

## **Wesley's Understanding of Christian Perfection: In What Sense Pentecostal?**

Randy L. Maddox

Laurence Wood recently graced this audience with an extensive essay on “Pentecostal Sanctification in Wesley and Early Methodism.”<sup>1</sup> Given the significance of this issue and the amount of material covered in Wood’s essay I would like to pay it the honor of an equally extensive reply. Let me begin by commending Wood for the seriousness of research reflected in his essay and the passion he reveals for helping the holiness movement to recover a more vital model of Christian Perfection than that inherited from late nineteenth-century debates. I am also sympathetic to his emphasis on the importance of reading the “late Wesley,” though I find more scholars already doing this than he suggests. Finally I would affirm his background thesis that following the publication of John Fletcher’s *Checks* Methodists increasingly granted these a prominence alongside Wesley’s writings, leading many to read Wesley through Fletcher’s eyes on certain issues.

The question that this thesis makes central, of course, is whether such a reading was faithful to Wesley’s own concerns. The burden of Wood’s essay is to argue that a reading of Fletcher’s specific emphasis on “pentecostal sanctification” into Wesley’s later works (i.e., those follow-

---

<sup>1</sup>Wood’s essay appeared in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34.1 (Spring 1999): 24–63. I want to offer my sincere thanks to Larry for his help when I was preparing this response. He not only answered several questions, he also provided portions of his larger manuscript so that I could get a broader sense of his argument.

ing publication of Fletcher's *Checks*) is entirely appropriate. Indeed he claims that while Wesley had some initial questions about this emphasis he was persuaded by Fletcher to "adjust slightly" his understanding of the relation of Pentecost to Christian Perfection and bring it into full agreement with Fletcher's dispensational model (p. 43). The focus of my response will be to explain why I believe that this claim overreads the evidence that is available, and to sketch an alternative analysis of Wesley's perspective on Fletcher's model of Christian Perfection.

### **Three Models Connecting Pentecost to Christian Perfection**

I must begin by suggesting that an assessment of Wood's argument is complicated by an ambiguity running through the various articulations of his central thesis. The way he puts the thesis in his conclusion is representative—namely, that "Wesley affirmed the connection between Pentecost and full sanctification after 1771" (p. 62). The issue left ambiguous in this claim is the type of connection being proposed. I will argue that Wesley had always affirmed a central connection of Pentecost to full sanctification, but that the later Wesley did not affirm the specific type of connection that Wood intends (namely, that championed by Fletcher).

There are at least three models—with differing emphases—of the connection between Pentecost and Christian Perfection in the writings of Wesley and Fletcher. The first of these might be called the *Dispensations of Grace* model. The central claim of this model is that God chose to make available to humanity progressively more effective resources of grace, in parallel with the progressively more complete revelation offered 1) in nature, 2) to the Jews, and 3) in Christ. One major concern of this model was to affirm that God indeed offers true grace in a nascent form (i.e., Prevenient Grace) to all persons, even those who have no contact with special revelation. Another concern was to insist that the New Covenant went beyond God's gracious benefits to Israel, not only in offering justification by faith in Christ but particularly in offering through the Gift of the Holy Spirit more effective gracious empowerment to live holy lives. The first Christian Pentecost was the decisive moment in salvation history when this greater gracious gift was poured out on the church, becoming

available to all thereafter. In this sense all Christians owe whatever degree of sanctification they attain in their lives to the “pentecostal” Spirit. But this does not mean that they had to be present at the original Pentecost, or that they must necessarily experience an *event* just like Pentecost in their lives. What they do have to experience is the regenerating *work* of the “Spirit of Pentecost,” by whatever means one assumes this work is initiated and nourished. While the term “dispensation” is rare, the central claims of this first model are standard through Christian history. Thus it can be found in Wesley long before he had contact with Fletcher.<sup>2</sup>

The second model of the connection between Pentecost and Christian Perfection is less common in the history of the church, but not unexpected from an Anglican. Ironically, Wesley first invoked it to indict his Anglican colleagues at Oxford in his pointed 1744 sermon “Scriptural Christianity.” It might be called the *Pristine Church* model. This model goes beyond affirming that the historical Pentecost introduced the Gift of the Spirit which makes the goal of true holiness a possibility for Christians in this life, advancing the claim that the community of disciples present at the first Christian Pentecost were so open and responsive to the Spirit that they *unanimously* and *immediately* were transformed into *full* holiness of heart and life. However, the rhetorical point of this claim was not so much to praise the earliest church as to emphasize how quickly and how far the subsequent church has fallen, such that *few* attain full holiness now and *rarely* is it attained at the initiation of one’s Christian walk, even though the same gracious resources are *still fully* available! Again, whatever one makes of the claims in this model, Wesley would have owed nothing in it to Fletcher.

Perhaps the most appropriate title for the third model of the relation of Pentecost to Christian Perfection is the *Personal Recapitulation* model. This model will be illustrated by Fletcher because it increasingly defined his understanding of the Christian life. The initial hint of its central claim can be discerned by comparing two early texts. In his 1758 treatise on *The New Birth* Fletcher contrasted the blessings of Christian regeneration to Jewish reformation in classic “dispensations of grace” terms, specifically emphasizing that the regenerating empowerment of the Spirit’s baptism begins at the same moment as justification.<sup>3</sup> In a slightly later (though

---

<sup>2</sup>One of the best early examples is the 1741 Sermon 40, “Christian Perfection,” §§II.11–13, *Works* 2:110–11. Note the defense of the expectation of holiness, but no call (anywhere in this sermon) for experiencing a personal distinct post-justification “Pentecost.”

<sup>3</sup>See *The New Birth*, Part IV, Sec. II, in *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher. Late Vicar of Madeley*, 4 vols. (New York: Waugh & Mason, 1835; reprint, Salem, OH: Schmul, 1974) 4:111–14.

posthumously-published) essay on “The Test of a New Creature” Fletcher again affirmed that regeneration begins with justification, but this time he stressed that this provides only a small degree of divine life and should be followed by “a day of pentecost for believers; a time when the Holy Ghost descends abundantly.” The potential implication here (which Fletcher will develop explicitly later) is that Christians should expect to experience the pouring of divine grace into their lives today in progressive stages that recapitulate the sequential dispensations of outpouring of grace in salvation history.<sup>4</sup> This goes beyond the claim of the “dispensations of grace” model that full sanctification was only available after Pentecost, proposing that the typical pattern for the Christian journey for all subsequent Christians will include a personal post-justification experience of the “baptism of the Spirit,” parallel to what those who were already disciples of Jesus experienced at Pentecost. In other words, while the first model can allow that individual Christians may appropriate in progressive degrees the full sanctifying grace that is *continually available* to them, the third model maintains that God actually makes this grace available to believers in a standard pattern of *progressive stages*, just as God did in history.

With the distinction between these models in mind, I believe it is fair to say that Wood’s thesis is that Fletcher’s articulation of the third model served to lead Wesley beyond the limited claims of the first model to embracing in his later writings 1) the importance of a personal post-justification baptism of the Spirit and 2) the equation of this baptism with the attainment of Christian Perfection (see pp. 31, 53). By contrast, I am convinced that the later Wesley remained uncomfortable with what he saw as implications of the third model, and that the pentecostal references and imagery in his later writings can be fully accounted for within the first two models. In particular the later Wesley resisted any equation of the baptism of the Spirit with entrance into Christian Perfection.

### **Wesley’s Earlier Engagement with Notion of a Post-Justification Baptism of the Spirit**

To understand Wesley’s concerns about emphasizing a post-justification baptism of the Spirit it is helpful to note that the 1771 controversy

---

<sup>4</sup>See Fletcher, “The Test of a New Creature,” *Works* 4:267–70 (quote on 270). The potential implication is more explicit in letters that Fletcher sent to Miss Hatton in 1762 and 1765 (cited by Wood, p. 27).

around Fletcher's "late discovery" was not the first time Wesley engaged this notion. It played a role as well in his struggle shortly after Aldersgate to rethink the "great expectations" instilled by Peter Böhler leading up to that experience.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Wesley began to question the suggestion that conversion immediately provides (and thus one's justification is tested by) unfaltering assurance and entire holiness of heart and life. Wesley visited the Moravians in Germany in late 1738 to find some perspective on Böhler's views and was drawn to Christian David's defense of God's gracious acceptance of those whose faith and holiness were not yet fully alive, on the basis of an analogy with Jesus' disciples who were accepted before they were baptized with the Spirit. Wesley reprinted an appreciative summary of Christian David's claim that Christians can be in justified relationship with God while lacking the "gift" or "indwelling" of the Holy Spirit in a 1740 installment of his *Journal*.<sup>6</sup> Josiah Tucker, an early critic, immediately incorporated this claim into his derogatory account of the "principles" of Methodism. Perhaps to Tucker's amazement, in the 1742 *Principles of a Methodist* Wesley readily endorsed (at this point!) Tucker's suggestion that Methodists teach that justification does not include the indwelling of the Spirit, understanding this to come subsequently with sanctification or Christian Perfection.<sup>7</sup>

This might suggest that Wesley had fully embraced a "personal recapitulation" model nearly thirty years before encountering it in Fletcher, but such a conclusion is premature. Wesley actually began to reject the central distinctive aspects of this model in his writings shortly after 1742, because he increasingly recognized how implications of this model related to other aspects of Moravian theology (i.e., aspects beyond Böhler's distinctive emphases) about which he was already uncomfortable. This discomfort first surfaced in late 1739, focused on the "quietist" suggestion of the Moravians that any attempts at holy living or disciplined use of the means of grace prior to receiving God's gracious gifts of faith and holiness were not only fruitless but actually prevent its reception, which comes by faith *alone*. Wesley's enduring concern about "responsible grace" led him to reject this suggestion, arguing for a vital interaction between God's gracious empowerment and our responsible appropriation.<sup>8</sup> This debate was

---

<sup>5</sup>For more on this see Richard Heitzenrater's fine article "Great Expectations" in *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1989), 106–49.

