

JOHN WILLIAM FLETCHER'S SHAPING OF WESLEYAN THEOLOGY IN ITS APPROACH BEYOND CHRISTIANITY

PATRICK PH. STREIFF

John William Fletcher (1729-1785) was not only John Wesley's designated successor, but he also shaped the mature theology of John Wesley. The controversy with Calvinistic Methodists in the 1770s deepened and widened his understanding of the working of God's grace in all of creation. This article shows the motives and biblical grounding of Fletcher's approach as well as his awareness of its consequence for a theological appraisal of humankind beyond Christianity.¹

Fletcher's Defence of Wesley's Theology in the Controversy of the 1770s

"I rejoice likewise not only in the abilities but in the temper of Mr. Fletcher. He writes as he lives. I cannot say that I know such another clergyman in England or Ireland. He is all fire; but it is the fire of love. His writings, like his constant conversation, breathe nothing else to those who read him with an impartial eye"—Such was the verdict of John Wesley when the controversy within Methodism over antinomianism and predestination was in full swing.² Fletcher saw himself drawn into it against his own will: "What a world! Methinks I dream when I reflect that I have written on controversy; the last subject I thought I should have meddled with."³ The controversy was sparked when the minutes of John Wesley's conference of 1770 became known to Calvinistic Methodists. The minutes repeated the warning from 1744: "We have leaned too much toward Calvinism." In 1777, at the end of the controversy, Fletcher looked back and wrote in a tract dedicated to Lady Huntingdon, his long-standing friend and benefactor who had reacted vigorously against the 1770 minutes:

Among our English Divines, several have greatly distinguished themselves, by their improvements upon Arminius's discoveries, Bishop Overal, Bishop Stillingfleet, Bishop Bull, Chillingworth, Baxter, Whitby, and others. But, if I am not mistaken, they have all stuck where *Arminius* did, or on the opposite rock. And thereabouts

¹ The article was first presented to the Working Group, "Wesley/Methodist Historical Studies," at the 13th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in August, 2013, which was held under the topic *Wesleyan Communities and the World Beyond Christianity*. It is published in a slightly revised version.

² Letter from John Wesley to Lady Maxwell, February 8, 1772, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, edited by John Telford, (London: Epworth, 1931), V, 304.

³ Letter from John Fletcher to Joseph Benson, August 24, 1771, in Luke Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882), 209.

we stuck too, when Mr. Wesley got happily clear of a point of the Calvinian rock, which had retarded our course; and [so far as he appeared by us to be governed by the Father of lights] we began to sail on with him through the straits of truth The Lord has, we humbly hope, blessed us with an anchor of patient hope, a gale of cheerful love of truth, and a shield of resignation to quench the fiery darts, which some warm men, who defend the barren rock of absolute reprobation, have thrown at us in our passage.⁴

In Fletcher's view a balanced Gospel was preached in the first three centuries of Christianity. He traces the split into a one-sided interpretation of the doctrine of grace or of the doctrine of justice back to the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius. He even finds the same dispute separating the two large wings of Islam.⁵

The minutes of the conference which Wesley held with his preachers in 1770 mention among others the following points: "1. Who of us is *now* accepted of God? He that now believes in Christ, with a loving, obedient heart. 2. But who among those that never heard of Christ? He that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, according to the light he has."⁶ Both questions and answers challenged Calvinistic and Wesleyan-Arminian Methodists⁷ likewise in their understanding of the Christian faith and its relationship to the world beyond Christianity. In his initial defence of the minutes, Fletcher writes:

"At this rate," say some, "an heathen may be saved without a Saviour; his fearing God and working righteousness will go for the blood and righteousness of Christ." Mr. W. has no such thought; whenever an heathen is accepted, it is merely through the merits of Christ All is therefore of grace; the light, the works of righteousness done by that light, and acceptance in consequence of them. How much more evangelical is this doctrine of St. Peter, than that of some divines, who consign all the heathens by millions to hell torments, because they cannot explicitly believe in a Saviour, whose name they never heard? . . . Is it not possible that heathens should, by grace, reap some blessings through Adam the second, though they know nothing of his name and obedience unto death; when they, by nature, reap so many curses through Adam the first, to whose name and disobedience they are equally strangers?

⁴ John Fletcher, *The Works of the Rev. John Fletcher* (London: Printed by R. Edwards for R. Lomas, New Chapel, City Road, and sold at the Methodist Chapels in town and country, 1806-1808), V, 249 ("The Doctrines of Grace and Justice," 1777). As Professor William Gibson noted in the Working Group of the Oxford Institute, Fletcher's selection of English Divines shows his excellent knowledge of the persons he wants to highlight and build upon.

⁵ "For above a thousand years, these *waters of strife* have spread devastation through the *Christian* world; I had almost said also, through the *Mahometan* world; for *Mahomet*, who collected the filth of corrupt Christianity, derived these errors into his system of religion: *Omar* and *Hali*, at least, two of his relations and successors, became the leaders of two sects, which divide the Mahometan world. *Omar*, whom the turks follow, stood up for Bound-will, Necessity, and a species of Absolute Augustinian Predestination. And *Hali*, whom the Persians revere, embraced rigid Free-will and Pelagian Free-agency. But the worst is, that these muddy waters have flowed, through the dirty channel of the Romish church, into all the Protestant-churches, and have at times deluged them; turning, wherever they came, brotherly love into fierce contention," J. Fletcher, *Works* V, 233f. ("The Doctrines of Grace and Justice").

⁶ R. E. Davies and G. Rupp (Gen. Eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London: Epworth, 1988), IV, 164-165.

⁷ During the controversy, the opposite parties were considered as Calvinistic or Arminian Methodists, but for present day readers, I use the term of Wesleyan-Arminian rather than Arminian.

