁵⁹ Without doubt, Fletcher found truth in the world of nature.⁶⁰ Constant references are made throughout his writings to the world of nature.⁶¹ Fletcher echoed the sentiment that Charles Wesley expressed in his *Hymns for Whit-Sunday*:

Author of every work Divine
Who dost through both creations shine,
The God of nature and of grace,
Thy glorious steps in all we see,
And wisdom attribute to Thee,
And power, and majesty, and praise.⁶²

Natural phenomena are a source for illustrating divine grace in Fletcher’s writings.

In order to make the point that human efforts do not invalidate the free gift of justification, Fletcher illustrated the concept with the laws of nature. When farmers respect the laws established by the “God of providence,” their obedience to the laws does not invalidate the fact that harvest is the free unmerited gift of God.⁶³ The God of nature is the same God as the God of grace; the basic law of nature that is applied to natural phenomenon is the same basic law that is applied in spiritual matters. Spiritual hunger is analogous to physical hunger, and common sense that regulates the dispensing of food to the sick to their capacity to receive it regulates the dispensing

58. Lawton discusses the literary genius of Fletcher and references the many allusions and other literary devices that Fletcher employs in his works (*Shropshire Saint*, 60–63).

59. JF→JB, 20 March 1774.

60. John Wesley held that God revealed the divine nature through nature as well (*Compend of Wesley’s Theology*, 36).

61. Cf. Fl-W1856, 3:453; 4:62.

62. Osborn, *Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 7:198.

63. Fl-W1856, 2:245–6.

of spiritual nourishment to sinners: “The word of God must be offered to sinners as a remedy suited to the disease of their souls; but to the faithful it must be administered as nourishing food. Hence . . . the order of grace resembles that of nature.”⁶⁴ Divine governance of nature and grace are similar: “the appointed ways of providence” and “the appointed ways of grace” both require divine intervention and human effort. Writing to Walter Shirley, Fletcher illustrated the necessity of human effort in his soteriology: “[S]o sure as a farmer, in the appointed ways of providence, shall have no harvest if he does nothing toward it, a professor in the appointed ways of grace, let him talk of finished salvation all the year round, shall go without justification and salvation, unless he do something toward them.”⁶⁵ Frequently, Fletcher depends upon the agrarian parables of Jesus to illustrate spiritual truths, demonstrating his penchant for connecting grace and nature.

Fletcher’s response to a cataclysmic event in his parish further demonstrates his concept of the relation between grace and nature. On Tuesday, 27 May 1773, a landslip occurred along the Severn River at the boundary of the Buildwas parish and Fletcher’s own parish, which significantly altered the topography of the area.⁶⁶ In July, Fletcher wrote an account of the event under the title: *A Dreadful Phenomenon Described and Improved: Being a Particular Account of the Sudden Stoppage of the River Severn, and of the Terrible Desolation That Happened at the Birches, Between Coalbrook-dale and Buildwas Bridge in Shropshire. On Thursday Morning, May the 27th, 1773. And the Substance of a Sermon Preached the Next Day, on the Ruins, to a Vast Concourse of Spectators*. As indicated by the title, the publication consisted of two principal parts. In the first part, he describes in great detail the topography of area prior to and subsequent to the landslip including measurements of the length, breadth and depth of the chasms and the redirection of the course of the River Severn.⁶⁷

The publication repudiated a Newtonian view of mechanistic regularity of the universe, which results in a deistical world where God is uninvolved in the ongoing activities of the human affairs. Against the philosophers of the day whom Fletcher labels “disciples of Epicurus” that deny the agency of God, Fletcher asserts that God is the force behind nature.⁶⁸ Nature is not to be worshiped nor should it be considered merely as the sum of laws by which God generally rules the world. God is the agent behind “natural”

64. Fl-W1856, 6:372.

65. Fl-W1856, 2:246.

66. JF→CW, 30 May 1773.

67. Fl-W1856, 8:219ff.

68. Fl-W1856, 8:272.

events. Fletcher replies with the following question: “Can any thing, then, be more irrational than the exclusion of God’s immediate agency from the works of nature?”⁶⁹ God is the first cause of all things with the exception of moral evil.⁷⁰ “But let us hear God himself speaking in Isaiah: ‘I am the Lord, and there is none else; there is no God besides me. I,’ not nature, ‘form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil.’ I create natural, to punish moral evil. ‘I the Lord do all these things.’ Isaiah xlv. 5, 7.”⁷¹

