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|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction .....   | 3  |
| <i>S T Kimbrough, Jr.</i>  |    |
| A Tribute to Oliver A. Beckerlegge: 1913–2003 .....                      | 5  |
| <i>S T Kimbrough, Jr.</i>  |    |
| <b>2003</b>  |    |
| The Christ-Mysticism of Charles Wesley .....                             | 11 |
| <i>Francis Frost</i>   |    |
| Charles Wesley and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England ... | 27 |
| <i>J. R. Watson</i>  |    |
| Song in the Service of Faith .....                                       | 39 |
| <i>David H. Tripp</i>  |    |
| “The Old Ship” .....   | 55 |
| <i>Peter S. Forsaith</i>   |    |
| <b>2004</b>  |    |
| Preliminary Explorations of Charles Wesley and Worship .....             | 67 |
| <i>Paul W. Chilcote</i>  |    |
| Charles Wesley on Worship .....  | 83 |
| <i>Karen B. Westerfield Tucker</i>                                       |    |

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# “The Old Ship”

Peter S. Forsaith

Charles Wesley was first and foremost a member, an ordained priest, of the Church of England. Almost before he was anything else—hymnwriter, Methodist, husband and father, son and brother—his churchmanship shaped his identity. This is nothing new. Telford quoted Charles Wesley as stating that “All the difference between my brother and me was that my brother’s first object was the Methodists and then the church; mine was first the church and then the Methodists.”<sup>1</sup> John Tyson takes the phrase, “The Old Ship,” to head that section of his Reader which deals with Charles Wesley and the established Church.<sup>2</sup> I have taken this title for one specific reason: that it occurs in his correspondence with John Fletcher of Madeley.

In a previously published paper I established, I hope, that Charles Wesley’s relationship with John Fletcher was intimate, sincere and significant.<sup>3</sup> Charles was a “man born for friendship” and he had many good friends and correspondents. For Fletcher the relationship was probably more important. Yet there is a certain uniqueness about Charles Wesley’s friendship with Fletcher; first because of Fletcher’s and Charles Wesley’s prominent positions in the Methodist body and second because Fletcher was also a churchman first and Methodist second—whatever John Wesley might have suggested later—and was priest of a parish.

In respect of his parish Fletcher was probably the model John Wesley would (in theory anyway) have liked to see multiplied across the country; “church Methodist,” an Evangelical minister, pastorally dedicated, and also a scholar. In reality such were thin on the ground. Grimshaw and Perronet were probably the only others to stand comparison, especially after the chips were down with the Arminian/Calvinist divide of the 1770s. Nineteenth century historians depicted Fletcher in the tradition of Puritan divines, holding a living while devoted to scholarship and writing. (Nineteenth-century historians possibly suffered from Trollopian notions of what the tenure of a parish involved). This was not Fletcher. He was primarily vicar of a busy proto-industrial parish who was for five years sucked (probably against his will and better judgment) into the Controversy.

So the question I am addressing here is: what insights can be gained through Fletcher’s correspondence with Charles Wesley<sup>4</sup> into their shared attitudes about “mother Church,” the “Old Ship”? This article is not centrally about Charles

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<sup>1</sup>*The Letters of John Wesley*, 8:267.

<sup>2</sup>John R Tyson ed., *Charles Wesley, A Reader* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 398ff.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Forsaith, “Mon très cher ami” in *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society*, 4 (1997): 53–67.

<sup>4</sup>See my unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Peter Forsaith, *The Correspondence of the Revd. John W. Fletcher: letters to the Revd. Charles Wesley, considered in the context of the Evangelical Revival* (Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, 2003).

Wesley but about Fletcher; but it is about what Fletcher wrote to Charles Wesley and which can reasonably be considered to be common ground. I will look at five areas, but I must caution that this will be a somewhat disparate sampling:

- preachers and parishes
- connexion or covenant
- a “Methodist Church of England”
- a Methodist Church of America
- the succession

Before we launch into this, however, it is important to clarify two assumptions which underpin my approach. The first is that the “Methodist” or “Evangelical Revival” in the 1750s to 1770s (the period covered here) was essentially a reform movement in the Church of England (though with some Dissent involvement), Calvinistic in doctrine, and that the Wesley’s “connexion” might be regarded as an embarrassing sideshow. The second is that Fletcher’s doctrinal position in the “Calvinistic controversy” was not *per se* anti-Calvinist but rather pro-Arminian. That is, that it was not his intention to demolish Calvin but that he was seeking to develop a paradoxical synthesis between two presumed opposites. Due to the constraints of the above themes stated above, these assertions will not be addressed here.

