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THE EARLY EXPERIENCE OF FLETCHER OF MADELEY

TYERMAN'S *Wesley's Designated Successor* (1882)—strangely overlooked by Canon Overton when preparing his biographical sketch of Fletcher for the *Dictionary of National Biography*—remains the standard biography. Tyerman used a wealth of materials, both printed and manuscript, including some of Fletcher's voluminous correspondence with his closest friend, Charles Wesley. For these letters he seems to have relied on *Thirteen Original Letters, written by the late Rev. John Fletcher* (1791) and the very much larger *Posthumous Pieces* published in the same year by Melville Horne, which Tyerman quotes simply as *Letters*. Tyerman did not see the original letters, however, most of which are preserved in the Methodist Book-Room, though a few are to be found in the Lamplough Collection, Wesley's Chapel, and the New Room, Bristol. As a result he missed much that would have enriched his work, particularly the letter reproduced below. Apart from this letter, the fifty or so letters which Fletcher wrote to Charles Wesley before 1771 are all in French, which may have been one of the reasons for their neglect.

The Ordination Lists of the Diocese of Bangor contain the following note:

1757. March 13th. Ordination in the said Chappel [i.e. the Royal Chapel at St. James], John William Fletcher, University of Geneva, at Request of Bishop of Hereford.¹

This was in fact his ordination as a priest, after he had been ordained deacon the previous Sunday by the Bishop of Hereford himself. Fletcher hastened straight from his ordination as priest to assist John Wesley in a crowded communion service at Snowfields.

Already Fletcher had been in touch with Charles Wesley, and one

¹ I am indebted for this information to the Rev. Griffith T. Roberts, who quotes it from A. Ivor Pryce's *The Diocese of Bangor during Three Centuries*, p. 110.

letter survives which was written by Fletcher before his ordination, endorsed by Charles Wesley "1754". Fletcher's ordination seems to have fired Wesley's enthusiasm, and led to a warm friendship and a spate of correspondence. Charles seems to have followed the regular pattern of most of his friendships, by asking Fletcher for the story of his spiritual pilgrimage. The result was a first instalment in a six-page letter addressed by Fletcher "To / The Revd. Mr. Wesley / at the Horsefair / Bristol", and endorsed by Charles Wesley "May 10, 1757 / Mr. Fletcher's Experience." The letter itself (as will be seen from the text) was to be followed by a lengthy personal interview, of which we have no record, though it doubtless covered the fuller story of Fletcher's conversion, as recorded by Tyerman, using his diary (from Mrs. Fletcher's account of her husband) and a letter to his brother. About the years before Fletcher's conversion, however, and especially before his coming to England in 1752, Tyerman discovered practically nothing, and as a result his opening chapter consists of a mere five-and-a-half pages. This letter is a valuable supplement to Tyerman's account. Of particular interest is Fletcher's reference to the embryo Holy Club at the University of Geneva. Because of its importance it is here reproduced in full, even though it is available in the *City Road Magazine* for November 1872, and as Appendix I to Marrat's *Fletcher* (1902).

Fletcher himself made no attempt to divide this lengthy letter into paragraphs, but apart from this alteration the original is faithfully followed, even to the erasures. Like those of many eighteenth-century correspondents, his full-stops are often written like commas, and therefore modern practice has been followed in transcribing them.

JOHN FLETCHER TO CHARLES WESLEY

Dear & Revd. Sir,

I am very glad that you and tho[se] that the Lord has committed to your care remember the absent brethren and among them him who by his weakness wants most [to be strengthen'd by (crossed out)] the prayers of all faithful people: may the Lord reward you for that labour of love according to the riches of his mercy! We are not altogether wanting in this important part of Christian fellowship and brotherly love, and I doubt not that by the grace of God, the assistance of your prayers, and the good example you set us, we shall be enabled to abound more and more. O may we strive continually to outdo each other in love and in all the duties and means that conduce to love!

I am not sure whether I shall be in town on Whitsunday. I am afraid I shall be upon the journey on that glorious day. It has been my Lot for these 3 last years notwithstanding my earnest request to be left behind and keep the feast according to my conscience. if you are in London the 26 of this month it will not be too late for me to ask your blessing by word of mouth, and to answer any question you shall think fit to ask me concerning God's dealings with the chief of sinners; in the mean time read over this short account and weep with him that weeps for his unfaithfulness.