After determining that the secondary cause of the phenomenon is an earthquake, Fletcher states, “But whatever the second or natural cause of our phenomenon was, it is certain that the first or moral cause of it is twofold: on our part, aggravated sin; and on God’s part, warning justice.”⁷² It seems that Fletcher has adopted Thomas Aquinas’ idea of a primary cause, God, who delegates divine action to secondary causes.⁷³ In this system, suffering and pain are not to be associated with the first cause, “but to the fragility and frailty of the secondary causes through which God works.”⁷⁴ On the very day of the landslip, Fletcher read and enlarged upon several passages from his book *An Appeal to Matter of Fact, or, a Rational Demonstration of Man’s Fallen and Lost Estate*. In these citations, Fletcher pointed out that there are spiritual implications to the occurrence of the natural phenomenon: “Does not the natural state of the earth cast a light upon the spiritual condition of its inhabitants?” The “God of nature and providence” is the one who is the primary Actor and causes the natural events in order “to punish disorders of the moral world.”⁷⁵ Fletcher sermonized, “God yesterday, for the first time, commanded these fields to rend the rocks in their bowels; to tear the green carpets that cover the surface; and to turn some south, others east and west: and he was obeyed. Thus, the word of the Lord, which is perpetually slighted by the generality of mankind, was instantly submitted to by the inanimate creation.”⁷⁶

Fletcher often used the word “nature” in contexts where he clearly had the doctrine of prevenient grace in view. In his observations on Romans 2:14 on the Gentiles who “do by nature the things contained in the law,” Fletcher inserted the following parenthetical comment after the word “nature”: “in

69. Fl-W1856, 8:272.

70. Fl-W1856, 8:272.

71. Fl-W1856, 8:273.

72. FL-W1856, 8:253.

73. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 286.

74. Ibid.

75. Fl-W1856, 8:255.

76. Fl-W1856, 8:279.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

its present state of initial restoration, without, any other assistance than that which Divine grace vouchsafes to all men universally.”⁷⁷ Clearly the preventive grace of God infuses nature, indicating a union between grace and nature; however, he also employed the word differently in other contexts. The word “nature” was sometimes used in opposition to the grace of God, specifically nature could be applied to fallen human nature. In *A Dialogue Between a Minister and One of His Parishioners, on Man’s Depravity and Danger in His Natural State*, Fletcher emphasized that the disorders of the world show “that its chief inhabitant is *disgraced* by the God of nature and providence.”⁷⁸ The disgracing of nature includes cataclysmic events such as “storms, inundations and earthquakes” or more common occurrences such as “lightening and thunder, burning heat and piercing cold;” nevertheless these events “concur to make this earth a vast prison for rebels, who are already ‘tied and bound with the chain of their sins,’ a boundless scaffold for their execution, an immense ‘field of blood,’ and, if I may be allowed the expression, the charnel house of the universe.”⁷⁹

On the day after the landslide, Fletcher preached a sermon to a crowd that gathered to see the catastrophe that was based on the text from Numbers 16:30–34; the sermon comprises the second part of the aforementioned publication.⁸⁰ Whereas the previous section of the publication is principally descriptive, the sermon is a theological interpretation of the event and of course an application of the gospel to the hearers. As in the previous address, God is the main actor whose purpose is to bring the inhabitants of the parish to repentance and Christian faith. The justice and the mercy of God are demonstrated in the catastrophic event, and Fletcher held these two doctrines in a dialectical tension. God has acted in judgment, but has demonstrated his mercy by not pouring out the full measure of the cup of his wrath.⁸¹ Fletcher portrays the divine rationale: “To rouse our souls, he tosses our grounds; to stop us in our sinful career, he absorbs our highway; and to water in our hearts the withered plant of God’s fear, he dams up our navigable river.”⁸² God has demonstrated mercy to the inhabitants by

77. Fl-W1856, 3:269.

78. Fl-W1856, 9:474; emphasis added.

79. Ibid.

80. This sermon was not the only sermon that Fletcher preached from the ruins. Jeremiah Brettell reported that Fletcher preached a sermon based on Psalm 46:8. The verse is a further indication of Fletcher’s theme of God as the first cause: “Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth” (Brettell, “Memoir of the Rev,” 651).

