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THE BIBLICAL SOURCES OF JOHN FLETCHER'S PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY

by

Laurence Wood

The writings of John Fletcher significantly shaped Methodist theology in the late 18th and 19th centuries. He was John Wesley's hand-picked successor. In a weakened condition from tuberculosis, he died in 1785 at age 55 from a fever epidemic which swept through his parish. His theology was contained in the four volumes known as *Checks to Antinomianism*, which were edited, corrected, published, and promoted by Wesley as representing an authentic interpretation of Methodist theology.¹ Wesley chose him to be his successor because of his "clear understanding" of "Methodist doctrine."²

No other Wesley scholar has been privileged to get Wesley's endorsement. Nor has any other Wesley scholar been so privileged as to receive Wesley's critical suggestions as did Fletcher, who regularly met with Wesley, who corrected Fletcher's writings when they were still in manuscript form. When Wesley was 58 years old and John Fletcher was 32 years old, Wesley said to him: "You would do more good and gain more benefit from being among us. Come, then, and if you do not wish to

¹For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Fletcher and John Wesley, see *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism, Rediscovering John Fletcher As Wesley's Vindicator and Designated Successor* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

²*The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978): 12:163-164, Letter to John Fletcher (January 1773).

be an equal partner with me, I will be ready to serve under you.”³ On two other occasions (1773 and 1776)⁴ Wesley pleaded with him to take over the leadership of Methodism, but he declined because he felt unworthy to assume that responsibility.

Fletcher's *Treatise on Christian Perfection* (an abridgement of *The Last Check to Antinomianism*) was published in America in 1796 and served as the standard of Methodist belief on sanctification. Bishop Francis Asbury placed the *Checks to Antinomianism* in the ministerial course of study, but in 1876 they were removed as theological liberalism was sweeping its way through the Methodist Episcopal Church.⁵ Fletcher is now the largely forgotten theologian of Methodism. Nonetheless, it is clear that, if he had not pentecostalized Wesley's theology of perfection in this particular treatise, the concept of the baptism with the Spirit would not have been prominently featured in early Methodism and in the Wesleyan-Holiness movement.

The Pentecostal motif is not something that John Fletcher freely invented and superimposed on the Wesleyan tradition. As Melvin Dieter has noted, “The adoption of Pentecostal and Baptism of the Holy Ghost paradigms as the major vehicle for the expression of Holiness thought. . . was no introduction of an unnatural or unWesleyan element in the holiness tradition; rather, it was a natural outgrowth of a weighted factor in Wesley's own teaching.”⁶ To be sure, Fletcher nuanced this theme in a particular way, with Wesley's approval, but Fletcher drew from a number of sources (including the Anglican rite of confirmation, the Puritanism of Richard Baxter and John Goodwin, and the Early Church Fathers, particularly Pseudo-Macarius). The concept of the baptism with the Spirit was

³Cited from Fletcher's original, handwritten letter to Charles Wesley, reporting John Wesley's offer, in Patrick Streiff, *Reluctant Saint? A Theological Biography of Fletcher of Madeley*, trans. G. W. S Knowles (Peterborough: Epworth, 2001), 133.

⁴Wesley, *Works* [Jackson], 12:163-164, Letter to John Fletcher (January 1773); cf. John Fletcher's letter to John Wesley on January 9, 1776, contained in the “Fletcher Volume” (103) of the Fletcher-Tooth Archival Collection in the John Rylands Library of Manchester University.

⁵Cf. J. F. Hurst, *The History of Methodism* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1902) 2:868; Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), 33-34.

⁶Melvin Dieter, “The Development of Nineteenth Century Holiness Theology,” *The Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20:1 (Spring 1985): 67.

also linked to sanctification in the radical pietism of Tersteegen in the Rhineland, which was close to Fletcher's birthplace.