<sup>6</sup>See *Journal* (8 August 1738), *Works* 18:270–71.

<sup>7</sup>See the original text of *The Principles of a Methodist*, §29, *Works* 9:64–65.

<sup>8</sup>See *Journal* (1–7 November 1739), *Works* 19:119–21; *Journal* (31 December 1739), *Works* 19:132–33; and the discussions of co-operant salvation and the means of grace in Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 147–51, 192–201.

originally framed in terms of the model of a single transition from being dead in sin to being fully alive in grace, but its implications would carry over to Christian David's model. If the newly justified do not yet have the empowering gift of the Spirit, and one assumes that this gift comes by faith *alone*, there would be no place for graciously-empowered responsible growth in the move from being newly justified to enjoying Christian Perfection—one should only wait and pray.

This point was driven home to Wesley in 1741 when Zinzendorf accused him of “changing his religion.” Zinzendorf specifically questioned Wesley's insistence upon responsible growth in personal holiness within the Christian life, equating this with returning to a reliance on inherent merit (i.e., work's righteousness). Wesley's defense pivoted around an insistence that Christ's holiness is not just imputed to true Christians, Christ's Spirit is also present in them—graciously enabling them to achieve perfection.<sup>9</sup> But then how could he accept Christian David's model which specifically treated the merely justified as only having imputed holiness, not the empowering indwelling of the Holy Spirit? At this point Wesley may have been allowing that they were not “true” Christians in the full sense of the word.

What he did not do is assume that this left the newly justified—or any Christian—free from the expectation to grow in holiness. As he pressed this expectation he was increasingly accused of moralism by critics beyond the Moravians. His consistent response from at least 1745 on was to insist that *all* Christians have “received” the Holy Spirit or have been “baptized” with the Spirit, therefore it is not by their inherent “works” but by “putting to work the grace of God” that they are able to grow in holiness. Importantly he specifically leaned on Anglican authorities for this claim, including quoting the liturgies of the church to show that “receiving the Holy Ghost” is an ordinary operation coming through baptism (i.e., at the initiation of Christian life).<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>See *Journal* (3 September 1741), *Works* 19:211–12.

<sup>10</sup>See esp. his 1745 *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part I, §I.6, *Works* 11:108; Part I, §V.23–24, *Works* 11:163–67; & Part II, §III.4, *Works* 11:253; and the 1746 Sermon 5, “Justification by Faith,” §III.6, *Works* 1:193. Note how he reprints the references to Anglican standards in his 1762 *Letter to the ... Bishop of Gloucester*, §II.21–22, *Works* 11:519–22.

This move correlated with his progressive clarification of the distinction between initial and entire sanctification, and his emphasis on the difference between babes in Christ (the new birth), Christian adolescence (growth in grace), and adult Christian faith and holiness (Christian Perfection). He now insisted that even new believers have truly been born of the Spirit or have the Spirit indwelling them, even though they surely need to seek *more* power over sin and *more* peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

### **Wesley's Concerns About Fletcher's "Late Discovery"**

It was in this context that Wesley encountered Fletcher's "late discovery," probably first through reading Joseph Benson's now-lost treatise incorporating it, and jotted on a sheet of paper some notes expressing concerns about it. Wood contends that the only real concern expressed in these notes and related correspondence was that Benson and Fletcher were verging on Zinzendorf's mistake of failing to distinguish between a justified believer and a sanctified believer (pp. 40–41). I see more present in these materials. To help readers judge for themselves I am appending a transcription of the manuscript of Wesley's notes, since it is presently available only in the Duke University archives and one unpublished dissertation.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from the manuscript that the treatise Wesley was critiquing was arguing that persons can be justified (have God's favor) but not yet have "received" the Spirit or experienced "new birth" by the Spirit (cf. Wesley's notes on pp. 15, 19, 24). Moreover, the text apparently used a distinction between water baptism (conveying justification) and a subsequent Spirit baptism (conveying true spiritual "birth") to articulate a *personal recapitulation* model of Christian life (cf. notes on pp. 16, 24, 33, 38). Wesley rejected this correlation. He insisted that the "baptism" or ini-

---

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Sermon 8 (1746), "The First-Fruits of the Spirit," §I.6 & §II.5, *Works* 1:237, 239; Letter to "John Smith" (25 March 1747), §4, *Works* 26:230; Sermon 36 (1750), "The Law Established By Faith, II," §III.6, *Works* 2:43; Sermon 38 (1750), "A Caution Against Bigotry," §I.13, *Works* 2:68; *NT Notes* (1755), Acts 1:5; Sermon 45 (1760), "The New Birth," §IV.3, *Works* 2:198; *Some Remarks on "A Defense of the Preface to the Edinburgh Edition of Aspasio Vindicated"* (1766), §4, *Works* (Jackson), 10:350; and Sermon 14 (1767), "The Repentance of Believers," §II.5, *Works* 1:349.

<sup>12</sup>The manuscript was first brought to scholarly attention by M. Robert Fraser, who appended a transcript in "Strains in the Understandings of Christian Perfection in Early British Methodism" (1988 Vanderbilt University Ph.D. thesis), 491–92.

tial “receiving” of the Holy Spirit comes at justification as the initiation of Christian life. Turning the point around, he claimed that the baptism of the Spirit does not bestow Christian Perfection (i.e., adult Christian holiness) but only the Christian faith of a “babe” (cf. note on p. 9). He willingly allowed that individuals may subsequently experience deeper immersions in the Spirit who indwells them at justification, but Wesley argued that these deeper immersions should not be confused with the “new birth” (cf. notes on pp. 21, 23, 24). In particular, he rejected the “metaphorical” use of “baptism” to refer not to initiatory Christian baptism but to some subsequent immersion in the Spirit (cf. notes on pp. 33, 38).<sup>13</sup>

I would suggest that Wesley’s critical responses to this treatise reflect pastoral concerns drawn from his earlier engagement with the personal recapitulation model, and that these concerns (or the basis for them) are evident in private correspondence among principal players at the time. One of Wesley’s concerns about the treatise is indeed that which Wood highlights. Wesley would have heard overtones of Böhler’s suggestion that one is not truly a Christian at all until one is a perfect Christian. In the terms used in the treatise, if one is not “born again” until they experience Christian Perfection, and one must be born again to enter God’s kingdom (John 3:5), then most newly-justified persons are still outside salvation. It is clear in Wesley’s letter to Benson on 28 December 1770

---

<sup>13</sup>Wood (p. 40) appears to derive from Wesley’s notes concerning pp. 33 & 38 of the treatise that Wesley viewed “baptism with the Spirit” simply as a metaphor for water baptism. Wesley is describing here the *treatise’s* “metaphorical” use of the phrase, not his own. Wesley never uses such phrasing in his own works and would be uncomfortable with it. He consistently sought to keep “baptism with the Spirit” and water baptism distinct while maintaining their interconnection—criticizing both those like the Quakers (cf. his comment concerning p. 16 of the treatise) who reduced baptism to a merely spiritual (or metaphorical?) sense and those who presumed upon their water baptism when it was clear they had long since shut out the spiritual life that it bestowed (if they were infants; if they were adults, whether the baptism of the Spirit accompanied water baptism depended upon their responsiveness). For representative treatments of this relationship in Wesley, see A Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the People Called Quakers (10 February 1748), *Letters* (Telford) 2:124; Sermon 18 (1748), “The Marks of the New Birth,” §1, *Works* 1:417 & §IV.2–5, *Works* 1:428–30; *Serious Thoughts Upon the Perseverance of the Saints* (1751), §23, *Works* (Jackson) 10:294; Letter to Rev. Mr. Potter (4 November 1758), *Letters* (Telford) 4:38; and Sermon 45 (1760), “The New Birth,” §IV, *Works* 2:196–200.

that Benson was drawing this conclusion about himself.<sup>14</sup> And Wesley would have feared that folk might draw the same implication from the suggestion that Fletcher made in a letter to Miss Hatton that believers are only fully assured of justification when they are subsequently “sealed by the Spirit,” or his insistence (specifically against Wesley) in a letter to Benson that none can have a constant witness of their adoption by God but the “baptiz’d.”<sup>15</sup>

A second pastoral concern drawn from the earlier debates is reflected in Wesley’s repeated insistence against the treatise that the term “new birth” be confined to our initial conversion. To understand this insistence it is crucial to see that for Wesley “receiving the Spirit” meant more than just receiving a *witness* of the Spirit to one’s justification (as per Wood, pp. 34, 40), it meant receiving the *empowering presence* of the Spirit into one’s life.<sup>16</sup> Since Wesley equated this empowering presence of the Spirit with grace,<sup>17</sup> he had come to recognize that any intimation that the newly justified still awaited the “birth” or “indwelling” of the Spirit would logically either degenerate into moralism (our efforts *apart from grace*) or leave these new Christians with little expectation of growing *in grace* until they were “born” in some subsequent event. The best evidence

---

<sup>14</sup>Note how Benson’s temptation to “cast away his confidence” in his justification is that he still senses the “inbred enemy,” in Letter to Joseph Benson (28 December 1770), *Letters* (Telford) 5:214. Note also Wesley’s comment about Benson’s faulty judgment “that he is not a believer who has any sin remaining in him,” in the letter to Mary Bishop (27 May 1771), quoted at length by Wood (p. 35).