81. Fl-W1856, 8:258.

82. Fl-W1856, 2:259.

warning them but not destroying them as they deserved.⁸³ Thus, both God's mercy and justice are demonstrated in this act of God. Fletcher insisted that the objective of certain songs within scripture is to demonstrate the justice and the mercy of God: "Thus, while the blessed show forth in heaven the praises of his holiness and mercy, the wicked in hell display those of his holiness and justice. Therefore, the destruction of the latter, as well as the salvation of the former, is the proper theme of heavenly songs."⁸⁴

The world of nature displays the variety of God's dealings with creation. The sovereignty of God is demonstrated in the world of nature as Fletcher illustrated spiritual things with natural things: "Why was the lark elected to the blessing of a towering flight, and of sprightly songs, from which the oyster is so absolutely reprobated? the poor oyster, which is shut up between two shells, without either legs or wings, and so far as we know, equally destitute of ears and eyes."⁸⁵ In the same manner, the grace of God reflects a great variety in dealings with human beings. God dispenses grace in various manners and in different degrees: "God, as a sovereign benefactor, may, without shadow of injustice, dispense his favours, spiritual and temporal as he pleases."⁸⁶ The sovereignty of God results in an "election of distinguishing grace, which is the basis of the various dispensations of divine grace towards the children of men," Fletcher continued with an explanation "Christ dies to purchase more privileges for the Christian church than the Jews, more for the Jews than for the Gentiles."⁸⁷ God's partiality is evident in the distribution of divine providential blessings and also in the distribution of spiritual blessings.⁸⁸

Consistent in his dialectical thought, Fletcher insisted that God's equality is evident as well: "The equality of God's ways does not consist in giving just the same number of gracious talents to all; but, first, in not desiring to 'gather where he has not strawed,' or 'to reap' above a proportion of 'his seed:' and, secondly, in graciously dispensing rewards according to the number of talents improved, and the degrees of that improvement."⁸⁹ The law of the harvest applies to nature as well as to grace. The law of the grace is "Use grace and have grace." "The inseparable counterpart of the axiom

83. Fl-W1856, 8:270.

84. Fl-W1856, 8:268.

85. Fl-W1856, 5:119.

86. Fl-W1856, 3:293.

87. Ibid.

88. Fl-W1856, 5:120. Cf. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century*, 123.

89. Fl-W1856, 2:405-6.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

[must be] admitted, 'Abuse grace and lose grace.'"⁹⁰ The law of the spiritual harvest is based upon Luke 12:48, "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required, and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

God uses nature to mediate grace. The subject of God's saving acts is human beings who, due to their fallen nature, have need of a "gradual display" of divine revelation: "But if you mean *Scriptural, distinguishing grace*, that is, the 'manifold wisdom of God,' which makes him proceed gradually, and admit a pleasing variety in the works of grace, as well as in the productions of nature."⁹¹ The need for the accommodation of divine revelation is the rationale for the doctrine of nature and its connection to the doctrine of dispensations.

NATURAL THEOLOGY?

The analogies that Fletcher made raise the question of the role of *analogia entis* in the thought of John Fletcher. Is there any likeness or analogy between the finite and infinite beings in Fletcher's thought? Is there, in Fletcher's thought, an *analogia entis* providing a foundation for a natural theology? The response to this question forms a crucial divide in any theological system.

Central to this discussion is the point of divergence between the Thomists and the Protestant scholastics over the *analogia entis*. While the Thomists argue for an analogy of being between the creature and the Creator, the Protestant scholastics give the doctrine little attention.⁹² John Knight argues that Fletcher sought a middle way between a "natural" theology and a thoroughgoing revelational theology.

