

## THE NEXUS OF ACCOMMODATION AND PERFECTION AS THE HABITUATION OF SANCTIFYING GRACE

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The doctrine of accommodation affirms that God adapts the form and content of divine revelation to limitations, weaknesses, and historical conditions of human beings. “From a human standpoint, the doctrine of accommodation implies that human beings are incapable of receiving the full revelation of the divine nature due to human finitude and sin, particularly the noetic effects of sin. From the divine standpoint, God, out of love, desires to reveal to created human beings the divine nature, but the nature of humanity dictates a less than a full revelation lest the object of revelation should be overwhelmed by the glory of the divine and fail to comprehend the content of the disclosure.”<sup>1</sup>

### *The Biblical and Historical Background of the Doctrine of Accommodation*

The idea of accommodation runs like a thread throughout the Scriptures. When God commanded Moses to lead the Israelites away from Mount Sinai and into Canaan, Moses sought assurance of God’s presence and, upon receiving it, asked God, “Please show me your glory.”<sup>2</sup> God extended to Moses a limited revelation of himself: “I will make all my goodness pass before you...”; yet, God underscored the limitations of his self-revelation: ““But... you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exod 33:19-20, ESV).<sup>3</sup> In his Gospel, John referred (what many biblical scholars believe is) God’s accommodation to Moses as he wrote of the greatest divine accommodation to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:17): “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18, ESV). Both passages, as well as many others, refer to a divine, accommodated revelation. The anthropomorphic language of the account in Exodus itself is accommodated language, not discounting the less-than-complete revelation. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is also accommodated since the Word “became flesh” (John 1:14, ESV). The incarnate Word enables the most complete revelation of God to humanity, yet it is still not a *full* revelation (1 John 3:2); it is an *enfleshed* Word.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Russell Frazier, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Divine Accommodation and Its Correspondence with the Methodist Triumvirate,” *The Asbury Journal* 78, no. 2 (2023): 376, <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2590&context=asburyjournal>.

<sup>2</sup> *Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Crossway, 2001, Exodus 33:18. Hereafter, all scripture references will employ this version of the Bible with an in-text citation, indicating this version as ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of discussing divine revelation and transcendence, H. Ray Dunning comments, “Thus, God is both seen and unseen. He does not reveal himself but does make himself known. If this sounds paradoxical, it is. Revelation cannot be defined from this point of view as ‘making clear,’ but rather as involving ambiguity. We may say that there is a balance of transcendence and immanence, or that God is here represented as both hidden and revealed at one and the same time” (*Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* [Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988], 103).

Given the Scriptural basis, the idea of accommodation came to play a vital role in the history of Christian thought. Christian thinkers adopted the language of Scripture to discuss accommodation and, in some cases, developed it into a full-fledged doctrine. Oftentimes, writers and thinkers have employed the word “condescend” or cognate words to express the act of divine accommodation to humanity.<sup>4</sup> Early Church Fathers often used the term “condescend” in their writings to speak of the condescension of the Son of God in enveiling himself in human flesh. A wide range of Early Church Fathers speak of the condescension of Christ, e.g., Irenaeus of Lyons,<sup>5</sup> Origen,<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria,<sup>7</sup> Theognostus of Alexandria,<sup>8</sup> and Augustine of Hippo,<sup>9</sup> among others. Chrysostom, called “le docteur de la condescendance,”<sup>10</sup> gave the most thoroughgoing treatment of the doctrine of accommodation. His teaching reflects five dimensions of accommodation:

1. *Transcendence*: God’s infinite nature requires divine adaptation to finite humanity.
2. *Hermeneutics*: Scripture uses human language and anthropomorphisms as accommodated expressions.
3. *Pedagogy*: Revelation unfolds progressively according to human ability to receive it.

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<sup>4</sup> In the current usage of the English language, the verb “condescend” carries the idea of patronizing: “to act graciously towards another or others regarded as being on a lower level; behave patronizingly” (*Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 12th Edition 2014*. S.v. “condescend.” Retrieved November 24, 2025 from <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/condescend>). As Samuel Johnson indicates in his 1773 dictionary, the primary meaning of the word “condescend” in the eighteenth century aligns more closely with the meaning intended by Christian theologians: “To depart from the privileges of superiority by a voluntary submission; to sink willingly to equal terms with inferiours; to sooth by familiarity.” (“condescend, v.n.” *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1773. Accessed 2025/11/22. [https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/condescend\\_vn](https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/condescend_vn)).