More recently, in 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Lima, Peru, introduced a pneumatological addition into the baptism liturgy that previously was dominated by a Christological interpretation. The Lima Text (as it is known) makes a clear distinction between water baptism and baptism with the Spirit.⁷ Gerard Austin believes this development represented a newly emerging consensus on the importance of confirmation.⁸ This recent development is consistent with Fletcher's view on the importance of confirmation as the liturgical rite of Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification.⁹

One noticeable influence of the liturgical renewal movement can be seen in Barth's distinction between baptism with water and baptism with the Spirit. So striking was this contrast that even his editors highlighted this new development in Barth's thinking, calling it "a sharp distinction."¹⁰ Barth argued that baptism with water and baptism with the Spirit were two events with a distinct meaning of their own. Baptism with water symbolized the beginning of the Christian life in regeneration and was the rite of Easter, whereas baptism with the Spirit (Pentecost) symbolized the perfection and sanctification of the Christian life.¹¹ This accords well with Fletcher, except, of course, that Barth understood the baptism with the Spirit in progressive terms and finally realized only in heaven.

My purpose here is to focus on Fletcher's biblical sources which he used to construct his doctrine of Pentecostal sanctification. Fletcher saw the church born on the day of Pentecost as the *restoration* of the kingdom of Israel that was prophesied by Moses and the Old Testament prophets.

⁷*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

⁸Cf. Gerard Austin, *Anointing with the Spirit, The Rite of Confirmation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1985), 92.

⁹For an extensive discussion of Fletcher's interpretation of entire sanctification as the core meaning of the rite of confirmation, see *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism, Rediscovering John Fletcher As Wesley's Vindicator and Designated Successor* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 337-379.

¹⁰*Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969, IV, 4, v).

¹¹*Church Dogmatics*, 4:4, 30. Cf Laurence Wood, *Pentecostal Grace*, 52-56, for a discussion on Barth's view of the salvific significance of Easter and Pentecost.

He believed Pentecost meant that the kingdom of God had been established within the hearts of believers, enabling them to love God with a pure heart. I will conclude with brief comments about Fletcher's influence in early Methodism.

Fletcher's Biblical Sources

Instead of relying on individual proof texts, Fletcher's hermeneutical method was to explain the progressive stages of salvation history from (1) Noah (Gentilism) to (2) Abraham and Moses and the prophets (Judaism), to (3) John the Baptist and the disciples of the earthly Jesus (which he called infant and imperfect Christianity), culminating in (4) Jesus sending the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (perfect Christianity).¹² This is known as the doctrine of dispensations. The theme of dispensations (with a variety of nuances) is found in the Early Church Fathers and has no connection with the modern dispensationalism of John Darby.¹³ Today we would refer to this theme as narrative theology. Its core meaning is that the history of Israel is typologically recapitulated in the history of Jesus and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

The general consensus of New Testament scholarship is that Luke, the author of Luke-Acts, was also Paul's traveling companion and fellow-worker.¹⁴ Whatever differences existed between them was due to the fact that Luke wrote as a narrative theologian and Paul as a pastoral theologian. Luke narrated the day of Pentecost and put it in its salvation-historical context. A word often used by Luke to describe the history of salvation is "narrative" (Luke 1:1; Acts 9:27). Luke included Paul as part of his Pentecost narrative by reporting in Acts 19:1-3 that Paul introduced Pentecost to the Ephesians. In Rom. 5:5 Paul made a direct pastoral application of the theological significance of the outpouring of the Spirit by showing that divine love was poured out in the hearts of believers on the day of Pentecost. Paul wrote: "God's love *has been poured* [a Pentecost

¹²Fletcher calls his doctrine of dispensations "my key and my sword." *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher* (New York: W. Waugh and T. Mason, 1833): 2:15-16, "A Prefatory Epistle."

¹³Cf. *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism*, compiled by Arnold D. Ehlert (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965).

¹⁴Cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

word] into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which *has been given* [a Pentecost phrase] to us" (Rom. 5:5).¹⁵

It has been said in recent years that there is a substantive difference between the theology of Luke and Paul. To be sure, there are substantive differences in their style and focus, but not in their theology of salvation history [cf. Paul's sermons which Luke reported in Acts 13:16-47, sermons steeped in the salvation-historical perspective]. Was Luke interested in the *power* of the Spirit and Paul in the *love* of the Spirit? To be sure, Luke was interested in showing that, through the power of the Spirit, the restored kingdom of God would conquer the world, and Paul was concerned to show the pastoral implications of life in the Spirit. But does Luke's focus on the power of the Spirit exclude Paul's pastoral emphasis on the love of the Spirit?