Fletcher did not rule out a "theology of nature" or deny the ontological claim of "analogia entis." That is, he was quite willing to assert that there are various levels of Being or Reality, and that Nature objectively reveals God in varying degrees. Indeed, the structure of his whole theology, which rests upon his doctrine of dispensations, is an illustration of this claim. There is a revelation of God that is peculiar to each dispensation. However, Fletcher did insist that this ontological claim of "analogia entis" can be made only from within the framework of faith. The epistemological claim of "analogia entis," then, is invalid. In

90. Fl-W1856, 2:406.

91. Fl-W1856, 3:452. Cf. Fl-W1856, 3:452.

92. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Term*, 32–33.

other words, one cannot come to understand or recognize the various levels of Reality and Revelation in Nature and history, until first he gives himself existentially to the object revelation of his dispensation. From this standpoint of existential faith, one can then interpret and understand the preceding and inferior dispensations and revelations. Thus the true or “intrinsic” knowledge of God is a Divine gift and is authenticated only in personal faith.⁹³

Hence, a purely natural theology is denied. On one hand, Fletcher rejected any hint of a purely natural theology, and as a matter of fact, called it “a painted Jezebel.”⁹⁴ Influenced by Enlightenment thought, Fletcher was careful, on the other hand, not to allow the pessimism that predominated Calvinistic theology to shatter the optimism inherent in natural theology. He nuanced his position on natural religion as much as he nuanced his position on the natural state of humanity. He accepted the idea of a religion of nature, but quickly clarified what he meant: “Some call it [i.e., Gentilism] the religion of nature: I have no objection to the name, if they understand by it the religion of our nature in its present state of initial recovery, through Christ, from its total fall in Adam.”⁹⁵

Despite a generally negative view of natural theology, Fletcher recognized the value of general revelation or a theology of nature. As was stated above, the natural state is a hypothetical theological construction. It was ludicrous, for him, to speak of a natural theology because he believed that all of life was infused by grace. In Fletcher’s thought, unlike Calvin, general revelation could lead to special revelation. General revelation is preparatory and introductory to a fuller revelation.

The good news of God’s redemptive activity is not limited by the lack of special revelation, but God makes the divine nature known through the means of heralds. “Every dispensation has had its peculiar preachers.” Fletcher wrote in *A Portrait of St. Paul*.⁹⁶ The preachers that testify to the knowledge of God the Creator include the works of creation, providence,

93. J. Knight, “John William Fletcher and the Early Methodist,” 211; emphasis original. Cf. *ibid.*, 268–69.

94. Fl-W1856, 152. Gentilism is commonly called “natural religion,” but it is appropriately called, according to Fletcher, “the gospel of the gentiles” (Fl-W1856, 5:54; contra. Kudo, Hiroo. “John Fletcher’s Concept of Christian Holiness,” 13). Cf. A. Wood, *Revelation and Reason*, 24.

95. Fl-W1856, 3:313; 4:78. Fletcher also spoke of a “law of nature” from which Adam and Eve fell (*Essay on the Doctrine of Dispensations* [The Fletcher-Tooth Collection, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, 18:12], 14).

96. Fletcher-Portrait, 2:171.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

the dreadful scourges (famine, pestilence, war, etc.), reason, and conscience.⁹⁷ While recognizing the limitations, Fletcher wrote approvingly of the knowledge that could be gained through creation and providence, “That there is a supreme, infinite, and eternal Mind, by which the world was made, is evident from the works of creation and providence.”⁹⁸ Actually, a failure to recognize the revelation of God through nature is the error of the Calvinists. They failed to recognize the all pervading love of God in the works of creation. In Romans 10 “[T]he apostle starts the great Calvinian objection: ‘But how shall they believe, and call on him, of whom they have not heard?’ . . . ‘Yes, verily,’ replies he, ‘their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the end of the world.’ If you ask, ‘Who are those general heralds of free grace, whose sound goes from pole to pole?’ The Scripture answers with becoming dignity, ‘The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handy work.’⁹⁹ The primary content of the knowledge that is revealed through nature is that God exists.¹⁰⁰ Not only does God reveal the divine nature through external means, God also reveals through internal light; conscience and reason are also heralds of the grace of God: “Out of Christ’s fulness all have received grace, a little leaven’ of saving power, an inward monitor, a Divine reprove, a ray of true heavenly light, which manifests, first moral, and then spiritual good and evil.”¹⁰¹ This internal light is operable in the lives of all and will lead willing persons to “the light of the world.”¹⁰² “Those who resist this internal light, generally reject the external Gospel, or receive it only in the letter and history.”¹⁰³ Obedience to the light brings greater light, but persistent disobedience to the light brings eternal damnation.

