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**Methodist Theology in the 18th Century  
Its Basic Structures with the Background of Other Theological (Calvinism)  
and Philosophical (Enlightenment) Concepts  
A Case Study of Fletcher of Madeley (1729-1785)**

It is well known that the 18th century was the age of reason and that the Wesleys were opposed to Calvinism. It is well known, too, that the Wesleys had a positive understanding of reason and, at the same time, joined the Calvinistic Methodists with their essential doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

The important question is, in which way Wesleyan Methodist Theology answered the challenges brought forward by the age of reason as well as by the Calvinists. The former asked not only "How reasonable is your teaching?" but also "What moral impact does it have?". The latter asked not only "Do you teach salvation by grace alone?" but also "What do you think about the total depravity of man and his utter inability to do any good work whatsoever?"

In the 18th and 19th century, one man was considered as the theologian and saint of Methodism: John William Fletcher. His theological work - fully approved, highly esteemed and widely circulated by John Wesley - reflects a thorough knowledge of the challenges both by "reasonable Christians" and by Calvinists. In this case study of Fletcher, I will try to show his way of dealing with theological and philosophical challenges of his age and what is fundamental to his theology. I will start with some very brief biographical notices, because every theology is tied up with history.

Fletcher was born in Switzerland, beside the lake of Geneva. He studied in Geneva, but not theology. He was theologically self-taught. At the time of his studies, Geneva no more belonged to the Calvinistic orthodoxy. Fletcher studied classics with a professor who later became one of the leading persons of the so-called "reasonable orthodoxy". Fletcher got to know the influence of enlightenment and the critics against Calvinistic orthodoxy already in Geneva.

The reasonable orthodoxy is characterized by three main themes which give an inner structure to its whole theology:

- 1) Man is created with a free will. The free will derives from man being created after the image of God. It is the privilege of man that God sets good and evil before him. Man can choose his way in full liberty and responsibility. He is a free, responsible, acting creature.
- 2) God has given the law. The law is the revelation of his will. It is the guiding line for man which he has to obey. Theologically, the law has a positive meaning. Without it, man would err because of his free will. He needs the orders of the law.
- 3) God has linked promise and punishment with his law in order to educate man to obedience. Whoever obeys the law will get eternal life from God on the day of judgement. Whoever doesn't obey, will be punished. Promise and punishment are the reasonable, educational means of God in order that free man will live in obedience to God.

Reasonable orthodoxy taught essentially a practical, moral, educational Christianity. Of course, its theologians could also talk of Christ's meritorious

death on the cross. Fletcher explained his own "reasonable" understanding of Christian religion before his meeting the Methodists in the following words:

"You (Fletcher speaks about himself) believe in God, in Jesus Christ, you are a Christian; you don't do wrong to anybody; you have never got drunk; you have never desired the wife of your neighbour; in general, you fulfil all duties; people even say you do it with accuracy; you go to church, and you pray more regularly than many; sometimes you even seem to do it with eagerness; calm yourself; Jesus Christ died for the sinners and his merit will supply what misses you." (letter in French to his brother Henri Louis, May 11, 1755).

At this time of his life, it was important for Fletcher to obey the laws of God. Obedience had to be as perfect as possible. What will be missing for perfection at the time of death, will be supplied by Christ's merit. Fletcher's Christianity was built on moral grounds, not on the "Credo".

In contrast, the teaching and life of the Methodists were a rediscovery of the "Credo", a rediscovery of Paulinian and Reformation-doctrines. The Methodists stressed

- 1) The radical fall of man into sin out of which he can't deliver himself;
- 2) The need of salvation in Christ, the justification by grace through faith in Christ;
- 3) The holiness of heart and life.

(cf. Letter of John Wesley to Lord Dartmouth, April 19, 1764, Wesley-Letters ed. Telford, IV, 235-239).

These three essentials gave the basic structure to Methodist theology. They were linked with a rediscovery of the powerful meaning of the creed, e.g. in pneumatology: The Holy Spirit brings not only enlightenment of reason, but is a recreating, renewing power.

So far, there is a basic difference between "reasonable orthodoxy" and Methodism. But the most interesting and fascinating fact is the way in which Wesleyan Methodists - in opposition to Calvinistic Methodists - tried to integrate reasonable critics against traditional orthodoxy into their teaching. The whole theological controversy within Methodism between 1770 and 1777 is a controversy about the possibility of integrating new insights of a "reasonable Christianity" into the basic, common Methodist teaching of salvation. Following Arminian tradition, the Wesleyan Methodists approved this possibility and the Calvinistic Methodists disapproved. (Instead of "Calvinistic Controversy" I prefer to speak of the "Antinomian-Predestinarian Controversy").

I will take three main examples to show in which way Fletcher tried to answer the challenge: the topics of free will, predestination and merit. (The most concise text of Fletcher is his "Fictitious and Genuine Creed" (1775) where you can find his doctrines more fully developed).

