

## JOSEPH BENSON'S INITIAL LETTER TO JOHN WESLEY CONCERNING SPIRIT BAPTISM AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

by

Randy L. Maddox and J. Russell Frazier

John Wesley met in conference with the preachers in his connexion in August, 1770. The publication of the *Minutes* of this conference sparked a vigorous debate between Wesleyan and Calvinist Methodists. In a concluding section of these *Minutes*, Wesley and his associates reiterated the claim (originally made in 1744) that they had leaned too much toward Calvinism. To counter this, they insisted that a believer's faithful response and works (in some sense) are a condition of final salvation.<sup>1</sup> The Calvinist Methodists (particularly those in connection with Lady Huntingdon) charged that these *Minutes* revealed the true colors of the Wesleys—as enemies of grace.<sup>2</sup> Among those who sought to defend Wesley on this point, insisting that he grounded salvation firmly in grace, were Joseph Benson, currently the head master at Lady Huntingdon's college in Trevecca, and John Fletcher, the college's president.<sup>3</sup> Their alignment with Wesley led to Benson's dismissal from the college in early January 1771, and Fletcher's resignation that March.<sup>4</sup>

### The Benson-Fletcher Proposal

Intriguingly, during this same period Benson and Fletcher began to champion a particular theological account of Christian perfection that

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<sup>1</sup>The disputed section of the 1770 Conference *Minutes* is found at the end, in the answer to Question 28; see Richard Heitzenrater (ed.), *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 392–394.

<sup>2</sup>Note the accusation of Lady Huntingdon recorded in Wesley's letter to John Fletcher (March 22, 1771), in John Telford (ed.), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1931), 5:231.

<sup>3</sup>Benson's stance and the tensions it was creating are evident already in Wesley's letter to him on October 5, 1770 (Telford, *Letters*, 5:202–204). In 1771 John Fletcher published his formal *Vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Last Minutes* (Bristol: W. Pine).

<sup>4</sup>Alan Harding, *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 262–265.

became the focus of some disagreement between them and John Wesley. This account suggested that our initial conversion may be attended by a witness of the Spirit to our gracious justification, but that the newly justified do not receive at that point the full “baptism” or “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit;<sup>5</sup> the full baptism of the Spirit is instead a distinct second work of God’s grace that initiates Christian perfection. One of the factors that drew Benson and Fletcher to this account was that it highlighted God’s initiative and empowerment in sanctification, which they hoped would ease Calvinist worries that Wesleyan emphasis on Christian perfection amounted to works righteousness. It also allowed them to encourage students at Trevecca to seek Christian perfection without appeal to Wesley (which would violate the non-partisan stance of the college) or to disputed biblical texts on perfection, casting it instead in terms of the centrality of the Spirit to the Christian dispensation. Without disputing these possible benefits, Wesley’s initial response to the Benson/Fletcher proposal rejected the separation of regeneration (through the indwelling of the Spirit) from justification. He worried that it either expected obedience from the newly justified *apart from empowering grace*, or left new Christians with little expectation of growing *in grace* until they received the *full* baptism in some subsequent event.<sup>6</sup>

This early dialogue between Wesley and Benson/Fletcher over Spirit baptism and Christian perfection was brought to modern scholarly attention by Donald Dayton in the mid 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Robert Fraser soon provided a more detailed account, including a manuscript that he located in Wesley’s hand providing comments on an apparent extended presentation (around forty pages in length) of the Benson/Fletcher proposal.<sup>8</sup> More recent studies have added a few details to the interchange, while debating at

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<sup>5</sup>For emphasis specifically on the *full* or *complete* baptism, particularly in Fletcher, see J. Russell Frazier, “The Doctrine of Dispensations in the Thought of John William Fletcher (1729–85)” (University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2011), 224, 265.

<sup>6</sup>See Wesley’s letter to Benson on December 28, 1770 (Telford, *Letters*, 5:215).

<sup>7</sup>Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press, 1987), 48–51 (the published form of his 1983 dissertation by the same title).

<sup>8</sup>M. Robert Fraser, “Strains in the Understandings of Christian Perfection in Early British Methodism” (Vanderbilt University Ph.D. thesis, 1988), 355–69, 490–492.

some length whether Wesley came to endorse the connection of the baptism of the Spirit to the initiation of Christian perfection.<sup>9</sup>

Our present purpose is not to rehearse the recent debate over this topic, but to report on two discoveries that combine to fill in an initial gap in the story. The first clear mention by John Wesley of the suggested linking of baptism of the Spirit with Christian perfection is in a letter that he wrote to Joseph Benson dated December 28, 1770. After describing entire sanctification, Wesley says, "If they like to call this 'receiving the Holy Ghost,' they may; only the phrase in that sense is not scriptural and not quite proper, for they all 'received the Holy Ghost' when they were justified. . . . O Joseph, keep close to the Bible both as to sentiment and expression!"<sup>10</sup>