For Fletcher, it was ridiculous to speak of a natural theology because in his thought all of life was infused by grace. As Knight states, “[T]here is no ‘natural’ man who could produce a ‘natural’ theology, since all men [in Fletcher’s thought] have the light of ‘prevenient grace.’”¹⁰⁴ The doctrine of grace was the foundation for all the analogies with nature.

97. Fletcher-Portrait, 2:172–73.

98. Fl-W1856, 2:399; 7:155.

99. Fl-W1856, 2:399–400.

100. Fl-W1856, 4:31.

101. Fl-W1856, 2:403.

102. I.e. Christ. J. Fletcher, *Third Check to Antinomianism*, 16.

103. Fl-W1856, 2:403.

104. J. Knight, “John William Fletcher and the Early Methodist.” 210. Knight also insists that Fletcher denied an absolute revelational theology because “he thought it reduces man to a mere puppet” (ibid., 210). “Mr. Wesley far from presuming to say that an heathen can be saved by the law, or sect that he professes, if he frames his life

THE CONNECTION OF THE DISPENSATIONS TO CALVINIST CONTROVERSY

Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations arose in response to the Calvinist controversy of the 1770s within evangelicalism of the eighteenth century and cannot be understood adequately apart from this context.

While Calvin held that "a general knowledge of God may be discerned throughout creation—in humanity, in the natural order, and the historical process itself," the epistemic distance between humanity and God is so great due in part to human sin that a natural knowledge "is inadequate as the basis of a fully fledged portrayal of the nature, character, and purposes of God."¹⁰⁵ The proper order of human knowledge of God in Calvin's thought is important: "[T]he noetic order is from Redemption to Creation—only by faith in the Redeemer can we know him as our Creator."¹⁰⁶ While Calvin acclaimed the natural sciences and reason, human or natural knowledge was inadequate to lead one to a saving knowledge of God; faith, in Calvin's thought, was essential to understanding. Human nature must be regenerated to experience grace.

In the Minute controversy of the 1770s, nature was frequently counter-distinguished from grace.¹⁰⁷ One definition of nature is as follows: "Humankind's natural state as distinguished from the nature of grace"¹⁰⁸ The Calvinists of the eighteenth century emphasized such a dichotomy between nature and grace.¹⁰⁹

In 1773, Sir Richard Hill (1732–1808), one of Fletcher's opponents in the Calvinist controversy, responded to Fletcher's *Fourth Check to Antinomianism* with *The Finishing Stroke*. In his rejoinder to Fletcher's doctrine of prevenient grace, Hill believed that he perceived an inconsistency in Fletcher's thought: grace and nature were two opposing principles, and one must

according to the light of nature, cordially believes that all the heathens who are saved attain salvation through the name, that is, through the merit and Spirit, of Christ" (FLW1856, 2:250).

105. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 209–11.

106. Noble, "Our Knowledge of God according to John Calvin," 13.

107. Cf. Cudworth, *Nature and Grace*. Fletcher had a copy of this pamphlet in his personal library.

108. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. "nature, n."

109. Forsaith distinguished three meanings of the word "nature" in Fletcher's writings: "First it refers to the immesasurable beauty of creation, to be found in the scenery of Switzerland or of Shropshire. But second, nature is not neutral, for it is used by God as the vehicle to convey messages to humanity. Thirdly, there is a sense of 'nature' in terms of human nature: the propensity to prefer evil to good and spoil the beauty of creation" (Forsaith, "Dreadful Phenomenon at the Birches")

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

necessarily overpower the other. Hill wrote “[W]hat is it that must improve this universal spark of grace, this light within, since even upon your own plan every man has naturally two principles in him? If you say grace alone carries on the work and triumphs over all opposition, you fall into perseverance, and consequently into Calvinism. If you deny this, you have nothing to say but that nature improves grace.”¹¹⁰ Another Calvinist, John Berridge (1716–1793), also emphasized the disparity between grace and nature:

Nature is sunk and fallen; and nature’s creed is this, *Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*, I see and I approve the better path, but take the worse. Nature may be over-ruled for a time by some violent restraints; but nature must be changed, or nothing yet is done. The tree must first be made good, before the fruit is good. A filthy current may be stopped; but the brook is filthy still, though it cease to flow. The course of nature may be checked by some human dam; yet opposition makes the current rise, and it will either burst the dam, or break out other ways. Restrained sensuality often takes a miser’s cap, or struts in pharisaic pride. Nothing but the salt of grace can heal the swampy ground of nature; as Elisha’s salt, a type of grace, healed the naughty waters and the barren grounds of Jericho, 2 Kings ii. 20, 21.¹¹¹

Hill insisted that one of two choices was available: the Calvinistic position in which grace overcomes nature or the Pelagian position in which nature overcomes grace¹¹²

The citations above underscore not only the disparity between grace and nature, but the difference between the Calvinist and Wesleyan understandings of the nature of grace. The Calvinists linked grace with the effectual call of God by means of which believers were quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit whereas the Wesleyan view of grace emphasized grace as enablement.

Fletcher recognized that at the basis of the Calvinistic view, there is a disparity between grace and nature, and in contrast to Calvin and the Calvinists of his day, he argued for a correspondence between the two.¹¹³ The Calvinist controversy crystallized Fletcher’s thinking on the correlation of grace and nature. Fletcher anticipated the response of the Calvinists

110. Hill, *Finishing Stroke*, 35.

111. Berridge, *Christian World Unmasked*, 212.

112. Hill cited Wesley, “There are still two contrary principles in believers, nature and grace” (*Finishing Stroke*, 35). Wesley added, “True, till they are perfect in love” (WJW, 10:397). Cf. Berridge, *Christian World Unmasked*, 146–147.

113. In *Discours*, Fletcher emphasized the distinctions between grace and nature (Fletcher-Discours, 11).

to the phrase of the Minutes, “And in fact every believer, till he comes to glory, works for, as well as from, life.” “How could those who were dead by nature do any work?” was the anticipated question. Fletcher’s response reveals the degree to which he had inculcated the theology of Wesley.¹¹⁴ The love of God, which proffered “the gospel to every creature,” made salvation available or efficacious. Within this context, Fletcher quoted Romans 5:18, a favorite verse used to support the doctrine of general justification and emphasized that all were given “a talent of free, preventing, quickening grace,”¹¹⁵ which enables them to work “from life.” Thus, grace interpenetrates nature and overcomes it. In response to the Calvinist idea of human beings being entirely incapable of doing any good works, Fletcher queried “[D]oes not ‘grace reign’ to control nature?”¹¹⁶ The very fact that God must intervene proves the corrupt and lost state of humanity.¹¹⁷

Despite his opponents’ view, Fletcher’s doctrine of general justification and prevenient grace enabled him to avoid the Calvinistic dichotomy between nature and grace. In defense of the first point of the extract of the 1770 Minutes in which Wesley argues for the need of continual faithfulness on the part of believers, Wesley cites from Luke 16:11 “if a man is not ‘faithful in the unrighteous mammon,’ God will not ‘give him the true riches.’”¹¹⁸ Fletcher perceived in the citation, “unrighteous mammon,” a depreciative reference to the material and physical and in the citation, “true riches,” a reference to the spiritual, divinely-bestowed grace. Although Fletcher recognized the contrast between nature and grace, he recognized an inherent comparison of the two concepts. In his vindication of this particular point of the Minutes, Fletcher recognized that man’s unfaithfulness in the lesser, more mundane, material matters will forfeit the blessings of the “more noble and valuable talents of wisdom and grace.”¹¹⁹ Fletcher quoted approvingly from Matthew Henry’s commentary on Luke 16:9:

If we do not make a right use of *the gifts of God’s providence*, how can we expect from him those present and future comforts which are *the gifts of his spiritual grace*? Our Saviour here compares these, and shows that though our faithful use of the things of this world cannot be thought to merit any favour at the hand of God, yet our unfaithfulness in the use of them may be justly

114. BiCentWJW, 3:207.

115. Fl-W1856, 2:235.

116. Ibid.

117. Fl-W1856, 2:48.

118. Fl-W1856, 2:202.

119. Cf. Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, in loco.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

reckoned a forfeiture of that grace which is necessary to bring us to glory, and that is it which our Saviour here shows, Luke xvi.10–12.¹²⁰

A correlation between nature and grace is assumed.