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, “Irenaeus against Heresies,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 417.

<sup>6</sup> Origen, “Origen against Celsus,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 501–502.

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor,” in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 228.

<sup>8</sup> Theognostus of Alexandria, “From His Seven Books of Hypotyposes or Outlines,” in *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 6, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 156.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur A. Just, ed., *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 182.

<sup>10</sup> The title was bestowed by Henry Pinard (Theron, “Chapter 12: Accommodation and Incarnation: A Favourite Concept of Calvin in the Theology of Oepke Noordmans,” 201).

4. *Christology*: The Incarnation is the supreme act of divine condescension, God's loving descent into human form.
5. *Paulinism*: Ministers, following God's example, must themselves accommodate their message to human beings.<sup>11</sup>

As we will see, this Chrysostomic pattern will be reflected in the thought of theologians who lived after him. John Calvin's thought reflects the patristic line of thought about the doctrine of accommodation; recent studies of Calvin's thought have shown that the doctrine of accommodation was not peripheral but central to Calvin's theology of revelation.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Methodist Triumvirate and the Doctrine of Accommodation*

The principal early Methodist theologians were John Wesley (1703-1791), his brother, Charles Wesley (1707-1788), and their friend, John William Fletcher (1729-1785). The Methodist triumvirate received and adapted the concept of accommodation from Scripture and patristic sources. John and Charles Wesley used the term "conscend" repeatedly in the hymns to describe God's loving accommodation to humanity; they underscored (more clearly than Calvin) that love is the driving motivation of divine accommodation, stressing it as *love, grace, and mercy*. In one particularly poignant hymn, the Wesleys underscore the condescension of God's indwelling presence and describe God's condescension as a "wondrous" act of taking up residence in the human heart, seeking to be the "everlasting home" of the "poor and simple." The hymn writer yearns for an intimate divine encounter, desiring to embrace God's "purest nature" and experience the "most unbounded measure of beatific love."<sup>13</sup> In Wesleyan hymns on the Incarnation, Christ "stoops down,"<sup>14</sup> "lays his glory by,"<sup>15</sup> and "invites and treats us [humans] as his friends."<sup>16</sup> The Wesleys employed three metaphors corresponding with Chrysostomic thought of the accommodated God: "God as Father, God as Teacher, and God as Physician."<sup>17</sup>

The third member of the Methodist triumvirate, John William Fletcher, developed the nascent concept of divine accommodation in the theologies of John and Charles Wesley into a full-orbed theology of accommodation. In Fletcher's thought, God accommodated revelation to

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment*, Reformed Historical Theology 16 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 75.

<sup>12</sup> Frazier, "Calvin's Doctrine of Divine Accommodation and Its Correspondence with the Methodist Triumvirate," 379f.

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 10 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1871), 116, 129.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 1 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 268.

<sup>15</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 5 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 113.

<sup>16</sup> John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 12 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869), 121.

<sup>17</sup> Frazier, "Calvin's Doctrine of Divine Accommodation and Its Correspondence with the Methodist Triumvirate," 386.

humanity's limited capacity to receive it.<sup>18</sup> His doctrine of dispensations is the means by which he communicated the unfolding progress of God's revelatory activity. God reveals himself in three dispensations as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The dispensations are dispensations of grace whereby grace is dispensed according to the dictates of humanity's capacity.<sup>19</sup> Because of human limitations, accommodation becomes a series of divine actions that aim at the goal of "full" revelation. God desires to reveal himself as fully and supremely as possible, but always in proportion to human capacity and at the appropriate time. Thus, the later, fuller revelation does not negate the earlier, impartial revelation; it only fulfils and completes it.

Salvation is a sequence of divine revelations and human responses that develops in time as God initiates the restoration of humanity to the full image of God. Characteristic of Fletcher's theology is an emphasis on divine condescending grace and human perfecting faith. This is the fundamental dialectic of Fletcher's theological system and of his functional synergism: divine condescending grace and human perfecting faith, and it informs Fletcher's accommodated practice of ministry as will soon become evident.