### **Of Preachers and Parishes**

Perhaps the model base unit in the Revival was of an evangelical incumbent operating a parish and welcoming itinerant Methodist preachers. Yet, as I showed in my 1997 article, this was not straightforwardly the situation in Madeley. Fletcher was diffident about preachers whom he had not invited or sanctioned and whom he thought were in some instances interfering with his work. Paradoxically, one preacher he did welcome, surely to John Wesley’s despair, was Thomas Maxfield who had fallen out with Wesley over the perfection crisis in London in 1762–1763, but who spent the summers of 1765 and 1766 at Madeley.

We know of all this through Fletcher’s letters to Charles Wesley. Between the two of them was an open and honest sharing of how a Methodist parish was working out. Through the correspondence Fletcher reported his progress, or lack of it, and asked Charles Wesley’s advice on parish, ecclesiastical, or domestic matters.

Charles Wesley, in a way his brother was not, was his father’s son. The Rector of Epworth’s shadow fell long across his youngest son’s life. The lyric muse of *Maggots* found fulfilment. The tensions of being married to an intelligent, attractive and independent wife were resolved with Sarah Gwynne as they had not been with Susanna Annesley. Epworth family tensions were not replicated in Charles Street or Chesterfield Street. Charles Wesley moved easily in echelons of society in which his father unsuccessfully sought status. Yet Charles Wesley never took a parish.

He was offered the living of Drayton in Oxfordshire,<sup>5</sup> but turned it down. Another offer was made in 1761, and for once Fletcher advised Charles Wesley:

*J'ai crois que vous ne pouvez pas vous empecher de communiquer à votre frere le dessein d'accepter une Eglise: S'il a quelque chose de materiel et de conluant à objecter il est bon que vous pensez et suivez ses raisons: Si elles ne sont pas de pouds vous pouvez lui dire que vous ne les trouvez pas concluantes; vous etes toujours votre maitre, apres lui avoir montre la confiance d'un collegue et la cordialité d'un frere.<sup>6</sup>*

Given John Wesley's resistance to Fletcher going to Madeley—a matter in which he never accepted defeat—the prospect of losing his brother to parish work a year later is intriguing. Note, though, Fletcher used the term *une Eglise* (a church) rather than *une paroisse* (a parish), which may be significant.

Yet I detect that something is going on beneath the surface in the letters, even though we only have Fletcher's side. Was Charles Wesley in a sense living out vicariously the parish he never had? Was Epworth the model in Charles Wesley's mind for Fletcher's strategy and ministry? After all, when we think of Methodist ministry in English parishes in the eighteenth century, as opposed to city locations, or circuits, two parishes seem central to the discourse: Epworth and Madeley. Others may feature Shoreham (Perronet), Haworth (Grimshaw), Everton (Berridge), but Epworth and Madeley were formative. There are similarities between the two. They were rural centers of population and small provincial market towns. Parishioners were hostile to an evangelical ministry. In both settings the religious society structure was tried (albeit over half a century apart) but was only moderately successful.

This author suggests that Charles Wesley was projecting onto Fletcher's early ministry in Madeley some of the lessons he remembered from his father's time in Epworth. If not, why was he so concerned Fletcher stay out of debt, lending him money he could probably ill spare? Why was he bothered about Fletcher's diet and health? Charles Wesley made this explicit in 1776, when Fletcher's health was in jeopardy:

*I think you stand in awe of the Sixth Commandment & dare not do what will probably injure yr. health or prevent what will probably restore it. My Father lost his life by wilfully officiating before his strength returned.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup>See Charles Wesley's communique to his wife, CW→Sarah Wesley, [27] July [1766] in GtBMR-MA DDCW5/99. (Classification number, The Methodist Archives, John Rylands Library, Manchester).

