

**Charles Wesley's Influence on John Fletcher:
The Role of the Holy Spirit in Sanctification**

by

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Assembled here with one accord,
Calmly we wait the promis'd grace,
The purchase of our dying Lord—
Come, Holy Ghost, and fill the place!¹

--Charles Wesley

“The difference [between your brother and me] consists (if there is any) in my thinking, that those who were ... baptized and sealed with the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost ... were in the state of christian perfection ...

As contradistinguished from the faith of ~~the~~ babes, or carnal believers ... which the apostles had
before the day of pentecost.²

--John Fletcher to Charles Wesley

“I am not in the Christian dispensation of the Holy Ghost and of power. I wait for it, but not earnestly enough:

I am not sufficiently straitened till my fiery baptism is accomplished.”³

--John Fletcher to Charles Wesley

¹ John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Farley, 1942), 165.

² ‘*Unexampled Labours*,’ *Letters of the Revd John Fletcher to leaders in the Evangelical Revival*, ed., with an introduction by Peter Forsaith, with additional notes by Kenneth Loyer (London: Epworth, 2008), 320.

³ *Ibid.*, 317.

This paper will explore the influence of Charles Wesley upon John Fletcher's developing understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. First, an explanation of the friendship between Charles Wesley and John Fletcher will be given. Second, it will be shown how the idea of an instantaneous moment of entire sanctification subsequent to justifying faith was developed by John Wesley (which he called "a second blessing" and "a second change) and appropriated by Charles Wesley (which he called a "second rest" or "second gift") and which was then further developed by Fletcher with a focus on Pentecost and sanctification. Third, attention will be given to Fletcher's self-conscious development of Christian perfection in relationship to Pentecost as explained in his letters to Charles Wesley.

Charles Wesley's Personal Relationship with John Fletcher

John Fletcher is generally known as the one whom John Wesley designated as his personal successor, although he declined the invitation which was extended to him on several occasions. By 1762, Fletcher had emerged as the third leader of Methodism behind John and Charles Wesley. In a letter to Charles Wesley in 1762, Fletcher wrote: "Your brother had done me the goodness to write to me very recently [;] the extract from his letter is: 'You are not fit to be alone [;] you will do and receive much better among us, come and if you do not want to be my equal I will be below you'." ⁴ John Wesley pleaded with Fletcher to be his successor because "the minds of the people in general are on account of the *Checks* greatly prejudiced in your favour. Should we not discern the providential time?" ⁵

⁴ Ibid., 134.

⁵ *The Letters of John Wesley*, edited by John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:34 (to John Fletcher, July 21, 1773).

After Fletcher died at the early age of 55, John Wesley said he had been “intimately acquainted with him for above thirty years.” John did not include Charles in his biography of Fletcher, leaving the impression that they were not close friends. However, Fletcher was more intimate with Charles. This difference in their relationship is seen in Fletcher’s letters. He greeted John as “Reverend and dear Sir,” but with Charles his letters began with, “My very dear friend.” Charles also spoke affectionately of Fletcher as “my friend.”⁶ Their intimate friendship is further evidenced by the fact that Fletcher served as the “godfather” of Charles’ daughter, Sarah.⁷

Fletcher once said to Charles: “I correspond with no-one regularly but you—Your brother ... and my mother have one letter from me in 6 months.”⁸ Those letters reveal Fletcher’s inner thoughts about everything, from the state of his spiritual life, to reports of ill will and problems in his parish, and to what we call chit-chat.⁹

These letters reveal Fletcher’s reliance on Charles’ theological advice and critique. They also show that Charles supervised the printing of Fletcher’s manuscripts, including proof reading the press copy.¹⁰ They also reveal that Fletcher relied on John for editing and correcting his manuscripts, as well as expecting to receive his “imprimatur.”¹¹ Realizing his tendency to be too lengthy, John reassured Fletcher “not to cramp myself, as he would abridge if necessary.”¹² In a

⁶ *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.* ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 2:234.

⁷ ‘*Unexampled, Labours*’, 88, 252.

⁸ *Ibid.* 164.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

¹² *Ibid.*, P. 286.

letter addressed to John and Charles, Dec. 26, 1771, Fletcher wrote: "I am quite satisfied with your alterations. I make no doubt but you correct and alter for God."¹³

Fletcher destroyed all of his personal correspondence in 1777 when he thought he might be dying in order to protect his correspondents, and he did not want "his "loose papers" and letters from his friends to be taken by strangers."¹⁴ Consequently, Charles' letters to Fletcher and other correspondents mostly do not exist.

John Fletcher's Theology of Pentecost as an Extension of John Wesley's concept of a "Second Blessing" and Charles Wesley's concept of a "Second Rest"

When and how did the Wesley brothers begin to make a carefully nuanced distinction between justifying faith and full sanctifying grace? It should not be assumed that this twofold stage was characteristic of their theology at the time of their respective conversions. Attempts to define their conversions in 1738 can thus be misleading.

In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* where he narrates the history of his understanding of Christian perfection, John Wesley shows that Christian perfection was always the goal of his life and preaching. However, the first clear distinction between justifying faith and full sanctifying grace appears in 1739, when John and Charles published a volume entitled, "Hymns and Sacred Poems." One of the hymns was entitled, "JUSTIFIED, but not SANCTIFIED."¹⁵

In their preface to "a second volume of Hymns" (1740) the Wesley brothers wrote:

¹³ Ibid., 290.

¹⁴ Ibid., 341.

¹⁵ John and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739), 151.

