Doctrinal Sources and Guidelines
In Early Methodism:
Fletcher of Madeley as a Case Study

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The adoption of the statement on Doctrinal Sources and Guidelines by the General Conference of The United Methodist Church in 1972 prompts a further examination of the role of doctrinal norms in early Methodist theology. John Fletcher (1729-1785), Anglican Vicar of Madeley and the principal defender of Wesleyan doctrine in the Calvinist Controversy of 1770-77, is a leading example of a first-generation Methodist theologian who consciously used the same doctrinal sources and guidelines named as normative for present Methodist theologizing. Since John Wesley set the standards of early Methodist theology, and since Wesley encouraged Fletcher to define and defend Wesleyan doctrine in the Calvinist Controversy, we may assume that Fletcher's use of these doctrinal sources and guidelines is in keeping with the standards of early Methodism.

The statement in The Book of Discipline of 1972 notes that while Scripture is the primary source and guideline for doctrine, in practice theological reflection may find its point of departure in any of the other three doctrinal norms of tradition, experience, and reason. However, all of these doctrinal norms should eventually be brought to bear upon every doctrinal consideration. The manner in which Fletcher of Madeley used these same sources and guidelines not only illustrates how he allowed the conditions of his Age to determine the point of departure in his theologizing but also shows the priority which an early Methodist theologian assigned to the doctrinal sources of Scripture and Christian experience.

Fletcher's intention with regard to the use of these doctrinal guidelines is most clearly stated in the Preface to the second part of his Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism. There he contends that "true Protestants" are those who agree with the Protestant reformers on three points regarding the authority for Christian doctrine:

1. Fletcher attempted to halt the publication of his First Check to Antinomianism after Wesley and Walter Shirley had come to a theological agreement denying justification by works. However, Wesley insisted on the publication of Fletcher's Check. Luke Tyerman, Wesley's Designated Successor (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882), 191-193.

1. That right reason has an important place in matters of faith; 2. That all matters of faith may, and must be decided by Scripture understood reasonably, and consistently with the context; And 3. That Antiquity and Fathers, Traditions and Councils, Canons and the Church, lose their authority, when they depart from sober reason and plain Scripture.3

From this statement it seems that Fletcher regards reason and Scripture as the most important authorities for doctrine, that tradition is a weak authority, and that experience is not considered an authority for doctrine. However, as Fletcher outlines and defends Wesleyan doctrinal positions, he shows that in practice he regards reason as a very weak authority and considers Christian experience as second in importance to Scripture as a source and guideline for doctrine. For Fletcher, Scripture is the primary authority for doctrine, Christian experience confirms the authority of Scripture, tradition is a useful secondary authority, and reason is a weak and potentially deceptive guideline which can lead to theological error if relied upon too heavily.

Reason

Fletcher defines reason as "a ray of the light that enlightens every man who comes into the world: and a beam of the eternal Logos, the glorious Sun of Righteousness." 4 Reason is "that noble faculty, which chiefly distinguishes us from the brute creation." 5 By a "faculty" Fletcher means a "power." "By reason, I mean that power, by which we pass judgment upon, and draw inferences from, what the understanding has simply apprehended." 6 It is the power of reason which enables man to engage in logical argument, and at times Fletcher can use reason and argument interchangeably. 7

By the use of his reason, according to Fletcher, man is able to formulate the doctrines of natural religion, which are inferred from the self-evident truths apprehended from general experience by the understanding and conscience. From his apprehension of the magnificence, perfection, and harmony of the natural world, man infers the existence of God. 8 Moreover, man uses his reason to infer the moral truths of natural religion from those self-evident truths apprehended by conscience. 9 There are

5. Works, VIII, 323.
6. Works, II, 60n.
7. Works, VII, 76.
8. Works, IX, 31. See also Works, VI, 179-180; II, 214.
9. Works, IV, 210-211.
three doctrines which Fletcher lists as truths of natural religion: 1. There is a God. 2. He will call us to an account for our sins. 3. He spares us so that we may break them off by repentance.10 Fletcher sees these doctrines of natural religion repeated both in Scripture and in the Apostles' Creed.11