<sup>6</sup>I think that you may be unable to prevent yourself from communicating to your brother the plan of accepting a Church: If he has some material and conclusive objection to make it is well that you stop and pursue those thoughts: If it is not weighty you can say to him that you do not find it conclusive; you are always your own master, after showing him the confidence of a colleague and the cordiality of a brother (John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 12 Oct. 1761). Underlined passages throughout are by the author for emphasis.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 12 Sept. 1776.

So when it came to parish life, Charles Wesley was taking more than a passing interest in Fletcher's work. It is an anomaly that despite receiving regular letters, he never visited, claiming somewhat lamely in 1785

*While I had strength I wanted opportunity. Now I have neither.*<sup>8</sup>

### Connexion or Covenant

What bound John and Charles Wesley and Fletcher together, fundamentally, was that they were Methodists, defined by John Wesley as "one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him."<sup>9</sup> This skeletal and universalist definition meant, outwardly, a conversion experience and pursuit of "scriptural holiness" with an inward life of communion with God expressed through community with other believers. In their time the term was virtually synonymous with evangelical; Methodists held to a belief in the Bible and a proclamation of faith.<sup>10</sup> Yet around the epistemological core gathered a range of interpretations.

Fletcher's understanding of "Methodist" was set firmly within the established church, whose articles and liturgy he believed to be apostolic. He was anti-Catholic and intolerant of Dissent. Yet he did not bring to that the baggage inherited from the English religious and civil turmoil of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He could happily ask Charles Wesley in 1762 about the health of *l'Église M-te*,<sup>11</sup> perhaps the earliest use of the term.

In 1764 John Wesley wrote to many Evangelical clergy urging them to enter into a loose connexion. Five years later he told his conference "I give them up . . . they are a rope of sand." In 1764 Lady Huntingdon was also attempting a similar scheme: Fletcher wrote about both in the same letter to Charles Wesley:

*Je me suis souhaité souvent à Bristol parmi vous, mais en vain: Je crois que si L. H-n peut hater un plan d'union, et faire recevoir par le clergé, elle fera un grand coup.*<sup>12</sup>

Further:

*Mon principal but en allant à W. Bromwich étoit d'engager Mr. Stillingfleet à entrer dans l'union dont votre frere a formé le plan.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 21 June 1785.

<sup>9</sup>See Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 107.

<sup>10</sup>John Vickers ed., *Dictionary of Methodist in Britain and Ireland* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2000), 230.

<sup>11</sup>"the Methodist Church."

<sup>12</sup>I have often wished myself at Bristol among you, but in vain: I think that if Lady H[untingdon] can expedite a plan of union, and make the clergy receptive to it, she will achieve a great coup [John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 22 Aug. 1764].

<sup>13</sup>My principal target in going to W[est] Bromwich was to enlist Mr. Stillingfleet to join the union the plan of which your brother has drawn up. [John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 22 Aug. 1764].

If he was apparently backing both horses, he seems to have regarded Lady Huntingdon's scheme as more likely to succeed. Most likely, though, that he saw both as complementary: characteristically Fletcher saw potential for accommodation where others saw contradiction.

He then gathered a West Midlands group which met quarterly for some five years. It had a rotating "Director" and subjects for discussion included "Publick Preaching; Religious Societies; Catechizing of Children and Instructing of Youth; Personal Inspection and Pastoral Visiting of the Flock; Visiting of the Sick; Ruling their own Household; Particular Experiences of Themselves."<sup>14</sup> This is characteristic Evangelical parochial routine.

Given its West Midlands location, centered on Worcester, it is difficult not to link this with Richard Baxter's patterns of a century earlier. Like Baxter, unity among Christians was paramount for Fletcher and he probably viewed this scheme as a tangible sign of unity. His encouraging comments about it to Charles Wesley seem to reflect that. Unfortunately its life coincides with a five-year lacuna in the correspondence, so we have only the early comments to Charles Wesley and have to surmise the remainder from mentions in Fletcher's letters to William Ley or George Whitefield.

