

Preface

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT listening. It is born out of the conviction that the Church must listen intently to the voices of the past in order to think critically about its message, to reflect upon its mission, and to move confidently into the future. Over the course of time, voices become muted due to the passage of time, the din of the present, or to the would-be listener's perception of the speaker's insignificance.

One voice that has been mitigated through the years is that of John William Fletcher (1729–1785). Fletcher was a seminal figure among the evangelical clergy of the Church of England and in the early methodist movement in the eighteenth century. While serving as vicar in the remote village of Madeley, Fletcher was renowned for his personal piety, his dedicated pastoral labors, and his theological writings. A native born Swiss, Fletcher maintained affinities and relationships with other immigrants to England throughout his life, and this continental affinity is reflected in the sources and flavor of his theology.

Fletcher's voice needs to be heard today. I believe that the Church should listen to this seminal theologian for several reasons. First, there is a breadth and depth to his theological enterprise that is scarcely paralleled today. Fletcher provides a panoramic view of theology and continually appeals to his readers to view the minutia of controversial issues within the light of a broader vision of God's salvific work in history. His thought has an ecumenical appeal. He invites his readers not only to understand the "whole tenor" (Wesley) of Scripture, but to listen to the harmony of divine revelation in all of creation and in all of history. Second, while certain biographers resorted to hagiography, evidence still remains that Fletcher was a man of great piety and devotion to God. If his theology produced such a godly man, one would profit greatly from listening to Fletcher. Thirdly, the modern-day reader will benefit from having Fletcher as a partner in dialogue because he handled controversy deftly. Fletcher models an irenic

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spirit, which advances discussions in a post-modern world that values dialogue, but that increasingly is bifurcated along cultural lines. The Church should listen to Fletcher's voice lastly because he provided a practical theology that gives clear direction for pastoral and missionary practice today. For over twenty-eight years, I have served as a pastor, an educator, and a missionary. As a minister wanting to serve with integrity, I sought to integrate the practical tasks of ministry with the more theoretical aspects of Christian thought; I sought intellectual and practical integrity. In Fletcher, I found such a system. Although much of Fletcher's system is bound to the eighteenth century and to the controversies in which he was embroiled, he provided a way out of the impasse; his is an integrated system unifying both practical and theoretical. The central and unifying doctrine of his system is his doctrine of dispensations.

This book examines the doctrine of dispensations in the thought of John William Fletcher (1729–1785), analyzing principally his published and unpublished writings. During the controversy surrounding Wesley's Conference Minutes of 1770, Fletcher developed his already nascent doctrine of dispensations to provide a cogent theology of history as a polemic against hyper-Calvinism, whose system of divine fiat and finished salvation, Fletcher believed, did not take seriously enough either the activity of God in salvation history or an individual believer's personal progress in salvation.

The principal pattern of Fletcher's theology of history was based upon the doctrine of the economic Trinity, as God disclosed the divine nature in the economy of salvation through three ages of history: the dispensations of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The doctrine of divine self-disclosure occurs on both a macro level, an objective view of history or an *ordo temporum*, and a micro level, a personal faith history or an *ordo salutis*. The dispensations, while revealing the variety of God's dealings with humanity throughout history, demonstrate an inherent unity as the God of holy-love accommodates revelation to human limitations and the noetic effects of sin in order to communicate effectively to the objects of divine love. Although principally a Calvinistic doctrine, Fletcher made the doctrine of accommodation a unifying principle of his theological system providing a theology that offered correctives to both Arminianism and Calvinism and proposed a reconciling theology between the two.

The doctrine of accommodation is furthermore central to Fletcher's doctrine of ministry. As God accommodated divine revelation to human capacity, Christian ministers must accommodate the gospel to the various states of their hearers in order to move hearers toward the *telos* of the Christian life, i.e., Christian perfection. The book concludes with a survey of the application portions of Fletcher's sermons to his hearers in order

to understand the way Fletcher categorized his congregants into different states of faith or dispensations, accommodating his message to them.

While not questioning all of the various polarities posited by the different interpreters of Fletcher's dialectical thought, the present book points to the more fundamental union of Fletcher's thought: the union of grace and nature that Fletcher developed in one of his most mature works, *La Grâce et la Nature*. The union of grace and nature was foundational to Fletcher's theology of history, for the Creator and Redeemer are one God. Thus, the present author argues that in Fletcher's thought grace infused all of nature and transforms fallen human nature in the period of history subsequent to the Fall.

The book questions implicitly the Wesleyan-holiness paradigm that has been used to interpret Fletcher's thought and concludes that the categories of that tradition are too narrow to conceptualize accurately the scope of Fletcher's soteriology and pneumatology in particular. In contrast to the normal Wesleyan-holiness distinction, made by many of Fletcher's interpreters, between the dispensation of the Son as the state of an evangelically regenerate believer and the dispensation of the Spirit as the state of an entirely sanctified believer, this book argues that the distinction between the two dispensations on the micro level is a difference between the "almost" and the "altogether" Christian or on the macro level is a difference between imperfect Christianity and perfect Christianity.