

JOHN FLETCHER'S METHODOLOGY IN THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY OF 1770-76

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For over two centuries, the name of John Wesley has been highly honored. He is the acknowledged leader of the Evangelical Revival and is credited with founding the Methodist Church and giving to it a distinctive theology. Many other deserving tributes could be paid this man. Without detracting from Wesley's accomplishments, it needs to be remembered that he had some very able assistants who made helpful contributions to his success. Today's evangelistic association is not wholly a twentieth century phenomenon.

Admittedly, the team which John Wesley headed was small when measured by today's standards. Ernst Sommer points out that by 1765 it was recognized that at the head of Methodism was a "troika" or, as he calls it, a triumvirate, John and Charles Wesley and John Fletcher. Luke Tyerman, the biographer of early Methodism, writes:

John Wesley traveled, formed societies, and governed them. Charles Wesley composed unequalled hymns for the Methodists to sing; and John Fletcher, a native of Calvinian Switzerland explained, elaborated and defended the doctrines they heartily believed. (1)

Unfortunately, this third man on Wesley's team is a veritable stranger to many Wesleyan theologians, and this unfamiliarity with John Fletcher in contemporary Wesleyan circles is regrettable.

Those historians who have not overlooked the significance of the mutual efforts of those associated with John Wesley describe Fletcher as the "earliest and fullest expositor and interpreter in English of the Remonstrant Theology of Arminius; whose works remain the storehouse of its treasures and the armoury of its defense." (2) Another claims that the theology of the Methodist movement was the theology of John Fletcher of Madeley. (3) Abel Stevens, one of the leading historians of Methodism, has written of Fletcher's Checks: "They have been more influential in the denomination than Wesley's own controversial writings on the subject. They have influenced, indirectly through Methodism, the subsequent tone of theological thought in much of the Protestant world. (4) Some writers have seen fit to call Fletcher "the theologian of Methodism" or "the chief theologian of the Wesleyans." (5)

Wesley, who was always judicious in the giving of praise, readily acknowledges his indebtedness to John Fletcher. Wesley enjoined: "Let all our preachers carefully read over ours and Mr. Fletcher's tracts." (6) The esteem with which Wesley held Fletcher was such that on two different occasions, once in 1773 and again in 1776, Wesley tried to persuade Fletcher to become his successor.

The following reasons partially explain the scant attention paid to Fletcher today: the general theological pauperism in Wesleyan circles; Fletcher's Works are not readily available; few students understand the historical context in which he wrote and, unfortunately, Fletcher's name bears a stigma because it is associated with controversy. A failure to understand Fletcher's methodology poses an additional hindrance. The purpose of this paper is to make some contribution to our understanding at this point.

John Fletcher's significant contribution to Wesleyan-Arminian theology came about as a result of his participation in the Antinomian controversy. As the Evangelical Revival progressed, it soon became apparent that there were two branches simultaneously developing, one Calvinistic, the other Arminian. In 1770 at the twenty-seventh annual conference of preachers, the following statement was made by Wesley: "We have leaned too much toward Calvinism." (7)

This statement caused what was smoldering to burst into the open flame of the Antinomian controversy. Lady Huntingdon was greatly offended by the minutes of the 1770 Conference and believed that the fundamental truths of the gospel were put in jeopardy by them. Walter Shirley, Henry Venn, Richard and Roland Hill and others aligned themselves with Lady Huntingdon. Until 1770, John Fletcher had been much admired by Lady Huntingdon; so much so, in fact, that she had made him president of Trevecca College which she had founded in 1768. Now, because of their theological differences, Fletcher found it necessary to resign the presidency of this college.

It was after this breach in fellowship that Fletcher took up his ready pen and began to write his memorable Checks to Antinomianism. Not only did he write out of a sense of "duty towards God," and towards his "honored father in Christ, Mr. Wesley, and his misunderstood minutes," (8) but because of a deep-seated concern for the welfare of the revival. He stated his chief reason for publishing his first Check thus:

It appears if I am not mistaken that we stand now as much in need of a reformation from antinomianism as our ancestors did of a reformation from popery. People, it seems, may now be 'in Christ' without being 'new creatures,' without casting 'old things' away. They may be God's children without God's image; and 'born of the Spirit' without the fruits of the Spirit. (9)