However, reason apart from Scripture is, for Fletcher, a very weak and unsafe guideline to use in the formulation of doctrine. Despite the restorative effects of prevenient grace, which gives man a conscience, reason, imagination, memory, and the understanding continue to be greatly affected by the Fall. Because of its darkened character, reason can lead to false theology, even among those who accept the authority of Scripture. According to Fletcher, this occurred in the development of Calvinist theology, which is dependent upon arguments produced by "Geneva-logic."12 Moreover, the sin of pride can so corrupt man that he rejects Scripture as a norm for doctrine and places his trust in reason alone, as the Deists did.13 This excess trust in reason is called "philosophism" by Fletcher, and it can lead one to practical atheism.14 Because reason is so dominated by sin, Fletcher can say that it is a faculty which men enjoy in common with devils.15 And despite all his emphasis on reason as a guideline for doctrine, in a letter to Joseph Benson, he says that speculation and reasoning hinder us as we seek the way of faith and lead us out of faith after we have found it.16

According to Fletcher, the principal function of reason as a source and guideline for theologizing is to lead man to God's Special Revelation in Scripture. Reason is that power which allows man to infer from his apprehension of the general experience of life that he is living in a condition of sin. In his Appeal to Matter of Fact and Common Sense, Fletcher endeavors to show that it is a "matter of fact" that man suffers from want, cares, toil, and sickness in this world, and that one may rationally infer from this suffering that man is a corrupt and lost creature.17 Moreover,

12. Works, III, 343-351.
15. Works, VII, 578.
16. Works, I, 510-311. This letter was written in 1781. In a letter to Mr. Vaughn in 1762, he says that reasoning with the serpent would soon draw us out of the simple way of faith. Works, I, 86.
17. For example, see Works, II, 25, 50, 64.
Reason further discovers, that, if man should admit the darkness of error into his understanding, and the fatal influence of sin into his will, he cannot possibly recover his pristine state, except through the manifestation of a new light, and the exertions of a stronger influence. But who shall produce the former except that Saviour, who is the light of the world, John 8:12. Or, who shall supply the latter, except that energetic Spirit, which helpeth our infirmities? Rom. 8:26. 18

Thus, for Fletcher, reason helps man see his need of Scripture and grace. If a man reasons correctly, he infers from his own experience that he is in a sinful condition and is driven to seek solace elsewhere. He discovers that his understanding and will are so corrupt that it is not possible to infer from his general experience that truth which will effect salvation. Man can rationally determine the tenets of natural religion from those self-evident truths apprehended by conscience, but he cannot reason his way to saving faith. Reason not only leads man to see his need of Scripture and grace but also allows him to develop the types of argument with which Scripture can be interpreted. However, reason, apart from Scripture and grace, is so dominated by sin that it ceases to be an effective guideline for theologizing.

Since Fletcher, in the exposition of his theology, regards reason as such a weak and unsafe guideline for theologizing, why does he make the statement in the Preface to his Equal Check II in which he seems to indicate that reason is a strong authority for doctrine? The answer can be found in the temper of the times. Despite the impact of the Evangelical Revival in England in the latter half of the Eighteenth Century, it is still known more generally as the Age of Reason. Although the debate about the nature and function of reason as an authority in religion, which was a central part of the Deist Controversy in the first half of the century, was on the wane in Fletcher's day, the general conviction that Christianity is a reasonable religion still permeated the works of many theologians. 19

Yet, Fletcher displays that skepticism toward the authority of unbridled reason which began to develop in theological circles as a result of the work of Law, Berkeley, and Butler in opposition to Deism. Tillotson, at the close of the Seventeenth Century, had said that Abraham's faith was "the result of the wisest reasoning, and soberest consideration." 20 For

19. Mark Pattison determined that "the title of Locke's treatise The Reasonableness of Christianity, may be said to have been the solitary thesis of Christian theology in England for a great part of the century." Essays and Reviews (1861), 258. Quoted in S. C. Carpenter, Eighteenth Century Church and People (London: John Murray, 1959), 30. The Reasonableness of Christianity was originally published in 1695. Gerald R. Cragg observes that most of the leading theologians in England from Tillotson (d. 1695) to Paley (d. 1805) exhibited the rationalistic faith of Latitudinarianism. Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), 40.
Fletcher, faith "is the gift of God, and the work of his Holy Spirit...."\textsuperscript{21} And Fletcher never attempted to produce a reasoned defense of Revelation such as Sherlock's \textit{The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Christ} (1729). For Fletcher, the uniquely Christian experience of the Holy Spirit in faith, assurance, and sanctification is that which confirms the primary authority of Scripture.\textsuperscript{22} However, Fletcher never condemned reason to the extent that his contemporary, David Hume, did when the Scottish philosopher said that reason is "the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."\textsuperscript{23}

\section*{Scripture}

For Fletcher Scripture is unquestionably the primary source and guideline for the formulation of doctrine. Scripture is authoritative because it is God's Revelation. This is Fletcher's presupposition. There is no thought of Scripture being anything but Revelation, and the terms Scripture and Revelation are used interchangeably.\textsuperscript{24} Fletcher says that as a Christian he lays a greater stress on the authority of Scripture than on the authority of reason.\textsuperscript{25}