Neither therefore dare we affirm ... that this full salvation is *at once* given to true believers. There is indeed an *instantaneous* (as well as a *gradual*) work of God in the souls of his children. And there wants not, we know, a cloud of witnesses, who have received *in one moment*, either a clear sense of the forgiveness of their sins, or the abiding witness of the Holy Spirit. But we do not know a single instance, in any place, of a person's receiving, *in one and the same moment*, remission of sins, the abiding witness of the Spirit, and a new, a clean heart.¹⁶

Where did John get this idea of distinguishing justifying faith and a subsequent full sanctifying faith? The answer to this question is important both for Charles and Fletcher because they largely derived their soteriology from John.

A strong hint is found in John's journal entry for February 1, 1738 on the day of his return to England from Georgia. He wrote that he had "*a sort of faith*" equivalent to the faith of the disciples of the earthly Jesus who "had not then 'the faith that overcometh the world'." He then described his quest for Christian perfection when he further explained: "The faith I want is, 'a sure trust and confidence in God,... . I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it For whosoever hath it is 'freed from sin'; 'the whole body of sin is destroyed' in him. He is freed from fear And he is freed from doubt, 'having the love of God shed abroad in his heart through the Holy Ghost which is given unto him'."¹⁷ Here John distinguishes

¹⁶ John Wesley, "Preface," *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, eds. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins, vol. 13 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 46.

¹⁷ John Wesley, February 1, 1738, *Journals and Diaries I (1735-38)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater, vol. 18 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 215-216.

between “the faith of the disciples of the earthly Jesus” and the full assurance of faith that frees one from all sin “through the Holy Ghost which is given unto him.”

Another hint of how John Wesley might be moving in the direction of a twofold stage of justifying faith and full sanctifying grace is seen in the first of his standard sermons, “Salvation by Faith.” This sermon was preached just two weeks before John’s Aldersgate conversion. He distinguished between salvation by faith that frees believers from “from all their sins: from original and actual,” on the one hand, from the faith “which the Apostles themselves had while Christ was yet upon earth,” on the other hand. Fletcher was later to reference this sermon as a source of his theology of the difference between pre-Pentecost and Pentecost believers.¹⁸

The idea of being cleansed from all sin and freed from all doubt and fear was John Wesley’s idea of Christian perfection. He initially thought he had attained this perfection on May 24, 1738 at the Aldersgate society meeting, but he altered his understanding when he still suffered from fear and doubt, as Heitzenrater has shown.¹⁹ This continuing struggle is why Wesley visited Herrnhut on June 13, 1738, so that “those holy men ... would be a means, under God, of so stablishing my soul.”²⁰

John Wesley met a lay preacher there by the name of Christian David, who impacted him more than anyone, except Peter Böhler.²¹ John heard him preach four times, and held extended

¹⁸ John Fletcher, *The First Part of An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism*, abridged and edited by John Wesley, second edition (Bristol: Printed by W. Pine, 1774), 168.

¹⁹ Richard Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 106-149.

²⁰ Wesley, June 7 – June 13, 1738, *Journals and Diaries I (1735-38)*, in *Works*, 18:254.

²¹ Cf. Outler’s comment about Christian David’s influence on John Wesley, *Ibid.*, 18:273n.

conversations with him. John said Christian David discussed the exact issues that he was trying to resolve in his own mind.²²

He heard Christian David explain about the varying degrees of assurance, consoling him that those “weak in the faith” may still be believers with some measure of assurance, though not full assurance. John particularly liked Christian David’s threefold distinction among (1) those in bondage, (2) those in an intermediate state of faith, and (3) those with the fullness of faith. John reported in his diary:

Thrice he described the state of those who are ‘weak in faith’, who are justified, but have not yet a new, clean heart; who have received forgiveness through the blood of Christ, but have not received the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. This state he explained once ... when he showed at large from various Scriptures that many are children of God and heirs of the promises long before their hearts are softened by holy *mourning*, before they are *comforted* by the abiding witness of the Spirit ... before they are ‘pure in heart’ from all self and sin... .

A second time he pointed out this state from those words, ‘Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God, Jesus Christ our Lord.’ ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.’ Hence also he at large both proved the existence and showed the nature of that intermediate state which most experience between that bondage which is described in the seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, and the full glorious liberty of the children of God described in the eighth and in many other parts of Scripture.

This he yet again explained from the Scriptures which describe the state the apostles were in from our Lord’s death (and indeed for some time before) till the descent of the Holy Ghost at the day of Pentecost. They were then ‘clean,’ as Christ himself had borne them witness, ‘by the word which he had spoken unto

²² Ibid., 18:270 (August 8, 1738).

them'. They then *had faith* ... Yet they were not properly *converted*; and they were not *delivered from* the spirit of fear; they had not *new hearts*; neither had they received 'the gift of the Holy Ghost'.²³

In a private conversation with John Wesley, Christian David explained that he himself struggled with feelings of assurance concerning his own salvation, but finally through increasing degrees of assurance he came to experience the full assurance of faith. John recorded Christian David's struggle moving from fear to faith:

Neither saw I then that the 'being justified' is widely different from the having the 'full assurance of faith'. I remembered not that our Lord told his apostles before his death, "ye are clean"; whereas it was not till many days after it that they were fully assured, by the Holy Ghost then received, of their reconciliation to God through his blood.²⁴

Christian David says this full assurance of faith comes through "the indwelling of the Spirit." He said the pre-Pentecost disciples of Jesus lacked this full assurance, although they were justified and forgiven before Pentecost. Because of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, one can, like the disciples, be cleansed from all sin.²⁵ The disciples' experience is thus cited as a pattern for all subsequent believers. What is noteworthy is the statement: "The state the apostles were in from our Lord's death (and indeed for some time before) till the descent of the Holy Ghost at the day of Pentecost" included a degree of faith. Christian David compared "being

²³ Ibid., 18:270-271 (August 8, 1738). It is noteworthy that Henry Moore, in quoting this passage from John Wesley's journal, added the word "fully" before the phrase, "[fully] received '*the gift of the Holy Ghost*.'"