<sup>15</sup>The letter to Miss Hatton (1 November 1762) is cited by Wood (p. 27). Fletcher’s letter to Joseph Benson (22 March 1771) is reprinted in Fraser, “Strains,” 486–89 (see p. 488). When Wood says that at this time “both Benson and Fletcher believed every child of God may have the witness of the Spirit” (p. 39) he must mean that they believed that those not yet “baptized” may have this witness intermittently.

<sup>16</sup>This is clear throughout Wesley’s works. To cite just a couple early examples, note how he stresses that the power to believe and the power to love come from “receiving” the Spirit, in *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part I, §1.6, *Works* 11:108; and Sermon 5, “Justification by Faith,” §III.6, *Works* 1:193. Cf. the discussion of the character of grace in Wesley as “uncreated” in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 86. Wood (p. 40) cites “Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection,” Q. 19 (in *Works* [Jackson] 11:421) as evidence that Wesley equated “receive the Spirit” with the witness of the Spirit. Wesley here discusses receiving the Spirit (which he says gives sanctification as *one* of the things we freely receive) and then discusses the witness of the Spirit, but is not equating the two.

<sup>17</sup>See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 119–20.

that Fletcher's "late discovery" reminded Wesley of the need to protect against any such intimation is that he went to great pains a year later (late 1772) when preparing the first collection of his *Works* to edit out of *The Principles of a Methodist* (without publicly admitting it!) all of the suggestions that Methodists teach that the "indwelling" of the Spirit comes not at justification but at a subsequent event of Christian perfection, suggestions that he had willingly affirmed in 1742.<sup>18</sup>

A third concern intimated in Wesley's response to the treatise was that in equating the "baptism of the Spirit" with Christian Perfection the author collapses the distinction between a newborn Christian and a mature Christian. Wesley reiterated this distinction in a letter to Benson shortly after reading the treatise.<sup>19</sup> This concern would again reflect the debates with the Moravians and Wesley's conviction that one can be truly born of God prior to reaching Christian Perfection. But it also reflects Wesley's caution growing out of the perfectionist debates that the Methodists weathered in the early 1760s. The focus of these debates had been the extreme claim of a few that a distinct state of Christian Perfection could be obtained immediately by even the most recently justified Christian through the simple affirmation "I believe," apart from any role for cooperant growth in grace between these events. Wesley's pastoral response to this debate had been to reiterate the importance of gradual growth *before* as well as after entire sanctification, and to suggest that while we *can* experience Christian Perfection at any time most believers actually *do* attain this level of maturity (if they ever do) only late in life.<sup>20</sup> Against this background Wesley's contesting of the equation of the baptism of the Spirit with Christian Perfection in the treatise was not just aimed at defending the presence of real spiritual life in those who are not yet perfect; it also was emphasizing that Christian Perfection should not

---

<sup>18</sup>See the alterations made in *The Principles of a Methodist* in the 1772 edition noted in *Works* 9:59 (note 88), 61 (note 94), 63 (note 4), 64 (notes 13, 14), and 65 (note 15). The changes are also schematized on pp. 546–47 (I comment on the 1777 edition below in note 72).

<sup>19</sup>See the Letter to Joseph Benson (16 March 1771), *Letters* (Telford) 5:229 (quoted by Wood, p. 39).

<sup>20</sup>For a discussion of this debate within the chronological developments in Wesley's conception of Christian Perfection see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 180–87. His cautious position coming out of the debates can be sampled in Letter to Charles Wesley (27 January 1767), *Letters* (Telford) 5:39.

be confused with the *beginning* of one's growth in grace, it was a transition to a level of *adulthood* within ongoing growth.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Wesley worried that Fletcher's "late discovery" could imply that the baptism of the Spirit instantaneously induced perfect Christian living in all recipients. That his worry was not totally off target is evident in Fletcher's own reflections on where the difference lay between him and the Methodist leader. In a 1774 letter to Charles Wesley Fletcher ventured that the difference himself and John Wesley was that Fletcher believed that the original disciples at Pentecost were introduced by that event itself into "at least the infancy" of the state of Christian Perfection.<sup>22</sup> This might sound like the same claim made in Wesley's "pristine church" model. But Wesley explicitly limited such uniform immediate perfection to the earliest church, while Fletcher was assuming that it continues to happen to all believers just as it had to the original disciples (i.e., personal recapitulation). Their difference on this point is subtly revealed in a slightly later unpublished essay where Fletcher quotes Wesley's comment in the *NT Notes* on Acts 8:15 that the believers at Samaria had not yet received the Holy Ghost in his "sanctifying graces" (a very typical "dispensations of grace" comment) and then glosses this to suggest that Wesley was intimating that all believers who are baptized with the Holy Ghost receive therein "those full and ripe perfect graces" [the ~~perfect~~ is by Fletcher].<sup>23</sup> In reality, Wesley typically claimed that the new birth awakens in believers only the "seed" of every virtue, these seeds attaining mature (or ripe) strength and shape as we responsibly "grow in grace." No wonder he wrote to Fletcher in 1775 suggesting that where their views on Christian Perfection differ is that Fletcher did not pay enough attention to the distinction between those

---

<sup>21</sup>This is why Wesley would never equate Aldersgate with his entrance into Christian Perfection, an equation that logically follows from the type of connection between the baptism of the Spirit and Christian Perfection that Wood is defending. Cf. Wood's embrace of this equation in "The Rediscovery of Pentecost in Methodism," *Asbury Theological Journal* 53.1 (1998):7–43 (here, 26).

<sup>22</sup>See Fletcher's Letter to Charles Wesley (14 August 1774), in *Asbury Theological Journal* 53.1 (1998):92–93 (here, 93). Fletcher is clearly sensing here that he meant more by the "infancy" of Christian Perfection than John Wesley intended by the "infant" degree of Christian life.

<sup>23</sup>See Fletcher, "An Essay on the Doctrine of the New Birth," §IV, in *Asbury Theological Journal* 53.1 (1998):45. This essay is likely from late 1775 or early 1776.

who are infants in Christian life, those who are adolescents, and those who are adults.<sup>24</sup>

Wesley's earlier engagement with the Moravians had alerted him to several pastoral dangers of even hinting that "full" holiness was typically attained in a single decisive event. One danger was that it would encourage folk to assume that God's work in the soul always takes dramatic—i.e., instantaneous and very perceptible—form, rendering them unappreciative of or insensitive to more gradual and subtle works of grace. It is revealing in this regard that Fletcher's initial evaluation of the debate at Trevecca over his "late discovery" was that he was battling the false notion "that believers are to grow in grace by *imperceptible dews*, and that we can do very well without a remarkable shower of grace and Divine effusion of power, opening in us a well of living water that is to flow to everlasting life."<sup>25</sup> This sounds a lot like Wesley immediately after Aldersgate, but stands in some contrast to the pastoral advice found in the letters of the late Wesley. While he never ceased valuing and defending the possibility of God's dramatic work in the soul, Wesley had come over time to appreciate the more gradual and subtle forms of God's work as well. Thus within a year of Fletcher's resignation Wesley can be found encouraging a correspondent that:

At many times our advances in the race that is set before us are clear and perceptible; at other times they are no more perceptible (at least to our selves) than the growth of a tree. At any time you may pray: "Strength and comfort from Thy word imperceptibly supply." And when you perceive nothing, it does not follow that the work of God stands still in your soul; especially while your desire is unto him and while you choose him for your portion. He does not leave you to yourself.<sup>26</sup>

And in a later letter Wesley could affirm the image of silent (i.e., imperceptible) dews:

You have faith, but it is only as a grain of mustard-seed. Hold fast what you have, and ask for what you want. There is an

---

<sup>24</sup>Letter to John Fletcher (22 March 1775), *Letters* (Telford) 6:144–45.

<sup>25</sup>From a manuscript likely written in March 1771 that is quoted in Luke Tyerman, *Wesley's Designated Successor* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1888), 183–84.