If love represents the core meaning of Pentecost in Acts 2, this will, of course, need to be shown, and I believe Fletcher's exposition of the restoration theme will show that it is. I will weave together a reconstructed narrative drawn from Fletcher's biblical references to show how a theology of the baptism with the Holy Spirit has love as its essential meaning.¹⁶

Paul says, "when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son . . . and . . . God sent the Spirit of his Son" (Gal. 4:4-6). Here Paul described the history of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit as the two decisive events which fulfilled God's promise to Abraham that through his seed the world would be blessed (Gal. 3:14). If the coming of the Spirit on the

¹⁵James Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1970), 139, 151. Dunn shows that Paul is here referring to "the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit." Fletcher shows that the various Pentecostal phrases are used interchangeably: "For in the language of the Scriptures the *giving*—the *pouring out*—the *shedding forth*—and the *baptism of the Holy Ghost* are phrases of the same import. And *to receive the Holy Ghost*—*to be sealed with the Spirit of promise*—*to be baptized with the Holy Ghost*—and to have *the Holy Ghost falling upon one*—and to be *endued with* (Pentecostal) *power from on high*, are expressions which convey the same meaning." Fletcher, *New Birth*, cited in *The Asbury Theological Journal* 50.1 (Spring, 1998), 45. Cf. James Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1970), 56 ff.

¹⁶Fletcher succinctly packs together the numerous biblical sources for his argument. Cf. Fletcher, *Works* (New York: T Mason and G. Lane, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1837), 2:627-634, "Last Check to Antinomianism." Cf. also Fletcher, *The Portrait of St. Paul* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1884), 166-173.

day of Pentecost was the climax of salvation history, the story begins with God's call to Abraham to leave his home and go "to the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:1). Noting that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, Paul saw this initial act of faith as prefiguring the meaning of justification by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1).

Fifteen years after he had first believed in God, the Lord appeared to Abraham again and said to him: "Walk before me, and be perfect [blameless in heart]" (Gen. 17:1). In exchange for being perfect in heart, the Lord promised Abraham that he and his descendants would occupy the land of Canaan. As a sign of this everlasting covenant, the Lord said to him: "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins" (Gen. 17:11). Genesis 17:23 says that on "that very day" when God told Abraham to be perfect, "every male among the men of Abraham's house" was circumcised. The removal of the inherited and impure flesh in the rite of circumcision thus symbolized perfection of love (Gen. 17:1) and purity of heart (Dt. 10:17). Canaan represented the "abode, the sanctuary" of the Lord (Ex. 15:17). In order for Abraham's descendants to live there in the presence of a holy God, they had to be a "holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Circumcision was the sign of the covenant that they would be a holy nation, and in return for their faithfulness God would give them Canaan as their inheritance where they would be established as an unending kingdom.

This promise to Abraham had its initial fulfillment through Moses who prefigured Christ because he was God's chosen leader to guide them out of Egyptian bondage into the land of Canaan (Acts 3:22). This exodus event from bondage and the conquest of Canaan were the two decisive events that established the nation of Israel as the people of God. They were brought out of the bondage of Egypt and led into the abundance of Canaan where God dwelt with his people: "He brought us out from there [exodus theme] that he might bring us in and give us the land [conquest theme] which he swore to give to our fathers" (Dt. 6:23).

Moses told them that the condition for living in the land was a perfect love and worship of God alone: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt. 6:4-5). This requirement of perfect love was often repeated by Moses in his instructions as they prepared to enter the Promised Land (Dt. 7:9, 12; 10:12; 11:1, 13; 13:3).

