

TH
F 955

THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOHN FLETCHER
TO
WESLEYAN-ARMINIAN THEOLOGY

By

ELDON RALPH FUHRMAN

A. B., John Fletcher College

B.D., Asbury Theological Seminary

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SACRED THEOLOGY
in
The Biblical Seminary in New York

New York, N. Y.
April, 1957

BIBLICAL SCHOOL OF
THEOLOGY LIBRARY
HATFIELD, PA.

18975

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page
A. The Subject	iv
1. The Subject Stated and Explained	iv
2. The Subject Justified	vi
3. The Subject Delimited	vii
B. Definitions	viii
C. Sources for Study	viii
D. The Method of Procedure	ix
Chapter	
I. THE LIFE OF FLETCHER	
A. Introduction	2
B. His Early Life	3
1. Birth and Childhood	3
2. Education	4
3. Frustration of Original Plans	5
4. Removal to England	6
C. His Adult Ministry	9
1. As Vicar of Madeley	9
2. As President of Trevecka College	17
3. As a Writer	21
D. The Later Years	24
1. Decline of Health	24
2. Marriage	25
3. Death	27
E. Summary	30
II. FLETCHER'S DOCTRINES OF GOD AND MAN	33
A. Introduction	33
B. Fletcher's General Theological Position	34
C. Fletcher's Special Theological Contributions.	35
D. Fletcher's Doctrine of God	36
1. The Knowledge of God	36
2. God's Nature in Unity and Trinity	42
3. God's Activity in Providence	45
E. Fletcher's Doctrine of Man.	47
1. Man's Original State and Fall	47
2. Original Sin	51
F. Summary and Conclusion	57

GIFT of Author

37374

April 1957

III. FLETCHER'S DOCTRINES OF GRACE AND FAITH	60
A. Introduction	60
B. The Antinomian Controversy	61
C. Fletcher's Doctrine of Grace	63
1. Grace and Justice	63
2. Grace and Sin	68
3. Grace and Salvation	70
D. Fletcher's Doctrine of Faith	76
1. Faith and Justification	76
2. Faith and Works	83
E. Summary and Conclusion	87
IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	90
A. Summary	90
B. Conclusions	92
C. Suggestions for Further Study	95

INTRODUCTION

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN FLETCHER
TO
WESLEYAN-ARMINIAN THEOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

A. The Subject

1. The Subject Explained.

Reverberations from the Wesleyan-Arminian Revival of the eighteenth century continue to be heard after two hundred years. Within the last twenty-five years significant contributions to Christian literature have acknowledged the virility of the distinctive emphases of original Methodism as a persistent moral and spiritual force. Newton Flew of England has likened the sudden rise of Methodism as a spiritual force to a river welling up to the surface from a hidden spring.¹ John Wesley Bready has done prodigious research to show the phenomenal moral transformation that took place throughout England and the western world as the result of early Methodism.² W. E. Sangster's interest in the doctrine of Christian perfection, one of the distinctive doctrines of Wesley's preaching, led to his publishing a book on this theme during World War II.³ Within the present decade he has written a sequel to the first book, in which he deals with some of the subjective problems surrounding the proper interpretation of heart purity.⁴ Four doctoral

.....

1. R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology*, p. 313.
2. John Wesley Bready, *England Before and After Wesley*.
3. W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection*.
4. Sangster, *The Pure in Heart*.

dissertations have been written in recent years on various aspects of the Wesleyan interpretation of perfection. Harold Lindstrom has shown the importance of John Wesley's doctrine of sanctification in his theology¹; George Allen Turner has set forth the scriptural basis of Wesley's teaching²; Mary Alice Tenney has shown the power of perfect love as a social force³; and John Leland Peters has traced the history of the doctrine of perfection in the American Methodist church and its satellites up to recent times.⁴ If survival power is a valid test of truth, the original doctrines of Methodism, as preached by Wesley, are well substantiated.

While the name of Wesley is a household word in evangelical circles the name of John Fletcher, Wesley's appointed successor⁵, is not so familiar. It is evident in Methodist history that Fletcher was the most valuable friend Wesley had even though Perronet was the oldest. Probably no one ever rendered greater service to Wesley and to Methodism than the vicar of Madeley. Turner tells that more than once Wesley, too busy in his itinerary to work out a closely reasoned theology, turned to Fletcher for help along these lines.⁶ When speaking of Fletcher's abilities as a writer Tyerman was most enthusiastic: "Suffice it to say, that for sound scriptural argument, able exposition, lively imagination, elegance of style, polished irony, and Christian

.....

1. Harold Lindstrom, Wesley and Sanctification.
2. George Allen Turner, The More Excellent Way.
3. Mary Alice Tenney, Blueprint for a Christian World.
4. John L. Peters, Christian Perfection and Modern Methodism.
5. Cf. Luke Tyerman, Wesley's Designated Successor, pp. 1-2.
6. Cf. Turner, op. cit., p. 194.

temper they (Fletcher's Works) have no superiors."¹

But Fletcher's gifts were not limited to his abilities as a polemicist and theological writer alone. He was equally renowned as an example of Christian grace. Robert Southey of the Church of England, though not in full sympathy with the theological emphases of Fletcher, had this to say of him: "Fletcher was a man of rare talents and rarer virtue. No age or country has ever produced a man of more fervent piety, or more perfect charity; no church has ever possessed a more apostolic minister."²

Perhaps these recommendations will show something of Fletcher's importance in his relation to the Wesleyan emphases. At least it is evident that one cannot have a full appreciation for early Methodist theology without knowing of Fletcher's contributions to it.

It is the purpose of this thesis to discover and evaluate Fletcher's unique contributions to Wesleyan-Arminian theology by an analysis of his life and thought.

2. The Subject Justified.

If theology is to have contemporary significance and regain its preeminence as "queen of the sciences," it must review continually its positions in the light of unceasing research in both the sacred and secular fields. This is especially true in times such as our own when interest in theological discussion seems to be increasing. Furthermore, such an investigation as is proposed here is especially pertinent to the

.

1. Cf. Tyerman, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

2. Quoted by J.R. Brooks, *Scriptural Sanctification*, p. 208.

participants in the Methodist heritage. Paul Tillich tell us, "John Wesley...is of great importance to contemporary theological discussion .."¹ If this is true of Wesley, then a renewed study of the works of "Wesley's designated successor" is also important.

According to recent statistics there are more than nine million members in the Methodist church today, plus nearly two million more in related denominations, including The Evangelical United Brethren, The Church of the Nazarene, The Free Methodist Church of North America, The Wesleyan Methodist Church, and others, that owe their spiritual heritage to this stream of Christian thought.² Those who take this heritage seriously will welcome any new insights that come from a fresh exploration of the headwaters of this stream. Many have studied Wesley but few, if any, have studied Fletcher. The secret springs of power that gave rise to the Methodist church were not to be found in Wesley alone. Early Methodist literature has indicated that there was a coterie about Wesley, the most illustrious of whom was Fletcher, who were responsible in part for the intellectual and spiritual vigor of the original thrust. Therefore any attempt to perpetuate this heritage is likely to be handicapped without a knowledge of Fletcher's life and thought. Hence the need for the investigation attempted here.

3. The Subject Delimited.

No attempt is made here to review Wesley's own writings, except

.

1. R.W.Burtner and R.E.Chiles, A Compend of Wesley's Theology, quoted on jacket of book.
2. Year Book of American Churches for 1956, pp. 239-243.

as they may come in for incidental consideration by Fletcher from time to time. Nor is any attempt made to go back of Wesley to the mystics, to Arminius, to Augustine, or to the early church fathers; although Wesleyan theology owes something to all of them as well as to the Biblical writers.¹ Nor is any sustained attempt made to determine the scriptural validity of the Wesleyan-Arminian interpretation. The concern here is to systematize Fletcher's thought in the hope of discovering his unique contributions to that body of theological thought now known as Wesleyan-Arminian theology. Accordingly, the main portion of this study comes from Fletcher's own writings, and not from interpretations by others.

B. Definitions

Broadly speaking, two emphases are noted in the term, Wesleyan-Arminian Theology: first, from James Arminius comes the insistent note that all men are savable by God's grace; and from John Wesley comes the added word that all men may be saved from all sin (as he defined sin) by God's grace. Hence the watchword, "Free salvation for all men, and full salvation from all sin," expresses what is meant by the term as used in this study.

C. Sources For Study

During his lifetime Fletcher carried on a voluminous corres-

.....

1. Cf. Newton Flew, op. cit., pp. 313-316.

pondence, much of which has been preserved and has been available for this study. Practically all of his refutation of the Antinomian heresy was put up in epistolary form. When these are combined with miscellaneous writings prepared for other occasions they provide nearly two thousand, five hundred closely written pages of primary source material.

With characteristic humility Fletcher said very little about himself. Consequently, most of what we know about his life and spiritual discipline comes from materials saved by his friends with whom he corresponded and which were published after his death. Shortly after Fletcher's death, Wesley, with the help of Mrs. Fletcher, wrote a biography of his life. Later Joshua Gilpin did the same. Shortly after the opening of the nineteenth century Joseph Benson, a close friend of Fletcher and an outstanding early Methodist, combined the three previous sources with his own personal information to give a rather complete account of Fletcher's life. Late in the nineteenth century Luke Tyerman added other unpublished material to that which had been used previously, to write the fullest and most authentic account of all. These, along with a few secondary sources, have provided most of the information for this study.

D. The Method of Procedure

Three chapters make up the body of this thesis. In the first chapter attention is given to the main events of Fletcher's life. Matters pertaining to his early life and education are noted; his removal to England, his conversion and subsequent life as vicar of Madeley, his labors as a writer, his marriage and death, are among the more prom-

inent features of this chapter.

Two things are emphasized in the second chapter: first, Fletcher is identified in relation to the broad theological classifications of his times; second, having ascertained his general theological position, Fletcher's special contributions to that position with respect to the doctrines of God and man are noted and discussed.

In the third chapter the investigation moves to a consideration of Fletcher's doctrines of grace and faith, especially as his interpretations were affected by the Antinomian controversy.

The summary and conclusions in the final chapter are based on the findings of the earlier chapters. Here the nature of Fletcher's main contributions are noted, along with an appraisal of their value to his theological school. Some suggestions for further study are given also.

CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF JOHN FLETCHER

CHAPTER I
THE LIFE OF JOHN FLETCHER

A. Introduction

It is impossible to understand fully or to appreciate John Fletcher's theological thought apart from his life and ministry. This, plus the fact that Fletcher is not well known in many evangelical quarters today, makes it necessary to review the highlights of his life.

The purpose of this chapter is to erect a backdrop for all else that follows in this investigation. In doing this Fletcher's early life and education are reviewed, along with his removal to England and his conversion there. Fletcher's threefold ministry, as an Anglican clergyman, as the first president of Trevecka college, and as a writer are noted next. Then brief attention is devoted to the latter years of Fletcher's life, marked as they were by his late marriage and an untimely death.

A statement concerning Fletcher which appeared in The Eclectic Review for June, 1805, serves well as an introduction and recommendation:

There have been some in most ages of Christianity, ... who have emulated its primitive and genuine excellence. Among these exalted few, the subject of the biography before us is unquestionably to be ranked. In whatever period he had lived, ... he would have shown in the religious hemisphere as a star of the first magnitude.¹

.

1. Cf. Joseph Benson, *Life of Fletcher*, p. 11.

B. His Early Life

1. Birth and Childhood.

Jean Guillaume De La Flechere (later Anglicised to John William Fletcher) was born in Nyon, Switzerland, a town about fifteen miles north of Geneva, September 12, 1729. His father was a professional soldier and the family was a branch of the earldom of Savoy. John was the youngest son.¹

As a boy John is described as having "an elevated turn of mind, accompanied with an unusual degree of vivacity."² From an early age members of the family noticed that he possessed a profound sense of the majesty of God and an unusual fear of offending him.³ Having quarreled with one of his brothers when he was about seven years of age, he was reproved by one of the lady servants of the home. "You are a naughty boy," she told him. "Do you not know that the devil is to take away all naughty children?"⁴ Her words troubled young Fletcher deeply. He thought, "I am a wicked boy, and how do I know but God may call me to account this night."⁵ He fell upon his knees and prayed, and many years later he confided to a friend, "And I think that God did hear me that night, and that I felt a little of the peace which I have since been acquainted with."⁶

Young Fletcher began an early acquaintance with the scriptures

.

1. Luke Tyerman, Wesley's Designated Successor, p.4.
2. Joseph Benson, op. cit., p.14.
3. Tyerman, op. cit., p.4.
4. Ibid., p.5.
5. R. Cox, Life of Fletcher, pp.2-3.
6. Ibid., p.3.

and thus was protected from many of the snares of the infidelity of the times. His early life was characterized by modesty and rectitude, and he had an unusual appetite for religious meditation. His sensitivity to sin was especially keen. Once when his good mother spoke too warmly to a member of the family young John mildly reproved her. She instantly repaid his forwardness with some severity, but her indignation quickly turned to admiration when he replied, "When I am smitten on one cheek, and especially by a hand I love so well, I am taught to turn the other also."¹

2. Education.

Having spent his early childhood in Nyon, young John and two of his brothers were sent to the University of Geneva. His superior abilities and diligence enabled him to win the two first prizes for which he was a candidate, even triumphing over several competitors who were related to the professors.²

He allowed himself little time either for recreation, refreshment, or sleep. After confining himself closely to his studies all day, he would frequently consume the greater part of the night in making notes of what he had found in the course of his reading worthy of observation.³

Upon completing his work at the University, Fletcher was sent by his father to Lentzburg, in the Canton of Berne, where he continued his earlier studies and also acquired the German language. Returning to Nyon, he studied Hebrew and improved his mastery of mathematics.⁴

.

1. Tyerman, op. cit., p.5.
2. Ibid., p.7.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

Eventually Fletcher became proficient in French, German, English, Latin, Greek and Hebrew.¹ It was during this time that he laid the foundation for his effective work in polemics and scriptural exposition.

3. Frustration of Original Plans.

Fletcher's parents had hoped that John would enter the ministry. Both by disposition and ability he seemed especially well qualified. But to their dismay he declared his intentions to follow in his father's footsteps and be a professional soldier. John had wished to be a minister, but in his own words he tells why he resolved to abandon the idea.

Feeling I was unequal to so great a burden, and disgusted by the necessity I should be under to ~~subscribe~~ the doctrine of predestination, I yielded to the desire of those of my friends who would have me go into the army.²

Fletcher turned from his studies in theology to the works of the great military engineers of his time while preparing to enlist. However providence seemed to prevent every attempt he made. First, he attempted to sail with the Portugese army to Brazil, but scalded his leg so badly he was forced to remain behind while his company sailed without him. Significantly, that ship was heard of no more.³ Later he set out for Flanders to serve a commission with the Dutch army. However peace was concluded; Fletcher's hopes for a military career were demolished; and he abandoned the thought of a military career altogether.⁴

.

1. J. McClintock and J. Strong, Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia, Vol. III, pp.595,596.
2. Benson, op. cit., p. 74.
3. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 9.
4. W.L. Phillips, Pentecostal Flashlights From the Life of John Fletcher, p. 13.

4. Removal to England.

Inasmuch as no career in the army seemed likely, Fletcher, now in his twenty-first year, yielded to his parents' desires that he go to England to learn the English language. Upon entering England he joined himself to a Mr. Burchell, first of South Mimms and later of Hatfield, to study the English language and political literature for about eighteen months.¹

In 1752 Fletcher left Mr. Burchell's Academy to become tutor to the two sons of Thomas Hall, Esq., of Tern Hall, in Shropshire. He was connected with this family more or less closely until he began his duties as vicar of Madeley in 1760.²

Upon beginning his duties at Tern Hall, Fletcher still retained the fear of God but knew nothing of evangelical conversion. Looking back on the period in later years, he described his condition to his brother, Henry, in a letter containing the following extract:

At eighteen years of age I was a real enthusiast; for, though I lived in the indulgence of many known sins, I considered myself a religious character, because I regularly attended public worship, made long prayers in private, and devoted as much time as I could spare from my studies to reading the prophetic writings, and a few devotional books... all my hopes of salvation rested on my prayers, devotions, and a certain habit of saying, 'Lord, I am a great sinner, pardon me for the sake of Jesus Christ.' In the meantime I was ignorant of the fall and ruin in which every man is involved, the necessity of a Redeemer, and the way by which we may be rescued from the fall by receiving Christ with a living faith... My religion, alas! having a different foundation to that which is in Christ, was built merely on the sand; and no sooner did the winds and floods arise than it tottered and fell to ruins.³

Fletcher then went on to describe his brief infatuation with

.

1. Fredric W. MacDonald, Fletcher of Madeley, p. 20.
2. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 11.
3. Gex, op. cit., p. 15.

Deism, but he found no consolation here either.¹

Two factors seemed to have combined to awaken Fletcher to his true spiritual condition: the first was a reproof by a servant of the Hill family for writing some music on Sunday², and the other was his acquaintance with the Methodists. John Wesley reported Fletcher's introduction to Methodism:

While Mr. Hill's family stopped at St. Albans, on their way to London, he (John Fletcher) walked out into the town, and did not return until they were set out on their way. A horse being left him, he rode after, and overtook them in the evening. Mr. Hill asking him why he staid behind, he said, 'As I was walking I met with a poor old woman, who talked so sweetly of Jesus Christ that I knew not how the time passed away.' 'I shall not wonder,' said Mrs. Hill, 'if our tutor does not turn Methodist by and by.' 'Methodist, Madam,' said he, 'pray what is that?' She replied, 'Why the Methodists are a people who do nothing but pray; they are praying all day and all night.' 'Are they? Then by the help of God I will find them out if they be above ground.'³

Upon attending a Methodist service Fletcher became convinced that a change of heart was the only answer to his soul-hunger. He began to strive with all his might to make himself acceptable to God, but to no avail. Finally he heard a sermon on the nature of living faith that began to bring light on his need. "Is it possible," he said to himself, "that I should yet be so ignorant as not to know what faith is?"⁴ His response to this was to try even more than ever, but to no avail. In the meantime his humiliating sense of defeat worsened. "The more I prayed for victory over sin," he said, "the more I was conquered."⁵

.

1. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 15.
2. Benson, op. cit., p. 27.
3. Phillips, op. cit., p. 14.
4. Benson, op. cit., p. 30.
5. Phillips, op. cit., p. 16.

This sense of helplessness grew steadily worse for several weeks, but it was not without its value. On Sunday morning, January 12, 1755, Fletcher received the sacrament and listened to a helpful sermon on justifying faith. On January 21, he wrote out a confession of his sins; and two days later he spent the day fasting and praying, still sinning, to be sure, but now fully aware that Christ alone could save. Sinking into despair he cried out, "Save me, Lord, as a brand snatched out of the fire, give me justifying faith in thy blood."¹

That evening a friend came by and encouraged him saying, "God is merciful, God loves you.... Wait then, patiently for Him, and never give up your hope."² This Fletcher resolved to do with all his heart. Going to his room, he learned a sacramental hymn, prayed it over many times; then went to bed, commending himself to God's care in a measure of hope and peace.³

The next morning Fletcher awoke to enjoy an uncommon sense of cheerfulness, and was pleased to note his victory over his besetting sin. In the evening he read of some of the experiences of other Christians and "found my case agreed with theirs, and suited the sermons I had just heard on justifying faith; so that my hope increased."⁴ Still not entirely at rest, Fletcher continued praying till nearly one o'clock the following morning when he opened his Bible on these words, "Cast thy burden on the Lord and he shall sustain thee: he will not suffer the righteous to be moved." Psalm 55:22. Filled with joy, Fletcher fell on

.

1. Ibid., pp. 16-17.
2. Benson, op. cit., p. 36.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 37.

his knees to beg God that he might ever do this. Opening his Bible again he read, "I will be with thee: I will not fail thee: fear not neither be dismayed." Deuteronomy 31:8. "With this comfortable promise," he said, "I shut up my Bible, being now perfectly satisfied....So having asked grace of God to serve Him till death, I went cheerfully to take my rest."¹

The cap sheaf of Fletcher's assurance of salvation came a short time later when the words of one of Charles Wesley's hymns were applied powerfully to his heart:

Siezed by the rage of sinful men,
I see Christ bound and bruised and slain:
'Tis done, the martyr dies!

His life to ransom ours is given,
And lo, the fiercest fires of heaven,
Consume the sacrifice.

He suffers both from men and God,
He bears the universal load
Of guilt and misery!

He suffers to reverse our doom,
And lo, my Lord is here become
The bread of life to me!²

For the first time John Fletcher was able to quote with confidence, "The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."³

C. Fletcher's Adult Ministry

1. As Vicar of Madeley.

.....

1. Ibid., p. 38.
2. Phillips, op. cit., p. 18.
3. Ibid.

Fletcher's new life in Christ was marked by unusual vigor and rapid progress. And no wonder for:

Now all his bonds were broken. His freed soul began to breathe a purer air. Sin was beneath his feet....From this time, he walked in the ways of God, and thinking he had not leisure enough in the day, he made it a constant rule to sit up two whole nights in the week for reading, prayer and meditation. At the same time, he lived on nothing but vegetables, and on bread with milk and water. One end of his doing this was to avoid dining in company. Besides sitting up two entire nights every week, his custom was never to sleep so long as he could keep awake, and he always took a candle and book with him to bed.¹

Fletcher's duties at Tern Hall were sufficiently light so as to give him time for strenuous spiritual disciplines, such as are described above. On Sundays prior to his becoming vicar of Madeley, he attended services at the Parish Church of Atcham, near Shrewsbury. When the service was over he usually walked along the Severn river or went into the fields for prayer and meditation. A Mr. Vaughn, also employed by the Hills, gave the following account of those walks:

It was our ordinary custom, when the church service was over, to retire into the most lovely fields or meadows, where we frequently either kneeled down or prostrated ourselves on the ground. At those happy seasons I was the witness of such pleadings and wrestlings with God, such exercises of faith and love, as I have not known in anyone ever since. The consolations which we then received from God induced us to appoint two or three nights in a week, when we duly met, after his pupils were asleep. We met also constantly on Sunday between four and five in the morning.²

It is little wonder, then, that Fletcher was often pressed in spirit to urge sinners to flee the wrath to come, even though his grasp of the English language was yet imperfect. Doors of opportunity for service began to open and the earnestness with which he spoke wrought

.

1. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 18.
2. MacDonald, op. cit., pp. 34-35.

deep impressions on the minds of his listeners and drew many to hear him.¹

Some time after this he was favored with another manifestation of the love of God, so powerful, that, he said, it appeared to him as if his body and soul would be separated. Now all his desires centered in one, that of devoting himself to the service of his precious master, which he thought he could do best by entering into holy orders.²

Thus an inward sense of call, ratified by outward providences of open doors for service, was sufficient to cause Fletcher to declare himself. Consequently, he received Deacon's orders in the Anglican church on Sunday, March 6, 1757, and Priest's orders one week later.³

In the meantime he had joined a Methodist Society and had become a close friend of the Wesleys⁴. The same day he was ordained priest he assisted John Wesley in administering the Lord's Supper at West Street Chapel in London.⁴

For almost three more years, however, Fletcher continued his tutorship at Tern Hall, interspersing his labors with occasional preaching appointments. In the spring of 1758 he was asked to preach to French prisoners on parole at Tunbridge, and many of them were deeply convicted of their need for salvation, asking Fletcher to preach to them again. But Fletcher's zeal had caught the attention of the Bishop of London and he forbade him to return. When the Bishop died of a cancer in his mouth a few months later, Mr. Wesley expressed the conviction that this was a divine retribution for silencing Fletcher on

.

1. Benson, op. cit., pp. 46-47.
2. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 18.
3. Phillips, op. cit., p. 21.
4. Benson, op. cit., p. 55.

that occasion.¹ By 1758, three years after his conversion, Fletcher was becoming famous, attracting not only the attention of the Wesley brothers, but George Whitefield and Lady Huntington as well.²

Early in 1760 Mr. Hill, Fletcher's Patron, was elated to announce that he had secured for Fletcher the Parish at Dunham in Cheshire, a vicarage with light duties and the comfortable living of four hundred pounds annually. But he was quite taken aback when Fletcher, after thanking him cordially, answered, "Alas, sir, Dunham will not suit me; there is too much money and too little labor." Hill answered that few clergymen made such objections, but Fletcher continued to refuse it. Said Mr. Hill, "It is a pity to decline such a living, as I do not know that I can find you another. What shall we do? Would you like Madeley?" "That, sir," said Fletcher, "would be the very place for me." It was in this way that he agreed for Mr. Hill to arrange for him to become the vicar of Madeley, at a salary less than half that of Dunham.³

Madeley was a Shropshire village⁴, "a market town in the county of Salop⁵," and separated from Broseley by the Severn river.⁶ In 1800, fifteen years after Fletcher's death, it contained 4,758 inhabitants.⁷ "The church is dedicated to St. Michael; and the parish includes Coalbrook Dale and Madeley Wood."⁸ Madeley was celebrated for its colliers,

.

1. Ibid., op. cit., p. 62.
2. Tyerman, op. cit., pp. 30-32.
3. Cox, op. cit., p. 33.
4. John Henry Overton, The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century, p. 37.
5. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 61.
6. Cox, op. cit., p. 35.
7. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 61.
8. Ibid.

its iron works and its china manufacturing.¹ The people with a few exceptions, were notoriously ignorant and impious.² "They openly profaned the Sabbath, treated the most holy things with contempt, disregarded the restraints of decency, and ridiculed the very nature of religion."³

All this made John Fletcher's work most difficult, especially at the beginning. Tyerman reports,

His mission was a trying one; and its burdensomeness was not lessened by the fact that there was not a single clergyman in the county of Salop who approved of his Methodist doctrines, or sympathized with his Methodist endeavors. Further he was without parochial experience. He had preached for the Wesleys and for the Countess of Huntington; and, on a few rare occasions, he had been permitted to occupy the pulpits of the Established Church; but notwithstanding the temporary assistance he had rendered to his Madeley predecessor, he had never held a Curacy. In parish work he was a novice, but he was not dismayed.⁴

Fletcher, persuaded of the importance of his charge, and concerned for the welfare of his people, "entered upon the duties of his vocation with an extraordinary degree of earnestness and zeal,"⁵ although few men ever considered themselves less sufficient for the task.⁶

He faithfully dispensed the word of life, instructing the ignorant, reasoning with gainsayers, exhorting the immoral, and rebuking the obstinate. Not content with discharging the duties of the Sabbath, he counted that day as lost in which he was not actually employed in the service of his master. As often as a small congregation could be collected, which was usually every evening, he joyfully proclaimed to them the acceptable year of the Lord, whether it were in a place set apart for public worship, in a private house or in the open air.⁷

.....

1. Cox, op. cit., p. 55.
2. MacDonald, op. cit., p. 55.
3. Cox, op. cit., p. 33.
4. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 61.
5. Benson, op. cit., p. 85.
6. Phillips, op. cit., p. 24.
7. Ibid., pp. 25, 26.

According to Benson, Fletcher's ministry was well adapted to the needs of his listeners:

As to the human heart, he had so long and so accurately investigated his own, that he was not easily deceived in forming a judgment of his neighbors. He knew its depths as well as its shallows, and its subtle artifices as well as its natural tempers: he explored its intricate mazes, and unlocked its secret recesses with wonderful ease; and could generally discover its real situation through any disguise.¹

For all his faithfulness to the people in his constant labors among them, and for all his acute exposures of the sin of the human heart, Fletcher's troubles in his early days at Madeley were numerous.² "He was dissatisfied with himself; a visionary convert caused him anxiety; and many of his parishioners maligned him."³ Writing to Charles Wesley in 1761 Fletcher showed his discouragement.

I feel more and more that I neither abide in Christ, nor Christ in me, nevertheless, I do not so feel it as to seek Him without intermission. 'Oh wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from' this heart of unbelief? Blessed be God who has promised me this deliverance, through our Lord, Jesus Christ!⁴

Commenting on his various trials, Tyerman pointed out that "to a great extent, Fletcher had yet to learn a lesson which the Wesleys and Whitefield had long ago been taught: 'If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you.'⁵

A sample of Fletcher's early ministry at Madeley is found in a discourse upon the words, "Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life," which he delivered in January, 1762. He described four classes

.....

1. Benson, op. cit., p. 91.
2. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 62.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 64.

of sinners who refused to come to Christ for life, the most abominable of which were those who refused because of unbelief. To these he said:

Unbelief is a sin of so deep a dye that the devils in hell cannot commit the like. Our Savior never prayed, wept, bled and died for devils. He never said to them, 'Ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life.' They can never be so madly ungrateful as to slight a Saviour. Mercy never wooed their proud, stubborn hearts as it does ours. They have abused grace, it is true, but they never trampled mercy under foot. This more than diabolical sin is reserved for thee, careless sinner. Now thou hearest Christ compassionately say in the text, 'Ye will not come unto me,' and thou remainest unmoved; but the time cometh when Jesus, who meekly entreats, shall sternly curse; when he who in tender patience says, 'Ye will not come unto me,' shall thunder in righteous vengeance, 'Depart from me, ye cursed; depart unto the second death,—the fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' In vain wilt thou plead then as thou dost now, 'Lord, I am no adulterer; I am baptized in thy name; I was a true churchman; there are many worse than I am.' This will not admit thee into the kingdom of Christ. His answer will be, 'I know you not; you never came to me for life.'¹

Such plain preaching as this certainly did little to please " the easy-going Pharisees of the age in which Fletcher lived"², especially since it was practically unheard of elsewhere in the Church of England at that time.³ On one occasion only a providential intervention prevented Fletcher from being bullied to death by drunken colliers.⁴ His archdeacon came and leveled an attack at him from his own pulpit.⁵ Another clergyman living in Madeley Wood charged Fletcher with rebellion, schism and disturbing the peace.⁶ In addition to all of these:

The voluptuary detested his temperance, and self-denial; the man of pride poured contempt upon his humility and condescension; the licentious were offended at his gravity and strictness; and the formal were roused to indignation by that spirit of zeal and devotion

.

1. Ibid., p. 70.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 80.
4. Benson, op. cit., pp. 102, 103.
5. Ibid., pp. 103, 104.
6. Ibid., pp. 107, 108.

which influenced his whole conversation and conduct. All of these, however they might differ among themselves, were leagued together as the inveterate enemies of this venerable pastor.¹

For all the problems and discouragements of the early years at Madeley, Fletcher's labors were far from fruitless. In a letter to Charles Wesley, April 27, 1761, he notes some signs of improvement:

When I first came to Madeley, I was greatly mortified and discouraged by the smallness of my congregation; and I thought if some of our friends in London had seen my little company they would have triumphed in their own wisdom. But now, thank God, things are altered in that respect. Last Sunday, I had the pleasure of seeing some in the churchyard who could not get into the church.²

Although the size of Fletcher's congregations varied, and could not be considered a sure thermometer of progress at Madeley³, there were other heartening evidences of a lasting ministry. One very profligate collier told how Fletcher sought opportunities to talk to him about his wretched state but time and again he ran home with all speed and bolted the door to escape the pungent reproofs. Finally, however, Fletcher "ran him down" and gained entrance to the collier's house.

The poor man, awed by the presence of his minister, and softened by the persuasive kindness of his manners, was greatly affected, and received these religious impressions which soon ended in a thorough change of his character.⁴

To another man named John, who had long hardened himself against the truth, Fletcher said, "Well, John, you must either turn or burn."⁵ This pointed phrase became such a barbed arrow that the man found no rest until he turned from sin to God.⁶

.

1. Ibid., p. 108.
2. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 63.
3. Benson, op. cit., p. 99.
4. Cox, op. cit., p. 50.
5. Ibid., p. 51.
6. Ibid.

Fletcher's zeal for truth had its corollary in his opposition to error. When Roman Catholicism revived its work in Madeley, he wrote to a friend, "The (popish) priest at Madeley is going to open his mass-house, and I have declared war on that account last Sunday, and propose to strip the whore of Babylon and expose her nakedness tomorrow."¹ On the following day he proceeded to show how the papists had departed from apostolic doctrine²; that they had given heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils when they introduced the merit of human works³; that they had obscured the authority of the scriptures⁴; and that they had perverted the meaning of prayer by their insistence upon many mediators.⁵ Thus he saved his flock from grave deception and continued to nourish them in the word of faith until his death in 1785.

2. As President of Trevecka College.

In 1768 Lady Huntington opened Trevecka College in Wales for the training of young ministers.⁶ She had actively supported the Wesleys and George Whitefield⁷, and held Fletcher in high esteem from the time of their first meeting in 1758.⁸ Although the immediate occasion for the founding of the school was the expulsion of six young evangelicals from Oxford on March 11, 1768⁹, Lady Huntington had been considering the establishing of such a college for several years.¹⁰ Consequently:

.

1. Benson, op. cit., p. 180.
2. Ibid., p. 181.
3. Ibid., p. 182.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 183.
6. Helen Knight, *Lady Huntington and her Friends*, pp. 166-173.
7. Ibid., p. 127.
8. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 31.
9. Cf. Knight, op. cit., pp. 165-167.
10. Ibid., p. 166.

After much deliberation and the counsel of her wisest and choicest friends, the plan of a college was drawn up, into which only such young men should be admitted as students, as gave evidence of piety and were resolved to devote themselves to the work of the ministry; they were to remain two years at the institution, board and education gratuitous, to receive a new suit of clothes once a year, and on leaving might enter the established church or any other Protestant religious denomination.¹

Having settled on the location in Trevecka, in the Parish of Talgarth, South Wales², Lady Huntington chose John Fletcher as its first president.³ Although Fletcher felt himself unfit for such an office⁴, he was nonetheless willing to lend his aid in setting up the curriculum and in leading the school spiritually.⁵ The agreement was that Fletcher was to undertake the superintendence of the seminary.

Not that he could promise to be generally resident there; much less constantly. His duty to his own flock at Madeley would by no means admit of this. But he was to attend as often as he conveniently could: to give advice with regard to the appointment of masters, and the admission or exclusion of students: to oversee their studies and conduct: to assist their piety, and judge of their qualifications for the work of the ministry.⁶

The college opened with impressive services for a whole week, "from the 19th. to the 25th. of August inclusive,"⁷ in 1768, and Fletcher paid the school frequent visits, though not without considerable personal discomfort and danger to his frail health.⁸

According to Joseph Benson, who became headmaster of the Academy early in 1770⁹, Fletcher's main employment on his visits was:

.

1. Ibid., p. 166.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 168.
4. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 136.
5. Ibid., pp. 136-148.
6. Benson, op. cit., p. 203.
7. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 149.
8. Phillips, op. cit., p. 47.
9. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 157.