### *The Wesleys' Accommodated Ministry*

The Early Methodist triumvirate—John and Charles Wesley and John Fletcher—taught the doctrine of divine accommodation and, in addition, discharged and embodied an accommodated ministry. While professing fidelity to the Church of England, John Wesley introduced many innovations and accommodations to further the cause of the revival, which were often perceived as infringements on the established Church's order. Some of these innovations include the following:

#### *1. Field Preaching*

Upon seeing first-hand the success of George Whitfield's field preaching, Wesley records in his journal on April 2, 1739, that he "submitted to 'be more vile,' and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation..."<sup>20</sup> This practice, which he first implemented at Bristol and continued throughout the kingdom, enabled him to reach larger audiences, particularly those who did not attend the worship services of the established Church, and further fuelled the revival among the masses.

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<sup>18</sup> Fletcher quoted from Joseph Alleine who affirmed the doctrine of accommodation. "The terms of mercy'—he should have said, The terms of eternal salvation—'are brought as low as possible to you. God has stooped as low to sinner, as with honour he can He will not be thought a factor of sin, nor stain the glory of his holiness; and whither could he come lower than he hath, unless he should do this? He has abated the impossible terms of the first covenant..." (Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 3:265).

<sup>19</sup> A phrase from Wesley's comments on 2 Cor. 3:9 reveals an understanding of God's accommodation in the history of salvation: "But how can the moral law (which alone was engraven on stone) be the ministration of condemnation, if it requires no more than a sincere obedience, *such as is proportioned to our infirm state?*" (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. Journals and Diaries, II (1738-1743)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Abingdon Press, 1990), 19:46.

## 2. Lay Preachers

As the work of the revival expanded, Wesley developed a cadre of itinerant preachers to assist in preserving the results of the revival and in expanding the work into new areas.<sup>21</sup> He empowered women to further the revival cause and ordained some preachers to the ministry to expand the work beyond the British Isles. This move mobilised a larger workforce and democratised preaching.

## 3. Organised Structure

To further and preserve the work of the revival, Wesley developed an organisational structure aligned with the methodical bent of the early Methodists. The societies were the focal point for identifying and unifying the new movement, designed “to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love.”<sup>22</sup> A sub-division of the societies was the class meetings designed to strengthen fellowship, accountability, and true Christian community among the Methodists. The bands, yet another subdivision, were intended for “soul-searching examination”<sup>23</sup> of their members, aimed at the habituation of sanctification.

## 4. Social Reform

Wesley advocated for the social transformation of society. He opened schools to train children, spoke out against the slave trade, developed followers to engage in acts of service and compassion, and wrote a book of common ailments (i.e., *Primitive Physick*, 1747) to provide accessible, inexpensive, and remedial medical advice to the poor.

## 5. Literary Works

Wesley was a prolific writer. He extracted the works of other Christian writers to his own purposes and published the extractions under the title *Christian Library*. In “The Preface” of his sermons, he indicated the desire to reach the masses: “I design plain truth for plain people.”<sup>24</sup> Though trained as a theologian, he accommodated his language to “the bulk of mankind—to those who neither relish nor understand the art of speaking.”<sup>25</sup> He ensured that his works were accessible, generally publishing in a small tract format at an affordable cost.<sup>26</sup> He published *The*

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<sup>21</sup> John Lenton, *John Wesley’s Preachers: A Social and Statistical Analysis of the British and Irish Preachers Who Entered the Methodist Itinerancy before 1791* (Paternoster, 2009), 7.

<sup>22</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:69.

<sup>23</sup> D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 113.

<sup>24</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. Sermons I, 1-34*, ed. Albert Cook Outler (Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:104.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 1:103.

<sup>26</sup> One of the arguments that John Wesley made for publishing a new hymnal was the affordability of purchasing one hymnal over purchasing the many hymnals that had been produced by the Wesleys. John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. A Collection of Hymns for*

*Arminian Magazine*, which featured theological and devotional content for the laity. Through these means, Wesley spread the Methodist message and solidified the unity and identity of the Methodist people.