According to Fletcher, it is important for the theologian to be able to distinguish between the literal and figurative language of Scripture. He relies heavily on this distinction in his own interpretation of the Bible. Fletcher sees the figurative language of Scripture as a reflection of a type of literary mysticism. This

rational mysticism found in many excellent works, both ancient and modern, \textit{is a thin veil covering the naked truth, to improve her beauty, to quicken the attention of sincere seekers, to augment the pleasure of discovery, and to conceal her charms from the prying eyes of her enemies.}

Poems in general, and the sacred Oracles in particular, abound with this mysticism, which consists in figures, allusions, comparisons, metaphors, types, allegories, apologues, and parables.\textsuperscript{26}

The basis of this literary mysticism is explained in Platonic terms which Fletcher finds in the writings of Paul. Metaphors, comparisons, and allegories are simply verbal copies of original spiritual truths.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} John Fletcher, \textit{The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher}, 4 vols. (New York: pub. by B. Waugh and T. Mason for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1855-36), IV, 147. This edition of Fletcher's \textit{Works} contains "A Dialogue between a Minister and One of His Parishoners" and several sermons and sermon outlines not found in the Benson edition.
\item \textsuperscript{22} \textit{Works}, VII, 332; VIII, 317.
\item \textsuperscript{23} David Hume, \textit{A Treatise of Human Nature}, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1928), 415. This was first published in 1738.
\item \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Works}, II, 133; IV, 138, 276; V, 248; VIII, 249, 296, 389.
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{Works}, VII, 89. Elsewhere Fletcher indicates that the acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity and the authority of Scripture is that which distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. \textit{Works}, V, 364-365.
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Grace and Nature}, xix.
\item \textsuperscript{27} \textit{Grace and Nature}, xxix-xxx.
\end{itemize}
The purpose of this literary mysticism is two-fold. First, by its use the most sublime truths are placed on a level with simple and unlearned people. Because man is a being compounded of body and soul, the language most proper for him is that which speaks both to his sense and to his understanding. A moral precept divested of this mystical, figurative language resembles the sketch of a picture before the painter has animated it with colors. Thus, this literary mysticism gives body and strength to moral precepts. Secondly, this mysticism serves as a veil to conceal these truths from false sages.

Thus, Fletcher sees a type of mysticism as intrinsic to Scripture itself. It is not something that is imposed on Scripture from without. Nevertheless, it takes the unique Christian experience of the Holy Spirit to allow one to recognize these figurative passages and interpret them correctly. Once the literal and figurative language of Scripture is recognized, one can demonstrate the unity and harmony of Scripture by showing that the Old Testament is the historical precursor of the New Testament and that the New is the historical fulfillment of the Old.

When Fletcher interprets Scripture, his intention is to do it reasonably and consistently with the context. He sees this intention as one of the principal differences between true Protestants and Roman Catholics. This means that each particular passage of Scripture must be interpreted in accordance with the general tenor of the Bible. The theologian must compare Scripture with Scripture and use the many plain passages to interpret the few obscure ones. A theologian must not distort a passage of Scripture to make it fit his preconceived notions.

In many of his writings, Fletcher earnestly endeavors to follow this intention. He recognizes that Paul and James were writing within different historical contexts and that this greatly affected their respective views on faith and works. He recognizes that an individual passage of Scripture must be placed in the literary context of the entire book of the Bible from which it comes. Moreover, what Paul says in one of his letters must be placed within the context of what he says in other letters. When com-

31. In showing this unity and harmony, Fletcher especially stresses the necessity of recognizing the typological language of the Old Testament. See Works, IV, 15, 330, 401, 403, 407; IX, 220, 223-229, 256.
32. Works, IV, 276.
34. Works, II, 236; IX, 261.
37. Works, VI, 229-234.
paring Scripture with Scripture, he usually interprets Old Testament passages with New Testament passages. At times, Fletcher seems to regard the words or writings of certain Biblical actors or authors as more important than those of others. The words of Christ appear to be, in some instances, his final Scriptural authority. He sometimes lists Biblical figures in what seems to be an ascending order of importance culminating with Jesus Christ. He regards Peter and Paul as the two greatest Apostles, and Paul is greater than Peter. In fact, Paul is to be our pattern next to Jesus Christ.

