Pentecostal Sanctification in Wesley and Early Methodism

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"But the Holy Ghost was not yet given in His sanctifying graces, as he was after Jesus was glorified. . . . And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, then first it was, that they who ‘waited for the promise of the Father’ were made more than conquerors over sin by the Holy Ghost given unto them. That this great salvation from sin was not given till Jesus was glorified, St. Peter also plainly testifies."—Sermon on “Christian Perfection” by Wesley.

"God may, and . . . does, instantaneously so baptize a soul with the Holy Ghost and with fire, as to purify it from all dross, and refine it like gold, so that it is renewed in love, in pure and perfect love."—From an essay on Christian perfection by Joseph Benson and published by John Wesley in *The Arminian Magazine*, 1781.

"John baptized with water, which was a sign of penitence, in reference to the remission of sin; but Christ baptizes with the Holy Ghost, for the destruction of sin [=entire sanctification]."—Adam Clarke in his *Commentary on the Book of Acts*.

"Christian perfection is nothing but the full kingdom in the Holy Ghost." Charles Wesley to John Fletcher (1774).¹

"To wash, cleanse, baptize with the Holy Ghost, and sanctify are commonly synonymous in Scripture; hence the phrase of being baptized with the Holy Ghost, which is elsewhere called being baptized with fire, to signify perfect purity."—Thomas Coke in his *Commentary on the Book of Acts*.

August 7, 1770, was a monumental day for Methodism. On that day John Wesley, at the age of 67 years, gathered his preachers together in London for their annual conference. Wesley asked what could be done to revive the work of God. Their tersely worded answer was that “they had leaned too much toward Calvinism.” Wesley believed that Calvinism led to spiritual mediocrity because it was fixated on justification by faith, although Wesley certainly believed that the doctrine of justification was important. Wesley and his preachers agreed that they should once again promote the message of Christian perfection. They especially agreed that they would stress the instantaneous moment when the justified believer could be made perfect in love.² This

²Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, 95.
agreement provoked a highly publicized controversy initiated by the Calvinist Methodists and led by the Countess of Huntingdon. This uproar made it difficult for Wesley’s friend, John Fletcher, who was the founding president of her new school, Trevecca College. Fletcher was also the vicar of the Church of England at Madeley, in Shropshire. Based on Wesley’s special recommendation, the Countess had also hired Wesley’s premier young scholar, Joseph Benson, to be the principal. The forty -year-old Fletcher and the twenty-one-year-old Benson were immediately bonded as dear friends when they came together at Trevecca in 1769.

Fletcher’s influence with the students at Trevecca was enormous. On the days when he was on campus, Fletcher would preach as well as teach. His usual theme was to encourage the students to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Although Fletcher also insisted on high academic standards for Methodist preachers, he insisted that the baptism with the Spirit was a more important qualification for ministry than all the book learning in the world. He often invited the students to follow him into another room at the close of the service to pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Suddenly, like the sound of a mighty rushing wind, a storm of controversy cut loose. It blew away the spirit of cooperation between Wesley and the Countess when Wesley and his preachers resolved that they had “leaned too much toward Calvinism” by not giving enough attention to full sanctification. Wesley’s Calvinist Methodist friends at Trevecca accused him of embracing the Roman Catholic doctrine of good works and of abandoning the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. The Countess swiftly banned her longtime friend from all her preaching chapels. She further canceled her plans to join Wesley in a previously scheduled preaching tour. In January, 1771, she also dismissed Benson because he supported Wesley’s holiness “heresy.” The evidence used against Benson was that he had written an essay on Wesley’s view of holiness under the disguise of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. On January 7, 1771, Fletcher resigned on the grounds that a spirit of toleration had ceased to exist at Trevecca.

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5Benson, The Life of the Rev. John W. De La Flechere, 144.