<sup>26</sup>Letter to Philothea Briggs (23 July 1772), *Letters* (Telford) 5:331.

irreconcilable variability in the operations of the Holy Spirit on [human] souls, more especially as to the manner of justification. Many find him rushing in upon them like a torrent, while they experience “The o'erwhelming power of saving grace.” . . . But in others he works in a very different way: “He deigns his influence to infuse; Sweet, refreshing, as the silent dews.” It has pleased him to work the latter way in you from the beginning; and it is not improbable he will continue (as he has begun) to work in a gentle and almost insensible manner. Let him take his own way : He is wiser than you; he will do all things well.<sup>27</sup>

Behind both of these letters we see the danger that persons who assume that God’s work will *always* take dramatic form can easily come to despair whether God is doing any work in their lives. The pastoral advice that Wesley gives in them he would likely also have given to Fletcher if Fletcher had voiced to John the mournful evaluation he gave in 1774 in a private letter to Charles: “I am not in the Christian dispensation of the Holy Ghost and of power. I wait for it, but not earnestly enough: I am not sufficiently straitened till my fiery baptism is accomplished.”<sup>28</sup>

Fletcher’s comments to Charles could awaken fears of one other pastoral danger of identifying the move into “full” Christian holiness with a single event, a danger to which the Moravian controversy had made John Wesley very sensitive. The language of “waiting” until deliverance is decisively “accomplished” hints at a slightly quietist model of attaining Christian perfection, where cooperant growth within the means of grace is downplayed. At this point even when Fletcher affirmed the contribution of the means of grace to the initial attainment of Christian Perfection he typically highlights only the *passive* means of prayer and faith in the truth—reflecting his assumption that Christians cannot even earnestly desire to change our lives prior to the empowering baptism of God.<sup>29</sup> Wesley’s confidence in the gracious empowering work already begun in

---

<sup>27</sup>Letter to Mary Cooke (30 October 1785), *Letters* (Telford) 7:298.

<sup>28</sup>Letter to Charles Wesley (4 July 1774), in *Asbury Theological Journal* 53.1 (1998):91–92.

<sup>29</sup>For example, the only means of grace that he recommends to those seeking the sanctifying Spirit in the *Last Check on Antinomianism* is communal prayer (§XIX, *Works* 2:648). See also his claim in *Essay on Truth* (§V, *Works* 1:538) that it is “truth cordially embraced by faith [that] saves under every dispensation of divine grace, though in different degrees.”

the New Birth allowed him to value as well a *responsive* role for the means of grace as formative disciplines, and to make ongoing faithful participation in the full range of the means of grace central to the attainment of Christian Perfection.

Having sketched the range of concerns that I see in Wesley's immediate response to Fletcher's proposed equation of entire sanctification with a post-justification baptism of the Spirit, I need to comment on the relative *degree* of his concern. Wood portrays Wesley's initial response to Fletcher's proposal as judging it a "dangerous error" that threatened the Methodist movement, and then argues for a reversal of this evaluation a couple of months later (p. 46). I would suggest that this portrayal lacks sufficient nuance. Wood is assuming that Wesley's only concern was that Fletcher's proposal entailed that persons are not Christians until they are delivered from all sin. Wesley did indeed consider this specific possible implication a dangerous error, leading him to doubt Benson's appropriateness to serve as a Methodist preacher until he was assured that Benson (and Fletcher) allowed that penitent believers who have not yet attained Christian perfection are accepted by God.<sup>30</sup> But Wesley clearly distinguished between this specific implication and Fletcher's proposal *per se*, with its other possible implications. This is evident in his earlier concession to Benson that while it is neither scriptural nor theologically quite correct, Methodist folk could call the "second change" of entire sanctification "receiving the Holy Ghost" if they liked.<sup>31</sup>

Those familiar with Wesley's "catholic spirit" will sense in this concession his characteristic willingness to "think and let think" within the Methodist fold concerning theological "opinions." These are matters about which there is legitimate room for debate because they are not decisively settled in scripture or the creeds. The question of whether believers are accepted by God prior to their full deliverance from sin was not open for debate for Wesley because it is decisively settled in scripture. The question of how entire sanctification relates to the baptism of the Holy Spirit is more ambiguous, hence open to competing opinions. But this does not mean that Wesley considered the latter item a matter of theological indifference! The language of "thinking" about theological opinions

---

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Letter to Joseph Benson (9 March 1771), *Letters* (Telford) 5:228; and Letter to Mary Bishop (27 May 1771), *Letters* (Telford) 5:252.

<sup>31</sup>Letter to Joseph Benson (28 December 1770), *Letters* (Telford) 5:214–15.

hints at the seriousness with which he could debate alternatives. However, the point of such debate was not to excommunicate, it was to seek greater insight into and consensus about the desirability of one option over another. One of the major criteria in this discernment was the *practical* impact of each alternative—i.e., its likelihood of fostering or deforming authentic Christian character among the Methodist people.<sup>32</sup> It is precisely worries about this impact that filter through in Wesley’s questioning of the broader range of possible implications of Fletcher’s “opinion.”

### **Evidences of Wesley Later Endorsing Fletcher’s Discovery?**

However one assesses the degree of Wesley’s initial negative reaction to Fletcher’s proposal, is there convincing evidence that he later changed this evaluation? Wood provides a handy eight-point summary of the evidence that he believes “irrefutably” demonstrates that Wesley soon came to endorse Fletcher’s proposed equation of the baptism of the Spirit with Christian Perfection (p. 63). My remaining task is to explain why I find this evidence much less convincing, and to propose a more modest outcome to their dialogue. I will touch on each of Wood’s points, though in differing order. Where my analysis will most resemble that of Wood is the prominence of inferential evidence. Precisely because the issue between Fletcher and Wesley was one of theological opinions, neither of them made it a matter of public debate. Thus we must depend upon the few glimpses of their private dialogue and ponder the implication of indirect indicators like Wesley’s 1772 decision to edit out from his collected *Works* the earlier positive comments on Christian David’s “personal recapitulation” model.

**1. What Wesley Valued about Fletcher’s Doctrine of Dispensations (Wood’s pt. 8)** I will begin with Wesley’s praise of Fletcher’s discussion of dispensations. It is crucial to discern the specific aspects or applications of this discussion that he was endorsing. This requires taking the context in which Fletcher’s *Checks on Antinomianism* were produced with utmost seriousness. Wood notes that the sparking event was the debate between Wesleyan and Calvinist Methodists over the *Minutes* of Wesley’s 1770 conference with his preachers, but he does not highlight that the main accusation of the Calvinists was that these *Minutes* showed Wesley

---

<sup>32</sup>For more on this, see Randy L. Maddox, “Opinion, Religion, and ‘Catholic Spirit’: John Wesley on Theological Integrity,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 47.1 (1992):63–87.

(with his emphasis on “works meet for repentance”) to be an enemy of grace.<sup>33</sup> In a rebuttal letter circulated among his preachers Wesley made it clear that what *he* saw at stake in the attack on the 1770 *Minutes* was a rejection of the balance of his conception of God’s grace as “responsible grace.”<sup>34</sup> As Wesley’s self-appointed vindicator, Fletcher’s primary task in the *Checks* became defending Wesley—and then himself—against the charge of moralism (i.e., of stressing human obedience *rather than* gracious transformation).

Fletcher’s initial apologetic strategy was to cite honored Calvinist divines in defense of Wesley’s disputed claims, invoking Richard Baxter for example as the “John Wesley of the last century.” When such proof-texting stalemated Fletcher turned to probing implications of the classic “dispensations of grace” model of God’s saving work. The implication that drew most of his attention was how this model portrayed good works by the unevangelized as possible only because of an initial degree of God’s prevenient gracious empowerment. This entailed that even in their case salvation was by grace, not by any inherent merit. Drawing a parallel with this case, Fletcher argued that the Wesleyan insistence on responsive obedience from those who did not yet enjoy full Christian holiness was also based on the assumption of ever-prior degrees of God’s gracious empowerment; thus, it too conformed to the doctrine of salvation by grace. When Wesley praised the “wonderful view of the different dispensations which we are under” that Fletcher offers in these initial efforts, what he valued most centrally was surely the way that Fletcher was using the classic notion of progressive dispensations of grace (a model that was assumed by most of Wesley’s critics) to rebut the accusation that Wesleyans teach that humans are “saved for our works.”<sup>35</sup>

The other specific aspect of Fletcher’s discussion of dispensations that Wesley explicitly commended is evident in a 1777 letter admonishing Alexander Knox:

---

<sup>33</sup>Note the accusation of the Countess of Huntingdon recorded in Wesley’s Letter to John Fletcher (22 March 1771), *Letters* (Telford) 5:231.

<sup>34</sup>See Letter to Several Preachers and Friends (10 July 1771), *Letters* (Telford) 5:262–65.

<sup>35</sup>I.e., one should relate Wesley’s Letter to Elizabeth Ritchie (17 January 1775) to the earlier Letter to Mrs. Bennis (1 March 1774) which was written after Fletcher had introduced this notion in the *Third Check*; cf. *Letters* (Telford) 6:76, 137.

