



PART II

John Fletcher

Every Methodist should know the name John Fletcher (1729-1785). Jean Guillaume de la Fléchère was born in Nyon, Switzerland. For seven years he attended college and academy in Geneva, which had been the stronghold of John Calvin.

Fletcher moved to England around the age of 20 where he anglicized his name to John William Fletcher. John Wesley designated Fletcher to be his successor as the leader of the Methodist Church, but Fletcher died six years prior to Wesley's own death. Perhaps the greatest tribute to Fletcher was paid by Voltaire, the French infidel. When asked if he had ever met anyone like Jesus Christ, Voltaire lapsed into silence and then replied, "I once met Fletcher of Madeley."

Fletcher pastored the Anglican congregation in Madeley for 25 years. Madeley was a mining town in Shropshire, England. Although he was offered a more affluent parish, Fletcher replied, "I want nothing but more grace."

Like the rest of the early Methodists, Fletcher opposed Calvinism on the one hand and rational deism on the other hand. Fletcher is most famous for his *Checks to Antinomianism* and his *Portrait of St. Paul*. His five *The Checks* were written to vindicate Wesley against Calvinism. His *Portrait* was originally written in French, but only published in English. This book ends with a rebuttal of Voltaire and Rousseau, two of the rationalistic philosophers of that day.

The only reprint of Fletcher's writings in the twentieth century was the four-

Vic's Pics

BOOKS EVERY METHODIST PREACHER SHOULD OWN BY DR. VIC REASONER, PRESIDENT SOUTHERN METHODIST COLLEGE

volume reprint by Schmull Publications in 1974. It is out of print, but should not be too hard to locate. A paperback edition of *The Portrait of St. Paul* is currently in print for \$11.99 and available through Foundry Press.

The best introduction to Fletcher's theology is *True Christianity* by J. Russell Frazier. Russ has lectured at Southern Methodist College and has offered his book through Foundry Press for \$35.

Adam Clarke

Adam Clarke (1762?-1832) was the great Methodist commentator. As a small boy in Northern Ireland, Adam repeatedly failed his lessons, even though his father was the schoolmaster. One day a visiting teacher came and examined some of the students. When he came to Adam, he was told, "That boy is slow at learning. I fear you will not be able to do much with him." But the visitor spoke kindly to Adam, laid his hand on his head and declared, "This lad will make a good scholar yet." Adam recalled that something broke within him. This kindness gave hope to Adam and he found that he could commit his lessons to memory with ease.

Adam went on to learn 20 languages, becoming the most able biblical scholar of his time. While Clarke never abandoned his pastoral ministries, he became a great scholar in classic literature, patristics, languages, history, geology, and natural science. When the Rosetta Stone first arrived in England, the Society of Antiquarians did not know what the third language was. It contained hieroglyphics, Greek, and an unknown third language. Clarke made a trip to their offices and identified the third language as Coptic.

His greatest work was his *Commentary* which took him 25 years to write and 15 years to get published (1810-1826). Clarke said, "I wrote every page of it in reference to the ministers of the word of God, and especially those among the

Methodists; and I know of no work, be it what it may, in which the doctrines of the Methodists are so clearly stated, illustrated, and proved."

Clarke was a pioneer in the field of lower criticism, which today is called textual criticism. This is the comparison and evaluation of biblical manuscripts in order to determine the correct reading. This is in contrast to higher criticism, which is a liberal attempt to determine how the biblical text evolved through natural means. By definition, higher criticism dismisses divine inspiration. Clarke affirmed divine inspiration and biblical inerrancy.

The Abingdon reprint of Clarke's 6-volume commentary, done in the 1950s, is out of print. They did a 3-double-volume reprint in 1977, which is also out of print. I do not recommend the one-volume abridgement by Ralph Earle done in 1967 because Earle took the liberty to "fix" Clarke where he disagreed with him. I reviewed Earle's hatchet-job in an article online <<http://fwponline.cc/v12n1/v12n1reasonera.html>>

Adam Clarke did not write a systematic theology, but his biographer Samuel Dunn went through Clarke's writings and compiled Clarke's *Christian Theology* in 1835. It is currently in print and available through Foundry Press for \$18.99. One can also get *The Christian Prophet and His Work* by Adam Clarke for \$7.99. This 152-page book contains a sermon by that title, his *Clavis Biblica*, and his Letter to a Preacher. Clarke wrote *Clavis Biblica* for two converted Buddhist priests who came to England to observe Christianity. A "clavis" is a key or glossary, and this clavis is a summary of the Bible and its teachings.

Clarke said,
No man ever taught
me the doctrine I
embraced; I received

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it singly by reading the Bible. From that alone I saw that justification by faith, the witness of the Spirit, and the sanctification of the heart were all attainable. These I saw as clearly as I do now; and from them I have never swerved. I often read the Bible on my knees. When I came to a passage I did not fully understand, I said, "Lord, here is thy book; it is given for the salvation of man; it can be no salvation to him unless he understand it; thou has the key of this text, unlock it to me;" and praying thus I

generally received such light as was satisfactory to myself.

However, this confidence led Clarke to eccentric interpretations on a few occasions. He opened the door to a firestorm of controversy with his comments on Luke 1:35. There he took the position that the term "Son of God" applies to Jesus Christ *after* the Incarnation. Fearful that this interpretation would open the door to rationalism, Richard Watson wrote *Remarks on the Eternal Sonship of Christ* in 1818.

By 1827 the Methodist Conference passed a resolution requiring every candidate for ordination to affirm the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ. Clarke never answered his critics, but continued to work on his commentary. The bottom line is that Clarke was not heretical, but the Methodist leadership was fearful that his interpretation could be exploited by those who were challenging the doctrine of the Trinity.

My analysis is that Watson thought as a systematic theologian, while Clarke limited himself to dealing with the text alone. The immediate result was that the Methodist Connection did not endorse Clarke's *Commentary*, but promoted Joseph Benson's five-volume *Notes* instead. However, Benson was not reprinted and over time Clarke's *Commentary* has received acclaim. Milton S. Terry wrote, "Next to Matthew Henry's exposition no work of similar scope and magnitude has had a wider circulation or is better known than the commentary of Adam Clarke. It is marked by a number of eccentricities of opinion, but displays a vast amount of learning, and is a monument of the tireless industry of its author. It has especially served a useful purpose among the Methodist ministry and people, by whom it has been chiefly used."

My next article will introduce Richard Watson, the first systematic theologian of Methodism.