Yet, despite his attempts to place Scripture passages in their historical and literary contexts, to use plain passages in the interpretation of obscure ones, and to make some distinction regarding the relative importance as authorities of various Biblical figures, Fletcher appears at times inclined to regard Scripture as a collection of proof-texts when he is intent upon establishing doctrine. This is most apparent in his *Scripture Scales*, which Fletcher himself saw as his most important work produced during the Calvinist Controversy. The method of the *Scales* is to quote in one column certain passages of Scripture which support the doctrines of free grace, mercy, and faith and to quote in a second, parallel column certain passages which support the doctrines of free will, justice, and good works. In these *Scales*, no distinction is made between the Old Testament and New Testament, between the various books of either Testament, or between the words of Jesus in the Gospels and the words of other Biblical figures. The passages he quotes are short, usually not more than one verse, and sometimes only part of a verse.

However, Fletcher himself did not see the *Scales* as a series of proof-texts. Rather he regarded the *Scales* as a harmonious whole, the meaning of which would be lost if it were separated into individual parts. He compared the various Scripture passages in the *Scales* to “the lights and shades of a picture [which] help to set off each other.” In this way the *Scales* are illustrations of a type of rational argument which he calls “opposition” or “contrast”. Almost half of Fletcher’s *Portrait of St. Paul* is based on this idea. It is most important to note that Fletcher’s idea of opposition or contrast is not one of dialectical opposition, i.e. he does not see the second item in the contrast as logically antithetical to the first.

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Rather, he intends the effect to be similar to the contrast of colors in a painting which "consists in a happy mixture of light and shade, from the contrast of which an admirable effect is produced, and the animated figure made to rise from the canvas." This is why Fletcher calls his work a "portrait" of St. Paul. This is why, in his Scripture Scales, Fletcher sees no need to seek a synthesis as a result of the contrast. There is no logical opposition of thesis and antithesis.

Like other eighteenth-century English theologians, Fletcher took great interest in the miracles and prophecy recorded in Scripture. When Fletcher refers to the miracles reported in Scripture, he means those in both the Old and New Testaments and not just the miracles performed by Jesus. He does not attempt to define "miracle" in any abstract way, and he does not refer to miracles as often as he does the prophecies contained in Scripture.

For Fletcher, prophecy means prediction, and he uses the words prophecy and prediction as synonyms. Old Testament prophets predicted events which are recorded in the New Testament. Furthermore, both Old and New Testament prophecies predict post-Scriptural events. And in his Letter on the Prophecies, Fletcher tries to establish a chronology for the work of God in history based on the authority of Scriptural prophecies, especially those in Daniel and Revelation, as those prophecies are interpreted by an "eminent divine."

Fletcher does not argue for the validity of the miracles and prophecies recorded in Scripture in order to "prove" the authority of Scripture. In Socinianism Unscriptural he argues that fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the New Testament "proves" the divinity of Christ but does not say that this "proves" the authority of Scripture. Rather, he uses this argument to prove the divinity of Christ precisely because he believes that his opponent, Joseph Priestley, already accepts the authority of Scripture.

Within the context of eighteenth-century English theology, Fletcher's

47. Works, VIII, 125.
49. Works, IX, 249.
50. Works, IX, 431-450. The identity of this "eminent divine" is unknown. This letter is one of Fletcher's earliest works (1755). and Tyerman, on the basis of one passage (p. 442), says that "at this period of his life, Fletcher was what is commonly called a Millenarian." Tyerman, op. cit., 21. However, when this letter is placed in the context of his more mature theological work, one may agree with Lawton, that "a certain mildness and reticence characterizes Fletcher's thought about the 'Last Things.' ...Certainly his mentality was not millenarian in the sense of indifference to social and ecclesiastical progress, although he shared the deep seriousness of those who held millenarian views." George Lawton, Shropshire Saint (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 93-94.
51. Works, IX, 219-269.
52. Works, IX, 29.
method of using Scripture as a source and guideline for doctrine marks him as an evangelical theologian. Latitudinarian theologians of his day felt compelled to prove that Scripture is Revelation and is, therefore, authoritative by the use of reason, \textit{i.e.} by demonstrating the fulfillment of prophecy and arguing for the validity of the accounts of miracles.\textsuperscript{53} However, Evangelicals like Fletcher held that Christian experience confirmed that Scripture is Revelation and is authoritative. Because of their understanding of the function of reason and Scripture, Latitudinarians tended to regard the Bible as a book of revealed propositions.\textsuperscript{54} But the confirmatory authority of Christian experience, which led Fletcher to distinguish between the literal and figurative language of Scripture, prevented Fletcher from regarding the Bible as a book of theological propositions and allowed him to see it as a means of grace, a mirror in which man sees himself as sinner and a channel through which the grace of God can flow.\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{Tradition}