Moses also told the Israelites that, when they came into the land of Canaan, these two events—exodus and conquest—were to be a part of the

liturgy of their worshiping congregation as they remembered their saving history (Dt. 26:5). The recitation of this liturgy permitted each succeeding generation of Israelites to participate in a personal way with their forefathers in the saving history of God: "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt. . . . And the Egyptians treated us harshly. . . . And we cried to the Lord. . . . And the Lord heard our voice. . . . And the Lord brought us out of Egypt . . . with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place" (Dt. 26:5f).

How shocking it must have been to the Israelites, as they were preparing to cross over the Jordan River into the land of Canaan, to be told by Moses that the Lord would "uproot them from their land" (Dt. 29:28) because they would not live up to the terms of the covenant made with Abraham to be perfect in heart. He explained the reason for their future backsliding. It was that the rite of physical circumcision was inadequate. What they needed was an inner circumcision (Dt. 30:6). Although they would be taken into captivity again, Moses said that they would be brought back through a new exodus and they would experience a new conquest (Dt. 30:6; cf. Jer. 31:40). This time they would remain forever in Canaan, never to be driven out again. "Then the Lord will *restore* your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again [a new exodus] from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. . . . And the Lord your God will bring you into the land [a new conquest] which your fathers possessed" (Dt. 30:4-5). Here they would enjoy the everlasting covenant made with Abraham and delight in the "fruit" of the land and be "abundantly prosperous" (Dt. 30:9).

The difference, Moses said, between the old conquest and the new conquest was that God would circumcise their hearts so that now they could love God with all their hearts: "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Dt. 30:6). This *restoration* theme became the message of the prophets. The original exodus and conquest would be followed up with a new exodus and conquest, which would restore the kingdom of Israel. Physical circumcision was no longer of any use because it did not empower the Israelites to walk perfectly in heart before God. It needed to be replaced with an inner circumcision.

Jeremiah proclaimed: "Circumcise yourself to the Lord, remove the foreskins of your hearts" (Jer. 4:4). The Old Testament prophets replaced

the language of physical circumcision with the language of cleanness.¹⁷ This cleansing was not something that they were able to do for themselves. Rather, it was to be done by the Spirit of God. Ezekiel prophesied:

I will take you from the nations [a new exodus], and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land [a new conquest]. I will sprinkle clear water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes. . . . You shall be my people, and I will be your God" (Ezek. 36:24-28).

Ezekiel also described this new conquest as meaning that Israel would be made holy, not by their own efforts and good works, but by God alone: "Then the nations will know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is in the midst of them for evermore" (Ezek. 37:28). This future restoration of the fortunes of Israel will occur, Ezekiel says, "when I pour out my Spirit upon the house of Israel" (Ezek. 39:29).

Jeremiah said: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, not like the [old] covenant. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (31:31-34). Joel prophesied that God "will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28) and that God "will restore the fortunes of Judah" (Joel 3:1). This means that "my people shall never again be put to shame" (Joel 2:27) because "I am the Lord your God, who dwell in Zion, my holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy" (Joel 3:17).

Peter proclaimed that Joel's prophecy of the coming of the Spirit during the last days had occurred on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). His very choice of words to describe Jesus' resurrection from the dead was exodus language: "With mighty works and wonders and signs . . . God raised him up" (Acts 2:22-24). This phrase ("mighty works and wonders and signs") in the Old Testament was traditionally used as an allusion to the original exodus event (cf. Dt. 6:20-24; 26:5-10; Joshua 24:17; Dt. 4:34; 7:19; 11:3; 29:3; Jer. 32:20-21; Acts 7:36), and Peter used this

¹⁷Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy, A Commentary*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 183-184.

phrase as an allusion to Jesus' resurrection. The phrase "having freed him from death" (Acts 2:24) is also exodus language. "Loosed" is the root word for "ransom" and is used in the Septuagint for Israel's deliverance from Egypt. It is also used in Rev. 1:5-6 as an allusion to the exodus and served as a paradigm of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus' resurrection is thus the new exodus.