## 6. *Hymns and Singing*

Charles Wesley was a prolific hymn writer. While the content of the hymns conveys the idea of accommodation, the nature of the hymns arises from the early Methodist accommodation to their followers. The hymnal, *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, was designed to give expression to the “experimental and practical divinity” and was “carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians.”<sup>27</sup> The language of the hymn employed biblical language. While reflecting “the purity, the strength, and the elegance of the English language,” the hymns, at the same time, conveyed “the utmost simplicity and plainness, suited to every capacity.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, even the language of the hymns was accommodated to the context to impact the singers. Wesley’s “Directions for Singing” (1760) anticipated that all the early Methodists would participate fully and heartily regardless of musical skill. Their use of hymns was a deliberate and strategic choice to accommodate the spiritual needs, educational levels, and cultural context of the people they ministered to, using song as an effective means of grace and instruction.

Each innovation (or accommodation) served to remove barriers to grace, democratising access to salvation, and shaping communities in holiness. Their ministry was thus not only evangelistic but formational, cultivating habits or “holy tempers” that shape the believer’s disposition in love. Hence, the Wesleys accommodated their ministry to their context to shape the contours of the revival, reach a wider audience, build a strong network of supporters, and develop people in the character of Christ.

### *Fletcher’s Theology of Ministry*

Fletcher articulated the doctrine of divine accommodation more explicitly than did the Wesleys. He developed the doctrine of accommodation into a full-fledged practice of ministry and underscored that ministers must accommodate their ministry to others, mirroring divine accommodation.

His most mature and complete articulation of this appears in his *Portrait of Saint Paul: or, The True Model for Christians and Pastors* (1790), in which he makes explicit the *telos* of the doctrine of accommodation:

Hence, it is necessary, that the faithful minister should acquaint himself with the different conditions and capacities of his hearers, *if he would happily accommodate spiritual things to spiritual men*. Without this knowledge, he will, under every dispensation, run

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*the Use of the People Called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, with James Dale (Abingdon Press, 1983), 7:73.

<sup>27</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 7:74.

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 7:74.

the hazard of refusing to advanced Christians the solid nourishment they need, and of presenting to the natural man that celestial manna which his very soul abhors.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, experimental knowledge of believers is contingent upon the divine, cognitive revelation. The minister's responsibility is to lead parishioners in an ever-increasing spiritual development toward Christian perfection by dispensing truth in appropriate measures. "As a prudent physician proportions his medicines to the different ages and habits of his patients, so the enlightened pastor, who feels himself concerned for the spiritual health of his flock, sees it necessary to act with equal care and discretion."<sup>30</sup>

Fletcher's entire theological scheme might be summarised as follows: God has, through history, accommodated divine revelation to the limitations of finite human capacity, and calls Christian ministers to accommodate themselves to their hearers (congregants) so that they may appropriate the Christian message. As God accommodated divine revelation to the fallen human condition in order to communicate effectively, Christian ministers must accommodate their message (and ministry) to their hearers in order to communicate the saving news of God in Christ effectively.

Fletcher recognised that divine accommodation must develop over time; for him, accommodation was progressive. It began with inferior knowledge and progressed to increasing superior knowledge.

To require of spiritual infants any high and important acts of faith in Jesus Christ, or in the Holy Spirit, before they are taught to entertain just notions of the Supreme Being, would be equally unreasonable as for a man to pretend that it is possible to make a good geometrician of an ignorant peasant, by instructing him to repeat the terms of Euclid's last propositions, without ever bringing him to a true understanding of the first.<sup>31</sup>

In order to minister effectively, ministers need, according to Fletcher, to understand the dispensations and the corresponding stages of faith. The minister must have not only an understanding of the various states, but "an experimental knowledge" of them, without which "a minister can no more lead sinners to evangelical perfection, than an illiterate peasant can communicate sufficient intelligence to his rustic companions to pass an examination for the highest degree in a university."<sup>32</sup> For Fletcher, failure to accommodate is pastoral malpractice.