As mentioned above, Fletcher, in stating his intention with regard to the use of doctrinal sources and guidelines, claims that tradition is a weak authority for doctrine. Nevertheless, Fletcher does appeal to tradition as a source and guideline for doctrine in a secondary sense. Shortly after his vigorous acclamation of reason and Scripture in the Preface to his \textit{Equal Check II}, Fletcher says,

\begin{quote}
I entirely rest the cause upon \textit{protestant-ground}, that is upon \textit{Reason} and \textit{Scripture}. Nevertheless, to show our antagonists that we are not afraid to meet them upon any ground, I prove by sufficient testimonies from the Fathers and the Reformers, that the most eminent Divines in the primitive church and our own, have passed the straits which I point out…\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

In his \textit{Portrait of St. Paul}, Fletcher indicates that function of tradition as an authority and explains what he regards as tradition.

\begin{quote}
If, in the course of this work, some truths are proposed which may appear new to the Christian Reader, let him candidly appeal, for the validity of them, to the Holy Scriptures, and to the testimony of reason, supported by the most respectable authorities, such as the confessions of faith adopted by the purest churches, together with the works of the most celebrated pastors and professors, who have explained such confessions.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Tradition, therefore, “supports” the authority of Scripture as Scripture is interpreted by reason. This tradition includes both confessions of faith and

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\textsuperscript{53} Cragg, \textit{op. cit.}, 54ff.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, 52.
\textsuperscript{55} See \textit{Works}, VIII, 404.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Works}, IV, 279-280.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Works}, VIII, 7.
\end{flushright}
explanations of these confessions by theologians. Each confession of faith is itself an "assemblage of doctrine," the faithful acceptance of which produces regeneration and a new moral life. Tradition is, in a sense, an intermediate stage between Scripture on the one hand and Christian experience on the other.

For Fletcher, tradition is actually the gradual restatement of doctrine which has its foundation in Scripture. This is especially evident in his letter to Wesley in which Fletcher urges the Leader of Methodism to undertake a reform of the doctrine of the Church of England and the establishment of a separate church. This new ecclesiastical organization, according to Fletcher, would be called the "methodist-church of England" and should be regarded as "a daughter church of our holy mother." As a doctrinal standard for this new church, Fletcher urged Wesley to cleanse the "specks of Pelagian, Calvinian, and Popish dirt" from the liturgy and Articles of the Church of England. Then

the most spiritual part of the common prayer shall be extracted and published with the 39 rectified articles, and the minutes of the conferences (or the methodist canons) which (together with such regulations as may be made at the time of this establishment) shall be, next to the Bible, the vade mecum of the methodist preachers.

However, for Fletcher, this new church should still maintain a vital relationship with the Church of England,

ready to defend the as yet unmethodized church against all the unjust attacks of the dissenters willing to submit to her in all things that are not unscriptural - approving of her ordination partaking of her sacraments, and attending her service at every convenient opportunity.

Fletcher claimed that this step would be in keeping with "the original design of the Church of England, which was to reform, so far as time and circumstances would allow, whatever needed reformation." Thus, in this letter Fletcher stresses the continuity between Methodism and the Church of England and indicates that his concept of the development of doctrinal tradition is one of continuous, gradual restatement rather than one of a series of radical restatements which are discontinuous with past tradition.

At times Fletcher seems to regard the Apostles' Creed as the most important part of tradition. After explaining his doctrine of dispensations, he says, "These distinctions are founded upon reason, upon Revelation,

59. A copy of this letter is in the Wesleyana Collection at Emory University. See also Frank Baker, John Wesley and the Church of England (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 209-211.
and upon the Apostles' Creed."  

The Apostles' Creed is the only part of tradition which Fletcher speaks of as a creed to which every true Christian subscribes. This is the only case in which Fletcher distinctly indicates the pre-eminence of any part of tradition. The other tradition to which he appeals is selected because of its usefulness at the moment.

Other tradition regarded by Fletcher as authoritative in this secondary sense includes the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and the writings of the Fathers; the Protestant confessions of faith and the writings of Protestant Reformers; the writings of Puritan and other Calvinist theologians; the writings of Arminian theologians; the Liturgy, Articles, and Homilies of the Church of England; the writings of contemporary Protestant theologians; and the writings of current Christian philosophers. Except for occasional complimentary references to Thomas à Kempis and Bishop Jean Baptiste Massillon, Fletcher does not regard the Medieval and post-Tridentine Catholic tradition as a source and guideline for doctrine.