Peter also used conquest language to describe Jesus' ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus went to heaven to sit on the "throne" and was "exalted at the right hand of God" and sent "from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit" which "he poured out" on us "which you see and hear" (Acts 2:29-32). Peter's Jewish hearers would have immediately caught the nuances of his choice of words. Peter was saying that the new exodus was Jesus' resurrection and the new conquest was Jesus' exaltation and the pouring out of the Spirit upon his people, as the Old Testament prophets had predicted regarding the restored Israel.¹⁸

When the people asked, "What shall we do?" Peter's response was for them to have their own personal exodus and conquest event: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins [the exodus event]; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [the conquest event]. For the promise [made by the prophets that the fortunes of Israel would be restored] is to you and to your children and to all who are far off [i.e., the Gentiles]" (Acts 2:38-39; cf. Acts 22:21; Eph. 2:13, 17).¹⁹ Here Peter is saying that the gift of the Spirit makes you a member of the restored kingdom, not physical circumcision.

Luke shows that the original Pentecostal event happened suddenly and was not by human effort. The prophets repeatedly said: God will sanctify you (Ezek. 28:25; 36:23, 37:28, 38:16; 39:27); God will circumcise your heart so that you may love him perfectly (Dt. 30:6); God will bring you back to this place (Jer. 30:3); God will restore your fortunes (Ezek. 29:14); God will pour out His Spirit (Ezek. 39:29). As the background for understanding the meaning of Pentecost, Luke says that the disciples were expecting the restoration of the new kingdom to occur at any time. Jesus appeared to the disciples for forty days, "speaking of the

¹⁸Cf. Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 191-193.

¹⁹G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 63.

kingdom of God” and instructing them “not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:3-5). The disciples then asked: “Lord, will you at this time *restore* the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). This question shows that the disciples believed that the new conquest was about to happen.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to be patient with God’s timing, assuring them that this would happen according to what “the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Jesus then told them that they would receive “power.” During his earthly ministry, Jesus had promised his disciples that they would see “the kingdom of God . . . come with power” (Mark 9:1) and they would be “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). This “power from on high” would give them the ability to be faithful citizens of the new kingdom, unlike the weak and fickle loyalty of the ancient Israelites whose hearts were uncircumcised and rebellious toward God. The terrified and timid group of 120 believers were baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire, and suddenly they were “more than conquerors” (to use a favorite phrase of Wesley and Fletcher to describe perfection of love). Beginning with Jerusalem, center of the old kingdom, this restored kingdom would spread to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) through the power of the Spirit until there would be “a grand Pentecost”²⁰ (as Wesley put it in his sermon on “The General Spread of the Gospel”) when righteousness will cover the earth as waters cover the sea.

Pentecost celebrated the fulfillment of the prophecy of Moses in Deuteronomy 30. Pentecost meant that “the law of God was written on the heart” (Jer. 31:33) because God’s Spirit had been poured out (Ezek. 36:27). Pentecost was an infusion of pure love for God and each other as they lived in “one accord” (Acts 1:14) and in fellowship (*koinonia*) together (Acts 2:42). The sign of this new reality was the restoration of spiritual gifts—prophecies, visions, dreams, wonders, and tongues (Acts 2:5-20). What connects the Old Testament and the New Testament writers is their theology of salvation history, and the goal of this history is for

²⁰John Wesley, *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, 2:494, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” in *The Works of John Wesley*; begun as “The Oxford Edition of *The Works of John Wesley*” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975-1983); continued as “The Bicentennial Edition of *The Works of John Wesley*” (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

God's people to live in loving fellowship with God and each other. To think of the display of power on the day of Pentecost as intending to emphasize primarily supernatural phenomena would contradict the purpose of salvation history and Jesus's condemnation of the Pharisees who were obsessed with the sensational need for miracles rather than with the worship of God (Matt. 12:38-42). Miraculous phenomena are confirmations of the work of God and play a supporting role, but they are not the essence of God's revelation.