If this be an *heresy* it is such an one as does honour to Jesus and humanity.⁸

The fierce outcry among Calvinistic Methodists against the minutes of the conference which John Wesley held with his preachers in 1770 becomes the immediate reason for Fletcher to take up his pen in defence of Wesley. It is a defence against antinomian tendencies. But the deeper issue behind the dispute has been the attempt to safeguard the Christian gospel against the accusation of contradicting the values of justice and equity, an attempt launched by all Arminians in earlier times under the influence of the early Enlightenment. If there is a final condemnation it must be just and cannot only be on the basis of “not being elected to be among the saved ones” as Calvinistic Methodists argued. Reflecting on such issues led Fletcher to re-think the whole understanding of grace and salvation in Christ. The initial key biblical text is Acts 10:35, quoted in the minutes. As we will see, other key texts are Romans 5 on Christ as second Adam and the parable of the talents in Matthew 25.

In the first of a series of *Checks to Antinomianism*, Fletcher expresses in a summary what he will develop during the controversy into a specific understanding of dispensations:

The brightness of divine dispensations, like the light of the righteous, *shines more and more unto the perfect day*. And though an heathen may be saved in his low dispensation, and attain unto a low degree of glory, which the apostle compares to the shining of a star, [for in my Father’s house, says Christ, there are many mansions,] yet it is an unspeakable advantage to be saved from the darkness attending his uncomfortable dispensation, into the full enjoyment of the *life and immortality brought to light by the explicit gospel*.⁹

Grace in All God’s work

Fletcher’s tracts during the controversy became known as “Checks to Antinomianism.” In fact, antinomianism was the danger which Wesley saw arising in leaning too much towards Calvinism. And as Fletcher began to argue in favour of Wesley’s theological stance, he realized how strongly the Calvinistic understanding of predestination influenced the controversy. Therefore, much of the initial debate turned around the understanding of election and reprobation, and of free-will and free grace. All of it had also to do with the theological approach towards the world beyond Christianity. In his *Third Check*, Fletcher writes:

I am sorry, dear Sir, I cannot do it without dwelling upon *Calvinism*. My design was to oppose *Antinomianism alone*; but the vigorous stand which you make for it upon Calvinian ground, obliges me to encounter you there, or to give up the truth which I am called to defend. I have long dreaded the alternative of displeasing my friends, or wounding my conscience; but I must yield to the injunctions of the latter, and appeal to the candour of the former. . . . Before I weigh your arguments against *working for life*, permit me to point out the capital mistake upon which they turn. You suppose,

⁸ J. Fletcher, *Works* II, 275f. (“A Vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley’s Last Minutes,” later called: “First Check to Antinomianism,” 1771).

⁹ J. Fletcher, *Works* II, 277f.

that *free preventing grace* does not visit all men, and that all those, in whom it has not prevailed, are as totally dead to the things of God, as a dead body is to the things of this life This main pillar of your doctrine, will appear to you built upon the sand, if you read the Scriptures in the light of that mercy which is over all God's work. There you will discover the various dispensations of the everlasting gospel; your contracted views of divine love will open into the most extensive prospects; and your exulting soul will range through the boundless fields of that grace, which is both richly free *in* all, and abundantly free *for* all."¹⁰

In his *Third Check*, Fletcher mentions for the first time the distinction between different dispensations as a tool to understand and explain different levels of God's action among humankind. He distinguishes the general seed of the Gospel given to Adam from the particular promise given to Abraham and his descendants. For the latter, he expressly points out, "that though the Redeemer should be born of his elect family, divine grace and mercy were too free to be confined within the narrow bounds of a peculiar election."¹¹

He goes on with Moses and the prophets, culminating with John the Baptist, and finally the full Christian dispensation, fulfilled with Pentecost. He compares the different dispensations to the growing from a seed to the full corn, and from the dawn to the full radiance of the sun. In such earlier tracts, Fletcher uses interchangeably the words of dispensation and of oeconomy. Later on, he keeps to the term dispensation and, during the 1770s, usually distinguishes four dispensations,¹² in its matured version only three. In explaining his doctrine, he often makes allusion to the parable of the talents. Another important Scripture text is Romans 5.12-21, as in the following quote: "But the moment we allow that the blessing of the second Adam is as general as the curse of the first: that God *sets* again *life and death* before every individual, and that he mercifully restores to all a capacity of choosing life, yea, and of having it one day more abundantly than Adam himself had before the fall, we see his goodness and justice shine with equal radiance."¹³

In his debate with Calvinistic Methodists, it becomes important for Fletcher to argue convincingly why humans, despite their total depravity through sin, have a free-will and personal responsibility which enables them to answer to God's love, without falling into the reverse error where humans

¹⁰ J. Fletcher, *Works* III, 6f. ("Third Check to Antinomianism," 1772).

¹¹ J. Fletcher, *Works* III, 10.

¹² "THE GOSPEL, in general, is a divine system of Truth, which, with various degrees of evidence, points out to sinners the way of eternal salvation, agreeable to the *mercy* and *justice* of a *holy* God; and therefore the gospel, in general, is an assemblage of *holy doctrines* of GRACE, and *gracious doctrines* of JUSTICE THE GOSPEL, in general, branches itself out into four capital dispensations, the last of which is most eminently called *The Gospel*, because it includes and perfects all the preceding displays of God's grace and justice towards mankind," J. Fletcher, *Works* V, 214 ("The Doctrines of Grace and Justice," 1777). The four dispensations were (*ibid.*, 214-218): (1) The Gospel of the Gentiles, frequently called natural religion; (2) The Jewish Gospel, frequently called the Mosaic dispensation, or the Law; (3) Infant Christianity, or the Gospel/the baptism of John the Baptist; (4) The [perfect] Gospel of Christ. Each dispensation displays a particular working of God's grace and has its particular promise which, in its turn, is fulfilled in the higher dispensation. In his mature theology, he distinguishes three dispensations; see below on *The Character of St. Paul*.