Fletcher follows two basic principles as he selects the particular parts of tradition which he cites as authoritative. First, he appeals to that tradition which agrees with his own understanding of Scripture and the doctrines based thereon. Other tradition is either directly discounted as an authority or is ignored. For example, in Sections IV and V of The Doctrines of Grace and Justice, Fletcher condemns Aquinas, Scotus, and Jansenius on the Roman side and Zwingli, Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Peter Martyr, and the Synod of Dort on the Protestant side for being too Augustinian. Erasmus and the Council of Trent were too Pelagian. Arminius, Archbishop Laud, Bishop Overal, Bishop Stillingsfleet, Bishop Bull, Chillingworth, Baxter, and Whitby are given limited praise. However, they just missed striking the proper balance in the doctrine of faith and works. Only Melanchthon and Cranmer were able to expound this doctrine correctly.

Secondly, Fletcher appeals to that tradition which he thinks will be acceptable to his theological opponents and to his readers. For example, when he writes for English Calvinists, he quotes

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60. *Works*, VIII, 287. Fletcher's "doctrine of dispensations" is an eighteenth-century adaptation of Calvinist Federal Theology, to which Fletcher had been exposed while he was a student at Geneva and which was part of seventeenth-century Puritan theology. See John Louis Nuelsen, *Jean Guillaume de la Flechere, John William Fletcher: der erste schweizerische Mетодист* (Zurich: Christliche Vereinsbuch-handlung, 1929), 81-83 and Carl E. Sommer, "John William Fletcher (1729-85), Mann der Mitte," *Basileia* (Stuttgart: Evang. Missionsverlag. 1959), 447.

61. *Works*, VIII, 340. At this point Fletcher is not sufficiently aware of the Eastern Church, which prefers the Nicene Creed.


Puritan theologians such as Baxter, Flavel, Bunyan, Owen, and Henry. When he writes for English Arminians, he quotes the Liturgy, Articles, and Homilies of the Church of England. When he writes for Continental Protestants, he quotes from Continental Confessions of Faith and theologians such as Ostervald, Roques, and Vernet.

It is apparent, therefore, that tradition is of secondary importance as a doctrinal source and guideline for Fletcher. Its purpose is to support the primary authority of Scripture. Since Scripture is a primary authority which must be interpreted in accordance with rational principles, the inconsistencies and contradictions of Scripture must be explained. No passage of Scripture can be ignored. On the other hand, only that tradition which supports Fletcher's understanding of Scripture and the doctrines based thereon is seen as authoritative by Fletcher. The rest is either refuted or ignored. Moreover, tradition itself is constantly changing and constantly needs to be changed. Tradition is the gradual restatement of doctrine by the living Church.

Experience

In the Preface to his Equal Check II, Fletcher does not mention the use of experience as a source and guideline for determining doctrine. Nevertheless, in the development of his theology Fletcher does regard experience as an authority for doctrine. He frequently mentions experience in conjunction with his other authorities. In his First Check to Antinomianism, he proposes to vindicate the propositions contained in Wesley's Minutes (August 7, 1770) "by arguments taken from Scripture, reason, and experience; and by quotations from eminent Calvinist divines...." In his Equal Check III, he proposes to draw the bounds of necessity and liberty "consistently with Reason, Scripture, and Experience." This authoritative experience is of two types: the general experience


65. Works, I, 74: II, 15-18; VII, 323-325. He also claims that the Liturgy has preference over the Articles, when the Articles seem too Calvinistic. Works, VI, 154-157.

66. Works, VIII, 182 (Gallican Confession); VIII, 183 (Augsburg Confession); VIII, 17, 165, 182-183, 188 (Acts of the Synod of Bern); VIII, 179, 182, 229-230, 232 (Second Helvetic Confession); VIII, 17, 20, 128, 131, 171-172 (Ostervald); VIII, 11, 34, 98n, 127-128, 130-131, 136, 142-143 (Roques); VIII, 310 (Vernet).


68. Works, V, 92.
of mankind and the experience of the Holy Spirit which is uniquely Christian. Neither type of experience is a primary authority for doctrine, but both are confirmatory authorities in that they confirm the primary authority of Scripture and the truth of the doctrines based thereon. As they confirm the truth of certain formulations of doctrine, they are in fact confirming the authority of certain parts of tradition, which itself is composed of continual restatements of doctrine.

The general experience of mankind which is authoritative is the common moral experience which all men share. This moral experience is common to all men, because all men have a common nature. It is characterized by selfishness, sloth, and hate on the one hand and moments of spiritual insight and moral conviction on the other. In Christian terms, Fletcher says that this common moral experience of mankind is the experience of original sin and prevenient grace. In this way this general moral experience is regarded as the starting point of that experience which in its next stage becomes specifically Christian.

