John Fletcher as John Wesley’s Vindicator and Designated Successor? A Response to Laurence W. Wood

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Finally, we see the appearance of the long-promised study on John Fletcher by Laurence W. Wood, Professor of Systematic Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary. At the 1998 joint meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society and the Society for Pentecostal Studies in Cleveland, Tennessee, Wood burst on the scene in a plenary session with a study of “Pentecostal Sanctification in John Fletcher and Early Methodism” (published the next year in the journals of both societies). In the same meeting he unveiled a special issue of the Asbury Theological Journal (Spring, 1998) that included, along with various interpretive materials, the first publication of a misplaced essay on the “new birth” by John Fletcher, a key theological figure in early Methodism. Wood suggested that this essay could play a key role in the interpretation of early Methodism and its relation to the emergence of Pentecostalism. Now we have the book length argument, published as one of the larger volumes (almost 400 pages) in the Scarecrow Press monograph series of “Pietist and Wesleyan Studies,” edited by David Bundy of Fuller Theological Seminary and Steven O’Malley of Asbury Theological Seminary.

This is a complex book with multiple arguments going on at the same time. On one level the book is an introduction to the life and work of John Fletcher, who came from French-speaking Switzerland to England where he joined the Methodists and became founder John Wesley’s confidante and interpreter. Fletcher is often called Wesley’s “designated successor” (the title of Luke Tyerman’s biography)—though his constitution was
frailer than Wesley’s and his premature death prevented him from fulfilling this role. He is often described as the “saintly John Fletcher” and is seen as a prime personal exemplar of the Methodist doctrine of “entire sanctification” or “Christian Perfection.” Most of his career was spent as vicar of the parish church of Madeley, but he was involved as well (as president) with Trevecca College, the first theological school of Methodism, and became the first theological interpreter of Methodist movement. In this last role he is best known for a series of treatises under the title of Checks to Anti-nomianism that defended Methodist Arminianism against the reigning Calvinism.

Wood’s interest, however, is primarily in Fletcher’s role in the “Pentecostalizing of Wesley’s theology.” Fletcher developed a doctrine of “dispensations” (either three or four) that give a heightened focus on the “church age” as the “age of the Spirit” inaugurated at Pentecost. Wesley welcomed this vision especially because its application to the life of the believer allowed him to speak developmentally of the “stages” in the Christian life. (Interestingly, some modern dispensationist literature refers to an unknown and mysterious “Mr. Fletcher” whose teaching is seen as anticipating some of their teaching.) But Fletcher also identified the “second blessing” of Methodism with the disciples’ experience at Pentecost, laying the foundations for a doctrine of the “Baptism of the Spirit” that flowered in the late nineteenth century “holiness” wing of American Methodism and became the major force in shaping the Pentecostal understanding of this theme (without “tongues”—the addition of which marked the emergence of Pentecostal theology building on the holiness hermeneutic of Acts).

Wood’s real interest in this book is to defend Fletcher’s reading of Wesleyan theology as the normative reading of the tradition and to argue that Wesley approved entirely these moves of Fletcher. On one level this is a defense of Wood’s earlier work Pentecostal Grace (Zondervan, 1980), which is a modern defense of the reading of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition through the lens of the “Pentecostal” Fletcherian prism. There is also a minor positive theological argument in the book that Fletcher’s thought provides a better basis for the practice of the rite of confirmation in the current “liturgical renewal” of Methodism. (As I noticed in my Theological Roots of Pentecostalism, Pentecostalism and the classical tradition of confirmation share a common hermeneutic of Acts in separating the reception of the Spirit from “baptism” and associating it with a “second experience” of the “laying on of hands.”)