¹³ J. Fletcher, *Works* III, 23 ("Third Check to Antinomianism," 1772).

could boast with their free-will and own merit. The theological key is his understanding of initial salvation:

THOUGH *the Scriptures tell us, that the carnal mind is enmity against God, and that the flesh lusteth against the Spirit*, yet we believe, that from the time God initially raised mankind from their fall, and promised them the celestial bruise of the serpent's head, *there is a GRACIOUS free-agency in the heart of every man* who has not yet sinned away his day of salvation: And that, by means of the GRACIOUS free-agency, all men, during the *accepted time*, can concur with, and work, under the grace of God, according to the dispensation they belong to.¹⁴

All free-agency is grace given because all humanity has been contained in the seed of Adam. Fletcher expresses this thought of initial salvation within a thoroughly historic understanding of the early narratives of Genesis, as it was generally the case at that time. But in opposition to the Calvinistic interpretation, he insists that this initial promise to Adam does not only free humans to be moral agents but also to answer spiritually in their relationship to God.¹⁵ And if Calvinists understood election as God's grace-given choice to save some whereas all others remain condemned sinners for eternity, Fletcher insists on the saving character of the initial salvation for Adam and all his descendants. However, the measure in which God reveals his saving work in Christ differs and God is absolutely free in how much he reveals to humans. Fletcher tries to understand this difference with the concept of dispensations. Thus, it is not so much a Calvinian argument on accommodation than a difference in the understanding of God's free grace, compared to his Calvinistic opponents, which brings Fletcher to unfold the Gospel covenant into different dispensations of God, as well in history as in the life of individuals.¹⁶

In the controversial debates of the 1770s, Fletcher openly acknowledges that his own views have developed and widened to see God's grace at work

¹⁴ J. Fletcher, *Works* III, 440 ("The Fictitious and the Genuine Creed," 1775).

¹⁵ "INITIAL SALVATION is a phrase which sometimes occurs in these sheets. The plain reader is desired to understand by it, *Salvation begun*, or, an inferior state of acceptance and present salvation: in this state sinners are actually saved from hell, admitted to a degree of favour, and graciously entrusted with one or more talents of grace, that is, of means, power, and ability *to work out their own [eternal] salvation*, in due subordination to God, who consistently with our liberty, *works in us both to will and to do*, according to the dispensation of the heathens, Jews, or Christians, *of his good pleasure*," J. Fletcher, *Works* V, xii ("Third Part of an Equal Check," 1775).

¹⁶ James R. Frazier in his unpublished dissertation, *The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*, (University of Manchester, PhD thesis 2011) explains Fletcher's thought with the concept of accommodation and traces it back to Calvinian tradition. In some parts of his dissertation, he argues with the concept of accommodation as underlying basis to understand Fletcher's thoughts (Frazier, 120 and 275ff), whereas in other parts he understands the concept of accommodation on the basis of Fletcher's understanding of grace (Frazier, 163 and 165) which is, in my own view, the more fundamental rationale for Fletcher's development towards a dispensational theology. It was the understanding of grace which shaped Fletcher's dispensational theology, which then was applied in accommodating the preaching of the Gospel to different situations of hearers in Fletcher's sermons (see Frazier, 166 quote 92, and the context in 277ff). Of course, Frazier is right in calling it a "progressive history of salvation" (Frazier, 120).

in all creation and all ages.¹⁷ His understanding of the dispensations of God's grace in history and in individual persons has been a means to overcome a notion of opposing covenants (covenant of the Law and covenant of the Gospel) and of limiting salvation to an explicit, personal confession of faith in Christ.¹⁸ Likewise, the dispensations of the triune God in history help to an integrated view of the breadth and depth of God's grace and justice likewise.

The judicious reader will easily perceive, that the additions made to this, and some other paragraphs of my old sermon, are intended to guard the inferior dispensations of the gospel. Are there not degrees of saving faith, inferior to the faith of the Christian gospel? And are not those degrees of faith consistent with the most profound ignorance of the history of our Lord's sufferings, and consequently of any *explicit* knowledge of the atonement From these observations may I not conclude: 1. That an explicit knowledge of Christ's passion and atonement, is the prerogative of the *Christian* gospel advancing towards perfection? And 2. That those who make it essential to the *everlasting* gospel, most dreadfully curtail it, and indirectly doom to hell, not only all the righteous Jews, Turks, and Heathens, who may now be alive; but also almost all the believers, who died before our Lord's crucifixion, and some of the disciples themselves after his resurrection?¹⁹

Being accused by his opponents of "creating different sorts of faith by dozens," Fletcher answers:

And, that the difference between the saving faith peculiar to the sincere disciples of Noah, Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ, consists in a variety of *degrees*, and not in a diversity of *species*; saving faith under all dispensations agreeing in the following essentials: 1. It is begotten by the revelation of some saving truth presented by free grace, impressed by the Spirit, and received by the believer's prevented free-agency: 2. It has the same original cause in all, that is, the mercy of God in Jesus Christ: 3. It *actually* saves all, though in various degrees: It sets all upon *working righteousness, some bearing fruit thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred fold*: And 5. Through Christ it will bring all that do not make shipwreck of it, to one or another of the *many mansions*, which our Lord is gone to prepare in heaven for his *believing, obeying* people.²⁰

¹⁷ Fletcher's Calvinistic opponents criticized him on the basis that his Checks of the 1770s contradicted a sermon which he had published in 1762. In the Equal Check he reprinted the sermon with additions and wrote: "This, and the preceding clauses are added, to guard the doctrine of the gospel-dispensations, of which I had but very confused views eleven years ago Leaning *then* too much towards Calvinism, I fancied, at times at least, that *the gospel* was confined within the narrow channel of its last dispensation;" J. Fletcher, *Works* IV, 44 note ("An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism, Part I," 1774).

