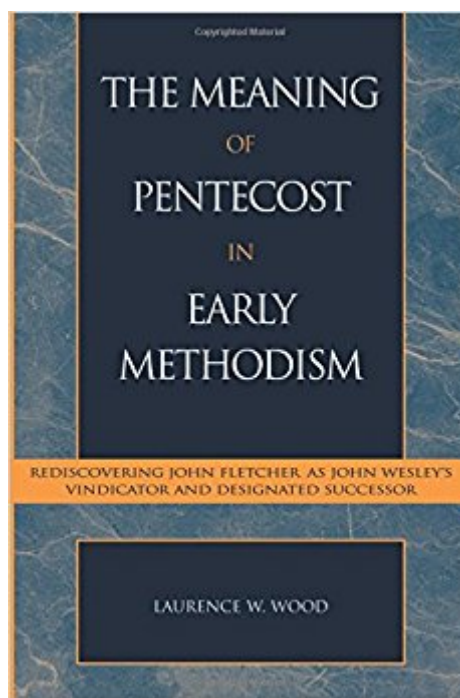


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# The Meaning Of Pentecost In Early Methodism: Rediscovering John Fletcher As John Wesley's Vindicator And Designated Successor (Pietist And Wesleyan Studies)



## Synopsis

Wood recounts the decisive influence Fletcher had on early Methodism, and shows that his writings were able to 'control the opinions of the largest and most effective body of evangelical clergymen of the earth.'

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a bombshell....a refreshing piece of work written with verve and restrained passion. It highlights fundamental issues that can no longer be set aside or ignored. (Dr. Abraham, William J.)Professor Wood deserves high praise for putting the record straight in his excellent historical analysis. His analysis is intellectually clear and satisfying. His superb historical research is convincing. (Dr. Walter J. Hollenweger)Larry Wood's pioneer Fletcher research marks a milestone in Wesley Studiesâ [Wood presents strong proof that Wesley not only did not distance himself from Fletcher's theology [of Spirit baptism], but rather put his imprimatur upon it, published it, and even preached it. This volume hopefully will lead to a much more informed discussion of Wesleyan theology and a more balanced assessment of how comfortable or uncomfortable Wesley might be with our contemporary Wesleyan expressions of preaching and living biblical holiness. (Dr. Melvin E. Dieter)This book offers a well documented revisionist approach to Methodist studies, examining the career and influence of John Fletcher as related to the later career of John (and Charles) Wesley and other influential early Methodist preachers. (Dr. Ted Campbell)

Laurence W. Wood is Frank Paul Morris Professor of Systematic Theology, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY and Editor of The Asbury Theological Journal. He has published numerous articles and two books on the subject of theology.

This book is a very detailed historical analysis of the formulation of Methodist doctrine particularly as it relates to its Pentecostal aspects. Therefore the book constitutes a vital study of the doctrinal assumptions that were held by the Wesleyan-half of the early Pentecostals and which influenced early Pentecostalism. While the book is somewhat redundant in its accolade's of John Fletcher, I nonetheless found it extremely helpful to my own research.

Dr. Wood has done an excellent job in narrating the indelible influence of the Reverend John Fletcher upon the "Pentecostal Dispensation" of God, as it was realized and recapitulated in the life of early Methodism! It seems that the annals of church history have little to remember or say concerning this man of towering grace and influence. Although, this legacy of anonymity would have met with Mr. Fletcher's humility in Christ, I praise God for Dr. Wood's keenness and historical acumen in showing the theological and historical affinity with (the easily neglected) reality of early Methodism, and its indelible influence upon subsequent traditions, that would eventually arise out of the people called Methodists! One of the better theological works I've read in a while!

good book

Because we are having 3 months renewal in our church and studying and teaching about John Wesley in the whole church. I teach adults and this book is excellent.

My husband purchased this and said this is one of the worst theologies of John Wesley he had ever read. That is his opinion so try it for yourself.

There's a good chance you've never heard of John Fletcher, and Larry Wood is trying to rectify that lack. John Fletcher was the saint of the early Methodist movement--a deeply pious Christian mystic who had a rich theology of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John Wesley designated Fletcher as his successor, but Fletcher died six years before Wesley did. Still, for over a century after his death, Fletcher's writings were Methodist theological and devotional standards. The title says it all: This book probes the meaning of the motif of Pentecost in early Methodism. Wood explores the role of

John Fletcher as the systematizer of John Wesley's theological vision, and in the process challenges the reigning orthodoxy in Wesley studies. Twentieth century Wesley scholars have generally distanced Wesley from Fletcher, claiming that Fletcher's views of entire sanctification as the "baptism of the Spirit" were a later malignant mutation. But, in thorough detail, Wood shows that Wesley entirely endorsed Fletcher's understanding and was himself strongly influenced by it; moreover, the early Methodist movement as a whole was saturated with Fletcher's ideas, out of which eventually grew the Holiness movement in the nineteenth century and the Pentecostal movement in the twentieth. As erudite as all of this might sound, this book is actually a good read! Wood's prose moves rapidly, and although his scholarship is thorough, it doesn't often get bogged down in minutia. The book's aims are indeed scholarly, but it has a real devotional quality to it. It truly melds "head" and "heart." The book deserves a wider readership than its lengthy title (and price) might suggest, and it should spur ecumenical dialogue between not only the Pentecostal and Methodist families, but also Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox.