²⁴ Ibid., 18:274, (August 10, 1738)

²⁵ Christian David equated "full assurance" and being "cleansed from all sin." Cf. Ibid, 18:272, (August 10, 1738).

justified” with the experience of the disciples of the earthly Jesus prior to Pentecost, whereas the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost meant they were “fully assured” and “cleansed from all sin.”²⁶

This development in John’s ideas of two distinct stages of salvation is also the background for understanding Charles’ focus on the Holy Spirit. The two brothers functioned with a single understanding at this early stage. John edited Charles’ hymns, and Charles preached John’s sermons.²⁷

After the bishop of London told John Wesley to preach to the world his idea of Christian perfection,²⁸ he wrote his sermon on “Christian Perfection” (1741). In this sermon, John says the possibility of being cleansed from all sin and made perfect in love became a possibility for the world only *after Jesus was glorified when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost*. John defined “the wide difference” between a pre-Pentecost and Pentecost experience in terms of sanctifying grace. He writes:

The Holy Ghost was not yet given in his sanctifying graces, as he was after Jesus was glorified And ‘when the day of Pentecost was fully come’, *then first it was* [italics mine], that they who ‘waited for the promise of the Father’ were made more than conquerors over sin [a common phrase for Christian

²⁶ The Moravians did not all agree about being “cleansed from all sin.” Christian David affirmed this doctrine, but John learned three years after his Aldersgate experience that Peter Böhler rejected it, as he told John on May 16, 1741. *Journals and Diaries II (1735-38)*, in *Works*, 19:195.

²⁷ Cf. Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley, A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁸ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II* in *Works*, 13:146.

perfection] by the Holy Ghost given unto them That this great salvation from sin [a common phrase for Christian perfection] was not given till Jesus was glorified, St. Peter also plainly testifies.²⁹

Fletcher referenced this sermon in his *Essay on Truth*, which John included in his special edition of *The Equal Check*.³⁰

Attached to this sermon is the hymn by Charles Wesley, “The Promise of Sanctification,” which highlights the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Here are two verses:

“Thy sanctifying Spirit pour,
To quench my thirst, and wash me clean:
Now, Father, let the gracious shower
Descend, and make me pure from sin.”

Within me Thy good Spirit place,
Spirit of health, and love, and power:
Plant in me Thy victorious grace,
And sin shall never enter more.”³¹

In John's conversation with Count Zinzendorf at Gray's Inn Walks in London on Sept 3, 1741 over the question whether or not entire sanctification occurred after justifying faith, John used essentially the same argument that he had heard from Christian David that “the apostles

²⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 40 , “Christian Perfection,” § 2, in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, ed., vol. 2 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 110.

³⁰ John Fletcher, *The First Part of An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism*, abridged and edited by John Wesley, second edition (Bristol: Printed by W. Pine, 1774), 169.

³¹ “Pleading the Promise of Sanctification,” *HSP* 1742, p 261-262.

were justified before Christ's death" and "they were more holy after the day of Pentecost" because "they were 'filled with the Holy Spirit'." Over against this view, Zinzendorf argued that "from the moment of justification he [any believer] ... is also entirely sanctified."³² Later, John Wesley wrote a letter to the Moravians at Herrnhut reporting that they held to different views on salvation and urging them to seek clarification of their own views.³³

In 1742, John Wesley's critics understood him to link "the indwelling of the Spirit" with full sanctification. In "The Principles of a Methodist" (1742), he answered one of his critics by noting: "I desire not a more consistent account of my principles than he has himself given in the following words" that a justified believer "hath not yet, in the full and proper sense, a *new* and *clean heart*, or the *indwelling* of the Spirit." One who was sanctified was described as one who had attained "the last and highest state of *perfection* in this life. For then are the faithful born again in the full and perfect sense. Then have they the indwelling of the Spirit."³⁴

An instance where John and Charles made a distinction between justifying and sanctifying faith, linking Christian perfection to the meaning of Pentecost, occurs in his description of the holiness revival which had spontaneously developed first in London and then spread throughout the British Isles in the early 1760's.³⁵ John wrote of this revival (October 28, 1762):

³² John Wesley, *A Library of Protestant Thought*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) p 367ff.

³³ Ibid., 372.

³⁴ John Wesley, "The Principles of a Methodist" (1742), in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Wesley, *Works*, 9:64-65.

³⁵ Cf. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher's comments about this revival in Moore, *The Life of Mary Fletcher* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1817), 35.

Many years ago my brother [Charles] frequently said, ‘Your day of Pentecost is not fully come. But I doubt not it will, and you will then hear of persons sanctified as frequently as you do now of persons justified.’ Any unprejudiced reader may observe that it was now fully come. And accordingly we did hear of persons sanctified in London and most other parts of England, and in Dublin and many other parts of Ireland, as frequently as of persons justified, although instances of the latter were far more frequent than they had been for twenty years before. That many of these did not retain the gift of God is no proof that it was not given them. That many do retain it to this day is matter of praise and thanksgiving. And many of them are gone to him whom they loved, praising him with *their* latest breath; just in the spirit of Ann Steed, the first witness in Bristol of the great salvation, who, being worn out with sickness and racking pain, after she had commended to God all that were round her, lifted up her eyes, cried aloud, ‘Glory! Hallelujah,’ and died.³⁶

Fletcher’s Developing Interpretation of Pentecost and Sanctification as Revealed in His Letters to Charles Wesley

Fletcher’s letters to Charles show his theology of Pentecost and sanctification was virtually an extension and expansion of what John Wesley had learned from Christian David and what John had incorporated into his early standard sermons.

