

Introduction

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO FLETCHER'S LIFE

Jean Guillaume de la Fléchère was born in Nyon, Switzerland, on 12 September 1729.¹ After having studied for the ministry at the Collège and in the Faculty of Arts at the Académie de Genève, he migrated to England at approximately the age of twenty where he anglicized his name to John William Fletcher.² In England, he came under the influence of the Methodist movement and experienced an evangelical conversion. In 1757, he was ordained in the Church of England and became, in 1760, the vicar of Madeley where he culminated twenty-five years of ministry upon his death at the age of fifty-five.

Close relationships developed between John and Charles Wesley and John Fletcher. When controversy arose in 1770 between the Calvinist and Arminian branches of the Methodist movement over the minutes of the annual Methodist conference, Fletcher rose to defend his friend, John Wesley, from the barrage of Calvinistic writings with his *Checks to Antinomianism*. Because of his theological and polemical contributions, he has been called the “theologian of early Methodism” and is credited with systematizing its

1. Streiff insists that this is only an approximate date (Streiff, *Reluctant Saint?*, 3). Fletcher wrote to MBF: “The twelvth of this month will be a memorable day for me: Then began to breathe my better self and/or thy worst self, if I remember right I was baptized the 20 or there about: if 8 days old, we might have begun to breath about the same day of the same month. What if we should be baptiz'd and born of the Spirit together.” (JF→MBF, 10 Sept. 1781). According to the church registry, Fletcher was baptized on 19 September 1729 by Isaac François Monod, the minister of the church at Nyon (Noms des Enfants Eb 91/4, 1).

2. Forsaith has suggested an earlier date than other biographers based upon evidence in JF→CW, 2 Aug. [1772] in which Fletcher made reference to the “Bottle Cunner,” a celebrated practical hoax that occurred in January 1749 (Forsaith, *Unexamined Labours*, 300).

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theology.³ Luke Tyerman summarized his contribution saying, “He did for Wesley’s theology what no other man than himself at that period could have done. John Wesley traveled, formed societies, and governed them. Charles Wesley composed unequalled hymns for the Methodists to sing; and John Fletcher, a native of Calvinian Switzerland, explained, elaborated, and defended the doctrines they heartily believed.”⁴

On 15 January 1773,⁵ Wesley asked Fletcher to succeed him as the leader of Methodism; however, Fletcher died on 14 August 1785 after less than four years of marriage to the former Miss Mary Bosanquet, preceding Wesley’s death. Fletcher’s piety was renowned throughout the Methodist movement of his day, and he was recognized as one of the preeminent models of Christian perfection within Methodism.

SURVEY OF THE SECONDARY LITERATURE

Developments in Theology⁶

Given Fletcher’s seminal contribution to early Methodist doctrine, relatively little has been written about his theology. He is often seen as simply the shadow of Wesley; few theologians have studied Fletcher as a competent theologian on his own terms. Much of what has been written about Fletcher in recent years has addressed a supposed shift between his theology and that of his mentor, John Wesley. Writers have posited that Fletcher modified Wesley’s theology at several points, and some insist that even Wesley himself was induced by Fletcher’s reasoning into making some adaptations. One of the suggested modifications is a greater emphasis on pneumatology in Fletcher’s thought.

Due, in part, to the rise of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, pneumatology has received significant attention in recent decades. The number of articles in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* demonstrates this attention and has illustrated a demarcation on the doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as Wesleyan-holiness theologians have attempted to distinguish their movement from the burgeoning Pentecostal movement. The positions may be classified in three broad categories: (1) baptism with

3. T. Smith, “How John Fletcher Became the Theologian,” 69.

4. Tyerman, *Wesley’s Designated Successor*, 346.

5. J. Wesley, *Letters of the Rev*, 6:10–12.

6. Some writers hold that Fletcher was an empiricist: Shipley, “Methodist Arminianism in the Theology of John,” 147; Knickerbocker, “Doctrine of Authority in the Theology of John,” 248; J. Knight, “John William Fletcher and the Early Methodist,” 208.

the Spirit has been associated with conversion;⁷ (2) it has been linked with entire sanctification;⁸ (3) and it is viewed as an ambiguous term.⁹