#### **Free will**

Free will is a main topic in reasonable Christianity. But how does it fit in with the doctrine of the sinfulness of all mankind? If everybody has fallen into sin, is separated from God, without any possibility to do good, he has no free will in matters of his salvation. Since the Reformation, this has been a strong argument against free will. The challenge of the Calvinists was: How can you, Wesleyan Methodists, pretend to believe in the fallen state of mankind and at the same time speak of the free will of each person?

The response of Fletcher to solve this contradiction was a unique interpretation of a doctrine of "initial salvation". Fletcher realized that you can't just talk of prevenient grace working in man. There are more

radical questions to be answered: Is grace irresistible or not? If you can resist grace and if you take seriously the fall of man (his thorough rebellion against God), man will always resist resistable grace.

Fletcher wrote several times in his Checks, that he had learnt a lot from his Calvinistic friends. One point was: If the fall of Adam was not only a stupid disobedience but unbelief and rebellion against God, if it was sin, only the irresistible grace of God could deliver Adam and in him all mankind. Fletcher's doctrine of "initial salvation" took up the point. It gave theological grounds to talk of preventent grace.

Unless God had been gracious to Adam, he would have died and with him all mankind. But, as Paul says: "So then, as the one sin condemned all mankind, in the same way the one righteous act sets all mankind free and gives them life" (Rom. V,18). It is the fundamental covenant of grace. Initial salvation means: God's grace in Christ is given to everyone; it is saving grace; it is irresistible. In initial salvation, God restores free will in man, which is no more natural free will (given in creation) but graciously (through Christ's merits) freed will. All God's further work in grace needs no more to be irresistible because He has freed the will of man to choose what is good. Man is again a responsible, free acting partner. Free will is no more in contradiction to free grace but is itself a consequence of an initial gracious act of God the Redeemer. Every good act of man is based on God's free grace enabling man to do good. Man is a free acting, responsible person no longer by creation but by redemption.

Methodists in the 19th and 20th century have often talked of free will, responsible man, preventent grace without being clear enough about the theological grounds of their position and therefore, of its consequences. I will just mention four consequences of Fletcher's doctrine:

- a) Because we always live beyond Eden, even man freed through initial salvation turns again to sin and stands in need of repentance and justification through faith. Therefore, the Methodists put a strong emphasis on evangelizing.
- b) Initial salvation is real salvation. Babies or mentally handicapped people who can't confess their faith are nevertheless saved. On this background the Methodists stressed that Christ died for all, and they had good reason for infant baptism, too.
- c) Even the heathens needn't be lost. With enlightened Christians, Fletcher was convinced that God never requires more than he gives (cf. Minutes of the Conference 1770, point 3/2; Acts X,32) and never requires explicit faith if someone has no possibility to hear the Good News. Mission, according to Fletcher, was originally based on the willingness to bring the brighter light of the explicit revelation in Christ to all mankind.
- d) Through the initial salvation in Christ, nobody is excluded from the working of God's grace. But this preventent grace is no longer irresistible because God doesn't force His will against freed man. The working of this common grace (common to everyone) is not only the grace of the Creator to sustain creation (as with Calvinists) but the grace of the Redeemer. It wants to lead man to final salvation.

#### Predestination

A second example of the challenge both from Calvinists and from enlightened Christians to Methodist theology is the interpretation of predestination.

Arminian theology didn't talk of free, electing grace of God (except

in talking of foresight which is opposite to any true notion of grace). Fletcher's opponents, the Calvinists, brought him to realize the importance of biblical passages on God's free, electing grace. But Fletcher came to understand God's electing, partial grace on the basis of the fundamental covenant of grace. Within this covenant, there is a trinitarian dispensation of grace both in history and in personal experience. Election and reprobation is God's free and partial will to spread more or less of his distinguishing grace, to give a higher or lower dispensation but not - as in Calvinism - a giving or excluding from salvation. The free electing grace of God working in a threefold dispensation as Father, Son and Spirit was Fletcher's "key and sword" to understand the respective biblical passages (and highly esteemed by John Wesley). Because God doesn't want to force man as a free, responsible person, man can resist God's electing grace. But man has to bear responsibility for his refusing God's grace.

If we look at Fletcher's doctrine of election and reprobation, he is again strongly influenced by Calvinistic insights into biblical truth (God's freedom in spreading grace) but at the same time eager to respect reasonable arguments against Calvinistic predestination (man's responsibility has to be taken seriously).