¹⁸ One effect of it is Fletcher's unambiguous understanding that there is not an opposition between the Law given to Jews and the Gospel given to Christians, but that they are different measures of revelation of the same grace of God.

¹⁹ J. Fletcher, *Works* IV, 49f. note.

²⁰ J. Fletcher, *Works* IV, 238 (numbering of sub points as in original text). Immediately prior to this quote, Fletcher writes: "To nip this witticism in the bud, I declare ONCE MORE: That I make no more difference between the faith of a righteous Heathen, and the faith of a father in Christ, than I do between daybreak and meridian light: That the light of a sincere Jew, is as much one with the light of a sincere Christian; as the light of the sun in a cold, cloudy day in March, is one with the light of the sun in a fine day in May;" (*ibid.*, 238). Such comparisons with every day life helped laypeople to understand theological thoughts. They are typical for Fletcher's pastoral approach to write in the midst of a fierce debate.

Fletcher is convinced that his understanding of the Gospel and its different degrees would also be attractive for many among the clergy of the Church of England and of Scotland and among Dissenters who refuse the narrow mind-set of many in the present revival when they declare that no one can be saved without a full, personal assurance of faith.²¹ The same year, John Wesley will echo this opinion.

Fletcher's dispensational understanding of the Gospel has been another means of exemplifying the Wesleyan doctrine of growing in grace on to perfection:

It is plain, from this account, that no preaching was ever attended with a more *universal* blessing, and that no discourse was ever more instrumental in conveying to all, the power of the faith of assurance, than that very sermon, which the apostle began by intimating, that his hearers were already *accepted*, according to an inferior dispensation. Hence it is evident, that the doctrine we maintain, if it be properly guarded, far from having a *necessary* tendency to lull people asleep, is admirably calculated to excite every penitent to faith, prayer, the improvement of their talents, and the *perfecting of holiness*.²²

How do Fletcher's new insights of the 1770s correlate with John Wesley's²³ theology?

Fletcher's Influence on Wesley's Mature Theology

A Calvinistic Methodist, Rev. Walter Shirley took a lead in opposing the minutes of the conference of 1770 as a dreadful heresy. He publicly showed up at the conference of 1771 where Wesley and all the preachers present (with the exception of one) signed a declaration on justification by faith in the merits of Christ which satisfied Shirley. Fletcher had already written six letters to Shirley trying to convince him of the true meaning of the 1770 minutes. He had shared these six letters with John Wesley who was convinced that a sound exposition of the meaning of the 1770 minutes was needed and, to this purpose, published Fletcher's letters. With other Calvinistic Methodists entering into the debate, the controversy continued and Fletcher's six letters became the *First Check to Antinomianism*. Fletcher who had close affinity to Calvinistic Methodists and Calvinistic-minded

²¹ "Are there not many pious and judicious ministers, in the churches of England and Scotland, as well as among the Dissenters, who dare not countenance the present revival of the power of godliness, chiefly because they hear us sometimes unguardedly assert, that none have any faith, but such as have the faith of assurance; and that the wrath of God actually abides on all those, who have not that faith? If we warily allowed the faith of the inferior dispensations, which such divines clearly see in the Scriptures, and feel in themselves; would not their prejudices be softened, and their minds prepared to receive what we advance in defence of the faith of assurance?" J. Fletcher, *Works* IV, 243f. ("An Equal Check to Pharisaim and Antinomianism, Part I," 1774).

²² J. Fletcher, *Works* IV, 245.

²³ This article only looks at the correlation with John Wesley. Fletcher was even more closely linked in friendship with Charles Wesley. In several letters to Charles, he makes reference to Charles' hymns and it would be interesting to research the influence of Charles' hymns on Fletcher's theology.

clergymen in the Church of England and many friends among them during the 1760s, considered the warning of the 1770 minutes ("We have leaned too much towards Calvinism") as a timely challenge to find the balance of the original gospel preaching.²⁴

In his writings, Fletcher rarely quotes Wesley. He discusses biblical texts extensively and uses everyday images and experiences as argumentative tools. Scripture, reason and experience are the categories mostly used. In only a few instances, Fletcher refers to tradition even if he is convinced to have succeeded in reconnecting to the sound gospel of the early Church and of the Reformers of the Church of England, particularly Cranmer. Much of what Fletcher develops can be found in a nutshell in Wesley's earlier writings. Several of Wesley's sermons allude to a covenant based on grace and made for the benefit of all humankind.²⁵ Thoughts about different dispensations can also be found in an early sermon of Wesley on Christian Perfection²⁶ where Wesley quotes biblical passages which distinguish babes, young people and adults. Wesley then mentions different steps in the dispensations: Jewish, John the Baptist, and Christian.²⁷ Fletcher elaborates on it and develops it further. And vice-versa: what Fletcher writes in his tracts is taken up and integrated in Wesley's matured theology.²⁸

One of the first hints about Fletcher's influence on Wesley is not found in one of Wesley's sermons, but in re-issues of his Journals in and after 1774. Wesley adds explanatory notes to his Journal entries in which he reflects on his spiritual condition prior to the Aldersgate experience. Originally, he wrote that he was without faith before his Aldersgate experience. In the mid 1770s, he adds the note: "I had even then the faith of a servant though not that of a son."²⁹ The new distinction between the faith of a servant and the faith of a son allows Wesley to overcome the strict alternative of the early years of the revival (no faith at all versus true, Christian faith; the almost Christian versus the altogether Christian) and to move towards a progression of different levels of faith. It echoes what Fletcher has developed extensively in his tracts.