The Worcester group probably fell apart with the onset of the Controversy which eclipsed hopes of non-partisan connexionalism, and monopolized Fletcher's priorities. At that time of internecine strife, Fletcher was clear to Charles Wesley about his hopes for peace and harmony and his view of the shape of the Methodists:

*You convene the preachers to settle the rounds, the Calvinists convene themselves to throw down the doctrine of perfection . . . Would not a conference of prayer & mutual exhortation among dissatisfied believers especially preachers, answer a better end than that of surfeiting our hearers with exhortations & sermons which they hear mostly out of custom, and have no Heart to receive, unless it be in the notion.<sup>15</sup>*

So Fletcher shared with Charles Wesley a strong sense of connexion between mutually minded Methodists, but within that they were bound together by a covenant relationship to each other. Neither understood their mother church to be anything but an integrated whole within which these relationships could emerge. In my doctoral dissertation I have addressed the "complex triangle of relationships" which included John Wesley and was "set about laterally with a cluster of co-ordinating ties and spatially by the passage of time."

Charles was dismayed and incensed by his brother's clandestine ordinations which made separation inevitable. His desolation was evident in 1785:

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<sup>14</sup>See Peter Forsaith, "An Eighteenth Century 'Worcester Association'" in *Silver Jubilee Miscellany 1965-1990* (Warwick: West Midlands Branch of the Wesley Historical Society, 1990), 44-50. The *Rules* are in the archives of Cliff College, Derbyshire.

<sup>15</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Jan. 1772.

*Be sure, the Sheep will be scatter'd. . . . Most, I hope, will return to the bosom of their Mother Church of E. Not one but several new Sects will arise: and Methodism will be broken into 1000 pieces.*<sup>16</sup>

### A “Methodist Church of England”

If Fletcher’s notion of a united but unofficial “connexion” between evangelical (what he would have called “Gospel”) ministers and laity was evident in his understanding, it was a logical step to seeking formal recognition within the ecclesiastical structures. But how did the idea of a “Methodist Church of England,” which he proposed in 1776, come about?

In a paper presented to a Huguenot Society conference in 2000,<sup>17</sup> I demonstrated that Fletcher’s early years in England, his initial evangelical experience, his theological reading and possibly his ordination were acquired not among Methodists but within French churches in London. I think that this also indicates that the overlap between the French churches and early Methodism is much more extensive than has been generally recognized.

Incidentally, I have recently had an interesting exchange with Prof. Larry Wood, who knew nothing of my research findings in this area. I asked him what, in his judgment, might have been the sources for Fletcher’s theology. He replied that he considered there to be links to French Protestant radical thought, but had not been able to make the connection. It is precisely what you would expect from someone whose reading was guided by a French pastor in London in the 1750s, and indeed Fletcher’s surviving library bears that out.

There is no space here to develop either of those theses. What I wish to address is the position that the Huguenot churches occupied in the English ecclesiastical landscape, what Charles Wesley’s involvement might have been (alongside Fletcher’s) and how he and Fletcher viewed the evolving identity of the Methodist movement in relationship to the Huguenot model. Britain, Prof. Collingwood once observed to be:

“a refuse heap on the edge of the ocean into which are swept the outworn relics of ethnic migrations and spiritual fermentations, there to linger indefinitely in a confused and inert mass . . . What it lacks in brilliance and novelty, it makes up in a certain maturity or ripeness; the very habit of blending . . . together [diverse elements].”<sup>18</sup>

British national and religious identity owes much to this mongrel background.

Methodism’s mixed parentage between the Church of England and European Protestantism has generally been acknowledged to the Moravians. However, in London

<sup>16</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 21 June 1785, and exchange of letters between Charles and John Wesley from Aug 1785.

<sup>17</sup>Peter Forsaith “‘A dearer country’: the Frenchness of the Rev. Jean de la Fléchére of Madeley, a Methodist Church of England vicar” in R. Vigne and C. Littleton, eds., *From Strangers to Citizens* (London: Huguenot Society & Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 519–526.