Three points in Fletcher's understanding of election and reprobation can be underlined:

- a) It stresses God's freedom: God is absolutely free in the dispensation of his grace. He is not bound to the foresight of man's acts. The freedom of God needn't frighten man. God uses his freedom within his covenant of grace in Christ with everyone. God will never be a tyrant playing with eternal life or death of man. He stands to his covenant. He is love (A theme more fully developed by Fletcher in his later years).
- b) Initial salvation is not synonymous with final salvation. The history in between (both of mankind and of individuals) is dynamic. There is a development from the dispensation of the Father to the dispensation of the Son and to the dispensation of the Spirit. It is a dynamic way enabling to lead through justification and sanctification up to Christian perfection or pure love.
- c) The Trinity is no more a obscure doctrine which has to be believed without being fully understood, but an expression of the life of God (Another theme more fully developed by Fletcher in his later years). The Holy Spirit is no more restricted to an enlightenment of reason. It is a changing power. The Methodists reactualized fundamental biblical truth. A dead creed for enlightened Christians in 18th century became a vital doctrine.

#### Merit

The third example is the notion of merit. The Conference Minutes of 1770 which had been the starting point of the antinomian-predestinarian controversy of the seventies, stated in point 6:

"As to merit itself, of which we have been so dreadfully afraid: we are rewarded "according to our works", yea "because of our works". How does this differ from for the sake of our works? And how differs this from secundum merita operum, - as our works deserve? Can you split this hair? I doubt I cannot."

For Calvinists, "merit" in relation to human acts was a horrible word opening a gate for salvation by works. For enlightened Christians the works and merits of men are necessary and will be judged by a God who rewards and punishes according to the acts of man. Wesleyan

Methodists had a different understanding. They tried to re-interpret the words merit, reward, worthiness according to biblical passages and their understanding of God's grace.

Everybody has to appear before God's throne and will be judged according to his works. The judgement will not only involve our acts but our thoughts and desires as well. Everyone will be judged according to the dispensation of grace he has received. Works of man are good if they are founded in truth. Christ is the truth. Pharisaic self-sufficiency can never bring forth good works. There can't be any self-merit in good works. Every good work is primarily rooted in God's grace and only secondarily in human obedience. God's judgement is gracious in that He doesn't demand anything which He hadn't given beforehand. It is just in so far as God judges everyone without partiality according to what he has received. God rewards the good works of man, but it is by grace and man can never claim it (in claiming it, man withdraws from grace and becomes proud). God rewards in his overwhelming grace the fruits of that grace He initially gave to everyone. The believer will be blessed in a double way. Whoever neglects the grace of God will be punished. The judgement is the impartial and conditional election and reprobation according to God's retributive justice. Reprobation therefore has no longer any notion of free-wrath in God.

The doctrine of a last judgement according to the works or the fruits of grace was important to secure the basic doctrine of salvation by grace, rooted in the merit and sacrifice of Christ alone, against anti-nomian interpretation. For Wesleyan Methodists, it was the only safeguard against faith without works. On the other hand, the only safeguard against pride and self-righteousness was in their doctrine of grace, fundamental to every good work. No one can stand in front of God in confidence of his own good works, but only in relying on God's abundant grace enabling him to do good works.

In all three examples (free will, predestination and merit) one can discover the influence of arguments both from Calvinism (with its roots in Paul's letters and the Reformation) and from enlightenment (with its influence in church through "reasonable Christianity"). All the same, Fletcher presents not a theological potpourri, but a well elaborated theology. The valuable contribution of Wesleyan Methodist theology in 18th century is twofold:

- a) Their theology is faithful to the fundamental doctrines of Paul and the Reformation (contrary to all kinds of reasonable Christianity). It takes part with the whole Methodist movement (including Calvinistic Methodists) in the rediscovery of basic tenets of Christian faith (the creed is no more a obscure, dead doctrine).
- b) Wesleyan Methodist theology is open to the challenges of the age (contrary to the Calvinistic Methodists) and tries to integrate them without losing the basic tenets of faith. It takes part with the whole age of reason in a re-discovery of the responsibility and gifts of man and in the importance of ethics.

Let me add a personal word at the end: the challenge nowadays has developed from reasonable theology and moral Christianity to a world-wide social dimension of theology and to political Christianity (political in a broad sense). The criticism of reason (after the criticism of religion in 19th century) stresses the consequences of every thought, doctrine or act for human society and in recent times more and more for the whole realm of nature within which we live. Methodist theology can

only give a valuable contribution to the mission of the whole church of Christ if it stands the twofold test of keeping faithful to the basic tenets of Christian faith and of remaining open to the challenge of modern society (social and political implications and consequences of theology). Extremes have to be overcome: If we were only interested in evangelizing and in personal aspects of faith, we would lose our credibility and impact in modern society. If we were only interested in establishing more justice in this world and in living in better harmony with nature, we would lose ourselves in hopeless activism (hopeless because it would not be rooted in God's changing power). The rediscovery (in every generation) of the powerful life behind the "Credo" has to be linked with an openness of spirit towards modern challenges and needs.