In Fletcher's concept of doctrinal authority, the general moral experience of man is the basis from which man rationally infers the truths of natural religion and from which he infers his need of Scripture and grace. In this way, general experience confirms the authority of Scripture, when Scripture alludes to the truth of the doctrines of natural religion and proclaims the truth of the doctrines of prevenient grace and original sin. However, the general moral experience of mankind can neither confirm nor deny the primary authority of Scripture as the basis for establishing the truth of those doctrines which are uniquely Christian, such as the doctrines of the Trinity, justification by faith, and Christian perfection. Only that experience of the Holy Spirit which is specifically Christian can confirm the truth of these doctrines and the primary authority of Scripture upon which they are based.

Christian experience is the experience in the soul of "that secret energy, which is called by many the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by some the influence of that Spirit, and by others the grace of God." That

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70. *Works*, II, 78; *Grace and Nature*, 150. For this reason, Fletcher can appeal to non-Christian authorities when they testify to a matter of general moral experience. *Works*, II, 101-103.
71. *Works*, II, 64, 72-76; IV, 210-211; VIII, 365.
73. Occasionally, when he seems to be addressing those who are extremely skeptical about the authority of Scripture, Fletcher appeals to the authority of the writings of non-Christians such as Pliny, Tacitus, Lucian, and Suetonius to confirm the fact that Jesus Christ actually lived as a man in history. *Works*, II, 117-118.
experience of the Spirit which is uniquely Christian is a continuation of the experience of prevenient grace, which is part of the experience of every man.

Fletcher regards Christian experience in both a collective and an individual sense as a confirmatory authority for doctrine. The experience of the Spirit by an individual must be interpreted within the context of the experience of the Spirit by other Christians. Shortly after his own conversion (1755), Fletcher wrote in his diary, “In the evening, I read the experiences of some of God’s children, and found my case agreed with their’s, and suited the sermon I had heard on justifying faith; so that my hope increased.” In describing the Christian experience of salvation, Fletcher says,

Once more; as soon as we can discover our spiritual blindness, we mistrust our own judgment, feel the need of instruction, modestly repair to the experienced for advice, carefully search the Scriptures, readily follow their blessed directions, and fervently pray, that no false light may mislead us out of the way of salvation.

Throughout his writings, Fletcher demonstrates that he regards Christian experience as an authority which confirms the primary authority of Scripture for establishing doctrine. It also confirms the truth of that tradition (doctrine) which is based upon Scripture, and it is not contrary to reason. A leading example of this is his entire work on The Spiritual Manifestation of the Son of God, in which he attempts to show that Scripture, tradition, and reason affirm the necessity of experiencing saving grace. When saving grace is experienced, one finds that the experience is conformable to reason, that Scripture is read with new eyes, and that the doctrine of saving grace is confirmed as true.

Specifically with regard to reason, Fletcher says that the true minister is “solicitous to make it appear, that the sanctifying and consoling operations of the Holy Spirit are as conformable to reason, as they are correspondent to our urgent necessities.” And he emphasizes that when one experiences salvation, “The God of Truth will warm thy heart in a rational manner....”

However, Fletcher most often emphasizes that Christian experience confirms the primary authority of Scripture. In a letter addressed to Joseph Benson in 1774, he writes,

An over-eager attention to the doctrine of the Spirit, has made me, in some degree, overlook the medium by which the Spirit works, I mean the Word of Truth, which is the wood by which the heavenly fire warms us. I rather expected lightening, than a steady fire by means of fuel.

75. Works, I, 20.
76. Works, II, 162.
77. Works, VII, 317-373.
78. Works, VIII, 309.
79. Works, IV, 226.
And in a letter addressed to Miss Bosanquet in 1778, he writes, "I build my faith not on my experience, though this increases it, but upon the revealed truth of God." 81 In the *Portrait of St. Paul*, Fletcher says that it is only through Christian experience that one is able to comprehend the true meaning of Scripture. After quoting passages from Galatians and Colossians, he writes,

> These, with a thousand other scriptural expressions, must be utterly incomprehensible to those, who, resting contented with a literal knowledge of the incarnate Word, admit not the internal manifestation of Christ, by his Spirit of revelation, wisdom, and power. 82

The Christian experience of grace also confirms the truth of those uniquely Christian doctrines which are based upon Scripture and are comformable to reason. Christianity "does not consist in speculative dissertations upon the doctrines which it proposes, but in an experimental knowledge of its mysteries...." 83 Fletcher even goes so far as to say that,