<sup>18</sup>R. G. Collingwood in R. G. Collingwood & J. N. L. Myres *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 4–5.



especially in the earlier part of the eighteenth century there was a massive French emigré population; asylum seeking refugee Protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Almost instinctively, as a French-speaking Swiss in a foreign land, Fletcher was drawn into this network of expatriate communities. As he came to know Charles Wesley in the later 1750s, it is noticeable that the incidence of French names in Charles Wesley’s own letters from London increases. Moreover, Fletcher averred that he first sat under Charles Wesley’s preaching at Hog Lane, the most fashionable French congregation in London, as well as at West Street, a former Huguenot chapel.

At West Street, where Charles Wesley and Fletcher both ministered, there was clearly a substantial continuing French element in the congregation. In 1758 Fletcher was preaching in French and was concerned to ensure that during his summer absence a M. Bernon *would take upon him preaching to the French in my place*.<sup>19</sup> and later entreated Charles Wesley to preach for both of them,<sup>20</sup> implying that Charles too was preaching in French.

In 1759 Fletcher sought a French bible for Charles Wesley<sup>21</sup> but not until 1762 did Charles Wesley preach in the French chapel at Spitalfields for the first time “my scruples being at last removed.”<sup>22</sup>

All the French churches were technically within the jurisdiction of bishops of the Church of England.<sup>23</sup> The Moravians also sought a similar accommodation.<sup>24</sup> In 1776, caught between the Calvinist controversy and the American revolution, the question of (Methodist) separation which had simmered in the background for decades, began to loom large. Fletcher, with Joseph Benson, proposed a plan for a “Methodist Church of England” which envisaged a contiguity with the established church while giving the Methodist body a level of independence and staving off the prospect of separation. Sacramental in worship and evangelical in belief, its purpose was to engender reform from within the Church of England.

Although in the event this plan was not adopted, and was perhaps never a seriously realistic proposition, it reflects a formalising of the type of structures which the Huguenots had previously evolved, and a dealing with similar questions around the issue and nature of conformity. This was especially true of the kind of “episcopal free chapel” which had been Fletcher’s experience in London (such as West Street had been).<sup>25</sup> It begs the question of whether this was a model in Fletcher’s mind upon which he was able to draw.

<sup>19</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 18 Feb. 1758.

<sup>20</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 16 Aug. 1758.

<sup>21</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, April 1759.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Wesley to Sarah Wesley, 17 Mar. 1762, GtBMR-MA/DD/CW 5/94.

<sup>23</sup>J. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre, 1951), 67; see also Robin Gwynn, *Huguenot Heritage* (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1985).

<sup>24</sup>Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728–1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 228ff.

<sup>25</sup>See G. E. Milburn “Early Methodism and the Huguenots” in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 45:3, 69–79; also JWJ 8:328ff.

### A Methodist Church of America

At the time of the American Revolution, Fletcher occupied a staunchly loyalist position, (it seems ironic that he later became so influential in America) writing to Charles Wesley in December 1775, “After a weeks resistance . . . [I] yielded to a desire of supporting your brothers address” (to the American colonies). He sent his manuscript to the leading Evangelical politician, Lord Dartmouth, for approbation. To Charles Wesley he wrote:

We are debtors to the king, as well as to God. The government protects us with the civil sword, and we ought to protect it with the spiritual sword.<sup>26</sup>

There may be more here than meets the eye, for Fletcher was not a natural monarchist nor a universal upholder of the law. In September 1774 Fletcher had responded to a letter from Lord Dartmouth, then Secretary for the Colonies, that he had written “to Mr. Ireland and an American friend to inform them of your gracious intentions” (and to ask their advice).<sup>27</sup> A later letter from Thomas Rankin (in Philadelphia, presumably the “American friend”) to Lord Dartmouth suggests that his Lordship’s “gracious intentions” may have been the offer to Fletcher of becoming (Church of England) Bishop for North America. Rankin cautioned Lord Dartmouth that the American situation had become too volatile for such an appointment, and to bide time.