The logic of Wood's argument is: John Fletcher was a great man intellectually and spiritually. John Fletcher frequently used pneumatological language or made references to the Holy Spirit. John Wesley put his seal of approval on Fletcher's writings. Therefore, Wood concludes that Wesley connected the baptism with the Holy Spirit and Christian perfection. Yes, early Methodism did use pentecostal language, but they did not explicitly connect it with Christian perfection. While they preached on the baptism with the Spirit, they did not preach it as entire sanctification. Wood asserts that Fletcher's unpublished manuscript on the new birth made a distinction between the birth of water (justification) and the birth of the Spirit (full sanctification). Apparently, Fletcher's incomplete essay on the doctrine of the new birth is based upon John 3:5. However, Fletcher's essay says something different than what Wood claims it says. Fletcher said the Wesleys earnestly contended "for the birth or baptism of the Spirit and for the perfection of Christianity." Fletcher argues against baptismal regeneration by preaching that those who are born again are not only baptized with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Fletcher then refers to John Wesley's sermon, "Salvation by Faith," in which Wesley compares the faith of the apostles before and after Pentecost. According to Wesley saving faith is faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. The apostles did not have this faith before Pentecost. Or, to use the words of Fletcher in his essay on the new birth, Wesley makes a distinction between "the faith of ante-Pentecostal, imperfect Christianity; and the faith of Pentecostal, perfect Christianity." Note that Fletcher is not defining Christian perfection, but saving faith. He continues by connecting "this important distinction" of "faith in Christ" with the full

dispensation, baptism, or seal of the Spirit. Fletcher declares "in the language of the Scriptures the giving - the pouring out - the shedding forth - and the baptism of the Holy Ghost, are phrases of the same import. And to receive the Holy Ghost, - to be sealed with the Spirit of promise - to be baptized with the Holy Ghost - and to have the Holy Ghost falling upon one -and to be endured with power from on high, are expressions, which convey the same meaning."The context continues to describe what it means to be born of the Spirit. It may be the opinion of Dr. Wood that John 3:5 teaches two works of grace, but early Methodism taught that water baptism was the outward sign of Spirit baptism, which is regeneration.Wood tends to write with sweeping generalities of the connection between pentecostal language and Christian perfection. In a 1979 paper Dr. Staples concluded that John Wesley did not describe entire sanctification in precise Pentecostal language. John Fletcher introduced that language, but spoke of many baptisms making no simple equation between entire sanctification and the baptism with the Holy Spirit. After Fletcher's time this baptismal language was not used by the Methodist theologians of the nineteenth century. When this language did become part of the holiness movement, it came from a source outside the Wesleyan tradition. While Wood claims that "Methodist preachers everywhere were accustomed to speaking of full sanctification in terms of the Pentecostal baptism with the Spirit," he offers no specific examples.It has been suggested that Joseph Benson was influenced by Fletcher to adopt pentecostal language and that he experimented with it briefly, perhaps for a decade. Benson received the famous letter from John Wesley in 1770 in which Wesley objected to this language.If they like to call this "receiving the Holy Ghost," they may: Only the phrase, in that sense, is not scriptural, and not quite proper; for they all "receive the Holy Ghost" when they were justified. God then "sent forth the Spirit of his Son into their hearts, crying, Abba, Father."O Joseph, keep close to the Bible, both as to sentiment and expression! Then there will never be any material difference between you and [me].Wood argues that Wesley, in this letter, misunderstood Fletcher and Benson, thinking they had adopted the view of Zinzendorf, who taught that regeneration and entire sanctification occurred in one act. This theory is not convincing and although Wood claims it is based upon "recently uncovered information," he does not disclose what that information is.Benson was admitted into the Methodist Conference in 1771 and apparently came to accept Wesley's advice. After his death in 1821 Benson's seven-volume Sermons, and Plans of Sermons on Many of the Most Important Texts of Holy Scripture was printed (1825-28), which contains 262 sermons covering Genesis to Revelation, the sermon on Matthew 3:11 makes no connection between the baptism of the Spirit and Christian perfection. There is no sermon from Acts 2. His sermon on Acts 19:2 declares "without the Holy Spirit, our faith cannot be a saving faith" and the thrust of the