Thus it was that Fletcher was firmly convinced that in evangelical Christianity you could not separate the faith of a Christian from the fruitage of a Christian life. Fletcher, like Wesley, was supremely interested in practical Christianity. (10)

Before we consider the methods Fletcher employed in the Antinomian controversy, it must be understood that his methodology was not in any way conditioned by blind partisanship, or by an element of surprise at what was developing in the Methodist Societies. He was not baffled by the sudden emergence of what might be falsely called a "new heresy". You cannot detect any frustration on his part as to what the solution must be. Fletcher did not consider controversy to be a necessarily evil thing. His position was

that "controversy, though not desirable in itself, yet, properly managed, has a hundred times rescued truth, groaning under the lash of triumphant error." (11)

Though emotions ran rampant at times, Fletcher retained his poise and always manifested a tender spirit. He submitted his First Check to Wesley before it was published so that all "tart" expressions might be removed from it. Wesley recorded his evaluation of Fletcher's Checks with these words:

One knows not which to admire most - the purity of the language, the strength and clearness of the argument, or the mildness and sweetness of the spirit that breathes throughout the whole. (12)

Throughout the controversy, Fletcher demonstrated that he was a man of both sobriety and piety.

Fletcher's methodology in the Antinomian controversy was based upon a careful historical analysis of the problem. He was aware that from the very beginnings of the Christian era, Antinomianism has always been a threat to the practical fulfilment of the Christian life as instituted by the New Covenant of Grace. Admittedly, the relationship between the moral law and the law of grace is not readily evident. Immanuel Kant expressed this relationship in terms of a mystery by saying: "Two things fill the mind with ever increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me."

In an attempt to meet the ethical demands of the New Testament, some of the early Christians turned to mysticism, asceticism, or to any one of a great number of heresies. (13) By way of example, the Marcionites taught "that the God preached by the Law and the Prophets, was not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one was known, the other unknown; the one righteous, and the other good." (14) William James writes: "The heretics who went before the Reformation are lavishly accused by church writers of antinomian practices." (15)

It is an accepted fact that by the sixteenth century the predominant emphasis in the church was upon a "work righteousness." Luther's reaction against this form of salvation supposedly achieved by means of meritorious works precipitated the Reformation. Just as the pendulum has the tendency to swing in the opposite direction, so Luther came dangerously close to an exclusive emphasis upon "faith." At first he found difficulty in reconciling the emphasis of Paul with that of James, and at this stage he preferred the teachings of Paul because he did not yet fully understand either Paul or James. (16) It must be remembered that as Luther recoiled from the theological errors of his day, his emotions temporarily blinded him to an understanding of how the emphasis of Paul and James could be reconciled.

More basic to the problem, however, was Luther's proclivity to Augustinianism in which he had been so thoroughly schooled. Not wanting to detract from Luther's courageous performance in the Reformation, John Fletcher ventures to say,

He was so busy in opposing the pope of Rome, his indulgences, Latin masses, and other monastic fooleries, that he did not find time to oppose the Augustinian fooleries of fatalism, Manichean necessity, lawless grace, and free wrath. (17)

In this period of turmoil, the humanism of Desiderius Erasmus with its emphasis upon free will failed to be of any help to Luther because it erred on the side of Pelagianism.

Thus an ancient conflict of the early fifth century is renewed. Pelagius, a British monk, gave great prominence to the ability of man to save himself. St. Augustine was his chief assailant and fought the Pelagian heresy with an emphasis upon the free grace of God. In this justifiable controversy, it was Fletcher's judgment that Augustine's view of grace was not wholly orthodox, especially where it gave rise to predestination. (18) Thus Augustine's corrective emphasis came short of achieving the equilibrium of the gospel in describing the God-man relationship.

When Calvin arrived on the Reformation scene, he likewise failed to find a mediating position with regard to the "holy doctrines of grace, and the gracious doctrines of justice." (19) His Augustinian teachings continued to aggravate the controversy in which Luther and Erasmus had been the chief disputants. The first reformer to balance the "Gospel .. axioms was, according to the viewpoint of John Fletcher, the English reformer Thomas Cranmer who had written these lines:

All men be monished and chiefly preachers, that, in this high matter, they, looking on both sides (i.e. looking both to the doctrines of grace and the doctrines of justice), so attemper and moderate themselves, that neither they so preach the grace of God (with heated Augustine), that they take away thereby free-will, nor on the other side so extol free-will (with heated Pelagius), that injury be done to the grace of God. (20)