²⁴ See also P. Streiff, *Reluctant Saint?* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth, 2001), 126-131, on the attempts to unite Anglican clergymen close to Methodism, and the two recently discovered letters of Fletcher to Rev. Thomas Beale in 1771, published in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 58.2 (May, 2011), 72-75.

²⁵ See Wesley's *Justification by Faith* (sermon 5, 1746), *The Righteousness of Faith* (sermon 6, 1746), *The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law* (sermon 34, 1750).

²⁶ See J. Wesley, *Christian Perfection* (sermon 40, 1741).

²⁷ Wesley uses John the Baptist as intermediate between Jews and Christians in order to strengthen the wide difference between the Jewish and the Christian dispensation. In Fletcher's dispensational theology and in the matured theology of Wesley, the emphasis is more on the presence of the Gospel in all dispensations.

²⁸ See also P. Streiff, *Perfecting Plain Truth for Plain People: John Wesley's Sermons* (forthcoming).

²⁹ *The Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, Bicentennial Edition, 1975-) 18 (published 1988), 215 (Feb. 1, 1738). Hereafter *WJW*; see also *WJW*, 235 (April 25, 1738); 242 (in a letter written immediately prior to the Aldersgate experience); 245 and 248 (in a memorandum about his spiritual journey, written after the Aldersgate experience).

In 1775, John Wesley praises Fletcher's theological contribution in a letter to a correspondent: "Mr. Fletcher has given us a wonderful view of the different dispensations which we are under. I believe that difficult subject was never placed in so clear a light before. It seems God has raised him up for this very thing."³⁰ Another confirmation of this renewed emphasis on grace-enabled good works prior to Christian repentance and faith can be found in Wesley's sermon before the Humane Society in 1777.³¹ Wesley says:

And upon his (sc. the Judge of all the earth) authority we must continue to declare that whenever you do good to any for his sake—when you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty; when you assist the stranger, or clothe the naked; when you visit them that are sick, or in prison—these are not "splendid sins," as one marvellously calls them, but "sacrifices wherewith God is well pleased."³²

And he continues:

[G]ood works are so far from being hindrances of our salvation, they are so far from being insignificant, from being of no account in Christianity, that, supposing them to spring from a right principle, they are the perfection of religion. They are the highest part of that spiritual building whereof Jesus Christ is the foundation.³³

Wesley did not meddle with the controversy in the 1770s, but he harvests the fruits in his sermons of the 1780s. In two of them, he expresses appreciation for Fletcher's life and contribution, but only after Fletcher's death in 1785. In the memorial sermon on Fletcher's death, Wesley mentions Fletcher's contribution in the controversy of the 1770s. In looking back, he has become grateful that his being attacked of heresy led Fletcher to writing the *Checks*: "That circular letter was the happy occasion of his writing those excellent *Checks to Antinomianism*, in which one knows not which to admire most, the purity of the language (such as a foreigner scarce ever wrote before), the strength and clearness of the argument, or the mildness and sweetness of the spirit which breathes throughout the whole."³⁴ By then, all of Wesley's preachers knew that Wesley had hoped Fletcher would become his successor.

Finally, in one of his late sermons, Wesley pays tribute to his younger, highly esteemed companion. The sermon, written in 1788, is also an excellent exposition of Wesley's mature theology.³⁵ In his introductory definition of faith, Wesley does not limit it to a living, saving Christian faith. He declares that he does "not remember any eminent writer that has given a full and clear account of the several sorts of it."³⁶ But then he adds: "Something

³⁰ Letter of John Wesley to Elizabeth Ritchie, January 17, 1775, in Wesley, *Letters*, ed. Telford, VI, 137.

³¹ See J. Wesley, *The Reward of Righteousness* (sermon 99, 1777).

³² *WJW* 3 (published 1986), 403.29-404.3 (sermon 99).

³³ *WJW* 3, 405.5-10 (sermon 99).

³⁴ *WJW* 3, 617.17-22 (sermon 114, On the Death of John Fletcher, 1785).

³⁵ J. Wesley, *On Faith* (sermon 106, 1788).

³⁶ *WJW* 3:492.10-11 (sermon 106).

indeed of a similar kind has been written by that great and good man, Mr. Fletcher, in his treatise on the various *dispensations* of the grace of God.³⁷ Wesley then paraphrases Fletcher's exposition of four different dispensations. He would never have done so if he had not seen it as a valuable and important theological contribution.³⁸

Based on this paraphrase of Fletcher's writings, Wesley then pursues to point out several sorts of faith, adding others to those outlined by Fletcher. Wesley begins with reference to current philosophical thought and with what he considers as the lowest sort of faith, that of a materialist, then goes on to deists, before he comes to heathens. "I cannot but prefer this before the faith of the deists; because, though it embraces nearly the same objects, yet they are rather to be pitied than blamed for the narrowness of their faith. And their not believing the whole truth is not owing to want of sincerity, but merely to want of light."³⁹ Wesley counts the Muslims among the heathens, and then proceeds to the next level above in talking about the Jews. He only briefly mentions the faith of John the Baptist, a dispensation which took more space in Fletcher's own writings in the 1770s. Then Wesley outlines different Christian beliefs. He begins with Roman Catholics and includes the following comment on their faith: "If most of these are volunteers in faith, believing more than God has revealed, it cannot be denied that they believe all which God has revealed as necessary to salvation. In this we rejoice on their behalf: we are glad that none of those new articles which were added at the Council of Trent to 'the faith once delivered to the saints,' does so materially contradict any of the ancient articles as to render them of no effect."⁴⁰ It reinforces what Wesley wrote earlier in his sermon *Catholic Spirit* (sermon 39, 1750). From Roman Catholics, Wesley moves on to the Protestants and says: "The faith of the *Protestants*, in general, embraces only those truths as necessary to salvation which are clearly revealed in the oracles of God."⁴¹