#### *Fletcher's Accommodated Ministry*

Ordained in 1757, Fletcher assisted John and Charles Wesley in preaching in the Methodist chapels in London when the occasion permitted it. In 1760, he became the Vicar of Madeley, a small village in Shropshire, England, where he served until his death in 1785. His ministry differed significantly from the itinerate ministry of the Wesley brothers as an

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<sup>29</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 7:15, emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 7:21.

<sup>31</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 7:94.

<sup>32</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 7:13.



each person in each category of parishioners should receive instruction in every sermon: “Now all these should find some spiritual food for their souls in every sermon...”<sup>38</sup>

## 2. Pastoral Care

Fletcher’s ministry extended far beyond the pulpit. His pastoral labours were unparalleled; they were, as Peter Forsaith indicated, “unexampled labours.”<sup>39</sup> In his biography of John Fletcher, Joseph Benson recorded the following (quoting from Gilpin’s notes) about Fletcher’s ministry:

Immediately upon his settling in this populous village, which was in the year 1760, he entered upon the duties of his vocation with an extraordinary degree of earnestness and zeal. He saw the difficulties of his situation, and the reproaches to which he should be exposed, by a conscientious discharge of the pastoral office: but, persuaded of the importance of his charge, and concerned for the welfare of his people, he set his face like a flint against all who might oppose the truth or grace of God. As a steward of the manifold grace of God, he faithfully dispensed the word of life according as every man had need; instructing the ignorant, reasoning with gainsayers, exhorting the immoral, and rebuking the obstinate. Instant in season and out of season, he diligently performed the work of an evangelist, and lost no opportunity of declaring the truths of the gospel. Not content with discharging the stated duties of the Sabbath, he counted that day as lost in which he was not actually employed in the service of the Church. As often as a small congregation could be collected, which was usually every evening, he joyfully proclaimed to them the acceptable year of the Lord, whether it were in the place set apart for public worship, in a private house, or in the open air.<sup>40</sup>

When it came to pastoral visitation and all his pastoral duties, Fletcher “was exemplary and indefatigable.”<sup>41</sup> Fletcher visited the sick, the poor, and the destitute. He entered the

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<sup>38</sup> John William Fletcher, sermon on Luke 15:7. Arthur Skevington Wood Archive Library, Cliff College, A/1/15. While all persons should be addressed in every sermon, Mary Fletcher insisted that an address made to persons in a higher category of spiritual development may not be understood by persons in a lower category: “It must be observed this sermon is address to sincere penitents – careless sinners have nothing to do with it nor will they understand the language. but sincere penitents fervent of the Light of a Brighter faith Frequently condemn themselves as having no work of God upon them; for that reason they are here invited to cast themselves just as they are on the Savior...” [Mary Fletcher, notes on a sermon. The Fletcher-Tooth Collection, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, 36, 6].

<sup>39</sup> John Fletcher, *“Unexampled Labours”: Letters of the Revd John Fletcher to Leaders in the Evangelical Revival*, ed. Peter S. Forsaith (Epworth, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Benson, *The Life of Rev. John W. de La Flechere Compiled from the Narrative of Rev. Mr. Wesley; the Biographical Notes of Rev. Mr. Gipin; from His Own Letters, and Other Authentic Documents Which Were Never Before Published* (Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 58–59.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Benson, *The Life of Rev. John W. de La Flechere Compiled from the Narrative of Rev. Mr. Wesley; the Biographical Notes of Rev. Mr. Gipin; from His Own Letters, and Other Authentic Documents Which Were Never Before Published* (Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 60.

alehouses and prisons. He became “all things to all people that by all means” he might save some (1 Cor. 9:22, ESV).