I have often heard from my friends, that there never was a Child prouder more passionate and stubborn than me from the cradle. the sin

by which it pleased God to begin the work of conviction was fighting [with (crossed out)] in a great rage one of my brothers: I was no sooner put to bed after it in the evening and left alone but I began to feel the wrath of God abiding on me. the pangs of hell compass'd me round about and I question whether I should not have dropt into hell under that burden that very night if the Lord had not come to my relief. he came and heaven came with him, my proud heart was melted and I began to love and weep much because much was forgiven me. I was about 7 years old when the Lord made this his goodness to pass before me for the first time. I did not know what to make of it nor what power I then receiv'd to conquer the world the flesh & the Devil, and I had almost forgot it when I began to hear your preaching:

I can not remember how long the clear sense of that pardon lasted, only for some months after I find that I often went into a retired place to beg of God to let me die a Martyr[,] a prayer in which I found an unspeakable sweetness:

When I was about ten years of age, I began to give up all and to sell myself under sin being surrounded on every side by temptations & drawn in by bad examples. But the Lord still strove with me. I had frequent returns of repentance and some times fresh assurances of my forgiveness, but without minding it much I sin'd it away as often as I received it:

When I was sixteen the Lord shewd me that it was not possible to serve two masters and that if I would Sin on I should soon have the wages of sin: I began to look about me, to strive in earnest to grow in holiness and for 8 month I think I walk'd as became a Follower of Christ.

About that time I was also convinc'd of the necessity of having a Christian friend and after many useless trials to find one I at last [found (crossed out)] met with 3 students who formd with me a religious society: we met as often as we could to confess one another our sins[,] to exhort[,] read & pray, and we could [no doubt (crossed out)] perhaps have been what the Methodists were at Oxford; Had not one of us been led away by a Deist and drank so deep of the poison of his arguments that all endeavours to recall him were useless. as he was remarkable for his great parts and made much of, on account of his wit and learning[,] he had such an ascendancy over our companions that I was soon left alone, and happy would I have been still, had not I provok'd the Lord, grievd and quenched his spirit by a relapse into sin.

The time was come when I was to chuse a way of life. My friends would by all means have me be an Officer and tho' I had often vow'd to the Lord that if he wou'd accept of me I shou'd rejoice to be the least of his ministers, I yielded to their importunities as wanting both gifts and grace to carry me thro' the duty of a Clergyman, which I saw not as they were but as they ought to have been practis'd; And setting out for Germany I spent a year there to learn Highdutch and fortification. The peace was made as I was thus occupi'd² and the body of Engineers into which I was to enter, disbanded, so that I came home disappointed.

All that while I saw from whence I was fallen. Some times I mourn'd, sometimes endeavour'd to divert my thoughts by studying without Interruption: and at all times resolv'd since I did not love God that I should not love the world, fool that I was! as if one who lives

² The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, 18th October 1748.

in any know [n] sin tho' it should be comitted but once in a year could have any reason to expect mercy from the God of purity because he does many things and avoids many.

Being come home, I was often laught at by my friends for loving so little the diversions of the world. the uneasiness their usage gave me and much more the anguish of my sinsick soul made me resolve to embrace the first opportunity of leaving my country. Soon after I was offered [500£ (crossed out)] to go into Brasilia as Surveior and ingeneer to the king of Portugal. I greedily embrac'd the proposal and was just setting out notwithstanding many checks of conscience when one let fall on my legs a pot of boiling water, and scalded my legs in such a dreadful manner that I lost for a considerable time the use of 'em and was forc'd to stay in Europe. he that will not turn at a check of God's Spirit must turn at the stroke of his rod, or what is worse must run on till he falls down the precipice.

When I was cur'd an Oncle offered me a comission in the dutch Service, upon which I set out for Holland, where I stay'd some months waiting for what he had promised me, till seeing too much of a military life to like it, and tired out by the promises of deceitful men, I resolv'd to go to England. for 6 years [.] I did not know how [.] I had intertaind a secret design of Seeing that Country, and even leard a great many words not to be at a loss when I should arrive there, but in this as in many other things I have since seen the finger of God and the unspeakable goodness of his providence.