After presenting these different levels of faith, Wesley insists that embracing such or such truths does not save anyone, "no more than it could save the devil and his angels—all of whom are convinced that every title of Holy Scripture is true."⁴² Right belief is not saving faith. This insight has brought Wesley—the more the older he grew—to limiting the importance of correct belief. Since 1738, Wesley insists that saving faith goes beyond the mere embracing of true doctrines. But the way he defines saving faith in this late sermon is very different from the early years of the revival:

It is such a divine conviction of God and of the things of God as even in its infant state enables everyone that possesses it to "fear God and work righteousness." And

³⁷ *WJW* 3:492.14-16 (sermon 106).

³⁸ "Herein he [Fletcher] observes that there are four dispensations that are distinguished from each other by the degree of light which God vouchsafes to them that are under each" *WJW* 3, 492.16-19 (sermon 106).

³⁹ *WJW* 3, 494.13-17 (sermon 106).

⁴⁰ *WJW* 3, 496.1-8 (sermon 106).

⁴¹ *WJW* 3, 496.9-11 (sermon 106).

⁴² *WJW* 3, 497.3-4 (sermon 106).

whosoever in every nation believes thus far the Apostle declares is “accepted of him.” . . . But he is at present only a *servant* of God, not properly a *son*. Meantime let it be well observed that “the wrath of God” no longer “abideth on him.”⁴³

And in order to clarify how far his revision reaches, he adds the following paragraphs:

11. Indeed nearly fifty years ago, when the preachers commonly called Methodists began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently apprised of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand that even one “who feared God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him.” In consequence of this they were apt to make sad the hearts of those whom God had not made sad. For they frequently asked those who feared God, “Do you know that your sins are forgiven?” And upon their answering, “No,” immediately replied, “Then you are a child of the devil.” No; that does not follow. It might have been said (and it is all that can be said with propriety) “Hitherto you are only a *servant*; you are not a *child* of God. You have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honourable service. Fear not.” Continue crying unto him: “and you shall see greater things than these.” 12. And, indeed, unless the servants of God halt by the way, they will receive the adoption of sons. They will receive the *faith* of the children of God by his *revealing* his only-begotten Son in their hearts.⁴⁴

As Fletcher has insisted in his writings on the various dispensations, so does Wesley also put emphasis on growing beyond lower stages of faith without devaluating lower ones in their own right.⁴⁵

Fletcher’s Late Writings, Posthumously Published, on the Gospel Dispensations

Pastoral ministry in his extended parish of Madeley together with writing his extensive tracts exhausted Fletcher. His health collapsed as he was infected with tuberculosis, according to the symptoms he described. He went for a prolonged period to the continent and stayed for a little more than three years in his hometown in Nyon, Switzerland. During that time, he worked on publications in French. He took the manuscripts with him back to England, but could not finalize all of them for a publication in either French or English.⁴⁶ Among all kinds of manuscripts, his widow found sections of a French draft for a publication, and handed them to the Rev. Joshua Gilpin who translated and published them posthumously in *The Portrait of St. Paul* in 1790. John Wesley’s manuscript diaries note with an exclamation mark

⁴³ *WJW* 3, 497.6-10+11-13 (sermon 106).

⁴⁴ *WJW* 3, 497.14-33 (sermon 106).

⁴⁵ There has been considerable discussion whether Wesley and Fletcher differ in their doctrines of Christian perfection and the understanding of the Holy Spirit. James R. Frazier, *The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*, (unpublished PhD thesis 2011) ably presents how Fletcher’s understanding matured and, in later years, does not fundamentally differ from Wesley (*ibid.*, p. 263ff and p. 273f.).

⁴⁶ In *La Louange* (Nyon, 1781) Fletcher mentions that three texts became too long to be published, among them the one on the connection of the doctrines of the Gospel to morality. This text-element may have been the groundwork for part three of *The Character of St. Paul*.

that he read it the same year.⁴⁷

The work consists of three parts. It opens with the portrait of the true Christian and the evangelical⁴⁸ clergy, contrasted by lukewarm, contemporary ministers. The second part deals with the doctrines preached by evangelical clergy. The third part insists on the connection between doctrine and morality, particularly aimed at contemporary philosophers. The background of this treatise is no more the debate with Calvinistic Methodists as in the controversy of the 1770s, but the encounter with a lukewarm church and with radical Enlightenment during his convalescence on the continent.⁴⁹ Nevertheless—or even more so—the doctrine of dispensations plays an important role in Fletcher's defence of the gospel. The critique of radical Enlightenment against the Christian faith becomes an intellectual challenge to the churches. In his writings, Fletcher has a pastoral aim: to show inconsistencies of the critique, but also the difference of his understanding of the Gospel compared to the presentation given by the critics. He wants to strengthen the ministry of clergy who have an affinity to Methodist principles. The dispensations of God's grace over all his creation play a prominent role in Fletcher's argument.