The first clear indication that Pentecost was about to become a dominant theme for Fletcher can be seen in a letter to Lady Huntingdon on February 10, 1769, which was only a few months after he had taken on the responsibility of the educational oversight of Trevecca College: “Power

³⁶ Wesley, October 28, 1762, *Journal and Diaries IV (1755-65)*, in *Works* 21:392.

from on high is what I want still,” he confessed and was hoping for “an abiding day of Pentecost.” He admitted that his “unbelief runs ... so high that I doubt whether it will come before my dying day.”³⁷ This theme of “Power from on high” and “Pentecost” constitute a repeated theme in his correspondence with Lady Huntingdon, who had established Trevecca College as a training center for Methodist preachers. In a letter sent to her after his resignation following their disagreement over Christian perfection in 1771, Fletcher explained to her that their many conversations on the theme of Pentecost was intended by him to be a bridge for them to come together over John Wesley’s doctrine of perfection since she also had often spoken of the need of Pentecostal power for strength to live out the Christian life. Fletcher, however, admitted to her that John Wesley was not “altogether consistent” in his use of such terms for perfection as “baptism with the Spirit.”³⁸

After Joseph Benson had been dismissed as principal from Trevecca College because of his essay on the baptism with the Spirit which was linked to Christian perfection, Fletcher unsuccessfully requested Lady Huntingdon to allow him to address the students to explain to them that he was leaving the college because of the lack “of freedom in the College since the grand point to be maintain’d there (the baptism of the Holy Ghost and day of power) hath been given up either in whole or in part.”³⁹ This rupture over Christian perfection marked the decisive moment when the baptism of the Spirit became a focus in Fletcher’s theology.

On Dec. 16, 1770, Fletcher sent a letter to Charles mentioning his exploratory ideas about the baptism with the Spirit. He noted that Mrs. Power who lived at Mr. Ireland’s home had asked

³⁷ ‘*Unexampled, Labours*’, 235.

³⁸ Cited in Luke Tyerman, *Wesley’s Designated Successor: The Life, Letters, and Literary Labours of the Rev. John William Fletcher* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882), 182-183.

³⁹ ‘*Unexampled, Labours*’, 271, (March 9, 1771).

him: “What is that evangelical faith of which you speak that you do not have, and that gift of the Holy Spirit which is the baptism of the true Christian?”⁴⁰ Because Mr. Ireland was in a hurry to leave, Fletcher said to Charles: “I do not have time to copy my ideas that I have tossed rapidly onto paper. She will communicate them. I pray you to say to me what you think of them.”⁴¹

Fletcher then suggested to Charles that Charles himself should have another Pentecost as a follow up to his original personal Pentecost on May 21, 1738:

But new baptisms are necessary from time to time. Compare Acts 2 and Acts 4. The more the magnet rubs the needle the more magnetized it becomes. Why did you not follow the Lord for another Baptism, and by his Spirit dwelling within you, when he once gave you an earnest of that happy day of Pentecost that you have not forgotten. Well then, Jonah, sleeper, why do you not cry to your God for the Spirit of Resurrection and of life which must enter again in the witnesses who are dead, or sleeping [an allusion to Charles’ sermon, “Awake thou, that Sleepeth.”]⁴²

At about this same time that Fletcher was writing to Charles about his developing ideas on Pentecost in 1770, he was also making assignments to the students at Trevecca College to “draw a parallel between John’s baptism & Christ’s, and prove the superiority of the latter over the former.” They were also “to draw up an Address to Jesus for the [bestowing of] the Holy Ghost urging the strongest reasons you can think of and feel to engage him to grant it you.”⁴³

Whatever may have been John Wesley’s view of the connection between Pentecost and perfection prior to 1770, he explicitly rejected the way that Joseph Benson and Fletcher were

⁴⁰ Ibid., 258

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 256.

using the phrases, “receiving the Spirit” and “baptism with the Spirit,” for explaining the meaning of perfection at Trevecca.⁴⁴ This criticism was confusing to Benson and Fletcher. It seemed to them that John himself had changed his mind. Fletcher explained his disappointment to Benson in a letter of March 22, 1771: “Now with respect to M^r Ws letter to you, I would have you ... preach the *seal of the Spirit the witness of the Spirit, or as he [John Wesley] properly calls it the Spirit of Adoption: None can have it (for a constancy) but the baptiz’d [with the Spirit];* that you know, whether he assents to it or not.” Fletcher requested Benson to keep this part of the letter private about their disagreement with John, except that he would allow Charles to read it.⁴⁵ It is likely that he was willing for Charles to know about their dispute because of their intimate friendship and perhaps because Charles himself had also developed some disagreements with John over sanctification, and it could be gathered that Charles would have agreed with Fletcher against John.

Fletcher followed his own advice given to Benson by continuing to develop the link between the baptism with the Spirit and perfection despite John’s objection. Fletcher believed it would enhance the understanding of holiness. He said to Charles (August 14, 1774) that he believed “the dispensation of the Holy Ghost ... to be the grand characteristic of Christian perfection” and “that by maintaining ... the doctrine of Christian perfection, and connected with the ...

⁴⁴Telford, *Letters* 5:215 (to Joseph Benson, December 28, 1770). Cf. Randy Maddox and Russell Frazier, “Joseph Benson’s Initial Letter to John Wesley concerning Spirit Baptism and Christian Perfection,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* , 48: 2 (Fall 2013): 60-77.