### 3. *Itinerate Parish Ministry*

From 1760 to 1785, Fletcher’s ministry was principally confined to the Madeley parish, excluding rare excursions and a period of convalescence. Though confined to the parish, his ministry took the contours of a Methodist ministry, itinerating within the local parish and establishing local societies.<sup>42</sup> Fletcher wrote a document entitled *The Nature and Rules of a Religious Society: Submitted to the Consideration of the Serious Inhabitants of the Parish of Madeley*, designed to guide the societies within the Madeley parish. Fletcher’s work differs from Wesley’s *General Rules of the United Societies* in that it provides biblical and theological grounding for the societies in the *Homilies* and the *Articles of Religion* of the Church of England.<sup>43</sup> Fletcher grounds his *Rules* in the local parish setting, distinguishing his societies from Wesley’s. Fletcher adopted the nature and principles of the Methodist societies from Wesley, but made adaptations for the local parish. Fletcher built, at his own expense, buildings in the parish to house the meetings of the societies and alternative or supplementary meetings to the parish church services. The tithe barn was built near the vicarage to house meetings in which Mrs. Mary Fletcher would exhort the congregants, since she would not have been permitted to preach in the parish church as a woman. Fletcher would often catechise members or preach a second service on Sunday afternoons following the morning services; parish members remained after the morning service and prepared meals on the grounds before attending the afternoon service.<sup>44</sup> Fletcher’s many innovations were evidence of his accommodations to the context and to the growth which the parish church experienced during his ministry.

### 4. *A Holy Condescension*

The accommodation of the minister to parishioners extends not only to preaching and pastoral care, but also to every aspect of the minister’s deportment. The source of the willingness to accommodate lies in the love of the pastor for the people: “Hence the charitable pastor cannot act otherwise than with a holy condescension toward all men, and especially toward the ignorant and poor, with whom the ministers of the present age will scarcely deign to converse....”<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the minister’s responsibility, Fletcher admonished the stronger believers in his congregation to consider their responsibility toward the weaker members of the parish. Not only are ministers to accommodate others, but the members of the parish must do so as well.

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<sup>42</sup> David R. Wilson, “Church and Chapel: Methodism as Church Extension,” in *Religion, Gender, and Industry: Exploring Church and Methodism in a Local Setting*, ed. Geordan Hammond and Peter S. Forsaith (Pickwick Publications, 2011), 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> Fletcher, John William. *The Nature and Rules of a Religious Society: Submitted to the Consideration of the Serious Inhabitants of the Parish of Madeley*. Edited by Melvill Horne. Pr. J. Edmunds, 1788. Melvill Horne, curate of the Madeley parish subsequent to Fletcher’s death, edited the document, added a prefatory epistle, and published posthumously Fletcher’s work.

<sup>44</sup> There is still evidence in the stone pillars in front of the Old Vicarage, where the parish members would sharpen their knives as they prepared meals between the morning and afternoon services.

<sup>45</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 6:293.

Fletcher pointed out that not all saints have experienced the same spiritual growth. After noting the marks of the weak, he offered some words of encouragement for them and their duties. Then he closed his discourse with admonitions on the responsibilities of the spiritually strong toward the spiritually weak.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, in *The Portrait of St. Paul* (1790), Fletcher pointed out that one of the advantages of the doctrine of dispensations is the ability to act redemptively toward other believers: “By the light of this doctrine, true worshippers, of every different class, may be taught to acknowledge and esteem one another, according to their different degrees of faith.”<sup>47</sup>

### *The Telos of Accommodation*

All of this talk about accommodation might make the reader think that the Methodist triumvirate was “soft on sin.” Nothing could be further from the truth! The theology and ministry of accommodation, for which the Methodist triumvirate advocated, did not alter the message of the Word of God. In his sermon “On Corrupting the Word,” Wesley asserted, “Let the hearers accommodate themselves to the word; the word is not, in this sense, to be accommodated to the hearers.”<sup>48</sup> In one place, Fletcher cautioned against over-accommodating: “Special care is, however, to be taken that this charitable condescension may never betray the interests of truth and virtue.”<sup>49</sup>

For the three influential Methodist theologians, accommodation—both divine and human—has a teleological focus; the focus of divine and human condescension is the restoration and perfection of humanity. For the Wesleys and Fletcher, accommodation is not softness but strategy. It aims for nothing less than full sanctification. In his September 15, 1789, letter to Robert Carr Brackenbury, John Wesley emphasized the importance of the doctrine of “full sanctification”: “This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appears to have raised us up.”<sup>50</sup> Harald Lindström underscores the centrality and teleological significance of the doctrine of Christian perfection in Wesley’s thought: “If the Christian life is regarded as a process towards the goal of perfection, the idea of perfection will be seen as a typical expression of the teleological alignment of his view of salvation.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> John William Fletcher, *Pocketbook of Sermons*. The Fletcher-Tooth Collection, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, 20.14, vol. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 7:47.