To think that Pentecost was only about "power" misses the message of the prophets about what would happen when the Kingdom was restored. The language of Acts 1-2 is the language of restoration and embodies this prophetic message, the essence of which is that the restored Israel would be empowered to serve the Lord because the law of God would be written upon their hearts, enabling them to love God perfectly. If we cannot see this because the word love does not appear in the text, it is because of modern literalism, along with the modernist demand that truth must measure up to the Cartesian ideal of "the clear and distinct idea." Simply because a certain word, such as love, does not appear in the text does not mean the concept is missing. The word Trinity is not used here, but it expresses the most important concept we have about God. With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God was revealed as Tri-personal. This meant that God is a social being whose essence is love.

In his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays argues that love cannot be used as a primary ethical motif because he did not find the word "love" very often in the New Testament.²¹ James Barr warned against using a lexical study as the basis of doing theology. There is something methodologically flawed in a word-study approach because it confuses words with concepts.²² Meaning is determined by context, not by word analysis. This confusion between word and concept is apparently why Hays says the Book of Acts is about power, not about love.²³ This view contradicts the consensus of Christian interpretation throughout the

²¹*The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 200-201.

²²*The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), 210, 233, 269.

²³*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 201.

history of the church and misses the essential message of Luke about the significance of Pentecost.²⁴

Luke focused on the external phenomena of Pentecost to emphasize that the new reality had come in an unmistakable way, but the decisive thing about Pentecost was the work of grace newly available to believers. The promise was to "you and to your children and to all who are afar off" [uncircumcised Gentiles], and the essence of this promise was that their hearts would be circumcised by the Spirit so that they could love God with all their hearts (Dt. 30:6).

This circumcision of heart, as Peter reported to the Jerusalem Council, took place on the day of Pentecost as "the Holy Spirit . . . cleansed [=circumcised] their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8-9). James and the Jerusalem Council thus concluded that it was unnecessary for physical circumcision to be imposed on Cornelius or other Gentiles (Acts 15:14, 19). Consistent with this is Paul's view that "a real Jew" is one who has been circumcised by the Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29).

When Paul alluded to Pentecost in Rom 5:5 as signifying the pouring out of love, this is perfectly consistent with Peter's Pentecost sermon in which he quoted from Joel to show that the gift of the Spirit would be poured out when the kingdom was restored. Joel specifically said that this restoration meant "Jerusalem shall be holy," as noted above. Peter's sermon also included the uncircumcised Gentiles ("to all who are afar off") as recipients of the gift of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit could do for them what physical circumcision failed to do. Luke's account of Pentecost, including the original Pentecost (Acts 2) as well as the Gentile Pentecost (Acts 10), is perfectly consistent with Paul's pastoral application of Pentecost as the pouring out of love.

Assuming the Protestant principle of the unity of Scripture, Fletcher also argued for the continuity between Acts 2 and the Johannine expecta-

²⁴Gregory Dix has shown that the original meaning of the laying on of hands (baptism with the Spirit) in the history of the church denoted "deification" (=being made God-like, sealed or imprinted with the Spirit, sanctification). He shows that "baptism with the Spirit" was treated as the rite of Pentecost which followed the rite of water baptism. The "sealing" constituted the completion and perfection of the Christian life. *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1946), 25. James Dunn also acknowledges that the baptism with the Spirit as subsequent in time to water baptism was the consensus of the church until the Protestant Reformation. Cf. Dunn, "Spirit-Baptism and Pentecostalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (November 1970): 397.

tion of the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-14), which meant that “the disciples would be perfected in one” (John 17:2) and would be “sanctified” (John 17:17).²⁵ To be sure, Fletcher and Wesley were pre-critical in their use of the Scriptures, but their theological exegesis allowed them to catch the significance of texts, something often missed by an exclusive reliance on the historical-critical method.

Fletcher’s Influence on Methodist Theology

Was Fletcher’s doctrine of dispensations accepted into Methodism? Yes, and it is found in Wesley’s leading preachers. It also received Wesley’s praise and approval,²⁶ although at first Wesley was more than a little suspicious of it until he began to edit and correct Fletcher’s manuscripts.²⁷ Fletcher preached a sermon on Pentecost sanctification in 1781

²⁵Cf. Fletcher, *A Treatise on Christian Perfection* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1837; originally published by Francis Asbury in 1796), 24.