You should read Mr. Fletcher's *Essay on Truth*. He has there put it beyond all doubt that there is a medium between a child of God and a child of the devil— namely, a servant of God. This is *your* state. You are not yet a son, but you are a servant; and you are waiting for the Spirit of adoption, which will cry in your heart, "Abba, Father." You have "received the Spirit of grace," and in a measure work righteousness. Without being pained for what you have not, you have cause to bless God for what you have, and to wait patiently till He gives the rest by revealing His Son in your heart.<sup>36</sup>

Note that Wesley is valuing the warrant he discerns in Fletcher's detailing of progressive dispensations of grace for the conviction that Wesley had hammered out following Aldersgate that one can truly have "received the Spirit of grace" even if there has not been an immediate transformation into enjoying constant assurance and full holiness of heart and life. Reflecting his mature perspective on the model of Christian David, Wesley specifically avoids the suggestion that such nascent Christians have not yet "received the Spirit" and need to pray for this dramatic immersion. Instead, he encourages his correspondent to "wait patiently" (in the means of grace?!) for further degrees of the Spirit's progressive enlivening work. In other words, Wesley framed his recommendation of this second aspect of Fletcher's published discussion of dispensations to counteract the very pastoral concerns that he was expressing privately about Fletcher's proposal of a post-justification baptism of the Holy Spirit!

Thus what Wesley affirmed in Fletcher's published discussion of dispensations were implications that Fletcher had drawn from the classic "dispensations of grace" model, not claims specific to his proposed "personal recapitulation" model. Wesley could make this public affirmation with little fear because Fletcher did not press his distinctive claims (more evident in private letters and unpublished manuscripts) prominently in the *Checks*. For example, explicit "baptism of the Spirit" imagery occurs very rarely in the first five *Checks* and almost all of the occurrences fit easily in the "dispensations of grace" model; I could find only one passing hint at the notion of a personal post-justification "pentecostal baptism" for present-

---

<sup>36</sup>Letter to Alexander Knox (29 August 1777), *Letters* (Telford) 6:272–73.

day Christians.<sup>37</sup> But what about the last two *Checks*? I will look at them more closely because Wood leans heavily on them in making his case.

**2. Specific Case of the Equal Check (Wood's pt. 2)** The sixth *Check* was titled *An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* and appeared in three separate parts between May 1774 and March 1775. The longer title reflects a fine-tuning of Fletcher's apologetic agenda. The earlier *Checks* had deflected the accusation of moralism (Pharisaism) against Methodists by charging the accusers with the opposite danger (antinomianism); now Fletcher labored to portray authentic Methodist doctrine as the ideal balance between opposing dangers. His overall goal remained the same as in the earlier volumes: maintaining authentic human *cooperation* with God saving grace.

Wood notes that Wesley almost immediately issued an edited second edition of *The First Part of an Equal Check*, along with a commendatory preface.<sup>38</sup> Wood takes this to demonstrate that "Fletcher literally spoke for Wesley almost as an amanuensis" (p. 49). While it indeed shows that Wesley saw an apologetic benefit in the book, I believe that any further implications are more likely the reverse of what Wood draws. Wesley took the theological refining of works that he judged generally beneficial for his people—like his brother Charles' hymns and the various writers abstracted in the *Christian Library*—to be among his most important roles as the "divine" (as theologians were called in the eighteenth century) of his movement. Fletcher's earlier *Checks* had proven helpful in the debate with the Calvinists. Their growing prominence in turn fostered the assumption among Wesley's critics that he endorsed (through editorial control) everything found in them. Wesley had found it necessary within

---

<sup>37</sup>This evaluation is based on both a computer search and a quick read of the whole. The passing hint is in the *Third Check* when Fletcher seems to imply that John the Baptist and his disciples are a prototype of Christians who have not yet been baptized with the Holy Spirit (an equation he defends more explicitly in the last two *Checks*); cf. Fletcher, *Works* 1:160.

<sup>38</sup>The first edition published in Shrewsbury in 1774 had indeed been Fletcher's own complete work, Wesley's edited version was released later the same year by his publisher (London: Pine) as the second edition (cf. Wood, p. 48, note 77).

the past year to contest this assumption in a public letter.<sup>39</sup> Continuing fears about perceived endorsement of every opinion expressed in Fletcher's original text more likely explains why Wesley chose to issue an *edited* version so quickly.

A comparative reading of the two texts reveals that Wesley edited not just to condense the length but to delete material that he could not endorse. The most relevant example for our purposes comes near the end. In his Second Appendix to "An Essay on Truth" (the fourth section of *The First Part of an Equal Check*) Fletcher returned to his argument that the possibility of Christian perfection is one of the surpassing privileges of the Christian dispensation of grace. He then correlated the three dispensations (heathen, pious Jews and John the Baptist, and Christian) with three degrees of faith—hinting that some who are in the Christian dispensation may progress through these degrees sequentially. His final argument made such sequential progression nearly normative by correlating it to the Anglican sequence of baptism and confirmation.<sup>40</sup> Those who are aware of Wesley's uneasiness with both the assumptions and practice of confirmation will not be surprised to find that his edited version deletes this final argument.<sup>41</sup> Whatever his reasons, the result of this deletion was that Wesley retained the elements of Fletcher's argument that fit the "dispensations of grace" model while removing the element that most favored a normative "personal recapitulation" model.

As Wood notes, the issue of editorial endorsement goes beyond what Wesley chose to retain in his edition of *The First Part of an Equal Check*, Wesley also marked several sections of the work with an asterisk to indi-

---

<sup>39</sup>See *Some Remarks on Mr. Hill's "Farrago Double-Distilled"* (14 March 1773), §40, *Works* (Jackson) 10:438. Hill asks why Wesley let the expression stand in one of Fletcher's *Checks*: "Solomon is the chief of the Mystics." Wesley responded: "Perhaps because I thought it an harmless one, and capable of a good meaning. But I observe again: Mr. Hill takes it for granted, that I have the correction of Mr. Fletcher's books. This is a mistake: Of some I have; of others I have not." Fletcher had made this claim in the *Second Check*, Letter 2 (*Works* 1:90); and then tried to clarify it in the *Fourth Check*, Letter 5, footnote (*Works* 1:238).

<sup>40</sup>See Fletcher, *Works* 1:589–94 (this edition of *Works* reprints Fletcher's first edition of *The First Part of an Equal Check*). Note that Wood advances the same argument as Fletcher on pp. 31–32.

<sup>41</sup>Compare Wesley's edited edition (London: Pine, 1774), 181; to Fletcher's edition in *Works* 1:594–95. I am grateful to the staff at the United Methodist archives at Drew University for making a copy of Wesley's edited edition available to me.

cate their particular usefulness. Wood claims that the sections marked specifically highlight Wesley's endorsement of Fletcher's equation of the baptism of the Spirit with full sanctification, particularly in "An Essay on Truth" which Wood characterizes as "saturated with Pentecostal terms, such as 'the baptism of the Spirit,' as expressing the meaning of holiness" (p. 49). My investigation of this work did not substantiate Wood's claim.

While general references to the importance of the work of the Spirit permeate the book, I could only locate a half dozen specific references to the "baptism of the Spirit" (or closely related terminology).<sup>42</sup> The first reference (which Wood emphasizes that Wesley highlighted) articulates the classic "dispensations of grace" claim that the full benefits of the Spirit were not available *until* Pentecost, but now come to *all* true Christians.<sup>43</sup> The last reference (which Wesley again highlights) marvels in "pristine church" terms at how the gift of the Spirit miraculously formed that first Christian community into a harmonious whole.<sup>44</sup> Between these two bookends are a couple of passages that Wesley lets stand where Fletcher suggests that some present-day persons experience only the baptism of John (penitence) and not the baptism of the Spirit (assurance) that makes them truly Christian.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, Wesley deleted a section containing the phrase "a spiritual Christian is baptized in the Spirit," which could connote that there are some (nonspiritual) Christians who were not so baptized.<sup>46</sup> The remaining reference (which Wesley retains without

---

<sup>42</sup>This count does not include the tangential references in Fletcher's Address to Baptized Heathen in "An Essay on Truth," where his concern is to challenge the widespread presumption upon the mere fact of one's (infant) baptism as automatically bestowing salvation; or Fletcher's quote of Wesley's "pristine church" model in the sermon "Scriptural Christianity" (see *Works* 1:585).

<sup>43</sup>Fletcher argues in his Preface that believers in earlier dispensations did not always have assurance, but that assurance is inseparably connected with the Christian dispensation which was fully instituted by Christ's outpouring of the baptism of the Spirit on Pentecost. He then says "No body therefore can truly believe, according to *this* dispensation, without being *immediately* conscious both of the forgiveness of sins, and of peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." Wesley could easily affirm this within his "dispensations of grace" model (cf. his edition, pp. vi–vii)!

<sup>44</sup>See Fletcher, *Works* 1:593; Wesley's edition, 180–81.

<sup>45</sup>Wesley highlights the more subtle occasion (*Works* 1:580; Wesley's edition, 161–62) but not the more overt one (compare *Works* 1:590 to Wesley's edition, 176–77; the \* in *Works* is Fletcher's notation for a footnote, Wesley's edition replaces it with † to distinguish it from his highlighting!).