By this time I was a strict Legalist. I spent part of the day in reading the Scriptures and in prayer, thinking that my repenting added to these duties, would skreen me from the wrath to come. But my eyes were soon open'd to see my hypocrisy. I acknowledged it before God, perceiv'd my danger and resolv'd to give up all mine Idols. but now tho' I was willing God did not give me back the power which I had had so long without using it. then began an horrible struggle between the flesh and the spirit. None but God [and the Devil can (crossed out)] know what I endur'd for 5 month. 3 times I was pardon'd and sinned my pardon away. at last driven to despair by the sin I had comitted against so merciful a God, I resolv'd to make away with myself that he might the sooner be glorified in the torments of so bold an offend'r, but his pity interpos'd [.] he bid me again go in peace [.] and added that blessed word I had so long refused to hear *Sin no more* [.] this was about five years ago and I do not think that I have ever felt a temptation from that time [at least (crossed out)] to that sin which for eight years had so often overcome me.

This enemy being destroy'd an other no less terrible stood against me. I thought myself both meek and patient but the frequent proofs which my calling oblig'd me to make of those Christian virtues shew'd me soon what little share I had of them, and how much anger and piveness lurkt in my heart. for two years I was in the fiery furnace struggling with principalities and powers and what is more with my wicked heart. Satan generally got the better in the day and I at night [.] he made me sin but I obtaind the pardon of my sin generally before I durst go to sleep: How many prayers growns fastings tears sighs watch-nights Did I go thro' and all I vain. Christ alone was to overcome for me, and the reason of it was that I kept to myself all my thoughts and

shund company as much as possible : the Children of God are minish'd from the earth, said I, and it would be a folly to seek for an other :

However I exhorted and reprov'd as I had an opportunity, & four years ago as I was going into the country my performing this duty was the cause of my finding another Christian and of hearing of a body of people among which there is several: The family³ had baited and while they drank tea I went to take a walk and get out of the way of the world: I soon met a poor woman who seem'd to be in distress, and asking her what was the matter I soon saw by her answers that she was a Christian: the pleasure and profit I found in her conversation made me forget that I was upon a journey, and when I return'd to the inn I found I had been left behind. However taking a horse, I overtook the family [before it was dark (crossed out)] and told the reason why I had stay'd behind. ["Don't go"] says a Lady ["talking so to Old women, people will say that we have got a Methodist preacher with us"]: I asked what she meant by a Methodist and when she had told me I said I would be one of them if there was really such a people in England :

The next winter I was no sooner in town but I inquir'd after the Methodists & came to west street and to Hog Lane every Sunday.⁴ I soon could trace all my experience in your preachings. only one thing I could not account for[,] [they (crossed out)] you preach'd forgiveness of Sin, and power over [sin] as being given at the same time. this brought me to examin[e] the point. I [knew] the doctrine of faith out of Scripture and other Books and at last was convinc'd—that tho I had had repentance towards God and tho he had often forgiven my sins and made me taste the powers of the world to come, I was yet a stranger to the merits of him by whom I had receiv'd these benefits: So that it was no wonder if I had fought so long as beating the air, since I fought without him. I was convinc'd of unbelief in God the Son and was brought into bondage thro' fear of death[,] [when (crossed out)] but about 10 weeks after as I was in prayer about one o'clock [at night (crossed out)] in the morning I was enabled to cast my self upon Christ so as to have peace assurance and power over sin.⁵

I have gone and still go thro' many trials since, but of them an other time. I am

Reverend Sir

Your unworthy brother & Servant

JOHN FLETCHER.

London the 10th. May 1757.

FRANK BAKER.

³ i.e. of Thomas Hill of Tern Hall, Shropshire, to whose two sons Fletcher was tutor. This incident took place at St. Albans: see Tyerman's *Fletcher*, p. 14.

⁴ The index to Rocque's *Plan of London and Westminster, 1747*, shows two Hog Lanes, either of which might be possible. One was what is now the northern end of Charing Cross Road, on the west of which stood another "French Church", closely linked with that at West Street which had been taken over by the Methodists. (Cf. John Telford's *Two West End Chapels*, p. 8.) The other Hog Lane was a continuation to Shoreditch of Windmill Hill Row and Worship Street, and off Windmill Hill Row stood Wesley's headquarters, the Foundery Chapel, which might thus have been very loosely referred to as "Hog Lane".

⁵ This was at 1 a.m. in January 1755, though Fletcher's diary leaves it uncertain whether it was Saturday the 25th, Sunday the 26th, or Monday the 27th. (See Tyerman's *Fletcher*, pp. 16-17.)