Previously, it was demonstrated that Fletcher was a dialectical theologian. Here again, he posited a dialectic between grace and nature that is foundational to the functional synergism of his theological system: “When a gardener affirms that he shall have no crop unless he dig and set his garden, does he manifestly set his work above that of the God of nature? And when we say that ‘we shall not reap final salvation, if we do not work out our salvation,’ do we exalt ourselves above the God of grace?”¹²¹ In this instance, Fletcher does not maintain an unresolved contradiction whether real or apparent between the two opposing forces of his dialectic, but proposed a synthesis or union of the grace and nature.

His rationale for the synthesis lies in his understanding of the nature of God. God through providential watch care over creation superintends both grace and nature. Nature and grace cooperate; the gifts of divine grace and divine providence coalesce: “Believing is the gift of God’s grace, as cultivating the root of a rare flower given you, or raising a crop of corn in your field, is the gift of God’s providence. Believing is the gift of the God of grace, as breathing, moving, and eating are the gifts of the God of nature.”¹²² In his *Essay on Truth*, Fletcher wrote,

The preceding pages represent truth as the remedy and nourishment of our souls; and I have already observed, that as we cannot take food without the continual help of the God of nature, so we cannot receive the truth without the continual assistance of the God of grace; it being the first axiom of the Gospel, that all our sufficiency and ability to do any good are of God.¹²³

Because God is God of nature and of grace, truths may be found in the natural order whose purpose is to lead to the Source of these truths, i.e., Christ who is the Truth. Fletcher wrote, “When *natural* and inferior truths raise our minds to the God of *nature* and of *grace*, they answer their *spiritual* ends: but if they are put in the place of their archetypes and antitypes, ‘the truth of God is changed into a lie.’”¹²⁴

120. Fl-W1856, 2:230; emphasis added.

121. Fl-W1856, 3:442.

122. Fl-W1856, 4:13.

123. Fl-W1856, 4:44.

124. Fl-W1856, 4:31.

The union of grace and nature provides foundation for the correspondence between the doctrines of Creator and Redeemer and the epistemological order from creation to redemption. Against Calvin's noetic order, Fletcher would insist that knowledge of the Creator is prior to knowledge of the Redeemer because, for example, it is impossible for one to have an awareness of the need to repent of offending God without an awareness of God's existence. However, it is important to note that the prior salvific activity of God makes possible all human knowledge of the divine. Both nature and grace are legitimized in his thought, and knowledge is given a soteriological purpose. The point is essential to Fletcher's concept of dispensations: Human knowledge is by its very nature progressive, but all human knowledge has its source in prevenient grace.

SUMMARY

Fletcher has been characterized as a dialectical theologian. However, in regard to the doctrine of grace and nature, he did not propose an unresolved dialectical tension between the two doctrines as he had done with other doctrinal concepts, but a synthesis or union of the concepts. The union arose from Fletcher's conviction that the God of nature and the God of grace is one God whose grace is demonstrated in every aspect of divine works. The One whose "name and nature is love" does not permit creation to return to the chaos toward which the trajectory of the Fall tends, but God continues to recreate the world, restoring fallen creation and the ruined race. God's love for creation causes grace to take precedence in divine-human relations; prevenient grace is the keystone of Fletcher's theological system. God's acts are chronologically prior to any human activity and essential to all human action.

Order and harmony were highly valued by Fletcher. His theological writings are a composition of the variegations of divine revelation into an organized, harmonious whole that reflects all of history and the variety of God's dealings with humanity. The dispensations were a reflection of those variegations of revelation and the next chapter provides a summary of them.