

BOOK REVIEW

J. Russell Frazier, *True Christianity, The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729-1785)*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014. 320 pp. \$31.50.

J. Russell Frazier has offered a comprehensive interpretation of John William Fletcher's doctrine of dispensations. He appropriately entitled it, *True Christianity*. Frazier has provided the context for understanding the thought of John Fletcher, highlighting that in his mature theological understanding he developed a soteriology corresponding to the history of salvation. Fletcher shows that the development of God's revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit generally reflects the personal history of salvation. In this reckoning, each individual believer progressively transitions from a general awareness of God to a more specific knowledge of God as Father and Creator revealed in the Old Testament. The believer then progresses to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whose life is distinguished between his earthly ministry entailing his life, death, and resurrection (Easter) and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit upon the church (Pentecost). Frazier shows that the most problematic feature of Fletcher's theology of dispensations is the soteriological use that he made between the early followers of Jesus (pre-Pentecostal believers) and Pentecostal believers. This theology of dispensations, as Frazier so rightly pointed out, has nothing in common with the dispensational theology of Darby or Schofield. As Frazier showed, Fletcher understood Jesus' earthly life as a brief period of time which represented a development of faith which was "singular" (as Fletcher put it) to John the Baptist and the early disciples of Jesus. John the Baptist said that he would baptize with water unto repentance, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fletcher interpreted the disciples of the earthly Jesus as having attained forgiveness of sins and justifying faith, but they had not yet experienced the fullness of the Christian dispensation which came on the day of Pentecost.

Frazier is to be commended for his excellent exposition of the milieu of Fletcher's theology and his theological foundations. His bibliography is most helpful and is worth the price of the book. His discussion of the contemporary understanding of Fletcher's theology is fairly presented, but there are a few nuances that I think could have strengthened his presentation.

First, Frazier's discussion of John Fletcher's idea of regeneration is incomplete. He is correct to point out that John Fletcher linked the new birth to being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Frazier, however, did not point out the larger Catholic understanding of the new birth as it was embraced by

Fletcher. As J. L. Rattenbury pointed out, Charles Wesley also equated being born of God or the new birth with Christian perfection, except in one possible verse.¹ Likewise the early John Wesley equated Christian perfection with the new birth. Subsequently, John Wesley came to equate the term, the new birth, with initial justifying faith, but Charles Wesley and John Fletcher equated the new birth with Christian perfection. Fletcher's unpublished essay on the new birth equated it with Christian perfection. I located this essay in the Fletcher-Tooth Archival Collection as part of the Methodist Archives in the John Rylands Library of Manchester University, England, and it was published in *The Asbury Theological Journal*. 50.1 (Spring, 1998): 35-56. In consistency with his Nazarene Church background, Frazier assumed a uniform meaning of the term, the new birth, as if it only referred to initial justifying faith.

Frazier's definition of the new birth is apparently the source of his assertion that Fletcher used the phrase, the baptism of the Spirit, for initial justifying faith as well as Christian perfection. If so, that really contradicts Fletcher's explicit statements made on several occasions that he intended to make John Wesley consistent in linking the baptism of the Holy Spirit with Christian perfection. In effect, Frazier made Fletcher also "inconsistent" on the very issue that he charged John Wesley with being "inconsistent." Fletcher carefully developed his understanding of the baptism with the Spirit while he was at Trevecca and he never deviated from it. I have never seen a single instance in Fletcher's writings after 1770 where he identified the baptism with the Spirit with justifying faith. On the day of Pentecost, Fletcher says in his *Essay on Truth* that the believers moved from the dispensation of the Father, to the dispensation of the Son, and to the dispensation of the Spirit all at the same time, although he allowed that some may have only "seemed" to have moved into the dispensation of the Spirit when after a few days later they may have discovered indwelling sin still remaining in their hearts. Always for Fletcher, if one has entered the dispensation of the Spirit and has been baptized with the Spirit, he was *ipso facto* entirely sanctified. Fletcher often said that he himself had not entered the dispensation of the Spirit and he worried that he might die only a disciple of John the Baptist because he had not been made perfect in love through the baptism with the Spirit.

Frazier said Joseph Benson changed his mind about the linkage between the baptism with the Spirit and Christian perfection, but I have not find anything to support this shift. Frazier cites Benson's letter to Mary Bosanquet (Fletcher's future wife) in 1778 as proof of this, but his interpretation apparently resulted from an inadequate transcription of the letter. Benson complained to Mary Bosanquet about the "language" that Fletcher used to speak of those who had heard the gospel but refused it. Benson was referring to a manuscript that Fletcher had sent to him entitled

¹ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941, 260-264; cf. John Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 214-225.