Wesley records that in 1776 Lord Dartmouth offered Fletcher a bishopric, although with no suggestion of it being outside England, or indeed anywhere specific but by then the American situation had passed beyond British episcopal control and his Lordship had resigned his Secretariat. So where were the Wesleys in all this? Interestingly, John Fletcher had not written to either John or Charles Wesley to ask advice. Possibly they never knew about it. Only one later comment by Charles Wesley in 1785 is suggestive:

Be not too sanguine for the American Methodists. First know their real condition—you justly fear not our M[ethodis]ts sh[oul]d get into the Prelatical Spirit. I fear the Fanatical Spirit also. I cannot explain this, in writing.<sup>28</sup>

So Fletcher’s loyalty to the crown and to the “Old Ship” was such that the Secretary for the Colonies (albeit a sympathetic Evangelical) could apparently consider this native Swiss seriously for North America. It also speaks volumes for Fletcher’s irenic outlook as well as his abilities to deal with new situations. While it is interesting evidence for Lord Dartmouth’s desire to broker a settlement for the religious dimension of the American situation, as he had achieved for Canada in 1774, the thought of Fletcher as transatlantic bishop is fascinating. Would he have accepted?

<sup>26</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 4 Dec. 1775.

<sup>27</sup>John Fletcher to Lord Dartmouth, 9 Sept. 1774, Staffordshire County Record Office [GtBSCRO], Dartmouth Papers D(W)1778 V697 Box 2.

<sup>28</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 21 June 1785.

Would he have been resident or titular? Given the criticisms of his leadership ability that have been voiced in respect of him succeeding John Wesley, how would he have managed? Would he merely have been an acceptable figurehead?

I am committing the unforgivable sin of dealing with one of history’s “ifs.” I might sin more boldly to ask the question of how Charles Wesley might have viewed this response to the American problem? Given his steadfast allegiance to the “Old Ship,” which surfaced most prominently after John Wesley’s ordinations in 1784, the possibility of a Methodist-orientated episcopal Church of North America might have been very attractive. But Americans are in a better position to adjudge that, and my sense is (from the silence) that Charles Wesley may never really have been aware of the exchange between Lord Dartmouth and Fletcher.

### The Succession

Fletcher’s personal qualities not only appealed to Lord Dartmouth but also to John Wesley, who asked Fletcher to accept recommendation to the Societies as his successor. If the throne of Wesley’s episcopacy was a saddle, Fletcher’s defective response was touched with humour:

[it] is a step to which I could by no means consent: It would make me take my horse, and gallop away.<sup>29</sup>

Charles Wesley hoped that Fletcher would succeed his brother.<sup>30</sup> This begs the question of Charles Wesley’s role, a factor which has hardly entered this long debate. Is it possible that he persuaded John Wesley (even against the latter’s better judgment) to invite Fletcher to accept nomination? Fletcher’s personal qualities were certainly there, but they were hardly the leadership qualities that would have been demanded of Wesley’s successor, as a number of commentators have remarked.<sup>31</sup> This might explain some of the apparent ambivalence in Wesley’s proposal. Indeed this was at a time when John Wesley’s mind was moving towards greater dependence on the preachers, the clergy having proved a “rope of sand.”<sup>32</sup>

It is hardly imaginable that on such an important matter the brothers had not conferred. John Wesley may too have been influenced by their friend Vincent Perronet, from whose home he wrote.<sup>33</sup> Charles Wesley’s opinion may have been in contrast to his brother’s and he may have continued to treasure a hope that Fletcher would succeed. This is reinforced by hints in surviving letters late in John Fletcher’s life. Charles Wesley wrote obliquely to Mary Fletcher:

Neither is his work finished. I could speak more than I can write.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup>John Fletcher to John Wesley, 9 Jan. 1776.

<sup>30</sup>See Charles Wesley to Walter Sellon, 26 June 1774, in *GtBMR-MA/Everett*, Vol. 2:15.

<sup>31</sup>See, for instance, R. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, Chap. 30 (Wesley in Old Age) “Death of Mr Fletcher.”

<sup>32</sup>*Minutes*, 1769.

<sup>33</sup>*The Letters of John Wesley*, 6:10.

<sup>34</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 21 May 1785

A more intriguing speculation arises from Charles Wesley's last letter to the Fletchers. Having written separately to John and Mary Fletcher, Charles Wesley then continued: "This side is for you both." There follows what Charles hoped and feared would happen after his and his brother's deaths. Unequivocally he expected the Fletchers to act jointly "to gather up the wreck." They "must stand still & see—the Design & the Salvation of God."<sup>35</sup> A husband and wife consortium to lead the Methodists is a novel suggestion, although clearly in Charles Wesley's mind.