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, Edited by Albert C. Outler, vol. 4, *Sermons IV, 115-151* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

<sup>49</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 6:294.

<sup>50</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. Letters VII (1789-1791)*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Abingdon Press, 2024), 31:114.

<sup>51</sup> Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (Francis and Taylor, 1998), 126-127.

In his *Last Check*, the teleological orientation of Fletcher's thought is evident in his discussion of the various degrees of perfection. His thought evinces progress from a "Gentile's perfection" to a "Jew's perfection" to the "perfection of infant Christianity" to the "adult, perfect Christian" to "the perfection of disembodied spirits" to "the complete perfection of glorified saints."<sup>52</sup>

The Methodist triumvirate viewed sanctification as the *telos* of the Christian life, leading to a reimagining of Christian ministry as a formative or discipling process toward perfection or Christlikeness. As Randy Maddox points out, Wesley often used the word "tempers" in "a characteristic eighteenth-century sense of an enduring or habitual disposition of a person."<sup>53</sup> Wesley argues that real Christians are delivered from "evil tempers." He argues against the claim of the objectors, "a servant is not above his master," with the following words: "But his master was free from all sinful tempers. So therefore is his disciple, even every real Christian."<sup>54</sup> The sanctifying grace of God enables deliverance and transformation from evil habits, in part, through habituation. Methodist theologian Thomas C. Oden addresses the importance of habituating grace in a section of his systematic theology titled "Grace and Habit":

The Christian life is a continuing habituation in the reception of justifying grace. The will may move increasingly toward a sustained, habituated condition of receiving grace. What may have been a transient awareness at the first moment of receiving justifying grace gradually may become a more enduring, habituated condition, a more permanent state of free consent sustained by sanctifying grace through Word and Sacrament. It is this habit-shaping grace that is sometimes called sanctifying grace.

Sanctifying grace is viewed by medieval Scholastics as working through habituation by forming behavior into stable patterns of responsiveness in the way of holiness so as to reflect the divine sonship. This habituation is enabled by the Spirit through Word and Sacrament, and cannot be acquired simply or naturally by practice.<sup>55</sup>

Accommodation is not merely pedagogical. It is eschatological: it serves the progressive restoration of the image of God. Such perfection was achieved through the habituation of sanctifying grace through the Early Methodist class meetings and other communal practices of discipleship and service. Perfection is cultivated through disciplined participation in the means of grace.

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<sup>52</sup> Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher*, 5:463-464.

<sup>53</sup> Randy L Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Kingswood Books, 1994), 69.

<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley. Sermons II, 34-70*, ed. Albert Cook Outler (Abingdon Press, 1985), 2:117-18.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology, Vol. III* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 219-220.

### *Practical Implications for Ministry Practice*

The Methodist triumvirate's accommodations were to their context and historical period. The doctrine and practice of accommodation in the theology of the Methodist triumvirate provide a foundation for a solid theology of missions and ministry and offer many practical lessons for ministry. The lessons will only be summarised here.

#### 1. *Love of God*

First, the controlling norm of early Methodist theology, the love of God, provides the compulsion for ministry and missionary service. If God, through divine loving providence and watch care over all creation by which God, for example, sends rain on the just and the unjust so loves every creature to the extent that God attempts to compass the salvation of every human being, should not this demonstration of divine love serve as a model for the missionary's compulsion to reach the world for Christ? One of the greatest evangelistic and missionary thrusts occurred during the Methodist revival, in part due to the compulsion of the love of God. As Jesus sent out his disciples (Matt. 10) when moved with compassion for the lost (Matt. 9:35f.), so today's ministers must go out with compassion for lost people.

#### 2. *Incarnational Principle*

The primary doctrine of Fletcher's theological system is the doctrine of accommodation, which surfaced, in part, from early Methodist Christology. Christ accommodated himself to human nature by condescending to human form and incarnating human flesh. With good reason, the concept of incarnational ministry has been emphasised in missiological studies.<sup>56</sup> As modelled in the Incarnation, missionaries must condescend, that is, humble themselves to learn from and incarnate the second culture. Missionaries and ministers must be willing to adapt the message to the culture to gain a hearing for the gospel.