Because of the Augustinian sentiments in Reformation circles on the continent, the Roman Catholics in launching the counter-reformation soft-pedaled their veneration for Augustine to the extent that following the Council of Trent they became decidedly more Pelagian. Thus both branches of Western Christendom were driven "still farther from the line of Scripture moderation." (21) According to Fletcher, the unpleasant result was:

That in the popish countries, those who stood up for faith and distinguishing free grace began to be called heretics, Lutherans, and Solifidians: while. in Protestant countries, those who had the courage to maintain the doctrines of justice, good works, and unnecessitated obedience, were branded as Papists, merit mongers, and heretics. (22)

In his review of history, Fletcher pointed to the seventeenth century saying that Arminianism within Protestantism and Jansenism within Roman Catholicism were both movements whose intention was to check the excesses to which these respective branches of Christendom were addicted. The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) condemned Arminius for his leadership in a reaction aimed at scholastic Calvinism's failure to recognize fully the

significance of human responsibility. Cornelius Jansen's attempt to bring into focus the Augustinian concept of grace especially within the Society of Jesus came to be known as Jansenism. Although both movements were officially condemned, all was not lost, however, for as Fletcher observes, "truth shall stand, be it ever so much opposed by either partial Protestants or partial papists." (23)

Fletcher believed that the problem of antinomianism in early Methodism was quite properly analogous to a similar problem which confronted the Presbyterians in the seventeenth century. It is for this reason that Fletcher's Works are replete with references to the works of the more moderate Puritan or Non-Conformist divines (e.g., Richard Baxter, Matthew Henry, John Flavel, Daniel Williams, Philip Doddridge). He also quotes from Bishop Lancelot Andrewes who represents the so-called Arminians of the Caroline divines.

Thus it was Fletcher's conclusion that the great central problems of theology change far less in matter and substance than in form and temper as they appear in history's successive ages. These problems dress themselves up in a new garb and outwardly they appear to be transformed. In more recent times, an English scholar verifies Fletcher's conclusion by saying:

Under the new names of Rationalism and Romanticism, we recognize the old antagonisms of free-will and predestination which at one era bore the names of Pelagianism and Augustinianism, and, at another, Arminianism and Calvinism. (24)

Fletcher's incisive study of history convinced him that Antinomianism became a threat to sound evangelical doctrine whenever the polarity between divine sovereignty and human responsibility was neutralized. To avoid this subtle pitfall, he believed that responsible theologians must bring themselves to an acceptance of the paradox.

In most cases, the Christian scholar's background in Aristotelian logic is a serious handicap in any understanding of the paradox. The natural temptation is to want to relieve the tension. David Shipley observes that the usual method is to take one truth and explain it "in terms of the other so that the dialectical tension is lost or lessened sufficiently to make possible popular uncritical perversion." (25) Thus it is with ease that the theologian can put an irreconcilable opposition between two equal truths to the end that he cancels them both out.

After a careful historical analysis of theological movements in the Christian church, Fletcher develops in the Antinomian controversy a methodology which accepts the reality of the paradox. Gertrude Huehns categorically states that "research has repeatedly pointed out that one of the main reasons for the victory of Christianity over other competing sacrificial mythologies was its paradoxicality." (26)

Accepting the element of paradox and recognizing the difficulty of making clear-cut distinctions between opposition and complementarity, Fletcher proceeds to develop a

methodology which has been called the "via media", or "the middle way." In his words he called it, "the harmonious opposition of the Scriptures." In more recent times this method has been called "dialectical." (27)

Fletcher's methodology undoubtedly grew out of his peculiar conception of the nature of Truth, which he maintained is an organic unity. "Truth," he says, "is confined within her firm bounds; nay, there is a middle line equally distant from all extremes; on that line she stands, and to miss her, you need only step over it to the right hand or to the left." (28)

During the course of the Antinomian controversy, Fletcher's dialectical methodology became the hermeneutical principle which he used in the exegesis of Scripture. When he was confronted with seeming contradictions in the Scriptures and differences of interpretation among individual Christians and theological groups, this was the method by which he sought a reconciliation. For example he cites Romans 4:5 and 5:1 which indicate that man is justified by faith. It is equally as important that the mind be confronted with John 6:27 which is a command of Jesus Christ to "labor [ergazesthe, literally, 'work'] for the meat that endureth to everlasting life." (29)

Any proof-text method not balanced by this dialectical methodology was thought by Fletcher to be potentially dangerous. To him this would be "wresting the Scriptures to one's own destruction" (I Pet. 3:6).