### Two Recently Located Documents

To what was Wesley responding with this exhortation? Both Dayton and Fraser mention looking for a relevant letter or document from Benson, but failing to locate it.<sup>11</sup> To fill this lacuna, Lawrence Wood suggests that Wesley was responding to a communication from Benson that included the (now lost) extended presentation on which Wesley made critical com-

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<sup>9</sup>The one who has explored this topic most fully, and argued most strongly for Wesley's endorsement of Fletcher's model, is Lawrence W. Wood. See particularly his early essay "Pentecostal Salvation in John Wesley and Early Methodism," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34.1 (1999): 24–63; and his extended treatment in *The Meaning of Pentecost in Early Methodism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002). The first extended reply to Wood was Randy L. Maddox, "Wesley's Understanding of Christian Perfection: In What Sense Pentecostal?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34.2 (1999): 78–110 (followed by Wood's rebuttal, pp. 11–35). These two engaged further in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36.1 (2001): 256–259. Wood and Donald Dayton carried on running dialogue in the journal *Pneuma* between 2004 to 2006. And most recently Kenneth J. Collins raised questions about Wood's position in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44.2 (2009): 7–39; answered by Wood in 45.1 (2010): 259–267. See also the chart of this debate in Frazier, "Doctrine of Dispensations," 474.

<sup>10</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 5:214–215. Scholars should bear in mind that the original manuscript of this letter has not been located; we know it only in the form that Joseph Benson himself (as editor) included it in the second edition of *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Cordeux, 1813), 16:277–279. From other instances where the manuscript does survive, we know that Benson occasionally abridged material without indicating that he had done so.

<sup>11</sup>See Dayton, *Theological Roots*, 59 n72; and Fraser, "Strains," 361 n51.

ments in the manuscript discovered by Fraser.<sup>12</sup> But if this were the case, one must wonder why so few of Wesley's critical comments in the manuscript appear in his December 28 letter to Benson.<sup>13</sup>

Two documents have been located recently that fill in this gap in the earliest stage of the dialogue between Benson and Wesley. Neither of these is the exact letter that Benson sent to Wesley, drawing his December 28 response; but they are very closely related. The first is a letter (located by Randy Maddox) from Joseph Benson to Alexander Mather, dated December 20, 1770, in which Benson includes a lengthy abridgment of the letter he had "lately sent" to Wesley. The content of this abridgment helped identify a second, longer, undated manuscript (located by Russell Frazier) as a draft of material that went into the letter sent to Wesley. Transcriptions of these two documents are given below, following general practices in the Wesley Works project: all contractions are expanded, material that is underlined (to show emphasis) is rendered in *italics*, and modern rules of capitalization and punctuation are adopted.

The transcription of the longer draft includes two significant editorial additions. The first addition reflects the incomplete nature of the manuscript. It was written on loose leaves of paper and comparison makes clear that one leaf (containing potentially two pages of text) is missing. We have inserted (in inset format) the text of the abridged letter that covers these missing pages, noting where the original text breaks off and takes up again. This demonstrates the flow of the remaining pages of the draft, but readers should bear in mind that the draft likely included some additional material. As a second editorial addition, we have underlined sections of the draft that do *not* appear in the abridged form of Benson's letter to Mather (recall that any underlining in the draft itself has been changed to *italics*).

Close comparison of the longer draft with the abridged version not only reveals missing material, but places where alternative words or phrasing have been adopted. We have not tried to annotate these occurrences, but there are enough instances to suggest that Benson did further

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<sup>12</sup>See Wood, "Pentecostal Salvation," 33; *Meaning of Pentecost*, 35–36.

<sup>13</sup>For a transcription of the manuscript, see Maddox, "Wesley's Understanding," 109–110.

polishing of the draft in the formal letter he sent to Wesley. The *draft* nature of the manuscript is also indicated by significant variation in the ink quality between some sections and the presence of open spaces on some pages—to allow potential expansion. Thus, in our judgment the longer document is not Benson’s transcription (for his records) of the actual letter that he sent to John Wesley but an initial draft from which he drew in preparing that letter.

To put an edge on this point, we do not believe that *everything* in the draft letter was included in the letter actually sent to Wesley. Comparison with Benson’s self-described “extract” of the letter he sent Wesley is again revealing. At several points through the extract he includes a long dash, a very common way of indicating elisions in the eighteenth century. Most of the occurrences of such dashes correspond to sections of the longer draft that are not present in the extract. A few seem to indicate only a pause (in both manuscripts). But the crucial point is that there are also sections of the longer draft missing from the extract where Benson gives no indication of elision in his extract. Barring further evidence, it is impossible to tell if these sections were elided already in the form of the letter sent to Wesley.