To call, intreat, and urge them to ascend with him to the glorious source of being and blessedness. He had leisure for comparatively nothing else. Language, arts, science, grammar, rhetoric, logic, even divinity itself,...were all laid aside when he appeared in the school room among the students.¹

The students eagerly hung on Fletcher's words and they seldom listened long until they were in tears.²

Being fully convinced that to be filled with the Holy Ghost was the supreme matter in a minister's preparation for preaching³, Fletcher would terminate his discourse to them by saying, "As many of you as are athirst for this fullness of the Spirit, follow me into my room."⁴

Speaking for the entire group, Benson said that upon this invitation

Many of us have instantly followed him, and there continued for two or three hours, wrestling like Jacob for the blessing, praying one after another till we could bear to kneel no longer. This was not done once or twice, but many times, and I have sometimes seen him on these occasions--once in particular--so filled with the love of God that he could contain no more, but cried out, "O my God, with hold thy hand, or the vessel will burst."⁵

So long as Fletcher remained president, or visitor, as he was sometimes called⁶, his activities were characteristically like those described above. But all was not well at Trevecka. For some time a doctrinal storm had been brewing.⁷ Lady Huntington tended toward supra-lapsarian Calvinism; Walter Shirley, also connected with the school,

.

1. Benson, op. cit., p. 205.
2. Ibid.
3. Cf. MacDonald, op. cit., p. 101.
4. Benson, op. cit., p. 205.
5. Ibid., pp. 205,206.
6. Cf. Cox, op. cit., p. 78.
7. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 167.

was also a Calvinist; while Fletcher, the president, and Benson, the headmaster, espoused the doctrine of general redemption.¹ However, there was no open conflict until August, 1770, when John Wesley opened the annual conference for his itinerant preachers in London.² In an effort to curb the growing antinomian tendencies of the time, Mr. Wesley made several significant though not unguarded statements concerning the relation of faith and works.³ As a result Mr. Shirley wrote a circular letter strongly condemning the minutes and urging the Methodist ministers to go to Bristol, where the following conference was to be held, and demand a retraction from Mr. Wesley.⁴ In the meantime Lady Huntington had read Wesley's minutes and was horrified at what she thought were heretical teachings. Accordingly she wrote to Wesley, forbidding him to preach in any of the pulpits over which she had jurisdiction.⁵ Furthermore, Joseph Benson was dismissed as headmaster of Trevecka because he adhered to Wesley's doctrines of free grace.⁶ Upon this action Fletcher wrote to Lady Huntington on January 7, 1771, as follows:

Mr. Benson made a very just defense when he said, he held with me the possibility of salvation for all men; that mercy is offered to all; and yet may be received or rejected. If this be what your ladyship calls Mr. Wesley's opinion, free will and arminianism, and if 'every arminian must quit the college', I am actually discharged also; for in my present view of things, I must hold that sentiment, if I believe that the Bible is true, and that God is love.⁷

In the month of March, of the same year, Fletcher made a trip

.

1. Cf. Cox, op. cit., p. 78.
2. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 169.
3. Ibid., pp. 169-170.
4. Cf. Benson, op. cit., p. 218.
5. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 171.
6. Ibid., p. 175.
7. Benson, op. cit., p. 213.

to Trevecka to see for himself how matters were being conducted. Accordingly, he reported his findings to Mr. Benson in a letter, part of which follows:

On my arrival at the college, I found all very quiet, I fear through the enemy's keeping his goods in peace. While I preached the next day I found myself as much shackled as ever I was in my life, and after private prayer, I concluded I was not in my place. The same day I resigned my office to my Lady, and on Wednesday to the students and to the Lord.¹

Before he left the grounds Fletcher recommended a Calvinistic president, inasmuch as the college itself had openly disavowed all Arminian teachings.² It is to be noted, however, that Fletcher conducted himself with such decorum that the way was left open for reconciliation and fellowship with Lady Huntington in later years.³ For the next seven years, however, Mr. Fletcher was employed largely by a written controversy over the articles of faith embedded in the minutes of the Methodist conference of 1770.

3. As a Writer.

Although he carried on a voluminous correspondence with his friends, it was the historic Arminian-Calvinistic controversy of 1770-1777 that launched Fletcher into his ministry as a writer.⁴ He had no sympathy for party strife⁵ but felt that his friend, John Wesley, had been greatly misunderstood and to remain silent would be the equivalent of betrayal.⁶ Furthermore, Wesley had little time to pursue the con-

.

1. Ibid., p. 215.
2. Ibid., p. 217.
3. Ibid., pp. 231-232.
4. Cf. John Fletcher, Works, Vols. I-IV.
5. Cf. Cox, op. cit., pp. 80-86.
6. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., pp. 180-186.

troversty, and often having briefly explained the meaning of some of his expressions, he was only too happy to delegate Fletcher for the task of elucidating his doctrines of grace.¹ Consequently after several attacks against Wesley's doctrine had been printed late in 1770 and early in 1771², Fletcher wrote his First Check to Antinomianism in which he sought to vindicate Wesley's views.³ When the hope of reconciliation between the opposing parties was seen to be an immediate impossibility this was printed.⁴ Walter Shirley wrote for the opposition, which in turn was answered by Fletcher's Second Check to Antinomianism.⁵ Here he showed the danger of minimizing good works as a necessity for justification and their proper place in the plan of salvation by faith.⁶ Mr. Shirley decided to quit the controversy but his place in the ranks of opposition was taken by two brothers, Richard and Rowland Hill, both of whom subjected Fletcher to considerable scurrility and abuse.⁷ The interchange between these men led to the publication of the Third and Fourth Checks to Antinomianism in which Fletcher continued to inveigh against the dangers of antinomian tendencies of the day and to insist upon the importance of St. James' emphasis on pure religion and good works as proper expressions of faith.⁸ The Calvinistic answer came when

.

1. Cf. Cox, op. cit., p. 80.
2. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 187.
3. Cf. Fletcher, Vol. I, pp. 23,24.
4. Ibid., p. 24.
5. Ibid.
6. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., pp. 210-217.
7. Cf. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 24.
8. Ibid.

Mr. Richard Hill next published what he called his finishing stroke; to which Mr. Fletcher replied by a treatise Logica Genevensis Continued, or the first part of the fifth check, with an appendix upon the remaining differences between the Calvinists and the anti-Calvinists, with respect to our Lord's doctrine of justification by words, and St. John's doctrine of justification by works, and not by faith only. About this time, Mr. Berridge, Vicar of Everton, entered the lists, and published his Christian World Unmasked, containing many humorous oddities and eccentricities. To this Mr. Fletcher replied by a defence of sincere obedience, entitled Logica Genevensis Continued, or the second part of the Fifth check to antinomianism.¹

Early in 1774 Fletcher published his treatise on Christian Perfection, which he called A Polemical Essay on the Twin Doctrines of Christian Imperfection and a Death Purgatory.

About this same time Fletcher also published An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism, in which he sought to point out and avoid the danger of both extreme positions.²

Some time after Mr. Richard Hill had confessedly relinquished the contest, he thought proper to enter the field again, and published what he called a Creed for the Arminians. To this Mr. Fletcher replied by a treatise which he calls the Fictitious and the Genuine Creed, with a preface, in which the author gives an account of Mr. Hill's new method of attack; and makes some reconciling concessions to the Calvinists, by means of which their strongest arguments are unanswered.³

In 1776 and 1777 Fletcher's main writings were in reply to Augustus Toplady, who published two works: A Vindication of the Decrees, Etc., or More Work for Mr. Wesley, and The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity.⁴ Fletcher's answers were written under the title of Remarks on the Rev. Mr. Toplady's Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity.⁵

.....

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid., p. 25.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

Before he was to conclude the controversy Fletcher wrote two more articles.

He published another tract, which he calls The Doctrines of Grace and Justice equally essential to the Pure Gospel. This has since been published with his last controversial piece, entitled The Reconciliation or an easy method to unite the professions of the people of God.¹

These, along with some miscellaneous articles, the most notable of which is An Appeal to Matter of fact and Common Sense, a rational demonstration of the corruption of man's nature and his lost estate, form the corpus of his writings and contain the essence of his theology.

For the purpose of this investigation it is not necessary to attempt an appraisal of the Wesleyan-Calvinistic controversy. It is proper, however, to note the significance of Fletcher's contributions as a writer especially among the people called Methodists. MacDonald expressed the conviction of many when he said:

Fletcher's checks to antinomianism at once took a foremost place in the literature of Methodism. Wesley recommended them to his followers with all the weight of his authority. The interest awakened by the controversy, the popular style in which they were written, and the elevation and fervour of piety manifest throughout, carried them into every Methodist household....It is not too much to say that for many years they were not least among the instruments employed in connexion with the ever-extending Revival....²

D. The Later Years

1. Decline of Health.

Throughout his adult life Fletcher had to contend with the hindrances of frail health. His asceticism³, his arduous labors in

.....

1. Ibid.
2. MacDonald, op. cit., p. 116.
3. Ibid., pp. 35,36.

Madeley¹, plus his exhaustive efforts during the antinomian controversy², all helped to make him susceptible to consumption.³ In March 1774, Fletcher wrote to a friend, "O, how life goes! I walked, now I gallop into eternity."⁴ At Wesley's insistence Fletcher purposed to ride with him through parts of England and Scotland, thinking the change would hasten his recovery. This he did for a few months in the spring of 1775.⁵ However, the benefits were only temporary, and late in 1776 Fletcher retired to the home of Charles and Mary Greenwood in Stoke Newington, where he remained until the following spring.⁶ In May 1777, Fletcher left the home of the hospitable Greenwoods and went to his friend, Mr. Ireland, of Brislington, near Bristol.⁷ It was decided, however, that his only hope of complete recovery was to be found in his going to a milder climate.⁸ Consequently he decided to take an extended trip through France and Switzerland, in company with a Mr. William Perronet, vicar of Shoreham.⁹ Accordingly they left England in December, 1777 and did not return until April, 1781. And it is possible to report that in spite of occasional lapses caused by overwork Fletcher enjoyed steady recovery and returned to England cured of consumption. But he remained at best, "a frail and delicate man."¹⁰

2. Marriage.

.....

1. Cf. Benson, op. cit., pp. 101-ff.
2. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 354.
3. Ibid., p. 356.
4. Phillips, op. cit., p. 47.
5. Ibid., pp. 48,49.
6. Cf. Benson, op.cit., pp. 275-ff.
7. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 392.
8. Ibid., p. 405.
9. Ibid., p. 407.
10. Cf. MacDonald, op. cit., p. 154.

Early in his Christian life Fletcher had made the acquaintance of Miss Mary Bosanquet, as eminently pious a lady as he was a man.¹ Upon meeting each was attracted to the other, but both equally feared that marriage would limit their services.² Consequently they had only the most casual relationship for about twenty-five years. After returning from Switzerland, however, Fletcher had felt so strongly drawn to Miss Bosanquet that he had written her, June 8, 1781, asking her to marry him. Miss Bosanquet comments as follows:

June the eighth, I received a letter from Mr. Fletcher, in which, she said, he told me-that he had for twenty-five years found a regard for me, which was still as sincere as ever; and though it might appear odd that he should write on such a subject, when but just returned from abroad, and more so without seeing me first, he could only say, that his mind was so strongly drawn to do it, he believed it to be the order of providence.³

Unknown to Fletcher at this time was the fact that Miss Bosanquet had often thought of Fletcher with great admiration; and when hearing of his illness and trip to the continent, had covenanted with God that if it were His will for them to marry, Fletcher would recover from his consumption and would return to England to seek her hand.⁴ Inasmuch as all she had covenanted for in August, 1777, was fulfilled even in the year she had thought it would be, Miss Bosanquet responded favorably and became Mrs. John Fletcher, November 12, 1781, at Cross Hall.⁵

Even at his own wedding Fletcher was quick to press the claims of Christ on those who had gathered. To quote Joseph Benson, one of

.

1. Ibid., pp. 158-161.
2. Phillips, op. cit., p. 65.
3. Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs Fletcher*, p. 134.
4. Ibid., pp. 88,89.
5. Ibid., p. 136.

the guests:

Mr. Fletcher was dressed in his canonicals; and after giving out one of Mr. Wesley's hymns, he read the seventh, eighth and ninth verses of the nineteenth chapter of Revelation, and spoke from them in such a manner as greatly tended to spiritualize the solemnities of the day. He said, "We invite you here to the marriage of the Lamb. The bride, the Lamb's wife, has made herself ready....Ye may all be the bride, and Jesus will condescend to be the bridegroom. Make yourselves ready for being filled with the Spirit."¹

Fletcher now considered himself "as possessed of the last possible addition to his earthly happiness; never mentioning the memorable event but with expressions of extraordinary gratitude and devotion to the God of all his mercies."² With the help of his wife Fletcher was able to expand his ministry at Madeley, and even make some contributions to the evangelical cause in other parts.³ It is no exaggeration to say that the four years of Fletcher's married life were the happiest days he spent on earth.⁴

3. Death.

According to Mrs. Fletcher, for some weeks before his last illness in August, 1785, her husband "was peculiarly penetrated with a sense of the nearness of eternity."⁵ The summer of 1785 was an unhealthy one at Madeley. Many were stricken with a fever and the Fletchers were kept busy ministering to the saints.⁶

On July 16 of the same year Fletcher wrote his friend, Mr. Ireland, thanking God that his wife had recovered from an attack.⁷

.

1. Benson, op. cit., p. 409.
2. Ibid.
3. Cf. Cox, op. cit., pp. 139ff.
4. Cf. Benson, op. cit., p. 417.
5. Ibid., p. 506.
6. Cf. MacDonald, op. cit., p. 189.
7. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., pp. 557, 558.

Twenty-five days later Fletcher himself was its victim.¹ In the meantime, however, scarcely an hour went by that he was not calling upon his wife to join him "to drop every thought and care, that we might attend to nothing but the drinking deeper into God."²

On Thursday, August 4, Fletcher returned home from his parish labors saying that he had caught a cold. But it was something more serious; apparently it was spotted fever.³ Although he was much worse by Sunday he insisted on fulfilling his duties, even though it was evident that he was very ill. Most appropriately, the subject of his last discourse was Mercy; and while he preached Fletcher seemed "to be carried above all the fears and feelings of mortality."⁴ Mrs. Fletcher said that his people were so affected by the service that "groans and tears were heard and seen as he administered the sacrament of the Lord's supper."⁵

After the service of almost four hours length, Fletcher was assisted to his bed where he immediately fainted.⁶ But he rallied and continued to declare God's praises with practically every breath. On Wednesday he received such a manifestation of God's love as he could not express.

It fills me, he said, it fills me every moment. O Polly! My dear Polly! God is love! Shout! Shout! Shout aloud! Oh! It so fills me, that I want a gust of praise to go to the ends of the earth.⁷

.

1. Ibid., p. 558.
2. Cf. Benson, op. cit., p. 507.
3. Ibid., p. 511.
4. Ibid., p. 509.
5. Ibid., p. 510.
6. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 562.
7. Ibid., p. 563.

With similar expressions of victory and praise Fletcher continued to fill his waking moments until late Saturday, when he entered the last stage of his illness. Realizing that he would soon be gone, Mrs. Fletcher made her final request:

My dear creature, I ask not for myself: I know thy soul: but for the sake of others, if Jesus be very present with thee, lift up thy right hand. Immediately he did. If the prospect of glory sweetly open before thee, repeat the sign. He instantly raised it again, and in half a minute a second time. He then threw it up, as if he would reach the top of the bed. After this his hands moved no more. But on my saying, art thou in pain? He answered, 'No!' From this time he lay in a kind of sleep, though with his eyes open and fixed....and so remarkably composed, yea, so triumphant was his countenance, that the least trace of death was scarcely discernible in it. Eighteen hours he was in this situation, breathing like a person in common sleep. About thirty-five minutes past two, on Sunday night, August 14, his precious soul entered into the joy of the Lord, without one struggle or groan, in the fifty-sixth year of his age.¹

Three days later John Fletcher was buried in Madeley churchyard in the presence of thousands of his mourning friends. He had frequently requested that he be buried in the plainest manner possible, and his wife acceded to the request. "A plain oak coffin, with a steel plate, conveyed his honored remains to their long home without a pall, pall-bearers, scarf, or hatband."²

John Wesley was not present at the funeral service; however, he did find time to write a funeral sermon, on the death of Fletcher, which he delivered in London on November 6.³ His admiration for Fletcher was expressed in the following words:

I was intimately acquainted with him for above thirty years. I conversed with him morning, noon, and night without the least

.....

1. Benson, op. cit., p. 516.
2. Cox, op. cit., p. 168.
3. Cf. Tyerman, op. cit., p. 565.

reserve, during a journey of many hundred miles. And, in all that time I never heard him speak one improper word, nor saw him do an improper action.- To conclude, many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within four score years. But one equal to him I have not known: one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblameable a character in every respect, I have not found either in Europe or America. And I scarce expect to find another such, on this side eternity.¹

It seems impossible for human praise to exceed this.

E. Summary

In this chapter the writer has sought to give a sketch of John Fletcher's life as a background for understanding his theological position.

The early life of Fletcher was traced briefly from the time of his birth, through the years of his formal training and young manhood, to the time of his removal to England and his conversion there.

It was noted that Fletcher's adult life and ministry had three main features: his ministry as vicar of Madeley, his brief term as president of Trevecka College, and his defense of Wesley's theology by his pen. An attempt was made to convey some of his spiritual fervency to the reader, by noting an excerpt from his sermon on unbelief, and by his exhortations to the students at Trevecka. No attempt was made to analyze the main body of his writings since these form the material for study in the next two chapters.