Fletcher's methodology gave him some keen insights into the Antinomian problem. He was able to appraise the current situation by saying, "Once we were in immediate danger of splitting upon 'works without faith': Now we are threatened with destruction from 'faith without works'." (30) He accounts for the fact that Antinomianism had again raised its ugly head because of Calvinism's one-sided emphasis upon Christ as the dispenser of grace and thus its preoccupation with only 'the first Gospel axiom," or justification by faith in the day of salvation. In contradistinction the rigid Arminian position imprisoned Christ within the context of the law and thus it was preoccupied with the "second Gospel axiom," a second justification by works. Fletcher insisted that both gospel axioms were complementary and must be held together theologically, and in practice by emphasizing Christ in all of His offices. Thus Fletcher wrote: 44

If I may compare the Gospel Truth to the child contended for in the days of Solomon, both parties, while they divide, inadvertently destroy it. We, like the true mother, are for no division. Standing upon the middle Scriptural line, we embrace and hold first both Gospel axioms. With the Calvinists, we give God in Christ all the glory of our salvation; and, with the moralists, we take care not to give him in Adam any of the share in our damnation. (31)

Fletcher's doctrine of a "second justification by works" must be understood as the means by which he sought to reawaken the Antinomians and to encourage believers to pursue a life of holiness. His explanation of the doctrine is that initial justification or conversion is by faith alone; justification at the day of judgment will be only by the works of faith. His prayer was that the "merciful Keeper of Israel" would save from both extremes by a

living faith, legally productive of all good works, or by good works, evangelically springing from a living faith." (32)

The current interest in ecumenicity is calling for a reappraisal of Fletcher's methodology. Because he was a mediating theologian, it is believed that he has something significant to offer to our contemporary situation. If this interest reflects a genuine quest for truth, then these words from Fletcher's pen are worthy of careful study:

Mankind are prone to run into extremes. The world is full of men who always overdo or underdo. Few people ever find the line of moderation, the golden mean; and of those who do, few stay long upon it. One blast or another of vain doctrine soon drives them east or west from the meridian of pure truth. (33)

If this evaluation of mankind's tendencies appears to be too pessimistic, it is only fair to Fletcher to add that he would balance this "pessimism of nature" with an "optimism of grace." (34)

Because Antinomianism is one of the very real problems in our contemporary society, Fletcher's Checks to Antinomianism are taking on a new relevancy. Churchmen of the twentieth century need to avail themselves of whatever they can find of value in Fletcher's methodology.

There is a small minority of people in our modern society who is concerned about our Antinomian problem and is sounding an alarm. Robert E. Fitch, professor of Christian ethics at the Pacific School of Religion, is one of them, and he writes a description of the widespread erosion of authority. He says:

Of course, I have in mind primarily moral authority. . . . The erosion of this authority has taken place partly under allegedly democratic and egalitarian theories that we're all equal and nobody's any better than anybody else, partly under the impact of relativistic teachings in history, anthropology and philosophy that say everything is relative to the culture and there's no objective standard of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. (35)

So widespread is this lawlessness that it respects neither the "radical right" nor the "existential left." Fitch continues:

Any number of 'liberals' and 'radicals' believe passionately in this same proposition.... This inordinate love of liberty apart from law, apart from social structure and order, which is not the classical pattern of liberty in either England or America. So you have a kind of individualistic, egoistic liberty, that destroys self. (36)

It is believed that the cause of today's widespread Antinomianism can be laid at the door of existentialism. L. Harold De Wolf suggests this when he writes:

Much existentialist thought moves on the very edge of antinomianism, that is, the repudiation of all moral law as related to salvation. Kierkegaard's depreciation of consistency and his doctrine that God commands the unethical and irrational, and Tillich's defining of justification as 'acceptance of acceptance', without specifying the need of repentance, tend to lessen the moral earnestness of Christian faith.
(37)

Someone has expressed the plight of today's Christians in the following line:

"How free we seem, how fettered fast we lie." (38)

Today's brand of Antinomianism must be recognized for what it is. Responsible leadership in the tradition of Wesley and Fletcher must guide the church today between the twin rocks of licentious lawlessness and Pharisaic legalism.

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