²⁶Telford, *Letters* 6:136-137. Letter to Elizabeth Ritchie (January 17, 1775). Wesley published an abridged edition of Fletcher’s *Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* (London: G. Paramore, 1795, third edition) so that it would have a wider reading audience. Wesley’s abridged edition prominently features the four dispensations of the Spirit (108-111). Wesley placed his approving asterisk in front of two paragraphs where Fletcher used the “baptism with the Spirit” as the meaning of perfection (vii, 169). Wesley also placed his approving asterisk in front of the last paragraph in Fletcher’s “Essay on Truth” where Fletcher explained that Pentecost was the basis of Christian perfection (p. 173). Interestingly, Wesley changed Fletcher’s wording from “daily baptized with the Spirit” to “duly baptized with the Spirit” (p. 144). John Miley, professor of theology at Drew Theological Seminary in the second half of the 19th century, says that, on the question regarding Christian perfection, “we place Mr. Fletcher next to Mr. Wesley.” He cites two paragraphs from Fletcher which he calls a “classical” picture of Christian perfection. These paragraphs describe Fletcher’s dispensational understanding of grace, noting that, in the Christian dispensation of the Spirit, one is able to experience the perfect love of Christ. Miley further notes: “The life in Christian holiness, as here portrayed [by Fletcher], is the same as in the citations from Mr. Wesley.” Interestingly, Miley notes that the difference between Wesley and Fletcher is that Wesley stressed the instantaneous moment of entire sanctification, whereas Fletcher allowed more clearly the element of time and the gradual development in the attainment of Christian perfection, carefully allowing for the different stages of growth. It is possible that this slight change from “daily” to “duly” might reflect Wesley’s concern to emphasize the instantaneous moment. John Miley, *Systematic Theology* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1894), 2:375.

²⁷For a discussion of Wesley’s initial reaction to the doctrine of dispensations, see Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism*, 35ff.

at Wesley's annual conference.²⁸ Wesley praised this sermon, noting that "the power of God attends both his preaching and prayer."²⁹ Shortly after this conference in the same year, Wesley published an essay by Joseph Benson, titled "Thoughts on Perfection," in *The Arminian Magazine*. Benson wrote: "God *may*, and that he often *does*, *instantaneously* so baptize a soul with the Holy Ghost, and with fire, as to purify it from all dross, and refine it like gold, so that it is *renewed in love*, in *pure* and *perfect love*, as it never was before."³⁰ Wesley, of course, did not accept the Zinzendorffian view that one was "often" justified and entirely sanctified at the same moment. He once noted that he did not know of a single instance where this had happened.³¹

In this essay on Christian perfection, Benson (with Wesley's approval) linked the baptism with the Spirit and perfection as a post-justification experience. Two years later, Wesley preached on "the baptism with the Holy Ghost" at his annual conference in 1783.³² By this time, Fletcher's main treatise on Christian perfection, *The Last Check to Antinomianism*, had been widely read and embraced by Methodist preachers. Wesley had corrected one incidental phrase in this treatise in 1775 in an early draft of it. Fletcher had equated "receiving the Spirit" with perfection. Wesley noted that this represented a "slight difference" between them, and so Fletcher corrected it before the manuscript was published. Wesley subsequently reported back to Fletcher that now there was no longer "any difference between us."³³ On the other hand, Fletcher in over 30 instances linked "the baptism with the Spirit" with Christian perfection without a word of censure from Wesley. It is thus understandable that the baptism with the Spirit became a common term for the doctrine of perfect love.

A typical representation of this motif is contained in the preaching of Richard Watson (1781-1833), the first *systematic* theologian of Method-

²⁸Letter from John Pescod to his wife, printed in *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 8 (August 1829): 528.

²⁹Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 4:213, Journal (August 8, 1781).

³⁰"Thoughts on Perfection," *The Arminian Magazine* 4 (October 1781): 553.

³¹Wesley, *Works* (Jackson edition): 11:380.

³²*An Account of the Infancy, Religious, and Literary Life of Adam Clarke* (autobiography), edited J. B. B. Clarke (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1833), 1:110.