The later years of Fletcher's life are important because of their continued revelation of his spiritual vigor in spite of bodily

.

1. Ibid., p. 567.

weakness. His physical frailty undoubtedly influenced the direction and content of his ministry with reference to his unusual consciousness of the future life. His marriage to Mary Bosanquet stands as an example of the meaning of holy love, the motif of his Christian faith, in human experience. His triumphant death likewise reveals the ultimate meaning of his beliefs in relation to life's greatest crisis.

These matters considered in their entirety, open the door to Fletcher's heart and mind and prepare the reader for a more sympathetic approach to and understanding of his unique contributions to what is now known as Wesleyan-Arminian theology.

CHAPTER II

FLEETHER'S DOCTRINES OF GOD AND MAN

CHAPTER II

FLETCHER'S DOCTRINES OF GOD AND MAN

A. Introduction

Since theology has to do with the study of God in his relations to the universe, and especially to man¹, it is only natural to begin our study of Fletcher's thought here also. Accordingly, two things are attempted in this chapter: first, it will be necessary to identify Fletcher's teachings in relation to the broad theological classifications of his times; then having ascertained his general theological position, Fletcher's special contributions to that position with respect to his doctrines of God and man will be noted and discussed. Inasmuch as this investigation is concerned with his special contributions it will be infeasible to give more than cursory notice to other matters of doctrine where Fletcher stands in general agreement with his own school.

To find Fletcher's general theological position an effort will be made to identify him in relation to the Church of England, in which he was an ordained priest. To discover his special contributions it will be necessary to uncover the sources of his motivations in the controversies of his times, for these lead directly to the areas of special importance in his writing.

Once Fletcher's special emphases with regard to the doctrines of God and man are understood the way will be prepared for a more en-

.

1. Cf. Wiley, H. O., Christian Theology, Vol. I, p. 15.

lightened appraisal of his other doctrines in the following chapter.

B. Fletcher's General Theological Position.

It has been noted that John Fletcher was a priest in the Anglican Church and a member of a Methodist society.¹ This meant that he had declared his faith in and support of The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England.² An example of this, as seen in his writings, is to be found in the following statement to a Mr. Prothero in defense of experimental religion:

Nevertheless, faith unfeigned alone justifieth, if the word of God and the articles of our church stand for anything; the eleventh of which runs thus: "We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works and deservings; wherefore that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort, as is more largely expressed in the homily on justification:" to which I refer you, sir, or to the enclosed extract of our homilies on this point, if you please to peruse it.³

Inasmuch as the Anglican Fletcher did honor these articles it meant that he also honored their sources, the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds with their view of the holy Trinity⁴, of the resurrection of Christ⁵, of the sufficiency of the scriptures for salvation⁶, of original sin⁷, of justification by faith⁸, of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper⁹, and of the oblation of Christ finished upon

.

1. Ante, p. 11.
2. Cf. Schaff Philip: The Creeds of Christendom, Fourth Edition, Vol. III, p. 486.
3. Fletcher, Vol. IV. p. 22.
4. Schaff, op. cit., pp. 487, 488.
5. Ibid., p. 489.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 492.
8. Ibid., p. 494.
9. Ibid., pp. 502, 503.

the cross.¹ Although the Thirty Nine Articles include one on Pre-destination and Election², it is nowhere evident that Fletcher ever understood them to teach a limited view of the atonement. Indeed, he denied such an interpretation vigorously.³ Broadly speaking, then, Fletcher stood with all those in the Church of England who believed that:

The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.⁴

Since neither the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England, nor the Twenty-five Articles of the Methodist Church, as drawn up in 1784⁵, said much about man's final state, Mr. Fletcher's peculiar views on this subject⁶ did nothing to identify him with, or ostracize him from the broad classification as an Arminian Anglican with strong affinities for the kind of experimental religion that made him one in spirit with the Methodists of that time.⁷

C. Fletcher's Special Theological Contributions.

To a great extent the direction of Fletcher's theological thinking was determined by the outstanding theological and philosophical controversies of his day. Socinianism, with its denial of Christ's

.....

1. Ibid., p. 507.
2. Ibid., pp. 497, 498.
3. Ante, p. 5.
4. Schaff, op. cit. p. 507.
5. Ibid., p. 807.
6. Cf. Luke Tyerman, Life and Times of John Wesley, Vol. II, p. 220.
7. Ante, p. 7.

essential divinity, Deism, with its emphasis upon natural revelation and human reason, and Antinomianism with its misinterpretation of salvation by faith to the neglect of good works, presented Fletcher with a threefold provocation to preserve a sound evangelicalism by means of tongue and pen. His refutation of Socinianism and Deism is found largely in his exposition of the doctrine of God and man. His refutation of Antinomianism, his most persistent opponent, is found mostly in his exposition of the doctrines of grace. Hence, it is as a result of these controversies that his special contributions to Wesleyan-Arminian theology are to be found in these areas.

D. Fletcher's Doctrine of God

1. The Knowledge of God.

Fletcher was convinced that "The existence of a Supreme Being is the first truth in religion."¹ Also he was convinced that God's existence was so elequently declared by the works of creation², by divine providence³, by reason⁴, and by conscience⁵, that it was actually self-evident. However, since the Deists of that day, along with some professed infidels and agnostic philosophers, refused to admit the need for or the validity of special revelation Fletcher thought it necessary to emphasize the additional means by which the knowledge of God is attained. Before doing so, however, he was careful to recognize the right use of

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 43.
2. Ibid., Vol. III, p. 179.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 180.

reason. In an effort to arouse the "baptized heathens" of his day he said, "If you have not sold yourselves to the father of deceits forever, pay yet some attention to natural, meral, and evangelical truths. They recommend themselves to your senses, your reason, and your conscience."¹

Fletcher then proceeded to show how reason and conscience when properly used and followed led to the very threshold of special revelation.

Regard natural truths. Earthly joys vanish like dreams. Life flies like an arrow. Your friends or neighbors are daily siezed by sickness, and dragged into eternity... And say not that the doctrine of the day of judgment is a fable... Is there not an essential difference between truth and falsehood, between mercy and cruelty, between honesty and villany? Have you...been able to erase from your breasts the law of truth and mercy, which the righteous God has deeply engraven there?... If your conscience would condemn you for the above-mentioned crimes; how much more will God do it, who is the author and judge of your conscience?... and, to say nothing of the gracious checks and sad forebodings of your guilty consciences, does not your reason discover, that as certainly as this great God is possessed of infinite wisdom, power, and justice, and has given us a moral law, he will call us to account for our breaches of it; and that, as he does not in general do it in this world, he will infallibly do it in a future state?²

However the limits of reason were very obvious to Fletcher, and made it necessary to use "figures, allusions, comparisons, metaphors, types, allegories, apologues, and parables"³, if the truth was to be declared in an understandable manner. He reminded them that:

Through the fall of the first man we are sunk in sensuality, and the language that makes the deepest impression, is that which strikes our senses in the strongest manner... In this manner St. Paul, by rending his garments before the Pagans, who were going to offer him sacrifice, more strongly expressed his indignation at their folly than if he had given them an elaborate harangue on the subject.⁴

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 558.
2. Ibid., pp. 558,559.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 7.
4. Ibid., p. 8.

At no time did Fletcher concede to the Deists of his day that natural revelation, as apprehended by reason, was "sufficient to lead men into the love and practice of solid virtue."¹ Rather, arguing from analogy, he proceeded to show that:

As the earth, deprived of its primitive fecundity, requires not only the genial influence of the sun, but must be enriched and assisted by many other means,... so the truths of natural religion can never restore the degenerate soul to its lost perfection, without the powerful assistance of a revealed Gospel... Without (special) revelation, we are left a prey to the most cruel uncertainty. The Almighty created man that he might partake of his felicity: and, after having placed in his heart an ardent desire after the sovereign good, he made a benign discovery of himself, as the one only and inexhaustible source of true blessedness. But since the darkness of sin has overspread our understanding, we have lost sight of the sovereign good, and are seeking it where it cannot possibly be found.²

In his fallen estate, then, man's knowledge of God remained a twilight knowledge at best. The original light of God's glory in man having been obscured by sin, he has neither the answer to life's greatest questions nor the power to fulfill the highest good. For these reasons it is little wonder that Fletcher waxed jubilant when he said: "In all this uncertainty, how happy is it to discover a volume (the Bible) which decides the question in so clear a manner, that reason itself can object nothing to the decision."³

By this time it is evident that Fletcher did not place natural and special revelation in a disjunct relationship. Rather, the former served as an introduction to the latter; and the latter served to fulfill the former. Together they made a two-step approach to God that

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 202.
2. Ibid., pp. 202, 203.
3. Ibid., p. 203.

began in sin and darkness but ended in grace and assurance.

Inasmuch as the place of the Bible in the Christian revelation was not a matter of special controversy it was not necessary for Fletcher to make a long polemical defense of the scriptures as the Word of God in writing. Nevertheless, he believed in their divine authority and gave good reason for doing so.¹ In an address to dejected sinners who were backward to come to Christ Fletcher's exhortation at times was transcribed almost entirely from the scriptures, thus revealing his high regard for them.

Hearken unto me, ye stout hearted, that are far from righteousness; I bring near my righteousness, it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry. Seek ye me while I may be found, call upon me while I am near: return unto me, and I will have mercy upon you; and though ye have only done evil before me from your youth, I will abundantly pardon: for my thoughts are not revengeful as your thoughts, nor my ways unloving as your ways: in me you shall be saved with an everlasting salvation. Come, therefore unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest: my yoke is easy, my burden light, and my rest glorious...Wherefore dost thou doubt, O thou of little faith? Is anything too hard for the Lord? Are not all things possible with God?²

It should be pointed out, however, that Fletcher's use of the Bible was never wooden, nor did he exalt the printed page to the neglect of the living God, whose utterance through men he believed the message of scriptures to be:

The genuine seed of the word is then always good, always full of divine energy... "The words that I speak," says our Lord, "though it should be only by the mouth of my servants, they are spirit and they are life to believing hearts."³

.

1. Ibid., pp. 309,317. Fletcher appealed to the usual external and internal evidences that evince the scriptures to be the written word of God.
2. Ibid., pp. 360,361.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 534,535.

Fletcher's unusual familiarity with the contents of the Bible was due to his reading it almost constantly. In a letter to Melville Horne, May 10, 1785, he said, "I seldom look into any book but my Bible; not out of contempt, as if I thought they could not teach me what I do not know; but because 'vita brevis, ars longa:' I may never look into either of them again."¹

Since Deism was Fletcher's chief opponent in matters pertaining to religious knowledge it is to be expected that some note would be taken of religious experience as a possible source of data. In a letter to Henry Brooke, early in 1785, Fletcher indicated his belief in the validity of the inward experimental knowledge of God, along with that found in natural creation.

Tracing his image in all the footsteps of nature, or looking for the Divine signature on every creature, as we would look for the King's image on an old, rusty medal, is true philosophy; and to find out that which is of God in ourselves, is true wisdom, genuine godliness...I see no danger in these studies and meditations, provided we still keep the end in view--the all of God, and the shadowy nothingness of all that is visible.²

On the one hand Fletcher appealed to practical experience to prove that false doctrines led to false morality:

Experience goes far in the decision of many difficult questions, and before it the most subtle sophism cannot long maintain its ground. To this, therefore, we cheerfully appeal for the happy effects of the Gospel. Ye incredulous sages of the day, show us a single enemy to the doctrines of revelation, who may truly be called a humble man, conducting himself soberly, justly, and religiously, in all the trying circumstances of life. Through the whole circle of your infidel acquaintance, you will seek such a one in vain.³

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, p.367.
2. Benson, op. cit., p.439.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p.215.

On the other hand, Fletcher was also aware that mystic experience sometimes ran into dangerous fanaticism, and became the occasion of delusion to the participants as well as spectators:

To set up impulses as the standard of our faith or rule of our conduct; to take the thrilling of weak nerves, sinking of the animal spirits, or flights of a heated imagination, for the workings of God's Spirit; to pretend to miraculous gifts... or to boast of the graces which that Spirit produces in the heart of every Child of God, when the fruits of the flesh appear in our life---this is downright enthusiasm.¹

Nevertheless, with a fine sense of balance between the extremes of arid intellectualism on one hand, and a ranting fanaticism on the other, Fletcher insisted that the testimony of Christian experience must be read into the record if man's knowledge of God is to be complete. Otherwise, Christianity is emasculated so badly as to be unrecognizable when compared to the standard in the Bible.

If a man may feel sorrow when he sees himself stripped of all, and left naked upon a desert coast, why should not a penitent sinner...be allowed to feel sorrow upon seeing himself robbed of his title to heaven...? Again, if it is not absurd to say that a rebel, condemned to death, feels joy upon his being reprieved and received into his prince's favour, why should it be thought absurd to affirm that a Christian who, being justified by faith, has peace with God, and rejoices in the hope of the glory to come, feels joy and happiness in his inmost soul on that account? On the contrary, sir, to affirm that such a one feels nothing, (if I am not mistaken,) is no less repugnant to reason than to religion.²

Broadly speaking, then, Fletcher's sources for the knowledge of God were two: natural and special revelation. Considered as two parts of a unified whole they spoke to man subjectively and objectively and provided necessary data for "the full assurance of faith."

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 215.
2. Ibid., p. 26.

2. God's Nature in Unity and Trinity.

Inasmuch as Deism and Socinianism were formidable enemies to evangelical Christianity in Fletcher's century it is to be expected that Fletcher's opposition to them would lead him to make significant statements concerning the nature and activity of God. As did Wesley so Fletcher also orients his formulations of the doctrines of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit about one central theme, the salvation of men's souls.¹ Only those areas where Fletcher made significant contributions to Wesleyan-Arminianism are noted here. The first of these concerns the doctrine of the trinity.

While Fletcher insisted that God's existence was the first truth in religion², he was also convinced that "the unity of this Being is the second."³

It is agreed on all hands that the Supreme Being, compared with all other beings, is one. One Creator over numberless creatures: one infinite Being over myriads of finite beings: one eternal Intelligence over millions of temporary intelligences...In this sense true Christians are all Unitarians. God having plainly revealed this unity by the prophets, by the apostles, and by our Lord himself, there is no doubt about this point.⁴

On this point Fletcher and his adversaries were agreed. But Fletcher could not stop here because special revelation did not stop here either. According to the Bible the unity of the Divine Being subsisted with a threefold distinction:

But although the Supreme Being is one,...shall we quarrel with him when he informs us, that,...yet, in himself, he exists

.

1. Burtner and Chiles, A Compend of Wesley's Theology, p. 43.
2. Ante., p. 36.
3. Fletcher, Op. Cit., Vol. IV, p. 43
4. Fletcher, Op. Cit., Vol. III, p. 398.

after a wonderful manner, insomuch that his one eternal and perfect essence subsists, without division or separation, under three adorable distinctions, which are called sometimes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and sometimes the Father, the Word, and the Spirit?¹

Characteristically, such a position as taken by Fletcher here, puts him midway between the errors of Arianism and Unitarianism on the one hand and Tritheism and Polytheism on the other.²

Because the trinitarian interpretation of the nature of the godhead had come under stringent attack in his day, Fletcher went on to defend it in a careful manner:

Moreover, if God has revealed his essence to us by the terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the generation and the procession, it is because they are the best that man's imperfect language can furnish to convey ideas of a mystery altogether Divine... We can in some measure conceive that an infinite and eternal Father has necessarily an infinite and eternal Son: if the Father be eternal, and if the Son be his eternal and perfect image, we can also comprehend that, as it would be absurd to admit of two infinities, the Father and Son are united in the most perfect manner by an eternal Spirit of peace, power, and love.³

Thus, it is evident that God's oneness of being is not to be confused with a threefold distinction of persons. God is not one in the same sense that he is three, nor three in the same sense that he is one.

The whole difficulty then lies in believing that God, who knows his own nature,...has condescended to inform us that, in his adorable nature, there are three principles so perfectly united that they form a trinity of substances, without breaking the unity of the substance, or Divine essence...those who worship only the Father, reject in part the Christian's God, who does not exist without his Son and Spirit, any more than the sun exists without his light and heat.⁴

.....

1. Ibid., pp. 398, 399.
2. Ibid., p. 399.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 42, 43.
4. Ibid., p. 43.

Fletcher continued to clarify the trinitarian position by the use of subtle distinctions and figures until it became evident that such a belief was not only philosophically possible but practically necessary. "Of what advantage is this doctrine?" he asked. "Does it render men more holy and happy? An answer to this question shall be my apology."¹

In proportion as God has withheld the revelation of his trinity, the nations,...have abandoned themselves to their passions, and men in general have neither been good nor happy;..."Destruction and misery are in their ways, and the way of peace they have not known"...In this fallen and corrupt condition in which human nature finds itself, the general knowledge of God, as a Creator, is insufficient to secure peace...But things are soon changed, when the Creating God reveals himself as Immanuel in believers; as soon as God, by the manifestation of his sanctifying Spirit, has reestablished his image in their souls. Then the trinity being clearly revealed, God is adored in spirit and in truth...then men begin to love and help each other with a charity which the world never saw before.²

Fletcher was able to call history to witness the devastating effects of a denial of the doctrine of the trinity in the church, and he insisted the Christian virtues flourished or decayed "in proportion as the doctrine of the trinity is rendered clear or obscured among men³," inasmuch as it was on this foundation alone that the Gospel became the power of God to salvation to all who believe.⁴ Fletcher's clear and impressive polemic for this doctrine included a powerful defense of the deity of Christ, the personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit, and did much to silence the cavils of Deists and Socinians in his day.