<sup>46</sup>Compare *Works* 1:536 to Wesley's edition, which deletes the entire Section IV of "An Essay on Truth."

emphasis) is Fletcher's exhortation to those who already enjoy sanctifying power that they be "daily baptized" with the Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

It is hard to see in any of this a strong endorsement of the equation of entrance into Christian Perfection with a post-justification baptism of the Spirit. Wesley specifically minimized the distinctive aspects of Fletcher's proposed "personal recapitulation" model in the edited version. This is particularly striking in light of a meeting that Wesley held with Fletcher between the release of the original and edited editions of *The First Part of an Equal Check*, precisely to discuss questions being raised about Fletcher's proposed model of Christian Perfection.<sup>48</sup> Fletcher insists that he satisfied Wesley's concern at this meeting, but Wesley's subsequent editorial work suggests that while he may have been satisfied that there was room for continuing discussion of Fletcher's opinion in Methodist circles he remained uncomfortable with some of its apparent implications.

Ironically, in this same period between release of the first and second part of *An Equal Check* Fletcher was becoming increasingly convinced that identifying the move into Christian Perfection with a unique act of divine empowerment (i.e., a distinct baptism with the Holy Spirit) was the most hopeful way to finally convince opponents that the Wesleyan Methodist emphasis on holiness did not amount to works' righteousness.<sup>49</sup> This apologetic motivation led him to express the equation of the move into full Christian salvation with a post-justification baptism of the Spirit more clearly in the remaining two parts of *An Equal Check*.<sup>50</sup> This more overt resolve may explain why Fletcher sought neither Wesley's editorial revision nor a commendatory preface for these two volumes. The fact that Wesley allowed them to be published through Methodist channels would signify his continuing openness to Methodists discussing Fletcher's opinion, but falls far short of proving that Wesley embraced this opinion himself. Indeed, Wesley's private complaint to Fletcher about collapsing the distinction between infant and adult Christian life was in direct response to these two volumes.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup>*Works* 1:571; Wesley's edition, 149–50.

<sup>48</sup>Fletcher describes this meeting in his letter to Charles Wesley (14 August 1774), *Asbury Theological Journal* 53.1 (1998):92.

<sup>49</sup>See his comment to Charles in this regard in *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>See esp. *Second Part of an Equal Check*, §XII, *Works* 2:110; and *Third Part of an Equal Check*, *Works* 2:135.

<sup>51</sup>Cf. Letter to John Fletcher (22 March 1775), *Letters* (Telford) 6:144–45.

**3. Specific Case of the Last Check (Wood's pt. 6)** This brings us to Fletcher's influential *Last Check* that defends the Wesleyan claim that Christians can be delivered from indwelling sin during this life. The main apologetic task in this regard was exegetical, explaining those scriptures that appear to teach that a sinful principle remains in believers until death or that emphasize the continuing need of all Christians for God's gracious forgiveness. Even so, Fletcher's assumptions about how one attains the state of freedom from indwelling sin are laced through the discussion, particularly in his concluding exhortations.

A careful reader will sense in several places Fletcher's distinctive conviction that a post-justification baptism of the Holy Spirit is the primary means by which our sin-enslaved lives are freed for holy obedience. It comes through most clearly in the prayer he proposes for Christians seeking entire sanctification:

Lord, I want a plenitude of thy Spirit, the full promise of the Father, and the rivers which flow from the inmost souls of the believers who have gone on to the perfection of their dispensation. I do believe that thou canst and wilt thus "baptize me with the Holy Ghost and with fire:" help my unbelief: confirm and increase my faith, with regard to this important baptism.<sup>52</sup>

However, one is also struck by the way that Fletcher appears to be trying to satisfy Wesley's private objections in this volume. For example his opening definition of Christian Perfection identifies it as "that maturity of grace and holiness which established adult believers attain to under the Christian dispensation" and makes no immediate connection to the baptism of the Spirit.<sup>53</sup> While Fletcher assumed such a connection, his definition was broad enough that one working within a "dispensations of grace" model could fully embrace it. Likewise Fletcher defends at some length in this text the possibility of *gradual* perfecting in love as well as instantaneous transformation, now saying that to deny this "is as absurd as to deny that God waters the earth by daily dews, as well as by thunder showers!"<sup>54</sup> Finally, while privileging the method of seeking perfection by laying hold of it in simple faith, Fletcher insists that "in the meantime we should do the works of faith." It is difficult not to hear muted echoes of

---

<sup>52</sup>*Last Check*, §XIX, *Works* 2:656.

<sup>53</sup>*Last Check*, §I, *Works* 2:492.

<sup>54</sup>*Last Check*, §XIX, *Works* 2:636–38.

ongoing friendly dialogue between Wesley and Fletcher behind the relatively greater prominence that these points find in the *Last Check*.

The other evidence of dialogue over their continuing differences that one finds in the *Last Check* is Fletcher's frank admission that he differs from Wesley in assigning sanctifying faith to "the baptism (or outpouring) of the Spirit" while Wesley attributes it (in his sermon "The Scripture Way of Salvation") in more general terms to the Spirit's various enlivening affects on our soul.<sup>55</sup> Fletcher suggests that this is merely a verbal difference, with Wesley using more technical theological terms while he is sticking closer to scripture. Given his own tendency to speak in scriptural phrases, I think Wesley would have described it instead as a continuing difference of opinion over *which* scriptural imagery (with related implications) best captures the dynamics of attaining Christian perfection.

While we have no record of Wesley's actual response to Fletcher's suggestion, his brief evaluation of the *Last Check* in a letter to Fletcher is revealing.<sup>56</sup> First there is the tantalizing line "I do not perceive that you have granted too much, or that there is any difference between us." Unfortunately Wesley does not reveal the exact topic about which Fletcher worried that he had granted too much, and I have found no independent indicator. But then Wesley goes on to say "The Address to the Perfect I approve most, and think it will have a good effect." In this case his reference is clear. The "Address to the Perfect" concludes the *Last Check* with a series of admonitions for those claiming Christian Perfection to remain sensitive to their human fallibility, faithful in their spiritual disciplines, humble in their spirit, and constantly growing in grace. That Wesley highlighted this section over the section where Fletcher stresses seeking the baptism of the Spirit by faith is significant. As Wesley goes on to say in his letter, "the doctrine of Justification and Salvation by Faith are grievously abused by many Methodists. We must guard as many as we can." The 1760s holiness debate had left Wesley hypersensitive to the danger of playing instantaneous sanctification by faith off against ongoing responsive participation in the means of grace. What he most valued in Fletcher's *Last Check* was not Fletcher's emphasis on the benefits of a post-justification baptism of the Spirit, but the way that Fletcher had

---

<sup>55</sup>See *ibid*, 647.

<sup>56</sup>Letter to John Fletcher (18 August 1775), *Letters* (Telford) 6:175.

counterbalanced this emphasis with an admonition for responsible growth in grace.

**4. Wesley's Endorsement of Fletcher neither *carte blanche* nor *unique* (Wood's pt. 1)** In light of all of this, what are we to make of the 1782 letter that Wood cites where Wesley says to Fletcher "I am satisfied with your motives and you had from the beginning my Imprimatur"? Once again it would help to know the specific topic that sparked this comment, and in this case I have not been able to locate the letter that Wood cites to check its larger context, let alone any indication of Fletcher's inquiry to which Wesley was responding.<sup>57</sup> Even so, I am confident that we should not take this to mean that Wesley was expressing "complete and unqualified approval of Fletcher's writings" (cf. Wood, p. 48). Wesley would not grant such *carte blanche* approval to any human author's work. More to the point, we have noted several places where Wesley expressed privately his personal disagreement or uncomfortableness with aspects of Fletcher's various published works. I would hesitate to press Wesley's implication in this comment beyond the point that he had found nothing in Fletcher's writings that stepped outside of the legitimate range of differing *opinions* that Wesley was willing to allow within his Methodist camp.

To take this a step further, while Wesley valued Fletcher's writings it is not obvious that he granted them a unique place of privilege in defining the doctrine of Christian Perfection, or Wesleyan doctrine in general. It is true that Wesley encouraged his preachers to read the *Checks* in the "Large Minutes" (notably, with specific reference to refuting Calvinism). But it is not true that Fletcher is the only one so recommended. Earlier in this same document Wesley instructed his preachers to read the entire *Christian Library*, which contained a range of theological voices—including a few which Wesley recognized stood in some tension with his own.<sup>58</sup> More significantly, the lists of suggested reading in general theology that Wesley sent to his preachers and lay members in the years between the completion of the *Checks* and Fletcher's death all include alongside Wes-

---

<sup>57</sup>Wood unfortunately was not able to make a photocopy at the time he jotted down the excerpt he quoted. Peter Nockles, curator of the Methodist archives in the John Rylands Library, made a search for the letter at my request but could not locate it (the collection is not yet fully indexed).

<sup>58</sup>See "Large Minutes," Q. 29, *Works* (Jackson) 8:314.

ley's own works Bishop Pearson's *On the Creed* (a long-time Wesley favorite) but nothing by Fletcher.<sup>59</sup> Would this be the case if Fletcher (and his distinctive view of Christian Perfection) carried Wesley's unique endorsement?