#### 3. *Regard for Other Cultures*

The early Methodist practice of accommodation commends an accommodated ministry to other cultures. Missionaries entering new geographical areas, tribes, or cultures must likewise learn to provide due regard to the intended audience's understanding, limitations, and culture, and to give adequate time to study and learn the culture to communicate effectively. They will

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<sup>56</sup> Books which reflect the emphasis at least in their titles, if not in content, include the following: Hiebert, Paul G., and Eloise Hiebert Meneses. *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1995. Lingenfelter, Judith E., and G. Lingenfelter Sherwood. *Teaching Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Learning and Teaching*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003. Lingenfelter, Sherwood G., and K. Mayers Marvin. *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*. second edition. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003. Erickson, M. J. *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1991. Kuruvilla, K. P. *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*. Delhi: ISPCK, 2002. Ratendas, C. *Incarnation and Contextual Communication*. Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithy, 2000.

seek redemptive analogies, those elements of the culture which anticipate the gospel, in order to communicate the gospel more effectively.<sup>57</sup>

Missionaries will give appropriate consideration and regard to the audience, recognising that God is the creator of all peoples. As Scott Moreau states, “That God is the creator of the universe establishes his concern for the people he creates. That concern is not limited by racial, political, gender, economic, or religious boundaries. Wherever one goes in the world, God is already there. He is intimately interested in every person in the world right from the start, and that interest does not change over time. Because of this intense interest in every person, God is in the process of making himself known long before missionaries arrive on the scene.”<sup>58</sup> Missionaries will learn to value other cultures, and the doctrine of accommodation provides an adequate theological foundation for valuing them.

#### 4. *Chronological Approach*

Fletcher’s emphasis on the noetic order of revelation is significant for missionary practice. When missionaries enter a second culture, they should give due regard to the people’s understanding and the steps in the progress of biblical revelation that lead people to an adequate understanding of God. For several years, New Tribes Missions has stressed the chronological approach to teaching the Bible, which seems consistent with Fletcher’s emphasis on the noetic order of revelation.

#### *Conclusion*

The early Methodist triumvirate sought consistently for a middle way between points of view in the Christian faith. In their view, the theology/practice of accommodation and the doctrine of perfection must be held in balance. While ministers of the gospel must accommodate their ministry to contextual realities, the goal of ministry in the Wesleyan spirit is to present everyone perfect in Christ (Eph. 4:12).

The nexus of accommodation and perfection provides a vital theological framework for global mission and ministry today. In a diverse and rapidly changing world, the Church of the Nazarene must embody holy condescension—not diluting the gospel, but translating it in love; not lowering the vision of holiness, but establishing communities capable of pursuing it.

Our ministry must, therefore, reflect divine accommodation in at least three ways:

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<sup>57</sup> Charles R. Gailey and Howard Culbertson, *Discovering Missions* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2007), 226. The idea of redemptive analogies has been touted by Don Richardson. See for example his contribution in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, “Redemptive Analogy.” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Don Richardson (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 397-403..

<sup>58</sup> A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Series*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 28.

- *Contextual Love*: Mission is driven not by strategy but by compassion. We stoop because God stooped.
- *Formative Community*: Holiness is not delivered through content alone but through communal habituation of grace.
- *Ministerial Wisdom*: Ministers must discern the stages of spiritual development and tailor the means of grace accordingly.

Accommodation without perfection fails to transform. Perfection without accommodation fails to communicate. The Wesleyan tradition insists upon their union: sanctifying grace, communicated with discernment, habituated in community, and ordered toward holy love. This is not merely Methodist heritage; it is a missional imperative.

For the Church of the Nazarene, as a steward of the doctrine of entire sanctification, the call remains clear: to form holy people by loving condescension, ecclesial discipline, and the Spirit's transforming power. In such a union, sanctifying grace continues to shape a global holiness movement capable of bearing faithful witness to God's holy love in every culture and every generation.

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