.

1. Ibid., p. 44.
2. Ibid., pp. 44, 45.
3. Ibid., p. 46.
4. Ibid.

3. God's Activity in Providence.

Since Deism also denied God's providential sovereignty of the universe¹ it is to be expected that Fletcher would give this subject special attention. Beginning with the commonly accepted doctrine of creation by divine fiat he proceeded to show that the God who had so created the universe had not locked himself out of it. He took scornful note of the popular beliefs of his time:

When God does a new thing in the earth, unwise philosophers make it their business to exclude his Divine agency. Our polite towns swarm with the disciples of Epicurus, who fancy that God sitteth somewhere above the circle of the heavens, and has committed the government of the material world to I know not what inferior deity, that they call nature.²

In a vein of sharp satire Fletcher went on to demonstrate the flaws in such reasoning:

If we believe those men, God made Aaron's dry rod to blossom once, but nature makes vegetables blossom every year. God appointed the peculiar death of Dathan and Abiram, but nature fixes the exit of the rest of mankind. How wild is the conceit! If God has so little to do in the universe, and nature so much, let us build temples to that powerful goddess. To her let us pray for rain or fair weather, for health and length of days: and when we have asked of God the pardon of our sins, let us say to nature, Give us this day our daily bread.³

On one occasion Fletcher gave a brief but comprehensive definition of what he meant by Divine providence:

"The living God," saith the apostle, "who, in times past, suffered all nations to walk in their own ways, left himself not without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness," Acts XIV, 15, 17.⁴

.

1. Cf. Wiley, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 223.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV., p. 76.
3. Ibid.
4. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 179.

He also interpreted various scourges, such as war, famine, drought, pestilence, earthquakes, etc., as means used by an avenging God to correct a rebellious world.¹ At no time, however, did he teach that God's works so overruled man's free agency as to encourage doctrines of Fatalistic Necessitarianism.² Rather, Fletcher's doctrine of providence supports the definition of H. Orton Wiley who has defined providence "as that activity of the Triune God by which He conserves, cares for and governs the world which He has made."³ Such government, of course, was understood to be expressed in a manner consistent with God's essential nature as holy love, whether it be direct or by means of secondary causes. Just as surely as Fletcher believed that reason and revelation walked hand in hand, so he also believed that divine government and human freedom were corollaries. But he was always careful to insist that while men were admonished to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, it was God who worked in them to will and to do of his good pleasure.⁴ Fletcher's balanced theistic perspective kept him from the errors of Deistic Transcendentalism on the one hand and Pantheistic Immanentalism on the other.

Since it has been the purpose of this investigation to give the main consideration to those areas of theology where Fletcher made

.....

1. Ibid.
2. Cf., Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 367-411. Fletcher disagreed sharply with Augustus Toplady on this matter. Toplady, he felt, had gone so far as to make God the author of sin and damnation. Fletcher agreed with Wesley that all salvation was of God and all damnation was of man.
3. Wiley, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 477.
4. Philippians 2:12, 13.

special contributions, much that he said regarding other matters pertaining to Evangelical Theism is not included here. Having noted the areas where it is believed that he did perform special service for his own theological family it is now possible to note his contributions in another area, the Christian interpretation of man.

E. Fletcher's Doctrine of Man

It is only as one keeps in mind his intense zeal for the salvation of men from sin that Fletcher's interpretation of man can be properly understood. Consequently, much that he said on this subject is found in fragments scattered throughout his writings and sermons. On one occasion, however, he did set forth a rational demonstration of what he meant by man's corrupt and lost estate.¹ The arguments are incisive and the insights into the foibles and the sins of the human family are sharp but not tart. Fletcher would have been the first to say that he knew what was in man because he knew himself.²

As was true with his doctrine of God, Fletcher's special contributions in this area are to a great extent brought into being by the unfounded optimism of the heretical theologians and sanguine philosophers of his day.

1. Man's Original State and Fall.

Fletcher accepted the Genesis account of man's origin as being historically authentic. Thus he believed that man began his earthly

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 244-342
2. Benson, op. cit., pp. 31-43. Fletcher's own description of his conversion shows how deeply he looked into the subtle intricacies of his own heart.

life with immense advantages and lofty dignity. "It is certain," says Fletcher, "from the testimony of sacred Scripture, that before the fall of Adam our nature participated in a holiness..., of which we have not any remains in coming into the world."¹ Among these endowments Fletcher notes that

the first man was endued with this two-fold life...He had both an animal life in common with beasts, and a spiritual life in common with angels. St. Paul,...intimates that it consisted both in that experimental knowledge of our Creator,...and in righteousness and true holiness, the moral and most glorious image of the Supreme Being.²

In this state of life Adam and Eve loved God with all their being, communed with him regularly, exercised dominion over the rest of creation, and "filled up each happy hour in evidencing their love to him and to each other."³

But Fletcher, in contrast to the popular opinion of his day, also believed that the scriptural account of man's fall was equally authentic, and that the method used by the tempter to seduce the parents is likewise effective on their children:

As the tempter caused the fall of our first parents, by inducing them to believe that they "should not surely die," if they broke the Divine law: so, now we are fallen, he prevents our recovering, by suggesting "the bitterness of death is past," and "we are in a state of safety."⁴

On this matter Fletcher spent little time attempting to defend the Scriptural account as being authentic. Instead, he busied himself in building what is probably one of the most powerful demonstrations ever written to prove "Man's Corrupt and Lost Estate." Addressing

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 104.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 317.
3. Ibid., p. 267.
4. Ibid., p. 334.

his people at Madeley in 1772 he dedicated to them An Appeal to Matter of Fact and Common Sense, in which he set forth thirty-six rational and scriptural proofs of human depravity. In what was apparently an effort to impress his readers with the importance of his subject he gave it a portentous introduction:

In every religion there is a principle of truth or error, which like the first link of a chain, necessarily draws after it all the parts with which it is essentially connected. This leading principle in Christianity, distinguished from Deism, is the doctrine of our corrupt and lost estate.¹

Pursuing a logic that was well-nigh relentless Fletcher went on to show the implications of this doctrine. The denial of this truth was tantamount to man's declaring himself self-sufficient in his own strength:

For if man is not at variance with his Creator, What need of a Mediator between God and him?...If his soul is not disordered, what occasion is there for such a Divine physician? If he is not helpless and miserable, why is he perpetually invited to secure the assistance and consolations of the Holy Spirit? And, in a word, if he is not "born in sin," why is a "new birth" so absolutely necessary, that Christ declares, with the most solemn asseverations, "without it no man can see the kingdom of God."²

Since this was another point of departure between Fletcher and the Deists, a point on which so much in Wesleyan-Arminian theology depended, he chose not only to controvert his foes with all the spiritual vigor he could muster but on their own vaunted ground of reason as well. Thus he drew his arguments from many sources, from nature³, from the Bible⁴, from the articles and creeds of various churches⁵,

.

1. Ibid., p. 251.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 258, ff.
4. Ibid., pp. 252-255; 309, ff.
5. Ibid., pp. 255-257; 328, 329.

from a study of man¹, and even from Deists themselves.²

Since it is in this area that Fletcher makes one of his most significant contributions to his own theological school it is proper to give a few samples of his pungent reasoning on this subject. Nature was his first witness to the universal depravity of man. Part of its witness is given here:

Does not the natural state of the earth cast a light upon the spiritual condition of its inhabitants?...Amidst the elegant and grand ruins which form the variety of our smiling landscapes and romantic prospects, can an impartial inquirer help taking notice of a thousand striking proofs, that a multiplied curse rests upon this globe; and that man,...is now disgraced by the God of nature and providence?³

Besides recounting many of the melancholy events in the course of nature, as evidence of man's displeasure to his Creator, Fletcher reminded his readers of some of the authors of scripture who spoke on the same theme. Moses is representative:

Moses, who informs us, that "God created man in his own image, and after his likeness," soon casts a shade upon his original dignity by giving us a sad account of his fall. He represents him, after his disobedience, as a criminal under sentence of death; a wretch filled with guilt, shame, dread, and horror; and a vagabond turned out of a lost paradise into a cursed wilderness, where all bears the stamp of desolation for his sake, Genesis 3,17.⁴

Perhaps one of the most telling blows against the Deist's view of man came when Fletcher was able to support his doctrine by producing a striking admission from Voltaire, one of the greatest poets, philosophers and Deists of that century. Voltaire said:

.

1. Ibid., pp. 276, ff.
2. Ibid., p. 307.
3. Ibid., p. 258.
4. Ibid., p. 250.

Who can, without horror, consider the whole earth as the empire of destruction?...In man there is more wretchedness than in all other animals put together...the bulk of mankind are nothing more than a crowd of wretches, equally criminal and unfortunate,...I tremble upon a review of this dreadful picture,...and I wish that I had never been born.¹

After he had clearly demonstrated that man was a fallen creature Fletcher turned his attention to the practical inferences that necessarily sprang from it. Since man is fallen Fletcher insisted that it behooved the ministers to cry aloud and show the people their need of a supernatural Saviour, to declare that their guilt is immense, that pride and self-righteousness is absurd and monstrous, and that regeneration is a dire necessity for all who reach the age of accountability.²

2. Original Sin.

What is original sin? Is it a universal phenomenon? If so, how is this explained? How is original sin related to actual sin? Is man to be considered as totally depraved? If so, in what senses is this to be understood? Does man sin of necessity or voluntarily? To what extent is fallen man a free moral agent and therefore still responsible to God for his actions? These were some of the questions Fletcher had to answer if he was to defend this conviction against his Deistic opponents. Each question is answered by the light of his two lamps, revelation and reason.

Fletcher began answering these questions by a consideration of various scriptural names given to original sin. Whatever the difference

.

1. Ibid., p. 307.
2. Ibid., pp. 330-334.

in terminology all the terms he defined agreed that original sin is to be understood as a vital and active force of evil within man, that leads to an ungodly life. His own words are as follows:

Various are the names which the apostle of the Gentiles gives to our original corruption; which are all expressive of its pernicious nature and dreadful effects. He calls it emphatically sin; a sin so full of activity and energy, that it is the life and spring of all others. "Indwelling sin;" a sin which is not like the leaves and fruit of a bad tree, that appear for a time and then drop off; but like the sap that dwells and works within, always ready to break out at every bud. "The body of sin," because it is an assemblage of all possible sins in embryo,... "The law of sin," and "the law in our members" because it hath a constraining force, and rules in our mortal bodies, as a mighty tyrant in the kingdom which he hath usurped. "The old man," because we have it from the first man, Adam... "The flesh" as being propagated by carnal generation, and always opposing the Spirit,... and "concupiscence," that mystic Jezebel who brings forth the infinite variety of "fleshly, worldly," and "mental lusts which war against the soul."¹

By this means Fletcher affirmed his agreement with and support of John Wesley, who insisted that original sin "is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually."²

All the arguments Fletcher adduced to demonstrate man as fallen likewise declared original sin to be a universal phenomenon. As proof of this he cited Paul's statement that Jews and Greeks alike were "all under sin." This, he insisted, was due to the relation of the race to Adam, since "Adam contained in himself, as in miniature, all his posterity."³

From this, Fletcher went on to say that as the branches of a

.....

1. Ibid., pp. 252, 253.
2. Cf. Schaff, p. 808.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 320.

large tree are nothing more than the unfolding of the original seed so the human race is the expanded existence of the original Adam. Thus it was no more ridiculous to believe that Adam had fathered a depraved race than to believe that an acorn produced an oak.¹

When they attempt to explain the mode by which depravity is transmitted, theologians often disagree concerning the nature of the relationship the race sustains to Adam. One of three positions is usually taken: some, adhering closely to a realistic interpretation of the transmission of depravity, insist that the entire race was present seminally in Adam at the time of his defection and therefore all shared the responsibility and the guilt for the act.² Others, emphasizing the legal aspect of approach, claim that Adam represented the race, and that all are guilty by imputation.³ Still others, such as the Pelagians, deny that Adam's sin had any hereditary effect at all, the consequences for his act being restricted to his own person. Fletcher's position was somewhat eclectic. While denying the third position entirely, he proceeded to combine features of the first two theories mentioned above. This will be seen by the following statement:

Adam was the general head, representative, and father of mankind; and we suffer for his rebellion legally; as the children of those who have sold themselves for slaves are born into a state of wretched slavery;...naturally, as the sons of a bankrupt suffer poverty for their father's extravagance,...and unavoidably, as an unborn child shares the fate of his unhappy mother when she inadvertently poisons, or desperately stabs herself.⁴

Although he retained a modified sense of Federal-headship in

.

1. Ibid.
2. Wiley, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 109.
3. Ibid.
4. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 321.

his thinking, as seen by the statement above, he was very careful to insist that hereditary guilt, for representative participation in the original defection, was cancelled by a gratuitous act apart from any confession of it. Basing his conviction on Romans 5:6-21, he said: "As Adam brought a general condemnation and a universal seed of death upon all infants, so Christ brings upon them a general justification and a universal seed of life."¹

In Fletcher's thinking original sin was related to actual sin like a parent to a child, like a root to its fruit, like a cause to its effect. He said:

This depravity is productive of the most detestable brood. When it has suppressed the love of God, perverted the love of our neighbor, and vitiated self love, it soon gives birth to a variety of execrable tempers, and dire directions, which should have no place but in the breasts of fiends, no outbreking but in the chambers of hell.²

After listing many of the expressions of human depravity, pride, sloth, envy, wrath, hypocrisy, bigotry, along with others, Fletcher challenged his readers to produce one mortal that had always been free from them:

Detestable as these vices and tempers are, where is the natural man that is always free from them? If anyone never felt them he may be pronounced more than mortal: but if he had, his own experience furnished him with a sensible demonstration that he is a fallen spirit, infected with the poison that rages in the devil himself.³

Those who objected to his convictions, the Pelagians and Deists of his day, raised a stock objection:

But if Cain sinned, and all mankind sin also, it is no more than

.

1. Cf. William Burton Pope, A Compendium of Christian Theology, Vol. II, p. 81.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 288.
3. Ibid., p. 290.

Adam himself once did by his own free choice, though he was created as exempt from original depravity as an angel. What need is there then to suppose that he communicated to his posterity an inbred proneness to sin.¹

Fletcher's answer took the form of a familiar analogy, the logic of which was obvious:

If a man, who is perfectly in his senses, by some unforeseen accident falls into a fit of madness, we may account for his misfortune from that accident; and no certain judgment can be formed of the bodily habit of his family. But if all his children, through a hundred generations, are not only subject to the same fits, but also die in consequence of them,... common sense will not allow us to doubt, that it is now a family disorder, incurable by human act.²

The meaning intended is obvious: Adam is the man, mankind is the family, the madness is sin, and death is the result.

Fletcher's teachings concerning the extent of human depravity, whether or not it may be considered as "total," must be interpreted by an understanding of the situation to which he spoke. In a dialogue with one of his parishioners, endeavoring to establish the truth that man was deeply fallen, he makes statements that seem as strong as the strongest Augustinianism:

Follow the wretch after the commission of his crime, and you will find him proud and sullen, in the midst of shame and disgrace. So stript is his soul of original righteousness, that he feels, even in his body, the shameful consequence of his spiritual nakedness,...So perverted are his affections that he dreads, hates, and runs away from his bountiful Creator,...So impaired is his boasted reason, that he attempts to hide himself from Him...So amazingly weak is his understanding, that he endeavours to cover his shame and guilt with an apron of fig leaves,...So impenitent, so stubborn is his breast, that he does not vouchsafe to plead guilty, or once ask forgiveness,...So seared is his conscience,...that he tries to excuse himself by indirectly accusing his Maker...Do you see, through all his behaviour, the least remains of God's moral image?

.....

1. Ibid., p. 295.
2. Ibid.

For my part, I discover in it nothing but the strongest features of the fiend, with the stupidity of one of the silliest creatures upon earth.¹

On other occasions, however, Fletcher emphasized another factor not mentioned here. In what seems like a contradictory point of view, even to the point of agreeing with Pelagians and Deists, he reminded Walter Shirley that:

He who walks in the light of Divine love, sees something of God's spiritual, moral, or natural image in all men, the worst not excepted; and at the sight, that which is merely creaturely in him,...directly bows to that which is of God in another.²

The reconciliation of these opposites is effected by a third feature, free prevenient grace. By this Fletcher meant a measure of divine influence, given in greater or lesser degrees to all men, which upholds fallen man at least to the level of free will and accountability. Speaking to those who insisted that man was totally disabled and therefore unable to freely respond to the call of the Gospel Fletcher said:

You suppose that free preventing grace does not visit all men; and that all those in whom it has not prevailed, are as totally dead to the things of God, as a dead body is to the things of this life: and from this unscriptural supposition you very reasonably conclude, that we can no more turn to God than corpses can turn themselves over in their graves;...this main pillar of your doctrine will appear to you built upon the sand, if you read the Scriptures in the light of that mercy which is over all God's works. There you will discover the various dispensations of the everlasting Gospel;...and your exulting soul will range through all the boundless fields of that grace which is both richly in all and abundantly free for all.³

Thus, in Fletcher's thinking, total depravity did not mean that every man was as bad as he could be, that no man was able to appreciate good or respond to truth, or that he sinned by unavoidable

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, pp. 415, 416.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 96.
3. Ibid., p. 137.

necessity. However, on the positive side, it did mean every part of man had been affected by the vitiating effects of depravity, that no man is now what he would have been but for the fall, that what measure of free will man retains is not by nature but by grace¹, that sooner or later all men yield to the downward tendencies of their natures and sin, not by necessity but by "the abuse or neglect of grace and its saving light."²

Thus it is only because of God's free prevenient grace that man, deeply fallen as he is, may freely exercise his power of free choice. Likewise, it is only for this reason that Fletcher can say that man is at one and the same time deeply fallen and yet a free moral agent. It is by this same method that he supported Wesley when he said that "all our salvation is of God in Christ,"³ and that "all our damnation is of ourselves."⁴ In the Wesleyan-Arminian contention for the possibility of a general redemption the doctrine of prevenient grace is an important factor.