“The Language of the Father’s Dispensation.” I also located this essay, and it is published along with the Fletcher’s essay on the new birth in same issue of the *Asbury Theological Journal*. In that essay, Fletcher said that those who had heard the gospel but otherwise did not accept it could still be included in the Dispensation of the Father and as such the “language” of “children of God” could still be applied to them. Benson strongly objected to this idea. Benson said to Mary Bosanquet in the opening paragraph that he fully supported Fletcher’s emphasis on “the baptism with the Spirit,” noting “now who of us will ~~contradict~~ speak a word ag[ains]t this? Who of us will not, rather as we have ability & opportunity bear our testimony to it? About this there is then can be no disputation.” Rather, the disputed thing which “will be deem’d not only new but also unscriptural by most of the serious people in the nation” is the idea that “to whom the gospel is clearly preach’d & its greatest blessing the fullness of the Spirit offer[e]d, may still be under the inferior dispensations of divine grace” and thus be “called children of God.” If Benson had been referring to Fletcher’s use of the language of the baptism with the Spirit, Benson could not have called it in 1778 something “new” and unacceptable to Methodists because Fletcher’s *Last Check* (explaining that Christian perfection was through the baptism with the Spirit) had already been published and endorsed by John Wesley three years earlier. Just one year before writing this letter, Benson actually said in 1777 his views about the baptism with the Spirit had not changed since he was at Trevecca. This fact must have escaped Frazier’s attention because he quoted this material (see Frazier, n161, p. 191). Frazier also reported that Benson’s published sermons on sanctification excluded pneumatological language, but Benson actually said that we are fully sanctified through the fullness of the Spirit.² In the appendix to his biography of Fletcher in 1804, Benson defended Fletcher’s theology of Pentecost against his critics, noting in particular Fletcher defined being “sanctified wholly” with “the fullness of the Spirit” and “Pentecost.”³

Finally, Frazier thinks that Fletcher did not equate the baptism with the Spirit and Christian perfection. Fletcher says without qualification in a letter to Charles Wesley that “the difference [between your brother and me] consists (if there is any) in my thinking, that those who were . . . baptized and sealed with the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost . . . were in the state of Christian perfection . . . As contradistinguished from the faith of ~~the~~ babes, or carnal believers . . . which the apostles had before the day of Pentecost.”⁴ I believe this characterization of the two classes of Christian is consistently maintained throughout Fletcher’s writings after 1770. Fletcher of course had a wide assortment of interchangeable terms to describe the larger meaning of

² Joseph Benson, *Two Sermons on Sanctification* (Leeds, 1782), 29.

³ Benson, *The Life of the Rev. John William de la Flechere*, in *Works*, 8:435-436.

⁴ “Unexampled Labours,” *Letters of the Revd John Fletcher to leaders in the Evangelical Revival*, ed., with an introduction by Peter Forsaith, with additional notes by Kenneth Loyer (London: Epworth, 2008), 320.

perfection, as Frazier has carefully shown.

One can assume that Fletcher understood that Pentecost marked the birthday of the Church, and we know that he supported the rituals and beliefs of the Church of England. His ecclesiastical practices saved his soteriology from an individualistic view of holiness, but his writings in isolation from his actual practice as the vicar of Madeley led to a kind of individualism in early American Methodism and in the subsequent Wesleyan holiness movement where entire sanctification was absolutized and narrowed down to a crisis moment. Fletcher consistently insisted that only fully sanctified believers were Pentecostal believers and that the believer needed “daily” and more complete baptisms with the Spirit as one grew in sanctifying grace.

Frankly, I think Fletcher’s unqualified equation of Christian perfection with the baptism with the Spirit tended toward a contradiction of the baptismal/confirmation liturgy. No one who has become a member of the Church through water baptism (Easter) and confirmation with the laying of hands (Pentecost) can be called literally a pre-Pentecostal believer. Experientially, I think Fletcher was right that such believers may not measure up to their status as a Christian and may be living beneath their privilege as a Pentecostal believer, but nonetheless they are Christian believers and they have access to all the potentialities of divine grace. There is literally no such thing as a pre-Pentecost believer in the strict sense of the term. Benson explained in the appendix to his biography that Fletcher intended his comments about Pentecost and the baptism with the Spirit to be taken metaphorically, but if so, it is not clear that he did. Nor was it clear to Fletcher’s critics. Frazier was rightly worried about any attempt to “flatten out” Fletcher’s theology of Pentecost, but it is equally important recognize the dispensational demarcations that were so important to Fletcher. As Frazier so accurately argues, each succeeding dispensations includes the previous ones, but at the same time Fletcher was consistent in maintaining their differences and insisting on the superiority of each advancing higher dispensations.

Frazier’s fine exposition is a reminder of one of the early leaders of Methodism whose influence was profound and extensive.

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