> Under the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, the great truths of the Gospel are demonstrated by the power of an internal evidence, which leaves in the heart no more room for doubt, than a mathematical demonstration leaves room for hesitation in the mind. 84

A minister must experience saving and sanctifying grace to be able to comprehend the doctrines of the Gospel which he must publish and explain. 85

Although Fletcher places great emphasis on Christian experience, he is careful to insist that this experience is not a primary authority for doctrine. Rather, it confirms the primary authority of Scripture. In this way, genuine Christian experience differs from Enthusiasm or fanaticism. 86 In his "Defense of Experimental Religion," addressed to the Rev. Mr. Prothero, who had preached against enthusiasm, Fletcher says, "To set up impulses as the standard of our faith, or rule of our conduct... is downright enthusiasm; I detest it as well as you, sir, and I heartily wish you good luck whenever you shall attack such monstrous delusions." 87 In addition to confirming the primary authority of Scripture, Christian experience is always comformable to reason and productive of a superior morality. In contrast, fanaticism is irrational and is not productive of Christian morality. 88

Thus, for Fletcher, from the basis of general experience man can rationally infer the truths of natural religion and his need of Scripture and

81. This is from a letter published by Tyerman in his biography, *op. cit.*, 412.
86. *Works*, VIII, 304-305. Fletcher uses "enthusiasm" and "fanaticism" as synonyms.
grace. In this way general experience and reason lead man to Scripture and Christian experience. Christian experience confirms the primary authority of Scripture and the truth of Scriptural doctrines. Scripture is an external or objective authority, and the Christian experience is an internal or subjective authority. Yet, they are inseparably united in Fletcher’s theology. The Revelation of Scripture precedes Christian experience, but Christian experience is necessary to understand Scripture. Scripture externalizes and objectifies the internal and spiritual truths of Christian experience. Christian experience internalizes and spiritualizes the truths of Scripture which have previously been external and literal. As it does this, Christian experience confirms the primary authority of Scripture.

Conclusion

In the formation of his theology Fletcher makes use of the four doctrinal sources and guidelines named as normative for present United Methodist theologizing. His point of departure in his theological reflection is his appeal to the authority of reason. This is his attempt to speak the language and use the analytical tools of the Age of Reason. Yet, as he brings to bear all four doctrinal sources and guidelines upon the theological problems of the day, Fletcher shows that he regards reason as a very weak authority for doctrine which must be constantly subordinated to Scripture and Christian experience. If reason is allowed the upper hand, it can lead to false theology and, worst of all, a lack of faith and moral power. On the whole, the statement in the United Methodist Discipline concerning the function of reason as a source and guideline for the formulation of doctrine seems compatible with Fletcher’s view of reason. The Discipline affirms that “revelation and ‘experience’ may transcend the scope of reason.” However, while

No claims are made for reason’s autonomy or omnicompetence,... it does provide tests of cogency and credibility. When submitting doctrinal formulations to critical and objectively rational analysis, our proper intention is to enhance their clarity and verifiability.89

In keeping with Fletcher’s emphasis on the primacy of Scripture, the Discipline acknowledges that Scripture is the principal source and guideline for doctrinal formulation.90 Fletcher also understood, within his eighteenth-century context, that “Scripture texts are rightly interpreted in the light of their place in the Bible as a whole, as this is illuminated by scholarly inquiry and personal insight.”91 Yet, it was Fletcher’s rich Christian experience which allowed him to use the exegetical tools of his

89. Discipline, 78.
90. Discipline, 75.
91. Discipline, 76.
time without making a serious theological mistake. He knew that "There is a radical distinction between intellectual assent to the message of the Bible and doctrinal propositions set forth in creeds, and the personal experience of God's pardoning and healing love." 92 But he was careful never to allow experience to become a primary source and guideline for doctrine. It always confirmed the primary authority of Scripture.

Finally, in harmony with the understanding of tradition expressed by Fletcher, the Discipline recognizes that tradition is subservient to Scripture as an authority and is always changing and always needs to change. 93 Fletcher saw tradition as the gradual restatement of doctrine which has its foundation in Scripture. In his letter to Wesley in 1775 urging a further reformation of the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England and the formation of a "methodist-church of England," if all else failed, Fletcher stressed the continuity of tradition and indicated that he did not regard the Methodist movement as a radical break with the past. The present United Methodist Discipline affirms that "United Methodists never undertake the task of theologizing as a totally new venture. We share a common heritage with all other Christians everywhere and in all ages." 94

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92. Discipline, 77.
93. Discipline, 76-77.
94. Discipline, 71.