F. Summary and Conclusion

Two things were attempted in this chapter: one, to locate John Fletcher in relation to the broad theological classifications of his day, and, two, to discover his unique contributions to that school of theology to which he belonged.

It was found that as a result of his ecclesiastical ties and

.....

1. Cf. Burtner and Chiles, op. cit., pp. 132, 133.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 464.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 17.
4. Ibid.

devotional sympathies Fletcher was to be classified as an Arminian Anglican who shared the experiential insights of John Wesley. It was also learned that Fletcher's special contributions to Wesleyan-Arminianism were the result of theological and philosophical opposition which he sought to combat. Perhaps some of his most important contributions with respect to God and man were noted in this chapter. Fletcher's contributions did not take the form of something new and novel; his best work was done as he expounded, amplified and defended views already held in germinal form.

As he expounded his understanding of the meaning of God, Fletcher made an impressive case for the need of special revelation, for the evangelical doctrine of the Trinity, and for the doctrine of divine providence. Each of these took form against a backdrop of opposition from Deism and Socinianism.

With the same opposition in mind Fletcher emphasized two things about man: one, his understanding of man's original state and fall, and two, the meaning of original sin in human experience in the light of revelation and reason. Original sin was interpreted as a vital force for evil that led to the commission of actual sin. Because of God's free gift of prevenient grace Fletcher saw that man was still endowed with a measure of free will and, therefore, remained responsible to God for his actions.

The clarification of Fletcher's doctrines on these two points makes possible an enlightened approach to his teachings on grace and faith.

CHAPTER III

FLETCHER'S DOCTRINES OF GRACE AND FAITH

CHAPTER III

FLETCHER'S DOCTRINES OF GRACE AND FAITH

A. Introduction

The preceding considerations of Fletcher's special contributions to Wesleyan-Arminian theology with respect to God and man open the way to consider his doctrinal contributions in the realms of grace and faith. As in the former case, so here also, Fletcher's main contributions came into being as a result of his participation in a major theological discussion of his times, the Antinomian Controversy. Accordingly, time is taken to review the issue briefly, to note the main areas of tension, and to consider Fletcher's attempts to resolve the differences between the two parties.

Since much of the controversy had to do with the meaning of grace in relation to justice, and faith in relation to works, Fletcher's expositions of these doctrines are important for the purpose of this thesis. Therefore, most of this chapter is devoted to these two doctrines. First, his exposition of the doctrine of grace is noted in its relations to justice, sin, and salvation. Then, his doctrine of faith is considered in relation to justification and works. This is followed by a summary and conclusion of the present chapter and makes possible a final appraisal of Fletcher's work.

.

B. The Antinomian Controversy

Methodism under the direction of the Wesley's and George Whitefield, began as a general evangelical movement.¹ At the beginning no more exact formulation of doctrine was required than what was found in the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England.² Thus men like Whitefield, Cennick, Venn, and Berridge, who believed in Particular Redemption (Calvinism), and others like Wesley and Fletcher who believed in a General Redemption (Arminianism), labored together with a considerable show of unity.³ There can be no doubt that Calvinistic Methodism, with the Countess of Huntington as its unifying personality, was a mighty force for evangelistic fervor and ecclesiastical independence.⁴ Wesley, on the other hand had a "genius for government not inferior to that of Richelieu."⁵ Together, each contributed to the other's need, and, in spite of some earlier disagreements between Wesley and Whitefield over various matters of doctrine, it was possible for Stevens to say of Methodism in 1762, "So pure at this time was the charity, so fervent the zeal of both classes of Methodists, that it was indeed difficult for either themselves or their enemies to distinguish between them."⁶

Before a decade had passed, however, the lines of battle had been drawn and Methodism had begun to experience the most critical doctrinal controversy of her short life. Because of what he believed to

.

1. Abel Stevens, The History of Methodism, Vol. I, p. 115.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 352 ff.
4. Ibid., p. 352.
5. Ibid., p. 108.
6. Ibid., p. 353.

be the Antinomian implications of the Calvinistic interpretations of individual predestination, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the unconditional final perseverance of the saints, Wesley, in his minutes of a public conference held in London in 1770, warned the Methodists against leaning too much toward the Calvinism of that day.¹

The reaction among the Calvinistic Methodists was almost instantaneous. Lady Huntington considered Wesley's Arminianism to be "horrible, abominable, and subversive,"² and closed her chapels to his ministry. Walter Shirley drew up a circular letter by which he attempted to organize a public remonstrance against Wesley.³ His former friends now considered him guilty of dreadful popish heresy and seemed ready to ostracize him without further hearing.

It was at this point that "Mr. Fletcher entered heartily into the great... Calvinistic discussion."⁴ Not only feeling a strong sympathy for Wesley's Arminianism but also sharing his fears of the encroachments of Antinomianism⁵, Fletcher set out to vindicate Wesley's minutes and to exonerate him from the charge of heresy.⁶ Recognizing that one of the basic differences between the two interpretations lay in the understanding of the relation of grace to faith, Fletcher de-

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 8,9.
2. Benson, op. cit., p. 216.
3. Ibid., p. 218.
4. George Curtiss, Arminianism in History, p. 183.
5. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 99 ff. Fletcher defines Antinomianism as an interpretation "which makes void the law through a speculative and barren faith."
6. Ibid., pp. 11 ff.

voted much of his time in thought and writing to these two areas. Reconciliation was deemed impossible unless agreement could be reached here.

C. Fletcher's Doctrine of Grace

Apparently Fletcher nowhere propounded a formal definition of grace. It is evident, however, from his use of the term that in addition to the usual idea of "undeserved favor" he thought of grace as a divine influence, an impartation of divine power, a motivation toward things holy and divine. To Fletcher the nature of grace is determined by the nature of its giver. Hence, it is an outflow of the divine nature in a manner consistent with the balance of the moral perfections. Grace was never given at the expense of justice; wrath was never expressed except grace had preceded it and had been rejected.

1. Grace and Justice.

In contrast to the main points of Calvinism, Fletcher believed that all men are saved until they reject their dispensation of grace; that Christ not only died for all men but that all men received certain unconditional benefits from his death; that whereas man was totally depraved, nevertheless God has bestowed upon him a measure of grace whereby he could turn and be saved; that because of this prevenient grace all men are still free moral agents; and finally, that while man's salvation was procured by Christ, the reception and maintenance of it was contingent upon man's good works. In other words, Fletcher believed that man must work for life as well as from life.

Since scholastic Calvinism had tended to become virtually synonymous with Protestantism certain crucial objections were raised almost immediately. Some considered such an interpretation to be a hopeless mixture of Pelagianism, Romanism, and Pharisaism. Others thought it destroyed the basic Protestant tenet of justification by faith alone. Still others considered such an interpretation a reflection on sovereign holiness, and a thief of God's glory. Others understood it to replace the merits of Christ's sufferings and death with those of the works of man and thus make salvation an earned reward instead of a free gift.¹

As Fletcher prepared himself to defend his position against the objections raised to it, he, like Wesley, was convinced that the general conviction of the scriptures assured him of two things: one, God would have all men to be saved; two, if man were finally lost it would be because of his own refusal of grace and not because of any sovereign decree to that effect. With this in mind Fletcher related grace and justice in the following manner: one, a revelation of grace to man always precedes the execution of justice; two, the demands of justice are never greater than the provisions of grace; three, grace is never separate from justice, and justice never ignores the possibilities of grace. Thus grace and justice were like two great counterweights that kept divine love and holiness in perfect moral balance. Such a balance was essential to a truly biblical theology. Emphasis on one at the expense

.

1. Ibid., pp. 11ff. Fletcher is aware of these objections as he writes his Checks. Although he never assembled all the objections in one place and answered them systematically, yet, in the course of his entire writings, practically all of them were treated at one time or another.

of the other was sure to lead into error. Fletcher saw this clearly and sought to steer his theological craft between the shoals of Pharisism on the one hand and the reefs of Antinomianism on the other.¹ The fact that it was sometimes called Arminianism meant little. He held no special brief for James Arminius, except as he believed him to declare the truth, and he did not hesitate to criticize some of the rabid Arminianism of his day.² Because of his ecumenical spirit he sought to effect a reconciliation between the opposing parties by taking the truth from each system and building it into a higher synthesis.³ Before such could happen, however, he was convinced that both sides would have to make some concessions and agree to the general convictions stated above.

Speaking of the differences between pious Calvinists and pious Arminians, Fletcher made the following observation.

The cause of their misunderstanding is singular. They are good men upon the whole; therefore they never can oppose truth as truth: and as they are not destitute of charity, they cannot quarrel merely for quarreling's sake. Whence then spring their continual disputes? Is it not from inattention and partiality? They will not look truth full in the face: determined to stand on one side of her, they seldom see above one half of her beauty. The rigid Calvinians gaze upon her side face on the right hand, and the rigid Arminians contemplate it on the left. But her unprejudiced lovers, humbly sitting at her feet, and beholding her in full, admire the exquisite proportion of all her features: a peculiar advantage this, which her partial admirers can never have in their present unfavorable position.⁴

As Fletcher prepared to introduce a plan of reconciliation he reminded his readers that the gospel depended equally on grace and justice for its foundation in truth.

.

1. Cf. Fletcher, op, cit., Vol. II, pp. 9 ff.
2. Ibid., pp. 285 ff.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 291.

The Gospel, in general, is a Divine system of truth, which, with various degrees of evidence, points out to sinners the way of eternal salvation, agreeable to the mercy and justice of a holy God; and therefore, the Gospel, ... is an assemblage of holy doctrines of grace, and gracious doctrines of justice. ... For, supposing man has a gracious capacity to believe in the light of his dispensation, there is no antinomian grace in the promise, and no free wrath in the threatening, ... but the conditional promise exhibits a righteous doctrine of grace, and the conditional threatening a gracious doctrine of justice.¹

Thus, any so-called Gospel that failed to harmonize properly grace and justice was sure to lead to error. Fletcher observed that rigid Arminianism, which was no more than Pelagianism, led men into the errors of "Arianism, Socinianism, Deism, and, sometimes avowed fatalism, or Popish Pharisaism."²

On the other hand the consequences of extreme Calvinism, when led to their logical ends were no better:

For the demolition of free will, and the setting up of irresistible, electing free grace, and absolute, reprobating free wrath, lead to antinomianism, Manicheism, disguised fatalism, widely reprobating bigotry, and self-electing presumption, or self-reprobating despair.³

As he launched into his exposition of the relation between grace and justice Fletcher observed "the Gospel in general branches out into four capital dispensations, the last of which is most eminently called the Gospel, because it includes and perfects all the preceding displays of God's grace and justice toward mankind."⁴

The lowest of these four dispensations is called Gentilism. Fletcher's own words best explain what is meant here:

Gentilism, I say, is a dispensation of grace and justice, which

.

1. Ibid., p. 261.

2. Ibid., p. 278.

3. Ibid., p. 279.

4. Ibid., p. 261.

St. Peter preaches and describes in these words:- "In every nation he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness (according to his light) is accepted of him." These words contain a holy doctrine of grace; which is inseparably connected with this holy doctrine of justice, In every nation he that feareth not God, and worketh not righteousness, (according to his light,) is not accepted of him.¹

The second of these four dispensations Fletcher called Judaism.

Like the former, it also is based on a just doctrine of grace and a gracious doctrine of justice:

Judaism,...is that particular display of the doctrines of grace and justice, which was chiefly calculated for the meridian of Canaan, and is contained in the Old Testament,...The prophet Samuel sums it all up in these words:- "Only fear the Lord and serve him in truth with all your heart, (according to the law, i.e. doctrine of mass) for consider how great things he hath done for you, (his peculiar people) but if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed," I. Sam. XII, 24. In this Gospel dispensation, also, the doctrine of grace goes hand in hand with the doctrine of justice.²

As he continued to demonstrate the axioms that all salvation is of God and all damnation is of man Fletcher showed their operation in the third dispensation of the Gospel, the Gospel of John the Baptist:

This Gospel dispensation,...is the Jewish Gospel improved into infant Christianity. Or, if you please, it is Christianity falling short of that "indwelling power from on high," which is called "the kingdom of God come with power." This Gospel is chiefly found in the four Gospels. It clearly points out the person of Christ, gives us his history, holds forth his mediatorial law; and, leading on to the perfection of Christianity, displays with increasing light, (1) The doctrines of grace, which kindly call the chief of sinners to eternal salvation through the practicable means of repentance, faith, and obedience. And, (2) The doctrine of justice, which awfully threatens sinners with destruction, if they finally neglect to repent, believe, and obey.³

The highest demonstration of the two axioms is seen as grace and justice operate in the dispensation of what Fletcher calls the

.....

1. Ibid., p. 262.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Perfect Gospel. It is here that grace and justice are given their fullest manifestation among men. In Fletcher's words,

The Perfect Gospel of Christ is frequently called the Gospel only, on account of its fullness, and because it contains whatever is excellent in the above-described Gospel dispensations...This perfected Gospel is found then, initially in the four books which bear the name of Gospels, and perfectly in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles...This Gospel is the richest display of Divine grace and justice which takes place among men in the present state of things. For Christ's sake "The Holy Ghost is given" as an indwelling, sanctifying comforter. Here is the highest doctrine of Grace! He is thus given "to them that obey;" and of consequence he is refused to the disobedient. Here is the highest doctrine of justice, so far as the purpose of God, according to the elections of grace and justice, actually takes place in this life, before the second coming of Christ.¹

After taking this historical survey of the various dispensations of the Gospel, Fletcher insisted that always:

"There is free grace in God, whence man's salvation graciously flows in various degrees;" and "There is free will in every man, whence the damnation of all that perish justly proceeds" whoever,...consistently holds forth these two self-evident propositions, is, in my humble judgment, a Gospel minister, who "rightly divides the word of truth."²

From all of this Fletcher concluded that the confusion in the evangelical churches of his day was due to the failure to distinguish properly between the election of unconditional and dispensational grace on the one hand and conditional and impartial justice on the other. Thus, "to restore peace to the Church, these two elections must be fixed on the proper Scriptural basis."³

2. Grace and Sin.

In the thinking of Fletcher the doctrine of sin was never

.....

1. Ibid., p. 263.
2. Ibid., p. 270.
3. Ibid., p. 296.

considered apart from the doctrine of grace. His most vociferous denunciations of the one were matched by fervent ejaculations of praise for the other.¹ Consequently, he was spared from dismal melancholy on the one hand, and from unwarranted optimism on the other. Throughout his considerations of these themes Fletcher's thought was governed, implicitly or explicitly, by two convictions: one, grace began where sin began; two, grace is always more powerful than sin.

In his defense of Wesley's statement that men must work for life as well as from life Fletcher's first conviction, that grace began where sin began, is defended by the words of Scripture:

And "As by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so, by the righteousness of one, is not the free gift come upon all men to justification of life?" According to the promise made to our first parents, and of course to all men then contained in their loins, is not "the seed of woman always nigh," both to reveal and "bruise the serpent's head?" Is not Christ "the light of men,-- the light of the world,--come into the world? Shineth he not in the darkness of our nature, even when the darkness comprehends him not?"²

Since the answers to the questions were obviously in the affirmative it was easy for Fletcher to refute the objections brought against Wesley's doctrine:

In this Scriptural view of free grace, what room is there for the ridiculous cavil that "Mr. Wesley wants the dead to work for life?" God, of his infinite mercy in Jesus Christ, gives to poor sinners, naturally dead in sin, a talent of free, preventing, quickening grace, which "reproves them of sin;" and when it is followed, of "righteousness and judgment." This, which some Calvinists call common grace, is granted to all without any respect of persons; so that even the poor Jew, Herod, if he had not preferred the smiles of his Herodias to the convincing light of Christ which shone in his conscience would have been saved as well as John the Baptist;.."³

.

1. Cf. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol IV, pp. 74, 75.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 31.
3. Ibid.

Fletcher also was persuaded that his second conviction, that grace is always more powerful than sin, was equally true as the first. Addressing a group of Christians gathered in the home of Hester Ann Rogers, August 24, 1781, in Park Row, Leeds, Fletcher waxed eloquent as he preached from the words, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." By way of reminder he asked his listeners,

How did sin abound? Had it not overpowered your whole soul? Were not all your passions, tempers, propensities, inordinate and evil? Did not pride, anger, self-will, and unbelief, all reign over you?... Well, my brethren, ye were then the servants of sin, and were free from righteousness; but, now, being made free from sin, ye became servants to God; and holiness shall overspread your whole soul, so that all your tempers and passions shall be henceforth regulated and governed by Him who now sitteth upon the throne of your heart, making all things new.¹

That Fletcher did not look upon such a life merely as a distant ideal is evidenced from the exhortation that followed immediately:

Who thus will be saved?...Who is a believer?...Here then is the word of the Lord: as sin abounded, grace shall much more abound! As no good thing was in your nature, so now no evil thing shall remain... O ye half believers, will you still plead for the murderers of your Lord?...O be no longer befooled! Bring these enemies to the Lord, and let him slay them.²

3. Grace and Salvation.

As Fletcher had considered the administration of grace under a fourfold dispensation so he considered salvation to be fourfold in nature also: initial, partial, perfect and final. The first, initial salvation, as has been noted previously, had to do with that unconditional bestowal of God's grace to a greater or lesser degree on every man.³

.

