

BOOK REVIEW

Laurence W. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism: Rediscovering John Fletcher as John Wesley's Vindicator and Designated Successor*. Lanham, MD, and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2002. 401 pp.

It is only rarely that a book appears which cogently questions the underlying assumptions of the existing historiography in a particular field of historical research, and when it does, it changes the way in which the subject is understood in significant ways. Laurence Wood's recent study of John Fletcher in relation to John Wesley, with reference to the theme of Pentecost, is such a work, and likewise holds similar promise for the future of research in John Wesley and early Methodism.

Wood's central argument, that there is an underlying continuity rather than discontinuity between the positions of Fletcher and Wesley on relating the theme of Pentecost to the understanding of Christian perfection, is developed with attention to the relevant historical data. Focus is given to the latter two decades of Wesley's life, from the 1770s, when this nexus becomes apparent. Wood's evidence shows that theological accord, including amity on the issue in question, was without interruption between the two leaders of early Methodism from that period. It is an argument that was widely accepted in earlier Methodist historiography, but which, in light of alternate readings of this data, is now in need of clear and convincing demonstration.

The author provides his demonstration with a web of evidence that reflects attention to chronology and historical context. The crucial pillars in this argument include evidence that Wesley served as editor and personal advocate of Fletcher's *Checks to Antinomianism*, including the decisive *Equal Check* and the *Last Check*, where the introduction of Pentecostal themes in relation to Christian perfection is substantial. Further, Wood demonstrates Wesley's support of this interpretation with contextual reference to its frequent appearance in Wesley's later sermons and in the *Arminian Magazine*, which he edited. Wood also provides evidence that Adam Clarke heard Wesley preach on the baptism with the Holy Spirit at annual conference as well as in other places in his revival travels. Adam Clarke also made the same connection between the baptism with the Spirit and perfection. Additional evidence for this interpretation is its widespread acceptance in the annals of early British and American Methodism, which is also extensively documented.

The position the author advocates serves to substantiate the pioneering historical work of the late Timothy Smith, who also offered a cogent case for continuity rather than discontinuity between the personal views of

Wesley and Fletcher, early Methodism, and the holiness revival of the 19th century. It appears that criticism of the author's position, which surfaced before the book was published and so did not have the benefit of his full documentation, is more a reflection of the unequivocal style of his argumentation than a substantial critique of his evidence. The importance of this Wesley/Fletcher model of understanding Christian perfection, which the book articulates, is heightened by the realization that it becomes normative not only for early Methodism and the subsequent holiness revival, but also for comprehending the theological roots of Pentecostalism. It is likely for these reasons that Wood's work received the Smith-Wynkoop Book of the Year Award from the Wesleyan Theological Society in 2003.

The reader will also find that the book is well organized, lucid, and clearly documented, which enhances its usefulness as a textbook as well as for the general reader.

The comment of William Abraham, printed in the preface, is perhaps not an overstatement, that this study will surely redefine the nature of Wesley studies, as we have known it.

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