⁴⁵ M. Robert Fraser. *Strains in the Understanding of Christian Perfection in Early British Methodism*. Ph. D. Thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1988. Photocopy (Ann Arbor, MI : University Microfilm.Inc., 1992), 489.

accomplishment of the promise of the Father, we can make the doctrine more intelligible to and defensible against all opposing friends.”⁴⁶

Eight months after Fletcher had told Benson to disregard John’s advice, we can see in his correspondence with Charles on Nov. 24, 1771 that he was developing his Pentecost interpretation. Fletcher said to Charles that he was writing his *Third Check to Antinomianism* and his *Last Check to Antinomianism*, which explained in detail his theology of Pentecost and perfection. Fletcher said to Charles: “I am busy about my 3rd. & last Check which I trust will be the most useful. I want sadly both your prayers & advice. I shall introduce *my*, why not *your* doctrine of the Holy Ghost, & make it one with your brothers perfection. He holds the truth, but this will be an ... improvement upon it, if I am not mistaken. In some of your *pentecost hymns* you paint my light wonderfully. If *you do not recant* then we shall perfectly agree.”⁴⁷

Fletcher essentially equated Pentecost with Christian perfection, noting that “the difference [between your brother and me] consists, (if there is any) in my thinking, that those who ... baptized and sealed with the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost ... were in the state of christian perfection As contradistinguished from the faith of ... babes, or carnal believers ... which the apostles had before the day of pentecost.”⁴⁸

Fletcher assumed that one did not live in the Pentecost dispensation if one was not perfected in love. He often confessed to Charles that Pentecost was an event that was yet to occur for him in the future. Fletcher’s typical self-assessment was: “I am quite clear that I shall die only a

⁴⁶ ‘*Unexampled, Labours*’, 319.

⁴⁷ ‘*Unexampled, Labours*’, 287-288

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 320 (August 14, 1774).

disciple of John unless I receive the baptism you have so well describ'd--What you saw in Hannah Richardson.”⁴⁹

It is likely that Charles was sympathetic to Fletcher’s idea of a future Pentecost because Fletcher included Charles as also expecting a Pentecost: “We await a day of Pentecost, but we do not pray enough to obtain it.”⁵⁰ Charles’ hymns emphasized that believers “should look for and expect new Pentecosts,” as J. Ernest Rattenbury has shown.⁵¹ For example, Rattenbury cites Charles Wesley’s passionate prayer to the Holy Spirit:

Refining fire, go through my heart,
Illuminate my soul,
Scatter Thy life through every part,
And sanctify the whole.⁵²

Rattenbury cites yet another hymn as an example:

The cleansing blood to’ apply,
The heavenly life display,
And wholly sanctify,
And seal us to that day,
The Holy Ghost to man is given
Rejoice in God sent down from heaven.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 288

⁵⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁵¹ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941), 185.

⁵² HSP 1740, 157; cf. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns*, 187.

One of the topics that often appeared in Fletcher's correspondence is the topic of whether Christian perfection is instantaneous or gradual. Fletcher preferred a synthesis of John's and Charles' differing interpretation of whether entire sanctification is gradual or instantaneous. He explained to Charles that "in general when my views of things seems clearer I think that those in a gradual rising to the top of John's ... dispensation, and that when we ... are gradually risen to that top, and are fit for the baptism of Christ, it is an instant conferr'd." He then encouraged Charles Wesley to join him "after the example of the Apostles" who "retired from the world, to wrestle ... 10 or 30 days in an upper room ... with *much* fasting and *hard* prayer." He confessed to Charles that "we must ... be reawaken'd, and a death must pass upon us which you have admirably described in your hymns. But now you must stand to *them*, and I to the *checks practically*."⁵⁴

Fletcher then presses Charles to recognize the need to experience personally their own theology of perfection: "I think at this time we are perhaps less called to recommend perfection to others in *words*, that heartily pursue it in *deeds* ourselves. The world will generally cry out to use *Physician heal thyself*, and laugh at us for our pains, unless we are ... benefited by our doctrine Shall we only talk about it, or write hymns and checks?" Fletcher proposed to Charles that he should convene "*a conference of prayer & mutual exhortation*" for this purpose of encouraging the experience of perfection. "I, and thousand more, look at you and your

⁵³ John and Charles Wesley. *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of Father* (Bristol: Farley, 1746), 6; cf. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*, 176.

⁵⁴ 'Unexampled, Labours', 290. (January 1772).

brother, just as some of my flock look at me. If it is not for him, say they, it is not for me. Thus they give it up.”⁵⁵

Fletcher realized his own responsibility in this matter as one of the promoters of the Methodist doctrine of perfection. “What can I say? I ... remain confounded, and ... conscious I am guilty I of the pharisaic absurdity of saying & not doing, of tying perceptive ... burdens upon the shoulders of others which I touch more with my pen or tongue than with my hand and shoulders. I hope God has not yet sworn ... that I shall die in the wilderness for my past cowardice, disobedience, hypocrisy.” He then urges Charles Wesley: “Come, let me have the benefit of your example Undoubtedly the apostles went into the kingdom before the 3000 on the day of Pentecost. If we ... get in, who knows but perhaps 3 scores ... may follow us. This is the only way to retrieve the asperred doctrine of perfection. Our works will preach, and back our words with ... influence.”⁵⁶

Two years later when Fletcher was writing his *Last Check*, he brings up this subject again (Jan 16, 1773) with Charles as he continues to resolve this question of whether or not Christian perfection is gradual or instantaneous.