The likelihood that such a prospect was ever considered by John Wesley seems remote. By 1785 John Wesley had enacted his Deed of Declaration and ordained preachers.<sup>36</sup> Charles Wesley's letter of 21 June 1785 is heavy with bitterness and disappointment. He was clearly apprehensive of schismatic fragmentation, perhaps fearing disunity most.

Fletcher's own attitude was articulated explicitly to Charles Wesley when in 1775 it seemed that John Wesley might die. In that event he anticipated that Charles Wesley and a "committee of the oldest and steadiest preachers"<sup>37</sup> should form the leadership of the Methodists. He made it absolutely clear that he would have no part until such a cabinet was established:

Should your brother be called to his reward, I would not be free to go to London till you and the preachers had settled all matters. My going just at such a time would carry the appearance of a vanity which I abhor. It would seem as if I wanted to be some body among the Methodists.<sup>38</sup>

Fletcher's constant preference for subsidiarity and obscurity is reflected here. It may express reluctance in the face of the inevitable, for relief is clear in his subsequent letter to Charles Wesley.<sup>39</sup> He would surely have refused to sever his ties with Madeley, so might have become an absentee "President" (as happened at Trevecca), travelling when opportunity arose but providing a very different kind of leadership from that to which the Societies were used or would have needed.

The Conference could have become, as Fletcher suggested to Charles Wesley: "a conference of prayer & mutual exhortation among dissatisfied believers especially preachers rather than one to settle the rounds."<sup>40</sup> So the twofold conundrum remains: why did John Wesley suggest that Fletcher might succeed him, and, had he done so, what might the result have been? An additional question needs to be: What was Charles Wesley's role?

<sup>35</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 21 June 1785.

<sup>36</sup>See Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast* (London: Epworth, 1992), 495ff; Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists*, 282ff.

<sup>37</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 2 July 1775.

<sup>38</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 2 July 1775.

<sup>39</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 8 Aug. 1775.

<sup>40</sup>John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, Jan. 1772.

## Conclusion

I want to finish on a wider stage than that onto which I stepped. We find ourselves today living through the *dénouement* of both the post-enlightenment liberal project and, in Britain at least, the Methodist church. It is appropriate, I think, to consider the role of the Methodist project as a post-enlightenment religious expression. Just as Charles Wesley's and Fletcher's position within the state religion of England was fraught with ambiguity, so was Methodism. That I think is the case whether one defines it as Wesley's Methodism or (as indicated near the outset of this paper) a reform movement in the established church.

Touch it where you will—doctrine, liturgy, church order, gender issues, conservative/radical politics—Methodism is characteristically ambiguous. To put it positively, that is part of its genius as it reaches out reconciling arms to embrace conflicting viewpoints and traditions. ("Names and sects and parties fall"<sup>41</sup>). To put it negatively it sits on the fence where it needs to take risks.

Addressing these ambiguities was at the heart of Fletcher's and Charles Wesley's concerns over the "Old Ship." In a series of disparate areas I have attempted to narrate something of their themes as they sought to navigate the Methodism they knew through channels and shifting sands. At the end of the day their Methodism, as Charles Wesley feared, became a sect. The Methodists did not "return to the bosom of their Mother Church. However, Methodism was not broken into 1000 pieces"<sup>42</sup> but formed a remarkably cohesive identity even through later divisions.

A predominantly third-world Methodism now faces a new world order often based upon neo-conservative fundamentalism, characteristically accompanied by shades of religious totalitarianism. Could it be that in the ambiguities and questions that John Fletcher and Charles Wesley encountered with the "Old Ship," there are some underlying lessons which they have to teach us? There may well be.

## Sources

### *Archives*

Unless otherwise indicated, all archive material is within the Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library, Manchester, England [GtBMR-MA].

### *Abbreviations*

JWJ—N. Curnock [ed.], *The Journal of John Wesley* [London: Culley, 1909], 8 vols., "Standard Edition."

<sup>41</sup>See HSP (1740) 'The Communion of Saints.'

<sup>42</sup>Charles Wesley to John Fletcher, 21 June 1785.