While much of this *mêlée* has been fought on biblical and theological grounds, efforts have been made to find the historical origins of the connection between the baptism with the Spirit and a Wesleyan understanding of entire sanctification.¹⁰ In the search for the “theological roots of Pentecostalism,” Fletcher has been frequently identified as the theologian who elevated pneumatology and linked or equated the doctrine of entire sanctification with Spirit-baptism. Under the influence of Donald Dayton’s work, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, the theory that Fletcher was the source for Wesleyan-holiness theology of the nineteenth century that gave rise to the Pentecostal and charismatic theologies of the twentieth century became widely accepted.¹¹

Another related concern is whether or not John Wesley approved or acquiesced to Fletcher’s theological emphasis and the perceived link in Fletcher’s thought between the doctrines of entire sanctification and baptism with the Spirit. On this issue, theologians have been rather divided as the table below demonstrates:

**Table on the Various Positions of Modern Theologians on Wesley
and Fletcher’s Position(s)**

	Wesley’s Concession	Wesley’s Toleration	Substantial Agreement
Position Described	Early Wesley held to a Christological dominant thought pattern but later Wesley, under the influence of Fletcher adopted an equation between baptism with the Spirit and Christian perfection.	Wesley permitted Fletcher’s position in Methodism but did not adopt himself an equation of the baptism with the Spirit and Christian perfection.	Neither Wesley nor Fletcher held to an unequivocal equation between baptism with the Spirit and Christian perfection.
Adherents	Wood, ¹ Neff, ² Smith ³	Dayton, ⁴ Maddox, ⁵ Knight, ⁶ Fraser, ⁷ Staples ⁸	Reasoner ⁹ Fletcher ¹⁰

7. Lyon, “Baptism and Spirit Baptism in the New Testament,” 14–44; Reasoner, “The American Holiness Movement’s Paradigm Shift,” 132–46.

8. Grider, “Spirit-Baptism the Means of Sanctification,” 31–50; Agnew, “Baptized with the Spirit,” 7–14.

9. Deasley, “Entire Sanctification,” 27–44.

10. McGonigle, “Pneumatological Nomenclature in Early Methodism,” 61–72.

11. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, 35–60.

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1. L. Wood, "Thoughts Upon the Wesleyan Doctrine of Entire," 88–99; L. Wood, "Third Wave of the Spirit and the," 110–40; L. Wood, "John Fletcher and the Rediscovery of Pentecost in," 7–34; L. Wood, "Pentecostal Sanctification in Wesley and Early"; L. Wood, "Pentecostal Sanctification in Wesley and Early Methodism"; L. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism*; L. Wood, "John Fletcher's Influence on John Wesley"; L. Wood, "Pentecost and the Wesleyan Doctrine of Full"; L. Wood, "John Fletcher of Madeley"; L. Wood, "The Biblical Sources of John Fletcher's"; L. Wood, "John Fletcher Revisited"; L. Wood, "John Fletcher as the Theologian of American."
2. Neff, *John Wesley and John Fletcher on Entire*.
3. T. Smith, "How John Fletcher Became the Theologian," 68–87.
4. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*; Dayton, "Wesleyan Tug-of-War on Pentecostal Link" 43; Dayton, "Rejoinder to Larry Wood"; Dayton, "A Final Round with Larry Wood."
5. Maddox, "Wesley's Understanding of Christian Perfection."
6. J. Knight, "John William Fletcher and the Early Methodist."
7. Fraser, "Strains in the Understanding of Christian."
8. Staples, "The Current Wesleyan Debate on the Baptism of the." Not all of the theologians in the "Wesley's toleration" position hold that Fletcher held "a simple one-to-one equation between entire sanctification and the baptism with the Holy Spirit." This category includes those who believe that "baptism with the Spirit" was an ambiguous term in Fletcher's thought that could apply to more than one experience of grace. Staples is an example of this position (Staples, "The Current Wesleyan Debate on the Baptism of the," 19–20). According to Staples, Fletcher associated the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the experience of entire sanctification but he did not equate them (*ibid.*, 29–30).
9. Reasoner, "The American Holiness Movement's Paradigm Shift."
10. W. B. Fletcher, "Christian Perfection in Wesley and Fletcher with," 263.