I have but one doubt. Perfection is nothing but the unshaken kingdom of God peace righteousness & joy in the H.G. [Holy Ghost] or by the baptism of the H.G. Now Quere. Is this baptism instantaneous as it was on the day of Pentecost, or will it come as *a dew* gradually. Nothing can set me clear herein but my own experience. And suppose I was clear by my own experience, would this be a sufficient reason to fix it as a *rule* for all believers?

⁵⁵ Ibid., 291

⁵⁶ Ibid.

If I Consult reason, it seems to me ... that perfection is nothing but the acts of holiness faith, love, prayer, praise, & joy so frequently repeated as to be turned into easy ... delightful habits. If I consult scripture I rather think it is nothing but the Spirit dwelling in a believer in consequence of an instantaneous baptism. I should be glad to be fully ... taught of God in this point, not only not to set any one upon a false scent, but to seek the blessing properly myself; because if the instantaneous baptism is absolutely necessary, it is absurd to repeat fruitless acts in order to form a habit which the H.G ... alone can instantaneously infuse: and on the other hand if I may so gradually improve my talent as to attain the perfect habit of holiness it is enthusiasm to look for its being immediately infused.⁵⁷

Fletcher's concept of perfection is most fully developed and explained in *The Last Check*, which was finished in March, 1775, but it was begun at least by November 24, 1771, having been interrupted by other pressing matters,⁵⁸ although Charles had encouraged Fletcher to give priority to its completion.⁵⁹

Fletcher had given John a copy of the manuscript for his editorial review, and John returned it to Fletcher on March 22, 1775, noting that their views were "a little different, though not opposite" regarding the use of the phrase, "receiving the Holy Spirit."⁶⁰

John Wesley had told Benson in 1771 that the connection between "receiving the Spirit" and Christian perfection was "Mr. Fletcher's late discovery," and that it was divisive and would be rejected among the Methodists. But now in 1775, having read Fletcher's manuscripts and understanding more fully his ideas, John toned down his criticism to say their views were "a little different." Yet John wanted Fletcher now to affirm that "babes in Christ" (= "little

⁵⁷ Ibid., 302-303

⁵⁸ Patrick Streiff, *Reluctant Saint? A Theological Biography of Fletcher of Madeley*, trans. G. W. S. Knowles (London: Epworth Press, 2001), 183.

⁵⁹ Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: John Kershaw, 1825), 2:260.

⁶⁰ Telford, *Letters*, 6:146, (to John Fletcher, March 22, 1775).

children”) have the Spirit in some measure. John expected Fletcher to make an adjustment in his thinking, and Fletcher complied by making the requested revisions in his manuscript.

Although John Wesley had in 1770 and 1771 rejected the idea of the “receiving the Spirit” and “baptism with the Spirit” as phrases for Christian perfection, John now no longer explicitly expressed any disagreement concerning Fletcher’s use of “the baptism with the Holy Spirit” after having read Fletcher’s manuscript. Fletcher had prominently featured “the baptism with the Holy Spirit” in this manuscript as the means for being made perfect in love. For example, Fletcher wrote: “O, baptize my soul, and make as full an end of the original sin which I have from Adam Give me thine abiding Spirit, that he may continually shed abroad thy love in my soul Send thy Holy Spirit of promise to fill me therewith, to sanctify me throughout.”

After receiving John Wesley's recommended correction, Fletcher revised the manuscript and then sent it to Charles on May 21, 1775 for his evaluation. In a passionate plea, he pleads with Charles to ensure that his *Last Check* is theologically sound:

I throw myself at your feet to put my manuscript upon Perfection [*Last Check to Antinomianism*] into your hands, and I implore your convictions for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of truth and souls. I give you *carte blanche to add, or lop off, but to none but you*. Your brother saw it as he went to Ireland, and I believe approved of it in general: I hope you see it improved, as I have made many alterations, I trust, for the better. I have not skill to make my book *shorter* and *full* [another of John Wesley’s recommendations]. God has given you the gift to be sententious: my . . . way is the reverse of yours, correct it.

I shall set about the *Application*, as soon as possible. Give me your directions, corrections, reproofs.⁶¹

⁶¹ ‘*Unexampled, Labours*’, 321.

In a letter from Fletcher to Charles (August 8, 1775), we know that Fletcher gave his final revisions to his brother John: “I have *sent to ... him* [John Wesley] *the four addresses* which conclude my Essay on perfection. So he has seen the whole.”⁶²

John responded to Fletcher on August 18, 1775, giving his approval to Fletcher's revised manuscript, *The Last Check*: “I have now received all your papers, and here and there made some small corrections.” John goes on to say, “I do not perceive that you have granted too much [to babes in Christ by allowing that they too have received the Spirit], or that there is any difference between us.”⁶³ John expressed no disagreement to Fletcher’s multiples references to the baptism with the Holy Spirit and holiness in this manuscript. Not only was John Wesley pleased with Fletcher’s acceptance of his suggested correction, but in this same letter he encouraged Fletcher to travel with him whenever he was not writing in preparation for the time when Fletcher could become his successor.

The Last Check contains more references to John’s writings and to Charles’ hymns than any of his previous writings⁶⁴ to show that he was in agreement with them. This was important because Christian perfection was the central tenet of Methodism. If John Wesley was particularly concerned to edit Fletcher’s writings to insure that his ideas reinforced his own views, it was equally important that Fletcher receive both John and Charles’ imprimatur. Among John’s many words of commendation about Fletcher’s writings on holiness, he said that Fletcher had written with more clear understanding on the theme of “pardon and holiness” than “scarcely any one has done before since the Apostles.”⁶⁵ Charles said to Fletcher on October 11, 1783: “You had from

⁶² Ibid., 330.

⁶³ Telford, *Letters*, 6:174-175, (to John Fletcher, August 18, 1775).