message is to seek spiritual life. I could find no evidence that the connection Wood makes exists in these sermons. He does declare that we are made members of the body of Christ by being "baptized" with and "made to drink into one Spirit." Members of this one body are all inhabited by one Spirit. As a Spirit of truth, he enlightens them in the knowledge of themselves, of God, and of Christ, and of the way of salvation: as a Spirit of grace, he quickens them, begets in them repentance, faith, the new birth: as a Comforter, he assures them of their justification and adoption, and inspires them with hope and joy, as a Spirit of power, he strengthens them; as a Spirit of holiness, he renews them. Benson makes the usual connection in Methodist theology between water and Spirit baptism when he says that the "one baptism" is baptism of water, "an emblem of regeneration; the same sign and the same thing signified" ("Christians Exhorted to Unity," Sermon #185). Wood also claims that in his biography of Fletcher Wesley noted a key category for Fletcher was "full sanctification in terms of the Pentecostal baptism with the Spirit." This time there is a footnote, but you will search the reference in vain looking for what Wood has claimed. Wood then claims that Wesley "explicitly linked perfection with Pentecost," in three later sermons, "The General Spread of the Gospel," "The Mystery of Iniquity," and "The Signs of the Times," but again Wood cites no specific examples. I have been reading these sermons for over twenty years, but never found what Wood claimed. I went back and surveyed them again. I rejoice, along with Dr. Wood, in the hope Wesley preaches that there will be a time of "latter-day glory." As the Holy Spirit is poured out there will be an increase in Christian virtue among all people, but I fail to see that this hope is an explicit link of Christian perfection with the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The historical record that both Wesley and Clarke preached from the text, "They were all baptized with the Holy Ghost" tells us nothing about the content of their messages. Wood can only infer that the subject matter links Pentecost and Christian perfection. However, Wesley's printed sermon on the text, "And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost," does not deal at all with Christian perfection. It is entitled "Scriptural Christianity." Then Wood claims that Adam Clarke linked Pentecost and Christian perfection in his comments on Acts 1:5. However, if Clarke's comments are read in their entirety it becomes obvious that he interprets this verse as describing the work of the Holy Spirit "to illuminate, regenerate, refine, and purify the heart." He makes no reference to Christian perfection. However, whenever Wood sees phrases like the dispensation of the Spirit, the seal of the Spirit, purification, or divine love, he assumes early Methodists are referring to a second blessing. This is due to an inadequate view of the new birth. According to Fletcher, the new birth is entrance into the dispensation of the Spirit. The seal of the Spirit is assurance of the new birth. The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts when we are born again. And Paul spoke of the washing of regeneration, which is an act of

purification. Wood asserts that Macarius had a Pentecostal interpretation of Christian perfection. Fletcher quotes from the writings of Macarius in his essay on the new birth and concludes that Macarius preached "the baptism and dispensation of the Holy Spirit." But the connection between this emphasis and Christian perfection exists in the mind of Dr. Wood, not Macarius. Wood claims that Wesley's experience at Aldersgate was entire sanctification and tries to say that this was also Fletcher's interpretation of Wesley's experience in "The Language of the Father's Dispensation," although there is no direct reference to Aldersgate in Fletcher's essay. Finally, Wood says the clearest indication that Wesley approved of Fletcher's use of the baptism with the Holy Spirit as a designation for full sanctification is found in Wesley's edition of Fletcher's *Equal Check to Antinomianism and Phariseeism*. However, in the preface of this essay Fletcher declares that believers under inferior dispensations did not always have assurance. Fletcher argues that with the opening of the Christian dispensation at Pentecost "nobody can truly believe... without being immediately conscious both of the forgiveness of sins, and of peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." While this most important truth had been derided and denied, it had been gloriously revived by Wesley and his associates. Note that Fletcher says nothing of Christian perfection, but of the witness of the Spirit in the new birth! I believe the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. However, with 43% of the American population claiming the new birth, it is obvious that there is a woefully inadequate understanding of regeneration. We need to make it clear that while the new birth does not do everything, it does something. A recently published testimony from an Asbury professor tells how he was led into the experience of entire sanctification. After hearing a message he came to see his Christianity was counterfeit. He went to the preacher and told him that he was not sure he was a Christian. It did not take the preacher long to diagnose his case. He was counseled to make Jesus king of his life, which, he was told, amounted to entire sanctification. When that surrender was made, for the first time in 15 years of profession, there was assurance and "a new victory over sin." While today this is heralded as the second blessing, anyone who understands the Scriptures or Wesley's teaching knows that this man was born of the Spirit, not entirely sanctified. Wesleyan scholars such as Herbert McGonigle, Rob Staples, Kenneth Grider, Donald Dayton, George Allen Turner, Mildred Wynkoop, Kenneth Collins, Leo Cox, and William Greathouse have all concluded that early Methodism did not connect the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost with entire sanctification, as did the later American holiness movement. Laurence Wood certainly has not provided clear proof that early Methodism equated Spirit baptism and Christian perfection. Please also consider the review of my colleague, Joseph D. McPherson, [...]

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