1. J. Gilchrist Lawson, *Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians*, pp. 192 ff.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Fletcher, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 408-410.

This needs no further consideration. That which Fletcher considered to be "partial salvation" was what is more familiarly known as that measure of divine grace given at the time of regeneration. His definition of regeneration was generally acceptable in the evangelical circles of his times:

Regeneration, brethren, is that mighty change whereby a natural man is made a spiritual or new man; and he that was a child of the devil becomes by grace a child of God. For, as by our natural birth we are made in the likeness of fallen Adam,...so by this spiritual birth we become new creatures--spiritual men--and sons of God in Jesus Christ, the second Adam.¹

Fletcher went on to show that such a dispensation of grace meant "a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness,"² a movement from darkness to light, from death to life, from slavery to freedom, a resurrection with Christ and a walking in newness of life.³ Thus, in Fletcher's understanding, regeneration meant to receive the Lord Jesus in his heart and to have dominion over sin.⁴

But Fletcher called regeneration a partial salvation because, as he said,

We are far from concluding that the body of sin is destroyed by this circumcision of the heart, this first revelation of Christ in the soul of a sinner. No: "the old man is only crucified with Christ;" and although he cannot act as before, he (the old man) lives still, and seeks occasion to disengage himself, and to exercise his tyranny with more rage than ever.⁵

It is because Fletcher believed that by a second revelation of Christ to the soul that the "old man" could be put off completely that

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 133.
2. Ibid., p. 134.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 113.
5. Ibid.

he believed in what may be called a perfect salvation, that is, salvation from all sin in this life. Since much of the Antinomian controversy raged around this point it may be helpful to explore Fletcher's doctrine of Christian perfection further.

Fletcher believed that much of the controversy over Christian perfection arose because equally good men on opposite sides failed to take time to understand each other¹: Consequently, he was very careful to define what he meant. In a letter to John Wesley in 1766 Fletcher stated his views on Christian perfection in the following words:

I think we must define exactly what we mean by the perfection that is attainable here...the light that I now see the thing in is this: as the body is not capable of perfection on this side of the grave, all those powers of the soul whose exertion depends, in part, on the frame and well being of the body,...will not, cannot be perfected here. Of this sort are, I apprehend: (1) the understanding; (2) the memory; (3) the passionate affections, or the affections as they work on the animal frame...The one power, then, that I see can be perfected here, because it is altogether independent from the body, is the will, and, of course, the affections so far as they work on the will.²

Whether Fletcher was always satisfied with this definition it is impossible to say. Certainly he left himself open for some misunderstanding here. In the following century D. C. W. Huntington cited this definition as proof that Fletcher believed that sin resides only in the will, that he believed in the possibility of salvation from voluntary sin only, and never from a sinful nature as such.³ Such a conclusion is built upon a partial foundation, however, and may be a misunderstanding of what Fletcher meant. At least, as G. W. Wilson insists, we must consider other definitions by Fletcher on this same matter before we can

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 491.
2. Luke Tyerman, Life and Times of John Wesley, Vol. II, p. 563.
3. D. C. W. Huntington, Sin and Holiness, pp. 193-199.

agree with Huntington.¹ Certainly Fletcher's opponents understood him to mean more than Huntington thought he meant. On one occasion they put the following words into Fletcher's mouth and he never denied that they bespoke his position: "It is plain from your account of Christian perfection that adult believers are free from sin, their hearts being purified by faith."²

When he wrote his Last Check to Antinomianism Fletcher dealt with the whole problem of Christian perfection in a thorough manner. Because nearly everything else he had to say on the subject depended upon his definition he is quoted at some length here:

Hence it appears that by "Christian perfection" we mean nothing but the cluster and maturity of the graces which compose the Christian character in the Church militant. In other words, Christian perfection is a spiritual constellation made up of these gracious stars, perfect repentance, perfect faith, perfect humility, perfect meekness, perfect self-denial, perfect resignation, perfect hope, perfect charity for our visible enemies, as well as for our earthly relations; and, above all, perfect love for our invisible God, through the explicit knowledge of our Mediator Jesus Christ, and as this last star is always accompanied by all the others, ...we frequently use, as St. John, the phrase, "perfect love" instead of the word perfection; understanding by it the pure love of God shed abroad in the hearts of established believers by the Holy Ghost, which is abundantly given them under the fulness of the Christian dispensation.³

Fletcher anticipated the objection of his opponents that such a definition amounted to an affirmation of sinless perfection. To this he replied:

Sin is the transgression of a divine law, and a man may be considered either as being under the anti-evangelical, Christless, law of our Creator; or, as being under the evangelical, mediatorial, remedying law of our Redeemer; and the question must be answered according to

.

1. G. C. Wilson, Methodist Theology vs. Methodist Theologians, pp. 205-208.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 502.
3. Ibid., p. 493.

the nature of these two laws.¹

Fletcher then went on to show that man is no longer under the law of Adamic or paradisiacal perfection, inasmuch as

Christ has so completely fulfilled our Creator's paradisiacal law of innocence,...that we shall not be judged by that law but by a law adapted to our present state and circumstances, a milder law, called "the law of Christ," i.e. the Mediator's law, which is, like himself, "full of evangelical grace and truth."²

Thus, the nature of the law in force determines the meaning of sin. Concerning the former law Fletcher never once made any claim that it could be fulfilled this side of paradise; concerning the latter law, the evangelical law of love, he insisted that it was both possible and necessary to keep it, even in spite of many involuntary imperfections.

His own conclusion to the matter was stated as follows:

We believe, that although adult, established believers, or perfect Christians, may admit of many involuntary mistakes, errors, and faults;...yet so long as their will is bent upon doing God's will; so long as they walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit; so long as they fulfil the law of liberty by pure love, they do not sin according to the Gospel: because (evangelically speaking) "sin is the transgression, and love is the fulfilling of that law...the righteousness of the law, which they are under, is fulfilled; and, of consequence, an evangelically sinless perfection is daily experienced."³

Fletcher went on to show that quotations from pious Calvinists supported this interpretation, the main point of dissent arising only when the law of Eden was confused with the law of Christ.⁴ He was able also to show how such an interpretation did not preclude further growth in grace nor make a return to sinning absolutely impossible. On the

.

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 495.
4. Ibid., pp. 495 ff.

contrary, he declared that Christians made perfect in love would always need the mediatorial work of Christ, like a ship needs water in which to navigate.¹

After a careful review of all the alleged objections to Christian perfection Fletcher concluded that there was nothing in Scripture, reason or human experience that made such a position untenable. In Christian perfection he saw the epitome of the divine requirement for New Testament believers fulfilled by the power of Divine grace as administered by the Holy Spirit.

Fletcher's teachings on this matter were not always directed against those who opposed it. Some of his most effective ministry was among "perfect Christian pharisees" whose proud readiness to profess Christian perfection made them its worst enemies.² These he scourged roundly. On the other hand, he did not fail to encourage those "imperfect believers who cordially embrace the doctrine.." to take those steps necessary to their entrance into this Gospel privilege.³ But perhaps one of his greatest contributions to this doctrine of grace was given in an address to those Christians who already laid claim to the grace of love made perfect. He reminded them that they could lapse into sin if they became presumptuous⁴, that they would be assaulted by temptation⁵, that they were not complete in wisdom, nor were they in a glorified state so far as their physical frame was concerned⁶.

.

1. Wiley, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 486.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 611 ff.
3. Ibid., pp. 627 ff.
4. Ibid., pp. 658, 659.
5. Ibid., p. 660.
6. Ibid., pp. 660, 661.

After urging his readers to seek ever enlarging measures of divine love continually¹, Fletcher turned to his favorite apostle, Paul, for a prize example of what Christian perfection was supposed to mean in everyday Christian living:

Would ye see this deep precept put in practice? Consider St. Paul. Already possessed of Christian perfection, he does good works from morning till night...He carries the Gospel from east to west. Wherever he stops, he plants a Church at the hazard of his life. But instead of resting in his present perfection,..."he grows in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ;" unweariedly "following after, if that he may apprehend that (perfection) for which also he is apprehended of Christ Jesus,"--that celestial perfection, of which he got lively ideas when he was caught up to the third heaven, ...With what amazing ardour does he run his race of Christian perfection for the prize of that higher perfection!²

Perfection on the way to perfection! This was Fletcher's teaching. Whatever the scale of the divine requirement he believed divine grace always made such a standard of excellence possible. Always, however, Christian perfection was to be understood as working within a context of an ever expanding moral ideal, where the limits were infinity itself, and where growth in grace was eternal. This, he was assured, was the combined testimony of Scripture, reason and experience. To these witnesses he added his own unique "Amen."

D. Fletcher's Doctrine of Faith

1. Faith and Justification.

Inasmuch as most of the discussion in the Calvinistic-Arminian controversy had to do with the nature of justification in relation to

.

1. Ibid., pp. 663-666.
2. Ibid., p. 667.

faith and works¹, it is only natural to find Fletcher speaking to these points in a concise way. It was by defining carefully the main terms used here, along with defending his definitions from Scripture, that Fletcher made his chief contribution to the discussion. Here, as in other areas already noted, his interest is practical; the salvation of men's souls is in his mind as he writes on these themes. Hence, his concern is not so much with faith in a general sense as in its relation to justification.

Before coming to what he felt was an adequate understanding of saving faith Fletcher reminded his readers that it must be distinguished from lower forms of believing.

If we assent to a religious truth merely because we cannot resist its evidence;-if we hate it, wanting to shake it off, wishing it were a lie, and fretting because we cannot make it so; we have the faith of devils:..²

Fletcher believed that others had faith higher than devils who still fell short of exercising saving faith. "The faith of immoral professors is not much better than the faith of Felix and Satan. They believe some glorious truths, but not with the heart to righteousness."³

By the use of a familiar comparison Fletcher demonstrated the absurdity of so-called saving faith that failed, or refused, to apply it in a practical manner:

Now, as it is absurd to suppose that speculating upon a medicine, instead of taking it, can conduce to the recovery of our bodily health, so it is unreasonable to fancy that bare speculations upon the doctrines of the Gospel can be productive of saving health.⁴

.

1. Ibid., p. 369.
2. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 540.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 541.

All of these forms of believing, common though they were, failed to meet Fletcher's standards of saving faith.

In contrast to the general opinion of his times, Fletcher insisted that saving faith as defined in the Bible was not to be understood as something wholly passive or receptive, although receptivity was part of its meaning.¹ He believed that undue emphasis on faith as a passive state only resulted in an unbalanced relation between faith and good works. With the common errors of his day in mind he moved cautiously to inquire into the nature and ground of saving faith.

What is faith? It is believing heartily. What is saving faith? I dare not say that it is "believing heartily, my sins are forgiven me for Christ's sake;" for if I live in sin that belief is a destructive conceit, and not saving faith. Neither dare I say that "saving faith is only a sure trust and confidence that Christ loved me, and gave himself for me;" for, if I did, I should damn almost all mankind for four thousand years. Such definitions of saving faith are, I fear, too narrow to be just, and too unguarded to keep out Solifidianism.²

Having pointed out the common errors concerning the nature of faith Fletcher prepared himself to define saving faith in a way that would prevent any Antinomian implications from being read into it.

To avoid therefore such mistakes; to contradict no Scriptures; to put no black mark of damnation upon any man, that in any nation "fears God and works righteousness;" to leave no room for Solifidianism; and to present the reader with a definition of faith adequate to "the everlasting Gospel," I would choose to say, that "justifying or saving faith is believing the saving truth with the heart unto internal, and (as we have opportunity,) unto external righteousness, according to our light and dispensation."³

Saving faith, then, is always productive of good works and any attempt to consider the former without the latter is dangerous heresy, according to Fletcher.

.....

1. Ibid., p. 552.

2. Ibid., p. 523.

3. Ibid., p. 524.

In the midst of his considerations on saving faith Fletcher took time to consider the meaning of the popular Protestant axiom: "faith is the gift of God." First, he noted the common interpretation of this axiom, expressing his dislike for it as he did so:

Some persons think that faith is as much out of our power as the lightning that shoots from a distant cloud; they suppose that God drives sinners to the fountain of Christ's blood as irresistibly as the infernal legion drove the herd of swine into the sea of Galilee; and that a man is as passive in the first act of faith, as Jonah was in the act of the fish, which cast him upon the shore. Hence the absurd plea of many who lay fast hold on the horns of the devil's altar, unbelief, and cry out, "We can no more believe than we can make a world!"¹

Having exposed the erroneous sense in which some interpreted "faith is the gift of God," Fletcher gave what he believed to be the true meaning of these words:

Believing is the gift of God's grace, as cultivating the root of a rare flower given you, ... is the gift of God's Providence. Believing is the gift of the God of grace, as breathing, moving, and eating, are the gifts of the God of nature... Free grace removes (in part) the total blindness which Adam's fall brought upon us: free grace gently sends us some beams of truth, which is the light of the "Sun of righteousness;" it disposes the eyes of our understanding to see those beams; it excites us in various ways to welcome them; it blesses us with many, perhaps with all the means of faith, such as opportunities to hear, read, inquire; and power to consider, assent, consent, resolve, and re-resolve to believe the truth. But, after all, believing is as much our own act as seeing.²

The ability to believe, then, is God's gracious gift to all men everywhere; the exercise of that graciously given ability rests with man. Fletcher emphasized this over and over because it was crucial to the Wesleyan-Arminian contention that God would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. By one means or another he

.

1. Ibid., p. 524.
2. Ibid., p. 525.

kept insisting that God's free grace had given fallen man free will. The conjunction of these two in the human heart formed the marriage of faith and gave birth to the child of good works.¹ Thus, with good reason, Fletcher insisted that the unsaved man must work for life as well as from life; he must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, which is a form of work. Saving faith, then, is active as well as passive in nature. Undue stress on either phase, to the neglect of the other, led to error. A balanced emphasis, such as Fletcher advocated, led not only to justification but to a life whose boasting was in God and not in man.

Fletcher's unique contribution to an understanding of the nature of justification is found in his comprehensive definition of the term. It has already been shown that, in common with the Church of England, he understood that "We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works and deservings."² But he did not stop here, In contrast to his opponents, who said that justification had only one meaning and that it was always perfect, full, final and complete³, Fletcher insisted that the Scriptures taught four separate stages of justification, and that each of these must be considered separately.

It is best to let Fletcher's own words tell what is meant by each stage, or degree, of justification. The first degree is

That which passes upon all infants universally, and is thus described by St. Paul: "as by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so, by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men, unto present justification from original sin, and

.

1. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 23.
2. Ante, p. 34.
3. Fletcher, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 289.

future justification of life;" upon their repenting and "believing in the light during the day of their visitation."¹

It is evident that such a justification is both universal and unconditional and is a part of the divine forbearance in granting a dispensation of light and life. In other words, it is part of the gift of prevenient grace.

The second justification is the one most familiar to evangelicals, the instantaneous justification of sinners by faith. Of it Fletcher says,

The justification consequent upon such believing, is thus described by St. Paul:--This blessing of "faith imputed for righteousness" shall be ours, "if we believe on Him that was raised from the dead for our justification. We have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law. Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,.." ²

It was around the third and fourth stages of justification as interpreted by Fletcher that much of the controversy swirled. Fletcher mentions the third one briefly here but gives considerable amplification of it elsewhere. The following statement is adequate for the present:

The justification consequent upon bringing forth the fruit of a lively faith in the truths that belong to our dispensation. This justification is thus mentioned by St. James:--"Rahab the harlot was justified by works. Abraham our father was justified by works. Ye see then how by works a man is justified, and not by faith only."³

The fourth justification is yet in the future. Fletcher's words are self-explanatory:

Final justification, thus asserted by our Lord and St. Paul. In the day of judgment "by thy words shalt thou be justified, and by thy

.

1. Ibid., p. 161.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

words shalt thou be condemned. Circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing, but the keeping of the commandments; for the doers of the law shall be justified."¹

After having classified justification into these four stages Fletcher notes a common factor in each: they are all "equally merited by Christ."² That is, they are all founded upon the atoning provision made by him. Thus there is no occasion ~~for~~ assuming man's self-sufficiency, nor is there any ground for pharisaical boasting in any of the four. Neither is there any excuse for Antinomian complacency.

We do nothing in order to the first, because it finds us in a state of total death. Toward the second we believe by the power freely given us in the first, and by the additional help of Christ's word and the Spirit's agency. We work by faith in order to the third. And we continue believing in Christ and working together with God, as we have opportunity, in order to the fourth.³

Thus, it was because of the special advantages that arose out of this fourfold distinction within the comprehensive doctrine of justification that Fletcher continued to contend for it. That there are special benefits peculiar to each stage is evidenced by the following:

The first justification engages the sinner's attention, encourages his hope, and draws his heart by love. The second wounds the self-righteous Pharisee, who works without believing; while it binds up the heart of the returning publican, who has no plea but "God be merciful to me a sinner!" The third detects the hypocrisy and blasts the vain hopes of all Antinomians, who, instead of "showing their faith by their works, deny in works the Lord that bought them, and put him to an open shame." And while the fourth makes even a "Felix tremble," it causes believers to "pass the time of their sojourning here in humble fear" and cheerful watchfulness.⁴

Although "all these degrees of justification meet in glorified saints,"⁵ Fletcher insisted that it is not true that they are so united

.