⁶⁴ Streiff, 184.

⁶⁵ Telford, *Letters*, 6:79-80. Letter to Mrs. Bennis (May 2, 1774).

the beginning my Imprimatur.”⁶⁶ Charles had specifically given his approval to Fletcher’s *Essay on Truth*, but his only concern was that Fletcher’s idea of dispensations of salvation might encourage some to remain in a lower stage of faith. Fletcher reassured Charles that he would obviate that possible misunderstanding.⁶⁷

When John expressed disagreement with Fletcher’s ideas about perfection, it was always when Fletcher’s writings were still in manuscript form. John never criticized any of Fletcher’s published writings, which he and Charles published after their editorial corrections had been made. If the Wesley brothers disagreed with Fletcher’s views, they had plenty of opportunity to let Fletcher know of their disagreement as revealed in Fletcher’s letters to them, and Fletcher often pleaded especially with Charles to critique his manuscripts and to advise him theologically.

Looking back at John’s writing after his encounter with Christian David, one can understand Fletcher’s claim that he was trying to make Wesley consistent on the connection between Pentecost and sanctification. However, John clearly did not approve when Fletcher first put forward his proposal at Trevecca. Later after Fletcher had developed his Pentecost theology, he wrote to Charles to tell him that one of John’s preachers confronted him in front of John, questioning whether or not his theology contradicted “the old methodist doctrine.”⁶⁸ Fletcher said to Charles that his brother John “seemed satisfied” with his explanation.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ A letter loosely contained in and bound up in a large volume (or folio) in John Rylands Library, entitled, *Letters Relating to the Wesley Family*, stored in JRULM MAW F1 Box 18. The immediate context of the approval of Fletcher’s writings given by Charles Wesley was related to a pamphlet that Fletcher wrote on “Three National Grievances,” but Charles expands on the extent of approval to include Fletcher’s writings from *the beginning*.

⁶⁷ Joseph Benson, *The Life of the Rev. John Fletcher* (1804), in Fletcher, *Works of John Fletcher*, ed. Joseph Benson (London: Richard Edwards, 1806), 1:180-181, (a letter to Charles Wesley, January 1775).

⁶⁸ ‘*Unexampled Labours*,’ 319.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

However, as noted above, John was still not satisfied because he advised Fletcher a year later to modify his statement about “receiving the Spirit” in his *Last Check*, although John said nothing against Fletcher’s use of the baptism with the Spirit. Perhaps it can be said that John, Charles, and Fletcher each had their own nuances that were particularly important to each one of them. John liked to emphasize the instant moment; Charles like to emphasize the progressive movement; and Fletcher emphasized numerous and fuller baptisms of the Spirit before holiness would become a habit in one’s life. The focus on perfect love as the core meaning of holiness was their point of complete agreement and each affirmed that sanctification was the work of the Spirit of Christ. We know that John wanted his brother to affirm the possibility of instant full sanctification and he wanted Fletcher to allow that even babes in Christ had received the Spirit.

Did John approve or merely permit Fletcher’s view? I think it is clear that Fletcher perceived John and Charles had come to agree with his interpretation, but that question is outside the scope of this paper. We know that Fletcher’s *Last Check* was widely received throughout Methodism and that Francis Asbury made it a textbook in North America. It was also published together with John’s *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* in North America in the same book binding. The reception of Fletcher’s *Last Check* as an approved text explains why it was common for Pentecostal nomenclature to be used for Christian perfection in Methodism, including Wesley’s closest associates.⁷⁰ It was also commonly used in early American Methodism well before Phoebe Palmer, although the tendency in the American holiness movement was to absolutize a crisis moment over against Fletcher’s more dynamic view.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Cf. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002); 247-292.

⁷¹ Wood, “John Fletcher as the Theologian of Early American Methodism,” *Religion, Gender, and Industry: Exploring Church and Methodism in a Local Setting*, ed. Geordan Hammond and Peter S. Forsaith (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 189-204.

Whatever may have been his reservations about Fletcher's link between the baptism with the Spirit and perfection, John affirmed the possibility of future Pentecosts and connected it with perfection. Fletcher's wife Mary occasionally preached with John at designated locations after her husband's death.⁷² In one of her messages which well may have been preached on one of those occasions, she alluded to John's sermon on "The General Spread of the Gospel." This sermon predicted a future "grand Pentecost" when everyone will be "filled with the Spirit" and "righteousness would cover the earth as waters cover the sea" in fulfilment of the promise that believers would be enabled to love God perfectly with all their heart through spiritual circumcision (Deut. 30:6).⁷³ In her reference to this sermon, Mary Fletcher said: "We often talk of the time when *righteousness is to overspread the earth*, but this millennium must overspread our own hearts, if we would see the face of God with joy." She then exhorted her hearers to have a personal Pentecost and to enter into the "spiritual Canaan [of perfect love], that *baptism of the Spirit*, to which every believer is expressly called."⁷⁴

J. Ernest Rattenbury believed Charles' idea of future Pentecosts contradicted the idea of the once-for-all historic day of Pentecost. Of course, there are no instances of Easter being repeated in the New Testament because Jesus' death/resurrection was a once-for-all-event, but there are repetitions of Pentecost in the Book of Acts. While the original day of Pentecost was unique and marked the birthday of the Church, is it proper to say the idea of "a new sending of the Spirit

⁷² John Wesley, March 8, 10, and 12, 1787, *Journals and Diaries VII (1787–1791)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol 24 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 7-8.