Part two of *The Portrait of St. Paul*, on the doctrines preached by evangelical clergy, begins with a section on preaching true repentance (33 pages), followed by three sections on faith, hope and charity (together 56 pages), and culminating in five sections related to the dispensations (together 54 pages).⁵⁰ Part three on the connection between doctrine and morality again refers several times to the Gospel dispensations. In part two, the link between the sections on faith, hope and charity with the sections on the dispensations is explained in the following way:

WE have seen, in the preceding chapters, that believers are saved by a living faith and a joyful hope, which mutually serve to excite and increase in their souls the superior grace of charity. Now this faith and this hope must necessarily have for their foundation some promise of GOD. A promise already accomplished is embraced by faith alone; but a promise, whose accomplishment is protracted, is equally the object of faith and of hope. He, therefore, who is appointed by Christ a preacher of the

⁴⁷ *WJW* 24 (published 2003), 340 (December 13, 17 and 18, 1790).

⁴⁸ The use of the term "evangelical" has undergone many changes. Fletcher spoke of "evangelical" or "Gospel" ministers related to all those whose preaching had affinities to Methodist principles whether they would call themselves "Methodist" or not at all, cf. his attempt to promote the unity among clergy in the Church of England on the basis of the three key doctrines of original sin, justification by faith and holiness of heart and life.

⁴⁹ "These philosophizing moralists, and these lukewarm disciples may be compared to the fruit, that falls before it has attained to the perfection of its species: examine such fruit, and you will find under a beautiful appearance, either a destructive worm, or loathsome rottenness," J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 387 ("The Portrait of St. Paul," 1790). James R. Frazier, *The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*, (unpublished Ph.D. thesis 2011), presents Calvinian accommodation in an interesting description of Jacob Vernet's theology, Fletcher's teacher in classical studies in Geneva (*ibid.*, p. 37ff). But nevertheless, Fletcher rarely quotes Vernet and rather chooses other philosophers and theologians from the Continent as supporting voices for his own arguments.

⁵⁰ The number of pages indicated refers to the publication in J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII.

everlasting Gospel, is solicitous to obtain clear ideas of the great promises of God.⁵¹

In this mature treatment, Fletcher presents three dispensations, not four as in earlier writings and in the nutshell of John Wesley's sermon on perfection of 1741. All heathens are under the first dispensation, Jews and also Muslims and modern Deists are under the second, Christians under the third.⁵²

Similar to what had happened in the controversy of the 1770s, where Fletcher's arguments shifted from a more anthropological (linked to the understanding of the human being) to a more strictly theological (linked to the understanding of God) approach, the three-fold dispensation is more theologically rooted in the revelation of the triune God. A trinitarian understanding of the Christian revelation becomes ever more important as Fletcher's theology matures. Fletcher insists that the three dispensations are not a separation into three different operations, but a distinction in emphasis, all rooted in the unity of the triune God:

These three dispensations have one common end. They mutually tend to manifest the different perfections of the Supreme Being, to raise man from his present low estate, and to perfect his nature. This three-fold design is apparent under the dispensation of the Father; it unfolds itself more clearly under that of the Son; and shines out with increasing luster under that of the Holy Spirit. As it is one and the same sun, that animates every thing in the natural world, so it is one and the same God, who operates every thing in the kingdom of grace . . . There never was a time, in which the Son and the Spirit were not occupied in completing the salvation of believers. But there was a time, when the Son became manifest upon the earth, making a visible display of his astonishing labours: and then it was, that his particular dispensation had its commencement. So likewise there was a time, when the Holy Ghost, more abundantly shed forth by the Father and the Son, began to work his mysterious operations in a more sensible manner: and at that time commenced the particular dispensation of the Spirit, which serves to perfect the dispensation of the Son, as that of the Son was given to perfect the dispensation of the Father . . . These distinctions are founded upon reason, upon revelation, and upon the Apostles' creed.⁵³

And with one eye on contemporary philosophers who criticized a gospel

⁵¹ J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 267. Gilpin translates in the first sentence "lively faith," but Fletcher's regular use was "living faith."

⁵² "There are three grand dispensations of grace. Under the first, every heathenish and unenlightened nation must be ranked; the Jews under the *second*; and the Christians under the *third*, which is a dispensation abundantly more perfect than either of the former. The followers of Mahomet may be classed with modern Jews, since they are deists of the same rank, and have equally deceived themselves with respect to that great Prophet, who came for the restoration of Israel. / Those Jews, Mahometans and heathens, who *fear God and work righteousness*, are actually saved by Jesus Christ. Christ is the *Truth* and the *Light*: and these sincere worshippers receiving all the rays of truth, with which they are visited, afford sufficient proof, that they would affectionately admire and adore the Sun of righteousness himself, were the intervening mists removed, by which he is concealed from their view. But it is wholly different with those, who beholding this divine Sun, as he is revealed in the Gospel, determinately close their eyes against him, and contemptuously raise a cloud of objections to veil him, if possible, from the view of others," J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 383.

⁵³ J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 286-287; see also 270; see also the way in which higher dispensations do not replace lower ones in a reference to the gospel given to Jews: "The universal creed under this ancient dispensation still forms a part of that, which is received among christians," (Fletcher, 284).

which has not been known to everyone from the beginning of creation, Fletcher writes:

IF the light of the Gospel had been due from GOD to every individual sinner; if he had not been left entirely free, in every sense of the word, to impart it to whom, at what time, and in what degree soever was most pleasing to himself: his impartial justice would then have engaged him equally to illuminate all mankind, and he must have caused the Sun of Righteousness, immediately after the fall, to have shone out in its meridian rightness. In such case, there would have been but one dispensation of grace But the Almighty has proceeded in the work of our redemption, according to the dictates of his own unerring wisdom, and not upon the plans of our pretended sages. The day of the Gospel, whether it be considered as enlightening the world in general, or the heart in particular, rises, like the natural day, from one degree of brightness to another, till all its glories are fully manifested.⁵⁴