### **5. Supposed Standard Encoding of "Baptism of the Holy Spirit"?**

**(Wood's pts. 3b & 7)** Against this background of Wesley's clear—but *focused* and *not uncritical*—appreciation for Fletcher's writings, I must challenge Wood's assertion that Fletcher established "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" as a standard encoded phrase for Christian perfection among Methodists by as early as 1774 with *The First Part of an Equal Check* (cf. pp. 47–48, 58). I believe I have shown that this is not obvious in Wesley's case. It is beyond the scope of this response to consider all of Wesley's eighteenth-century colleagues or the developments in nineteenth-century Methodism, but a greater divergence of views than Wood allows can be demonstrated there as well. Fletcher's theology did assume a prominent role in nineteenth-century Methodism, particularly in North America, and his "personal recapitulation" model of Spirit baptism did become normative for one major branch of this movement, but it never held the unquestioned universal role that Wood implies.<sup>60</sup>

The real problem with Wood's assertion of this standard encoding is methodological, it leads to circular reasoning. On the basis of his assumption that this encoding was in place Wood attributes to every instance of Wesley's infrequent use of "the baptism of the Spirit" all of the implications of Fletcher's proposed model (even if these implications are not mentioned in the context), and he reads Wesley's frequent affirmations of the Spirit's *general* role in sanctification as all implicitly focusing this

---

<sup>59</sup>See Letter to Alexander Knox (5 June 1778), *Letters* (Telford) 6:314; and Letter to [his niece] Sarah Wesley (8 September 1781), *Letters* (Telford) 7:83. Compare earlier recommendations of Pearson in *Journal* (23 February 1749), *Works* 20:263; and Letter to Margaret Lewen (June 1764), *Letters* (Telford) 4:247.

<sup>60</sup>For a fine treatment of the differing emphases in early British Methodism see Fraser, "Strains." I have discussed the tensions in American Methodism (involving differing assessments of Fletcher's proposal) in "Holiness of Heart and Life: Lessons from North American Methodism," *Asbury Theological Journal* 51.1 (1996): 151–72. For evidence of the growing role of Fletcher's theology in American Methodism see Maddox, "Respected Founder / Neglected Guide: The Role of Wesley in American Methodist Theology," *Methodist History* 37 (1999): 71–88, esp. footnotes 13–17.

work in the specific event of the baptism of the Spirit.<sup>61</sup> Thereby his operating assumption obscures the very evidence that could suggest a difference of emphasis between Wesley and Fletcher. It would have the same effect applied to other Methodist thinkers.

**6. Wesley's Own Preaching (Wood's pts. 3a & 5)** Let me illustrate this methodological problem by considering the preaching of the "late Wesley" that Wood emphasizes. I will start with the sermons that Wesley published in the *Arminian Magazine*. Wood argues that these sermons contain extensive use of Pentecostal phrases as encoded nomenclature for Christian perfection (pp. 51–55). Emphasis on the work of the Spirit can be found in all of them, and many contain references to Pentecost in relation to the possibility of Christian perfection, but all of these references remain within Wesley's long-standing embrace of the "dispensations of grace" and "pristine church" models.

For example the 1781 sermon "On Zeal" has a section describing the balanced religion "which our Lord has established upon earth, ever since the descent of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost." Nothing in this section goes beyond the "dispensations of grace" model to hint at the distinctive notion of a post-justification baptism of the Spirit for present believers. Nor are there such hints in the 1782 sermon "God's Love to Fallen Man," which emphasizes how God's response to the fall included providing the Holy Spirit to renew the image of God in our soul and seal us unto the day of redemption.<sup>62</sup> The most telling sermon in this regard is the 1788 "On Faith." In this sermon Wesley sets out to map the various species of faith, drawing an explicit parallel with Fletcher's detailed distinctions of the various dispensations of grace. But in his parallel Wesley makes a significant refinement of Fletcher. We noted that in the later *Checks* Fletcher equated the state of a Christian who is forgiven but not yet baptized with the Spirit with the dispensation of John the Baptist. In his sermon Wesley quickly dismisses the need to discuss a type of present faith fitting the dispensation or faith of John the Baptist "because these, as Mr. Fletcher well describes them, were peculiar to himself"! Wesley instead

---

<sup>61</sup>Note for example how easily he concludes that Wesley intended by "sealed with the Spirit" the same thing Fletcher assigned to the "baptism with the Holy Spirit" (p. 51).

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Sermon 92, "On Zeal," §II.5–6, *Works* 3:313–14; and Sermon 59, "God's Love to Fallen Man," §I.2–3, *Works* 2:426–27.

moves to the Christian dispensation and distinguishes *within* this dispensation between those who have only the faith of a servant and those who have the full faith of a son. Those who have the faith of a servant are sensitive to the Spirit's awakening work in their lives and Wesley exhorts them not to halt by the way until they "receive the Spirit of adoption." He then makes clear that this event is not their entire sanctification by exhorting those who have received this Spirit to "go on to perfection." His specific advice for attaining this perfection is to "walk in all the *good works* whereunto ye are created in Christ Jesus," not to seek some yet-lacking baptism of the Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

Wesley's 1785 sermon "On the Church" requires distinct attention. Wood argues that it teaches that water baptism only gives the Spirit in a "lower sense" while the baptism of the Spirit is reserved for fully sanctified believers. He bases this on the quote "Some indeed have been inclined to interpret this [water baptism (Wood's addition)] in a figurative sense, as if it referred to that baptism of the Holy Ghost which the apostles received at the day of Pentecost, and which *in a lower degree* [Wood's italics] is given to all believers."<sup>64</sup> A check will reveal that the referent of "this" in the excerpt Wood quotes is not water baptism but the scriptural text on which Wesley was preaching: "There is one baptism." In this passage Wesley is actually arguing *against* those (like the Quakers) who overlook the unique dispensational situation of the apostles at Pentecost and draw the faulty conclusion that the "spiritual" baptism that they received is totally distinct from (and replaces) water baptism in Christianity. His comment about those who receive the baptism of the Spirit "in a lower degree" refers not to those who have only water baptism, but indeed to *all* Christian believers other than (i.e., subsequent to) the apostles. This comment is reminiscent of Wesley's "pristine church" model.

Indeed, the most striking of Wesley's later sermons explicitly revive his "pristine church" model, this time using it to indict his own Methodist people rather than the broader Anglican community. In the 1783 "The Mystery of Iniquity" Wesley reiterates the claim that Acts demonstrates that the community present at the first Christian Pentecost were so open and responsive to the Spirit that they *unanimously* and *immedi-*

---

<sup>63</sup>See Sermon 106, "On Faith," *Works* 3:492–501. The most significant paragraphs, from which the quotes are taken, are I.7, I.10–13, and II.5.

<sup>64</sup>Compare Wood's quote (p. 53) to Sermon 74, "Of the Church," §I.12, *Works* 3:49–50.

ately were transformed into *full* holiness of heart and life. The particular evidence of this transformation that he highlights is their willingness to share “all things in common.” Then Wesley described in woeful terms how quickly and universally the Christian church has fallen from this ideal, and argues that the chief culprit in this fall has been the desire for riches.<sup>65</sup> Lest his Methodist people see themselves as an exception, Wesley recapitulated the argument in the 1784 “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” this time focusing in particularly on how quickly the early Methodist movement lost its spiritual focus.<sup>66</sup> In all three sermons Wesley’s prescription for recovering the spiritual life evident at Pentecost included nothing about seeking a new baptism of the Spirit; instead he exhorted his people to repent and again begin to share their riches with those in need. If they would do so then the “Pentecost” of Methodism might fully come—with Methodist converts moving quickly from Christian infancy to maturity, unlike what was now the case.<sup>67</sup>

If there is no clear endorsement of the identification of the attainment of Christian perfection with the baptism of the Spirit in Wesley’s later published sermons, what about his oral sermons? Wood highlights a couple of 1783 reports of Wesley preaching on the passages in Acts about being “baptized” or “filled” with the Holy Spirit (pp. 57–58). It would not be hard to add other examples such as Wesley’s decision on Pentecost 1781 to preach on “They were all filled with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:4) and show “in what sense this belongs to us and to our children.” But should we assume from this (as Wood does) that Wesley’s sermons expounded Fletcher’s “encoded” claims? I do not think so. While it is

---

<sup>65</sup>See Sermon 61, “The Mystery of Iniquity,” *Works* 2:452–70; the appeal to Pentecost is in §8. The emphasis on holding all things in common as the key evidence of the full sanctification of the Pentecost community was present already in his initial invocation of the “pristine church” model in Sermon 4, “Scriptural Christianity,” §I.10, *Works* 1:165.

<sup>66</sup>Sermon 68, “The Wisdom of God’s Counsels,” *Works* 2:552–66; appeal to Pentecost in §7. For a slightly earlier sermon that is less explicit in its critique of Methodists see Sermon 63, “The General Spread of the Gospel,” §§13–20, *Works* 2:490–94. Cf. his 1788 “Thoughts upon a Late Phenomenon,” *Works* 9:534–37.

<sup>67</sup>This is the context in which to understand Wesley’s comment to Fletcher, “The generality of believers in *our* Church (yea, and in the Church of Corinth, Ephesus, and the rest, even in the Apostolic Age) are certainly no more than babes in Christ; not young men, and much less fathers. But we have some, and we should certainly pray and expect that our Pentecost may fully come.” Letter to John Fletcher (1 June 1776), *Letters* (Telford), 6:221.

well known that Wesley's oral sermons were not exact copies of his written sermons, their general themes were surely the same. I can see no reason to assume that the content of these oral sermons was any different than that in the contemporaneous written sermons just discussed. Indeed my guess is that Wesley's Pentecost 1781 sermon was a ringing indictment of growing materialism in the Methodist movement.