1. Ibid., pp. 161, 162.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.

as to be inseparable in the present life. The consequence of disobedience, at any of the four levels, is condemnation:

For all the wicked who "quench the convincing Spirit,"...fall from the first,...All who "receive the seed among thorns,"...All who "begin in the Spirit and end in the flesh," and all "who draw back,"...by falling from the third, lose the second,...And none partake of the fourth but those "who bear fruit unto perfection," according to one or another of the Divine dispensations.¹

Thus it is evident that, as in his interpretation of other doctrines, in his exposition of justification by faith Fletcher avoids extreme positions and takes middle ground. His right use of reason and his fidelity to revelation seem to make him dissatisfied anywhere else.

2. Faith and Works.

Because of his preoccupation with the threat of moral laxity in the church much of the material written in Fletcher's Checks to Antinomianism has to do with the importance of works in relation to faith. However, he was not unaware of the opposite threat of pharisaism, or pride in works to the disparagement of faith. Consequently, he sought to guard his utterances against giving implicit encouragement to either form of error.

In 1774, Fletcher published An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism, in which he sought to promote both faith and works with equal impartiality. As he prepared to harmonize the two he submitted the following propositions to his readers:

(1.) In the day of conversion we are saved freely as sinners, (i.e. made freely partakers of the privileges that belong to our Gospel dispensation in the Church militant,) through the merits of Christ, and by the instrumentality of a living faith. (2.) In the day of judgment we shall be saved freely as saints, (i.e. made freely partakers of the privileges of our Gospel dispensation in the Church

.

1. Ibid.

triumphant,) through the merits of Christ, and by the evidence of evangelical works.¹

The conclusions to these two propositions are very obvious.

If the two propositions stated above are true, it follows:

(1) That nothing can absolutely hinder our justification in a Gospel day but the want of true faith; and, (2) That nothing will absolutely hinder our justification in the day of judgment but the want of good works. If I am not mistaken, all the evangelical doctrines of faith and works turn upon these propositions... Wilt thou enter into Christ's sheepfold? Believe. Wilt thou stay there? Believe and obey. Wilt thou be numbered among his sheep in the great day? Endure unto the end; continue in well doing; That is, persevere in faith and obedience.²

Fletcher went on to observe that a boatsman on a river must ply two oars with equal force if his craft is to continue on a straight course, so the evangelical Christian must give equal attention to faith and works if he would hold a straight course in thinking and living. He noted that history recorded the fall of some because of wrong emphasis on the former, while others fell by misinterpreting the latter.³

As he endeavored to give equal attention to both Fletcher was faced with the question, "Which is most important to salvation, faith or works?" As usual he framed his answer in the form of a familiar analogy:

I beg leave to propose a similar question: Which is the most essential to breathing, inspiration or expiration? If you reply, that "the moment either is absolutely at an end, so is the other; and therefore both are equally important:" I return exactly the same answer. If humble faith receive the breath of spiritual life, obedient love gratefully returns it, and makes way for a fresh supply.⁴

Works then, according to Fletcher, are the sure reflex of faith.

.

1. Ibid., p. 431.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., pp. 431, 432.
4. Ibid.

The one is the necessary corollary of the other. They are of equal importance.

But another objection seems to have been brought against Fletcher's insistence that faith and works were equally important. Some were saying that faith was more important than works because the former gave birth to the latter. Fletcher conceded that faith did give birth to works, but he also pointed out that works were necessary for the completion of faith:

If faith has the advantage over works by giving them birth, works have the advantage over faith by perfecting it. "Seest thou," says St. James, speaking of the father of the faithful, "how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?" and if St. Paul affirms that works without faith are dead, St. James maintains, "faith without works is dead also."¹

It seems that some remained unconvinced, however, for one more objection was brought against Fletcher's position. The objection was stated somewhat as follows: "You are setting Christ aside. You forget that it is by his merits alone that we are justified." Fletcher's reply to this serious charge is as follows:

Christ is always the primary; original, properly meritorious cause of our justification and salvation. And yet to deny that, under this primary cause, there are secondary, subordinate, instrumental causes of our justification, and consequently of our salvation is to set the Bible aside..²

Thus Fletcher denied that his emphasis on faith and works did any disservice to Christ, whatsoever. All he was attempting to do was to revise certain other phases of biblical teaching that had been long neglected.

.....

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.

His next step was to show how these "secondary, subordinate, instrumental causes of our salvation" work in various degrees of justification.

Now, if in the day of our conversion faith is the secondary, subordinate cause of our acceptance as Penitent sinners; in the day of judgment works, even the works of faith, will be the secondary, subordinate cause of our acceptance as Persevering saints. Let us therefore equally decry dead faith and dead works, equally commend living faith and its important fruits.¹

By this time it is obvious that Fletcher did not emphasize good works that man might merit heaven. But if good works will never merit heaven, why then, should they be performed? Fletcher answers that there are at least six good reasons for doing so. They are given here in abbreviated form:

1. We are to do good works to show our obedience to our heavenly father. As a child obeys his parents, not to purchase their estate, but because he is their child, (and does not choose to be disinherited;) so believers obey God, not to get to heaven for their wages, but because he is their father, (and they would not provoke him to disinherit them).
2. We are to abound in all good works, to be justified before men, (now and before the judge of all the earth in the great day;) to show that our faith is saving, ... and that my faith is living and genuine.
3. Our Saviour told his disciples that they were to do good works, not to purchase heaven, but that others might be stirred up to serve God....
4. We are to do good works out of gratitude and love to our dear Redeemer, who, having (conditionally) purchased heaven for us with his precious blood, asks the small return of our love and obedience...
5. We are to be careful to maintain good works, ... that we may nourish and increase our faith and spiritual life...
6. We are not to do good works to obtain heaven by them, (as if they were the properly meritorious cause of our salvation.)... But

.

1. Ibid., pp. 433, 434.

we are to do them because they are recorded in heaven.¹

From the preceding evidence Fletcher's position regarding the relation of faith and works may be summarized in the following statements: One, good works are necessary to the life of faith because the moral law has been incorporated into the gospel. Two, works are practical expressions of faith because the nature of faith is seen in the works which proceed from it. Three, faith is the tree, works are the fruit of it. Therefore either is dead without the other.

By this time it seems evident that God's call to "believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ," is of no greater importance than to "keep his commandments and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." I John 3: 22, 23.

E. Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to an investigation of Fletcher's doctrines of grace and faith, especially as they were developed in the light of the controversies going on in the Church at that time.

The doctrine of grace was studied in its relation to justice, sin and salvation. It was noted that grace and justice acted like great counterweights, not only in God's general activities of providence but more especially in his dealings with man, whom he sought to win from sin to salvation by "a just dispensation of grace and a gracious execution of justice."

Fletcher's doctrine of faith was considered in relation to

.....

1. Ibid., pp. 481-483.

justification and works. Although it was found that the first stage of justification was given unconditionally to all men, it became increasingly evident that the last three stages depended upon that faith which works by love. Hence, in Fletcher's thinking the emphasis was placed on the works of faith.

Since this investigation has been limited to those areas of Fletcher's theology where he made special contributions to Wesleyan-Arminianism, no attempt has been made to pursue these ramifications into other areas such as eschatology. Thus the way is open for a final summary and evaluation of what has been discovered in this limited phase of research.

CHAPTER IV
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER IV
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A. Summary

The contents of the first chapter were prepared with the intention of introducing the reader to the main features of John Fletcher's life and work, with the hope that such would produce a sympathetic approach to his writings. Accordingly, the most interesting features of his early life were noted. These included an account of his education, his removal to England and his conversion to Christ there. This was followed by a chronicle of his adult labors, as vicar of Madeley, as president of Trevecka College, and as a polemical writer. It was in this era that his profound devotion and contagious spiritual fervency were seen quite clearly. His later years, marked by his unusually happy marriage and triumphant departure, were like a corona resting upon his entire life.

In the second chapter Fletcher's general theological position was seen to be that of an Arminian Anglican, with hearty sympathies for Wesleyan Methodism. It was the later group that profited most by his efforts as a theological writer.

By this time it had become evident that the controversies prevailing in the eighteenth century provided the incentive to get Fletcher started writing. The main controversies were three in number: Deism, Socinianism and Antinomianism. Thus when Fletcher expounded his doc-

.

trine of God he was careful to show, in contrast to Deism, that special revelation was both necessary and possible, and that God's activity in providence brought him into much closer relation to man than commonly was believed to be possible. In contrast to Socinianism Fletcher insisted that the one God existed in a trinality of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal."

Fletcher believed that the Scriptural account of man's creation and fall into sin was authentic, the latter point being confirmed by a host of witnesses. He also believed that man's depravity was extensive-ly total, that every part of his being had felt the vitiating effects of sin. He was quick to add, however, that a dispensation of grace had been given freely to all men, by which man was enabled to respond freely to the further overtures of mercy.

In chapter three it was noted that Fletcher wrote on the doctrines of grace and faith in the light of the controversy over the relation of faith and works. Beginning with the underlying conviction that holiness and love were equally true in God, Fletcher developed his doctrine of grace and justice on this foundation. As a result he concluded two things: one, that a dispensation of grace always accompanies a demand of justice; two, that a just distribution of grace is followed always by a gracious demand of justice in any dispensation.

As he traced the relations of grace to sin, Fletcher found that grace not only began where sin began but was always more powerful than sin. Thus he was optimistic about the possibility of salvation from sin by grace. He recognized, however, that salvation had to be considered at four separate levels, initial, partial, perfect, and final. At the first level man is saved from complete ruin and is

sustained at a level of accountability. At the second level man is saved from bondage; at the third level man is saved from inward corruption, and at the fourth level man shall be saved from the consequences of sin.

At this point it should be noted again that Fletcher was always careful to insist that man could be saved up to the height of the divine requirement. Hence, inasmuch as the requirements of the present dispensation, as seen in the Sermon on the Mount, demand inward purity, singleness of motive, simplicity of desire, and unfeigned love, this is the present possibility of grace also. This he called perfect love, or Christian perfection, the fulness of every Christian grace to the exclusion of its opposite.

Because of his belief in free prevenient grace and free will, Fletcher defined saving faith as a free volitional act of man wherein he humbly appropriated the merits of Christ to his own life, which merits were the sole ground of man's justification. He was quick to point out, however, that the merits of Christ did not absolve man from good works. At every level of justification Fletcher insisted that good works, performed in the power of faith, were absolutely necessary. He was fond of saying often that faith gave rise to good works and good works completed the act of faith. Thus faith and works were actually two parts of the same thing: both were equally important for life, both would be equally important in the hour of judgment.

B. Conclusions

Fletcher's contributions to Wesleyan-Arminian theology came

more in the form of exposition and clarification than by the innovation of new ideas. Every major theological tenet he held may be found in Wesley's writings, in germinal form, at least. But Wesley never had time to systematize his own thought. Most of his theology is found scattered throughout his sermons. Thus when it came to defending his position against the opposition, he was only too happy to turn this responsibility over to Fletcher. Hence Fletcher stood in relation to Wesley somewhat like Melancthon stood in relation to Luther. Both Melancthon and Fletcher were content to remain in the background and support those who were qualified dispositionally to be in the vanguard. It is evident, however, that the two hemispheres of the Protestant Reformation owe much of their intellectual vigor and spiritual pungency to these two men.

More specifically, however, Fletcher's contributions to his own theological school may be noted under the following list:

1. He clarified the relation between the Law and the Gospel in the Old Testament. He gave convincing evidence that moral law is as much a part of the Christian dispensation as it was of the dispensation of Moses. This is evident throughout his developement of the relation of sin and grace, of faith and works.

2. Throughout his entire Christian life, and especially during the years of heated controversy, he fulfilled the scriptural admonition to speak the truth in love. Ephesians 4: 15. There is no evidence of bitterness or ill-will toward his foes at any time. Some, who cordially disliked his theology, had profound regard for his spirit of devotion. His life was fragrant with sweetness and devotion to God.

3. Fletcher exemplified the Wesleyan-Arminian emphasis on perfect love. Because of Fletcher's life and work Wesley was delivered from some forms of misunderstanding over this doctrine. It seems probable that anyone who reads Fletcher's teachings on this subject with a candid mind will be impressed with his masterful treatment of it. The doctrine was shown to have strong biblical foundations.

4. Fletcher adapted profound theological truth to the child-like understanding of his hearers and readers. His parishioners at Madeley were for the most part crude and unlettered but they were able to comprehend much that he said. He organized special Bible schools for the children of his parish, and they loved him dearly. He made converts among the youth as well as among the adults.

5. Fletcher emphasized holy love as centered in the evangelical understanding of God. This was the secret of his harmonization of grace and justice. This was his guiding influence in his philosophy and practice of evangelism as well.

6. By his efforts Fletcher greatly reduced the danger of an extreme Antinomian reaction to the Roman Catholic teachings of his times. The initial break from Rome came by the liberating cry of "justification by faith alone." This of course was true, but arid speculation on this axiom had given rise to the imminent danger of moral laxity. Fletcher not only protested against the looseness but gave the biblical setting for "Faith which works by love."

7. Fletcher delivered a powerful apologetic for special revelation as against the Deistic and skeptical emphases of the times. To some extent, at least, Fletcher made the kind of "revealed religion," that was common in Methodism then, respectable before the eyes of a

hardbitten people.

8. By his own example Fletcher generated genuine interest in the higher levels of grace. He believed strongly in the crisis of regeneration; he believed just as strongly in the crisis experience of entire sanctification for the Christians. But he never stopped there. Beyond the immediate crisis he saw the endless process and was continually athirst for greater measures of divine grace.

9. By his own ecumenical attitude he opened the door for fellowship and high-level discussion with theological groups other than his own. He did not hesitate to criticize his own group when he thought it wrong; neither did he hesitate to commend other groups when he thought they were correct. His keen sense of balance between theory and practice, worship and work, and achievement and growth qualified him as a liaison man between the various evangelical groups of his time.

C. Suggestions for Further Study

Inasmuch as this investigation concentrated on the areas of special tension in Fletcher's theology much that he wrote on other doctrines has not been discussed here. However, it seems to this writer that Wesleyan-Arminian theology still needs further consideration, especially in the two phases following: First, the doctrine of Divine Providence needs to be explored more thoroughly. In this connection, the matter of Divine prescience and human freedom would be weighed carefully. How are these to be reconciled? etc. Second, the Eschatology of Wesleyan-Arminianism ought to be reexamined. It has been noted that some of this group are post-millennialists, some a-millenn-

ialists, and others are pre-millennialists. It would be interesting to learn if "the theology of perfect love" favors one of these interpretations over another.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. Primary Sources

Fletcher, John: The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher; Volumes I to IV, Carlton and Porter, New York.

B. Secondary Sources

Benson, Joseph: Life of Fletcher. John Fletcher College Press, University Park, Iowa, 1925.

Bready, J. W. : England Before and After Wesley. Harper and Brothers, New York, 1938.

Brooks, J. R. : Scriptural Sanctification. Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Nashville, 1904.

Burtner, R. W. and Chiles, R. E. : A Compend of Wesley's Theology. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1954.

Cox, Robert: Life of Rev. John William Fletcher. George and Byington, Philadelphia, 1837.

Curtiss, George: Arminianism in History. Hunt and Eaton, New York, 1894.

Flew, Newton: The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology. Oxford University Press, London, 1934.

Huntington, D. C. W.: Sin and Holiness. Eaton and Mains, New York, 1898.

Knight, Helen: Lady Huntington and Her Friends. American Tract Society, New York, 1853.

Lawson, James G.: Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians. The Warner Press, Anderson, Indiana, 1911.

Lindstrom, H.: Wesley and Sanctification. The Epworth Press, London, 1946.

MacDonald, F.W.: Fletcher of Madeley. A. C. Armstrong and Son, New York, 1886.

- Moore, Henry: The Life of Mrs. Fletcher. Hunt and Eaton, New York, 1817.
- Overton, J. H.: The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century. Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1900.
- Peters, John L.: Christian Perfection and American Methodism. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1956.
- Phillips, W. L.: Pentecostal Flashlights From the Life of John Fletcher. God's Revivalist, Cincinnati, 1902.
- Pope, W. B.: A Compendium of Christian Theology. Vol. II, Hunt and Eaton, New York.
- Sangster, W. E.: The Path to Perfection. Abingdon Cokesbury Press, Nashville, 1943.
- The Pure in Heart. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1954.
- Schaff, P.: The Creeds of Christendom. Vol. III, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1877.
- Stephens, Abel: The History of The Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century Called Methodism. Vol. I, Wesleyan Conference Office, London.
- Tenny, Mary A.: Blueprint for a Christian World. Light and Life Press Winona Lake, Indiana, 1954.
- Turner, G. A.: The More Excellent Way. Light and Life Press, Winona Lake, Indiana, 1952.
- Tyerman, Luke: Life and Times of John Wesley. Vol. II, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1876.
- Wesley's Appointed Successor. Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1882.
- Wiley, H. O.: Christian Theology. Vols. I and II, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 1940.
- Wilson, G. W.: Methodist Theology vs. Methodist Theologians. Jennings and Pye, Cincinnati, 1904.

C. Reference Works

- Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia. Vol. III, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1891.

Yearbook of American Churches for 1956. National Council of Churches
of Christ in the U. S. A., New York, 1956.