Fletcher refers to parallels between the natural world and spiritual things as well as to images which Jesus used in the Gospel:

It is probable, that, as every thing is discovered to operate gradually in the natural world, the same order might be established in the moral world. Even since the time of Christ's outward manifestation, the influence of his redeeming power has but gradually discovered itself in our yet benighted world. He himself compared the Gospel to a little leaven, which spreads itself by slow degrees over a bulky mass of meal; and to a small seed, from which a noble plant is produced. To this we may add, that a portion, of time, which appears long and tedious to us, appears wholly different in the eyes of the everlasting I AM, before whom a thousand years are no more than a fleeting day.⁵⁵

Fletcher is well aware of the vast consequences of his understanding of the gospel dispensations. And he makes it quite explicit concerning the world beyond Christianity:

For the Father of mercies, who knoweth whereof we are made, will no more *absolutely* condemn such worshippers, on account of the extraordinary respect they have discovered for Moses, Mahomet, and Confucius, than he will finally reject some pious Christians, for the sake of that excessive veneration, which they manifest for particular saints and reformers: nor will he punish either, because their guides have

⁵⁴ J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 280; see also: "it is undoubtedly true, that those who have lived in different periods of time, have not been permitted to enjoy all the various truths which GOD has successively revealed to man. Nevertheless, it is equally certain that every man in what period of time, and in what peculiar circumstances so ever he found himself placed, has received sufficient light to discover, as well as sufficient power to perform, what GOD has been pleased to require at his hands," (Fletcher, 282); see also 376-377.

⁵⁵ J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 378.

mingled prejudice with truth, and legendary fables with doctrines of theology.⁵⁶

In his final summary Fletcher states: “As languishing infants may be restored by the medicines of a physician, with whom they are totally unacquainted, so Jews, Mahometans, and heathens, provided they walk according to the light they enjoy, are undoubtedly saved by Jesus Christ, though they have no clear conception of the astonishing means deployed to secure them from perdition.”⁵⁷ Fletcher concludes with a long quotation from Lactantius⁵⁸ on the superiority of the life changing power of the Gospel over the ideas of philosophers.

The development of Fletcher’s theology is quite remarkable. His reflection on people of other faiths was not born out of direct encounters, but of critical questions about the understanding of Christian revelation in an age when knowledge of the world beyond Christianity became ever more present and pressing. Fletcher’s pastoral approach to dialogue and debate shows up in the controversy with Calvinistic Methodists in the 1770s. It was characterised by close reading, listening to arguments of critics, sharp intellectual analysis of arguments combined with respectful treatment of persons, and search for common ground and for promotion of holiness. Fletcher quoted from a wide variety of biblical texts, particularly in his *Scripture Scales*. And interwoven with all of it were many examples to experiences of daily life which made intellectual arguments understandable to readers without theological education.⁵⁹

In the development of his theology, Fletcher built on earlier writings of Wesley and reciprocally influenced the late Wesley. Fletcher’s *Checks to Antinomianism* as well as his *The Character of St. Paul* were widely read by Methodist preachers on both sides of the Atlantic. A few publications

⁵⁶ J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 285. See also the interesting evaluation of Islam in the posthumous tract “General Observations on the Redemption of Mankind by Jesus Christ,” translated from French by M. Martindale where Fletcher says after several references to the Koran: “I would remind my readers, that the reason of the above quotations, is first, to shew that though the Koran so much disfigures Christianity, for the chastising of disobedient and hypocritical Christians; yet it admits enough of our doctrines to overthrow idolatry, and the external empire of Satan upon earth; insomuch that in Africa and India, Mahometanism prepares idolaters for the reception of Christianity: And secondly, to nourish our hope, that the Mahometans, who have already such exalted notions of Jesus Christ, will embrace the gospel, when the great scandals of the Christian Churches shall be done away; the additions which Mahomet has made to the gospel, being founded only upon false miracles, and absurd reveries. On the contrary, pure Christianity, contained in the gospel, is so reasonable, that all who examine with candour, are obliged to acknowledge the *force* of those proofs which demonstrate its truth,” (J. Fletcher, *Works* IX, 408). In the list of posthumously published works in P. Streiff, *Reluctant Saint?*, 387-388, the three fragments in J. Fletcher, *Works* IX, 397-427 (“General Observations on the Redemption of Mankind by Jesus Christ; on Three Principles; and on Fanaticism”) are not listed, but they are all part of *Grace and Nature*, translated into English by Miles Martindale and published in 1810. There are a few minor differences between the two English publications.

⁵⁷ J. Fletcher, *Works* VIII, 382.

⁵⁸ Lactantius lived from 250 to 325 and wrote in Latin.

⁵⁹ The poems, *La Louange* (1781) and *La Grâce et la Nature* (1785); *Grace and Nature*, engl. translation 1810), reflect even more this openness of the natural world to become an image for the spiritual. Fletcher calls it “evangelical mysticism.”

mention Fletcher's influence on American Methodism.⁶⁰ It would be an interesting topic for further research, what effects his dispensational theology has had among Methodists on the theological understanding of the world beyond Christianity and on preaching in general.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Randy Maddox lists the names of prominent early American Methodists who have highly valued Fletcher's writings, some of them quoting Fletcher much more often than John Wesley, see: Randy L. Maddox, "Respected Founder/Neglected Guide: The Role of Wesley in American Methodist Theology," *Methodist History* 37 (1999): 71-88, particularly pages 74-76. See also Laurence W. Wood, *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002), particularly chapters 13 and 14 about the influence of Fletcher and his pneumatology on American Methodism.

⁶¹ James R. Frazier, *The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis 2011), argues that Fletcher's understanding got lost in subsequent history (Frazier, 28).