⁷³ Wesley, Sermon 63, "The General Spread of the Gospel," §§ 20–25, in *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 494-498,

⁷⁴ *Life of Mary Fletcher*, 398.

from Heaven cannot logically be harmonized with ... the finality of the Pentecostal gift.”⁷⁵ The disciples were filled with the Spirit in Acts 2:4, and then we are told again in Acts 4:31: “When they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” The original day of Pentecost does not seem to be the only day of Pentecost because there are further Pentecosts in Acts, and both John and Charles expected future Pentecosts as reflected in Charles’ hymns and John’s sermons, as seen in “The General Spread of the Gospel.” Fletcher also spoke of “daily baptisms with the Spirit,” “fuller baptisms,” and “fresh baptisms of the Spirit” in his *Essay on Truth and Last Check*. Fletcher did not absolutize a crisis moment, but saw sanctification as a process of being punctuated with many crisis moments through the ongoing life of the Spirit.

The late J. Ernest Rattenbury was a renowned British Methodist liturgical scholar and historian, and it would be interesting to know what he would say today about the new baptism liturgy in the United Methodist Church which contains both the gesture of water baptism and the laying on of hands in granting the Spirit. In the case of those who were baptized as infants, they are subsequently to be confirmed with the laying of hands for the renewing of the Spirit in words similarly used in infant baptism: “The power of the Holy Spirit work with in you.” The confirmation ceremony excludes water baptism because Jesus died and rose again only once, but there is a repetition of Pentecost through the laying on of hands as a gesture indicating the work of the Spirit to renew what transpired in their infant baptism.⁷⁶ So there are now two

⁷⁵ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns* (London: Epworth, 1941), 186.

⁷⁶ *Baptism and Eucharist, Ecumenical Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns* (London: Epworth, 1941), 186.

⁷⁶ *Baptism and Eucharist, Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration*, eds Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 65.

“Pentecosts” in the liturgical life of United Methodists, and in fact, “confirmation can and should be repeated whenever a person has made a new, deeper, clearer commitment.”⁷⁷

Rattenbury also believed that Charles’ idea of the gift of the Spirit was “almost entirely individualistic.”⁷⁸ It is understandable that someone could read Charles in that way, but to expect a personal infilling of the Spirit does not have to mean that it is “individualistic.” That is why Fletcher emphasized the worshiping context of those who were filled with the Spirit in the book of Acts, noting that “social prayer is closely connected with faith in the capital promise of the sanctifying Spirit: and therefore I earnestly recommend that mean of grace ... as being eminently conducive to the attaining of Christian perfection.”⁷⁹ Charles’ Pentecost hymns also were never intended to be sung in solitary “individualistic” withdrawal from the worshiping community.

Fletcher also did not divorce the Spirit from Christ as some ecstatic movements have done, but rather he emphasized that Christ was the one who would baptize with the Spirit. Fletcher exhorts: “Christ is ready; and he is all you want. He is waiting for you: he is at the door! Let your inmost soul cry out,” and then he quoted Charles’s hymn from John’s sermon, “The Scripture Way of Salvation”:

Come quickly in, thou heav’nly guest,
Nor ever hence remove,
But sup with us, and let the feast

⁷⁷ *Follow Me: Handbook for Pastors, Parents, and Congregations*, an official resource for the United Methodist Church prepared by the General Board of Discipleship (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1993), 27.

⁷⁸ *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns*, 186.

⁷⁹ John Fletcher, *Last Check to Antinomianism*, in *The Works of John Fletcher*, ed. Joseph Benson (London: Richard Edwards, 1806): 6:385.

Be everlasting love.⁸⁰

Fletcher cited more than twelve of Charles' hymns in his treatise on Christian perfection, *The Last Check*.⁸¹ He particularly believed that Charles' hymns supported his interpretation of the connection between Pentecost and sanctification.

In conclusion, Fletcher was generously assisted by Charles through editorial help, theological guidance, and technical assistance in arranging for his manuscripts to be published and in correcting the press copy. Fletcher's understanding of the role of the Spirit in sanctification was decisively influenced by the hymns of Charles. The time involvement of Charles' editorial and technical assistance was huge, but the affection between them was profound and intimate. Once when Fletcher was very ill, Charles wrote a hymn on June 30, 1776 in his honor which was sung by the London and Bristol Methodist congregations.⁸² Fletcher survived that particular illness, and later Charles sent the hymn to his wife during another illness shortly before his death in 1785.⁸³

Jesus, Thy feeble servant see,
Sick is the man beloved by Thee:
Thy name to magnify.
To spread Thy gospel truths again.
His precious soul in life detain,
Nor suffer him to die.

⁸⁰ Charles Wesley, *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* (London: Strahan, 1742), 25. Fletcher, *Last Check*, 385.

⁸¹ *The Last Check*, 117–420.

⁸² Thomas Jackson, *Life of Charles Wesley* (London, Mason, 1941), 2:306.

⁸³ Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley As Revealed by His Letters* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 146.

The fervent prayer Thou oft hast heard,
Thy mighty arm in mercy bared;
Thy wonder-working power
Appear'd in all Thy people's sight,
And stopp'd the spirit in its flight,
Or bade the grave restore.

In faith we ask a fresh reprieve;
Frequent in deaths he yet shall live,
If Thou pronounce the word;
Shall spend for Thee his strength renew'd,
Witness of the all-cleansing blood,
Forerunner of his Lord.

The Spirit which raised Thee from the dead,
Be in its quick'ning virtue shed,
His mortal flesh to raise,
To consecrate Thy human shrine,
And fill with energy Divine
Thy minister of grace.

Body and soul at once revive,
The prayer of faith in which we strive,
So shall we all proclaim,
According to Thy gracious will,
Omnipotent the sick to heal,
From age to age the same.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Cited in Luke Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor*, 362.