**7. Publications in the Arminian Magazine (Wood's pt. 4)** It remains only to touch on Wood's claim that Wesley published (and thereby editorially endorsed) articles by others in the *Arminian Magazine* that highlighted the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the meaning of Christian perfection. The only example that Wood cites is an article by Benson in volume four (1781). In scanning this volume I found no other *articles* relating Christian perfection to the baptism of the Spirit, though there were several letters by his Methodist followers. As Wesley admonishes in the prefaces to early volumes of the magazine, these letters must be read with a critical eye. He selected for inclusion those that most effectively expressed Christian experience and practice, though he allowed that their particular manner of expression was sometimes controversial.<sup>68</sup> The letters included in volume four are an excellent example of this mixture. They come from the early stages of the 1760s holiness debates and several suggest the claim (which Wesley explicitly rebutted in his sermon on "Wandering Thoughts") that believers can have and must seek a *third* blessing of the Spirit that removes all wandering thoughts and places them above temptation!<sup>69</sup> Wesley's printing of these should not be taken as a total endorsement of their contents.

By contrast, I agree with Wood that in printing Joseph Benson's article "Thoughts on Perfection" in this volume Wesley was endorsing it.<sup>70</sup> But just what was he endorsing? Wood twice (pp. 24, 44) quotes from this article Benson's claim that "God *may*, and, . . . *does, instantaneously* so baptize a soul with the Holy Ghost and with fire, as to purify it from all dross, and refine it like gold, so that it is *renewed in love*, in *pure* and *per-*

---

<sup>68</sup>See *Arminian Magazine*, 2 (1779), Preface §§4–7, in *Works* (Jackson) 14:282–83; 3 (1780), Preface, §§3 & 7, in *Works* (Jackson) 14:285–86; and 4 (1781), Preface, §3, *Works* (Jackson) 14:287.

<sup>69</sup>See esp. the letters in *Arminian Magazine* 4 (1781):110–11, 278–9, 334–35, 442–46. Cf. Sermon 41, "Wandering Thoughts," *Works* 2:126–37.

<sup>70</sup>See "Thoughts on Perfection," By Mr. J. B., *Arminian Magazine* 4 (1781):549–53.

fect love.” In both cases Wood elides a significant qualifier by Benson. What Benson wrote is that “God *may*, and that he often *does* . . .”(p. 553). Wesley would have little trouble endorsing this claim. His “pristine church” model requires the possibility that the Spirit’s baptism (coming at one’s initial conversion) *can* instantaneously bring about full renewal, even as this model laments that this is currently not frequently enough the case. What Wesley resisted was a standardized model where present believers were led to expect that the move into Christian perfection could *only* come in this rapid way. The strategic “often” in Benson’s article shows that he had come to accept Wesley’s qualification. More importantly, the occasion of Benson’s article was his concern about instances of misconduct by those professing Christian perfection, and the substance of the article was a series of exhortations to watchfulness and humility (like Fletcher’s “Address to the Perfect”). I fail to see how publishing Benson’s article shows Wesley endorsing the identification of Christian perfection with a post-justification baptism of the Spirit. Instead it appears to show that Benson, like Fletcher, was nuancing his earliest claims as a result of his dialogue with Wesley! This move on Benson’s part is even clearer in two sermons on sanctification he published in 1782. Benson avoids equating entire sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit in these sermons, attributing entire sanctification instead to an *increase* of the influences of the Spirit that was given to us at our conversion, and stressing the role of responsible participation in the means of grace in nurturing this increase.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Let me wrap up this overly-long response with two conclusions. The first is historical. I believe that what the Fletcher/Wesley dialogue over the baptism of the Holy Spirit reveals is that there was *diversity* on this topic within the early Methodist movement, even among these two close friends. While Wesley saw Fletcher’s proposal as an allowable opinion, he expressed privately to Fletcher various concerns about it. Fletcher’s response was not to surrender the proposal but to temper his presentation of it in ways that addressed Wesley’s concerns. As a result, by the late 1770s this issue faded from the focus of their interac-

---

<sup>71</sup>See Joseph Benson, *Two Sermons on Sanctification* (Leeds: J. Bowling, 1782), esp. pp. 28–29, 34–35, 47.

tion, though both retained their differing opinions.<sup>72</sup> The question posed by the later history of Methodism is whether Wesley's concerns about the possible implications of Fletcher's proposal have proven warranted.

My second conclusion embraces Wood's commendable concern for how we as Wesley's and Fletcher's heirs can recover an appreciation for the doctrine of Christian perfection and a commitment to pursuing this in our lives. Wood's suggestion is that we need to break out of the moralism that engulfed the twentieth-century holiness movement and focus our people's attention again on experiencing the renewing infilling of the Spirit. Like Wesley, I would endorse strongly the importance of Christians at all stages in their journey nurturing their openness to the Spirit's affect in their lives. However I also share Wesley's concern about focusing exclusively on experience when seeking to nurture holiness of heart and life. Thus I would suggest that we need to recover the balance found in Wesley's purported response to the question of what should be done to keep Methodism alive after his death:

Preach our doctrine, inculcate experience, urge practice, enforce discipline. If you preach doctrine alone, the people will be antinomians; if you preach experience only, they will become enthusiasts; if you preach practice only, they will become Pharisees; and if you preach all of these and do not enforce discipline, Methodism will be like a highly cultivated garden without a fence, exposed to the ravages of the wild boar of the forest.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup>This is indicated by the fading of evidences of private discussion of this issue after 1776. It is also suggested by the reissuing of the tract *The Principles of a Methodist* in 1777 (the first reprint since the edited version in the 1772 collected *Works*). Wesley's method of revising such tracts for reprinting was to take the prior edition and mark in his changes. In this case, rather than trying to extract and edit the pages in the *Works*, Wesley used the earlier separate edition that contained his endorsement of Christian David's model (see the schemata in *Works* 9:546–47). While Wesley introduced some minor changes into the 1777 edition, he did not sense it necessary now to covertly excise this endorsement as he had in 1772. This *might* be because he now agreed again with the "personal recapitulation" model, but lacking other strong evidence of such a change I take it to show instead that this topic was not presently as focal to his concerns as it had been in 1772.

<sup>73</sup>Cited in Franz Hildebrandt, *Christianity According to the Wesleys* (London: Epworth, 1956), 11–12. Hildebrandt takes this from a caption under a picture in Nicolson Square Church, Edinburgh. As he notes, there is no corroborating record of this precise quote, but it epitomizes Wesley.

## Appendix

This manuscript is housed in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library of Duke University, and is published here with permission. It is by Wesley and most likely records his reaction notes while reading Joseph Benson's (now lost) paper on "The Baptism of the Holy Ghost." Richard Heitzenrater has kindly shared his expertise in polishing the following transcription (which expands all abbreviations).

- p. 9 Q? If Cornelius then received any more than the Christian faith of a Babe?
- p. 10 Q? If any more than this is implied in John 14.15, etc.
- p. 15 Is not an assurance of God's favour the fruit of "receiving the Holy Ghost"? i.e. in the first degree?
- ib. "Is any one of these Christian Dispensations."  
Q? Is any more than one?
- p. 16 No. 8 This sentiment, I think, is utterly new. I never yet baptized a real Penitent who was not then baptized with the Holy Ghost. See our Catechism. One Baptism includes the Outward Sign and the Inward Grace. The Quakers only speak otherwise in order to set aside Water Baptism.
- p. 19 I allow all that is said in the latter end of this page. But let us confine the term New Birth to its one Scriptural meaning.
- p. 23 "Ought to be distinguished." Ἐπέχω
- p. 24 Every Penitent is then baptized with the Holy Ghost; i.e., receives righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.  
I have proved it over and over.  
I do not think the Doctrine of the threefold Dispensation requires one word to be said about Water baptism. It may be built on a less disputable Foundation.
- p. 20. Q? Is this a parallel case?
- [p.] 21. Or this? Still I scruple the term Birth
- [p.] 23. Have ye received the Holy ghost. He does not use the term Birth here.

- [p.] 24. Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost—i.e. shall receive him as ye have not yet done.
- [p.] 25. St. Paul certainly means that to Christians there is but One Baptism or Outward sign of the New Birth.
- [p.] 29. I doubt if the Expression be worth so much dispute; it seldom occurs in the Bible.
- [p.] 33. Were it needfull, I should make many Queries here. But *tis lis de verbis*.<sup>74</sup> Still I doubt, whether we need say a word about Water Baptism. I doubt if the word Baptism is ever used (unless twice or thrice metaphorically) for any but Water Baptism. And we can sufficiently prove our whole Doctrine, without laying any stress on those metaphorical Expressions.
- [p.] 38. It will never quit<sup>75</sup> (could it be done) to confute our Church Catechism.  
The thing I object to all along, is the laying so much stress on the metaphorical expression, “Baptized with the Holy Ghost.”

---

<sup>74</sup>Latin: “Merely strife over words.”

<sup>75</sup>“Quit” is probably used in sense of “clear us of charges.”