³³Telford, *Letters*, 6:174-175 (to John Fletcher, August 18, 1775).

ism. Watson wrote: "The entire sanctification of the soul from sin is held forth, both as necessary to qualify us for heaven, and as the result of that *baptism of the Spirit* which we receive in answer to prayer, and through faith in Christ."³⁴ He showed that this Pentecostal event was not just for the disciples. Every believer can "now" experience "a constant, though secret, Pentecost."³⁵ He exhorted his hearers: "Christ now baptizes with the Holy Ghost and with fire."³⁶ This personal Pentecost means that one can have "purged from the heart of man all its stains of sin."³⁷ In his sermon on "Qualifications for the Ministry," preached at the ordination service of ministers held at the British conference in Manchester in 1827, Watson encouraged the new preachers to experience the "Spirit of love"³⁸ which was first given to the disciples by "the baptism by the Spirit."³⁹ This Spirit of love "came down with the pentecostal fire, and then kindled a zeal to fulfil their Lord's commission."⁴⁰

When Watson said that "the pentecostal fire . . . kindled a zeal to fulfil their Lord's commission," he was repeating a theme found in one of Wesley's later sermons, "On Zeal." In this sermon, Wesley said: "This is that religion which our Lord has established upon earth, ever since the descent of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost . . . love enthroned in the heart [=Christian perfection]."⁴¹ Watson went on to say to these new preachers that a "baptism by the Spirit" similar to what the disciples experienced would instill "this heavenly affection in you," empowering them to engage in sacrificial service as faithful ministers of the gospel.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, if Benson and Watson believed that perfect love was instilled in the believer's heart through the baptism with the Spirit, this conclusion was based on Fletcher's theological exegesis. It was also based

³⁴"Conversations for the Young," *The Works of the Rev. Richard Watson* (London: John Mason, 1857), 6:263. Italics mine.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 2:168.

³⁹Ibid., 2:175.

⁴⁰Ibid., 2:174.

⁴¹Outler, *Sermons* 3:314, "On Zeal."

⁴²*The Works of the Rev. Richard Watson*, 2:175.

on the perception that it is consistent with John Wesley's thought. In Wesley's abridged edition of Fletcher's *Equal Check* (1774), Wesley placed his approving starred symbol in the paragraph immediately following Fletcher's interpretation of Acts 2, where he argued that "the baptism with the Spirit" and being "filled with the Spirit" endowed the disciples with "an uncommon degree of sanctifying grace." Ironically, Fletcher concluded his theological exegesis of Acts 2 by appealing to Wesley's own words in the sermon on "Scriptural Christianity" (1744), based on Acts 4:31 where Wesley said that being "filled with the Holy Spirit" was for the purpose of giving to the disciples "the mind which was in Christ" and "to fill them with love."⁴³ Wesley's approving starred symbol shows that he agreed with Fletcher's interpretation of his own words on this subject.

Wesley's view in his sermon "On Zeal" (1781) that "the descent of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost" entailed "love enthroned in the heart" also corresponds with Fletcher's interpretation, and it was probably influenced by his close supervision of Fletcher's writings and his assessment of Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations, which Wesley expressed in a letter to one of his class leaders: "Mr. Fletcher has given us a wonderful view of the different dispensations which we are under. I believe that difficult subject was never placed in so clear a light before. It seems God has raised him up for this very thing."⁴⁴ Whether or not this interpretation is right depends upon the theological exegesis of the prophetic expectation of the coming of the Spirit when Israel would be restored (Acts 2:16). Fletcher also believed Paul's claim that love was poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given on the day of Pentecost (Rom. 5:5). This is consistent with Luke's narrative of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is also consistent with Luke's narrative in Acts 15:8-9 that the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost meant circumcision of heart.

If Fletcher's theology of Pentecost was accepted in early Methodism, it was because his theological exegesis of Acts 2 was compelling, and because it received Wesley's personal approval.

⁴³ Wesley's abridged edition of Fletcher, *Equal Check*, 174.

⁴⁴ *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:136-137. Letter to Elizabeth Ritchie (January 17, 1775).