Some hold that while Wesley permitted Fletcher's viewpoint within the ranks of his branch of Methodism, Wesley never acquiesced to Fletcher's position or adopted a link or equation between the two doctrines. Others argue that Fletcher influenced Wesley to concede an equation of the two doctrines and that it became the widely accepted position within Methodism and the holiness movement. Few theologians have argued that neither Wesley nor Fletcher maintained a link between the two above mentioned doctrines.

Further, Knight notes a shift under Fletcher's influence from a theocentric to an anthropocentric emphasis as Fletcher developed the doctrine of free will as a corollary of Wesley's doctrine of free grace. While Fraser agrees with Knight,¹² he insists that Wesley was not influenced on the association of Spirit-baptism and Christian perfection, pointing to a John Wesley manuscript supposedly written to criticize the use of Pentecostal language in an unpublished treatise of Joseph Benson's entitled *The Baptism of the Holy Spirit*.¹³ The differences of opinions on Wesley and Fletcher

12. See Fraser, "Strains in the Understanding of Christian," chapter 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 490–91.

emphasize the need for a re-evaluation of the theology of John Fletcher whose supposed doctrinal innovations are the subject of such controversy.

Shipley contrasted Fletcher's Methodist Arminianism with Dutch Arminianism and to some extent the major theological traditions of Western Christianity. Fletcher's Arminianism was analogous to the classical Protestant tradition including certain characteristics of the Roman Catholic position with the Protestant pattern remaining dominant.¹⁴ Fletcher's theology is dialectical, according to Shipley; his position has been endorsed in successive evaluations of Fletcher's theology. Wiggins, who places Fletcher's writings within their historical context studying his works in chronological order,¹⁵ concludes that Fletcher held in dialectical tension the doctrines of "grace and justice." Kinghorn argues that Fletcher failed to dissolve the dialectical tension between faith and works and held equally to their validity.¹⁶ Davies argues that Fletcher's doctrine of election held in dialectical tension the human will and divine sovereignty and that furthermore, the dialectical, hermeneutical method of Fletcher led him to make some original contributions¹⁷ in balancing seemingly contrary texts of scripture to show them to be complementary.¹⁸ Fletcher's efforts as a mediator between the Calvinistic and Arminian Methodists caused him to arrive at a mediating position and to make his most significant contribution to theology.¹⁹

Phillip Streiff wrote a theological biography of his compatriot that has been recognized as a standard work.²⁰ He places Fletcher's theology within its historical context and demonstrates the influence of continental theology upon Fletcher's thought. According to Streiff,²¹ Fletcher held to two covenants (contra Dayton), as did the Reformers and John Wesley: a covenant of works and a covenant of grace; Fletcher divided the latter into three dispensations: the dispensations of the Father, Son and Spirit.²²

14. Shipley, "Methodist Arminianism in the Theology of John," 195–202, 364–67, 389–90, 406.

15. Wiggins, "Pattern of John Fletcher's Theology," v–vi.

16. Kinghorn, "Faith and Works," 169.

17. *Contra* Lockhart, "Evangelical Revival as Reflected in the Life."

18. Davies, "John Fletcher of Madeley as Theologian," 11.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Streiff, *Jean Guillaum de la Fléchère John William*.

21. *Ibid.*, 203.

22. *Ibid.*

Developments in Practical Theology

Two writers have made contributions to Fletcher's pastoral/practical theology. George Lawton has evaluated Fletcher's roles in ministry and has given particular attention to his literary style. Flick provides "insight into the pastoral thought and life of John William Fletcher while vicar of Madeley parish."²³ Fletcher's understanding of ministry is analyzed according to three functions: prophetic, priestly and kingly functions.

Developments in Historical or Bibliographical Studies

Whereas the secondary literature on Fletcher's thought is very limited, biographies of Fletcher abound; however, many biographies border on hagiography or merely repeat material found in the standard biographies. Luke Tyerman and Joseph Benson, a personal friend of Fletcher's, who was assisted by Mary Fletcher, have provided for many years standard biographies for Fletcher's life and reflect an obvious loyalty to institutional Methodism. They accessed many original materials, but often truncated Fletcher's letters. Robert Cox, an Anglican minister, wrote his biography from the perspective of the established church.

The focus of Peter Forsaith's thesis is not theological, but historical.²⁴ The author has transcribed letters that were previously unpublished or largely inaccessible.²⁵

David Robert Wilson's thesis takes the form of church history localized on Madeley studying the parish ministry and Methodism with special attention given to the ministry of John Fletcher. Wilson holds that the religious societies that Fletcher formed were an extension of his parish ministry; thus, Fletcher's brand of Methodism differed from that of John Wesley's. His principal argument is that "Fletcher's ministry at Madeley was representative of a variation of a pro-Anglican Methodism—localized, centered upon the parish church, and rooted in the Doctrines and Liturgy of the Church of England."²⁶

23. Flick, "John William Fletcher," 10.

24. Forsaith, "Correspondence of the Revd," xiv; cf. Forsaith, *Unexamined Labours*.

25. The present writer has reviewed Forsaith's book in Frazier, Review of *Unexamined Labours*.

26. Wilson, "Church and Chapel," 7.

SURVEY OF PRIMARY LITERATURE

Fletcher's theological treatises will be given primary consideration in this work.²⁷ However, the collected works are incomplete, and many manuscripts remain unpublished; these unpublished holographs will be considered in this work.²⁸ Under the anvil of the Calvinist controversy, Fletcher developed his doctrine of dispensations, which was nascent at least in c. 1767 when he wrote *Six Letters on the Spiritual Manifestation of the Son of God*, a posthumously published work. Another significant work, *The Portrait of Saint Paul or the True Model for Christians and Pastors* (1779), was written in French while he convalesced in Switzerland and was later translated into English. It discusses not only his doctrine of dispensations but also its connection to his doctrine of ministry.²⁹ His letters and his sermons will be useful in determining his understanding and application of the doctrine of dispensations.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Although John Wesley endorsed Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations, his teaching on dispensations has not been taken seriously by Wesley's followers. The debate over the link between Spirit-baptism and the doctrine of Christian perfection arose in part because Fletcher's pneumatology has not been studied adequately within its dispensational structure. None of the writers who have considered Fletcher's theology have given sustained analysis of his doctrine of dispensations, though widely recognized as central to Fletcher's thought. While some have discussed it, the treatments tend to be cursory or concise, falling short of a thoroughgoing analysis of the doctrine.³⁰

27. For a full list of Fletcher's published works, see "Appendix 1: Fletcher's Published Works" in Frazier, "Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729–1785)," 289ff. The transcriptions published in the *Asbury Theological Journal* are not completely reliable and reflect the unsorted state of the archival material (ATJ 49/1 [Spring 1994]).

28. The thesis upon which the present work is based contains a rather lengthy transcription of one of Fletcher's holograph essays that was entitled by the present author "Essay on the Doctrine of Dispensations" (cf. Appendix 6, Frazier, "Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729–1785)," 424ff.

29. Fletcher-Portrait.

30. The following writers have given some treatment: Flick, "John William Fletcher," 152–62; Fuhrman, "Contribution of John Fletcher to," 190, 354–59; O'Brien, "Trinitarian Revisioning of the Wesleyan," 32–36; Streiff, *Reluctant Saint*, 192ff.; Wiggins, "Pattern of John Fletcher's Theology," 226–68; L. Wood, *Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism*, 113ff.; Wilson, "Church and Chapel," 285–96.

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This book will analyze John Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations and its structure of the divine/human experience, noting how it might inform a minister's response to persons at various stages of their spiritual development. The current work is both historical and descriptive: it describes the doctrine of dispensations, but it moves beyond a mere restatement in order to analyze the historical context in which the dispensations arose. It will endeavor to avoid the two extremes of a mere recitation of the facts on one hand and the error of not taking history seriously enough on the other hand. It will attempt to interpret correctly the subject of study and as such will be principally an inductive task. The present work will not be merely a discourse in historical theology, which is the primary task, as valuable as that may be, but it will also provide some suggestions for a Wesleyan theology of ministry.

The subject will unfold in the following manner. Chapter 1 explores the influences upon Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations, including the continental and British contexts. Chapter 2 investigates the key doctrine of divine grace and nature that serve as a theological foundation for the doctrine of dispensations. Chapter 3 discusses the relationship between the doctrine of dispensations and the doctrine of divine revelation. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will explore in greater detail each of the dispensations in the trinitarian schema of the doctrine. The conclusion surveys Fletcher's own application of the doctrine to the hearers of his sermons. It attempts to provide some practical insights to the ways a Wesleyan minister can intelligently, sensitively and more effectively minister to persons using the dispensations.