### **A Clearer Sense of Benson to Wesley**

The preceding qualifications allowed, when these two sources are consulted together, a fairly clear sense can be gained of the letter that Benson sent to Wesley, about December 15, 1770, that drew Wesley’s response of December 28. For example, Benson’s self-disclosing comments in the opening two paragraphs of the longer draft (much abridged in his extract) help explain why Wesley’s response opens: “What a blessing we can speak freely to each other without either disguise or reserve.” Similarly, Benson’s confession in the draft that “it was often suggested to my mind ‘I have not the Spirit!’” and his concluding mention of expecting the experience that “will make me a Christian” cast light on Wesley’s strong assurance, “You are a child of God.” Finally, Benson’s appeal to Wesley’s 1741 sermon *Christian Perfection*, adds significance to Wesley’s recommendation that Benson read the later sermons *On Sin in Believers* and *The Repentance of Believers*, which were written as implicit qualifications of some of the claims in *Christian Perfection*.

**Joseph Benson to Alexander Mather  
(including an abridgment of his letter to John Wesley)<sup>14</sup>**

[Trevecca] College  
December 20, 1770

Dear sir,

I make no apology for troubling you with an hasty extract from<sup>15</sup> a letter I lately sent to Mr. Wesley. The importance of the subject appears to me a sufficient apology. I beg you will give it a candid and attentive perusal and offer it to the consideration of your friends, and let me have your observations as soon as possible.

Reverend and much honored sir,

Ever since I enjoyed a sense of the pardoning love of God, I have been convinced of the *possibility*<sup>16</sup> and indeed *necessity* of experiencing something *vastly superior* to anything I had possessed. This I was led to expect chiefly, I suppose, from a consideration of what you urged respecting the doctrine of Christian Perfection. It appeared clear beyond dispute *such a state* was promised in Scripture. Your arguments in many respects seemed *quite conclusive*. . . .<sup>17</sup> I felt moreover a want in my heart. I had not *rest*. I was not *happy*, unless *now* and *then* when the Lord gave me some manifestations of his love. Under this notion then I have continued *coldly* to seek it. Till of late, from a train of circumstances too tedious to mention,<sup>18</sup> the following propositions appeared with *great evidence to my mind*, and the more I search the Scripture the more I am convinced of them. I

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<sup>14</sup>This manuscript letter is held by the Manuscript and Rare Books Library, Emory University, in Wesleyana Collection, Box 1, Folder 1. The transcription is published with the permission of Emory.

<sup>15</sup>Ori., ‘*copy of*’ changed to “extract from.”

<sup>16</sup>All instances of underlining in the text of the manuscript have been rendered in italics. They are in the same ink as the text, and almost certainly drawn by Benson to show emphasis.

<sup>17</sup>Benson frequently uses a long dash in the manuscript. It is clear in many instances that this marks an elision. The dash has been rendered as an elision mark (. . .) whenever comparison with the longer text, or with original Scripture quotations, makes clear that this is the meaning.

<sup>18</sup>The longer set of draft notes highlight the role played by Benson’s reading of John Wesley’s sermon *Christian Perfection* (1741).

earnestly entreat you to give them an unprejudiced and serious consideration, which their *importance* certainly deserves.

1. A person may believe on Christ for the remission of sins and yet not have received in the *proper sense, the Holy Ghost*.
2. The receiving the Holy Ghost is that *great privilege of the new covenant* which *distinguishes it from*, and renders it *vastly superior* to, the *old*.

[1.] The second proposition appears plain from these among a variety of other passages of sacred writ. (Instead of transcribing all I must beg leave to refer you to some which I desire you to turn to.)

Joel 2:28ff, “I will pour out *my Spirit* upon all flesh. . . .”<sup>19</sup> This Peter declares to be the *standing privilege* of the Christian dispensation, though it did not commence till the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). This is plain from the following texts.

John 7:38[–39], “He that believeth on me, as the Scripture saith, out of his belly shall *flow rivers of living water*. This he spake of the Spirit which they who believed on him were *afterwards* to receive (εμελλον λαμβειν). For the Holy Ghost was *not yet given*, because Jesus was *not yet glorified*.”

John 14:15ff, “If ye love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father and he shall give you another comforter to *abide with you for ever*, even the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive . . . but ye know him, for he *abideth with you* and *shall be in you*. . . . In that day ye shall know that *I am in my Father and you in me and I in you*. . . . If a man love me, he will keep my word, and . . . we will *come* unto him and make *our abode* with him. . . . He shall teach you *all things and bring all things to your remembrance*.”

[John] 16:7, “It is expedient for you that *I go away*, if not the *Comforter will not come*. . . . I will send him.”

1 Pet. 1:9[ff], “. . . of which salvation the prophets . . . searched diligently, searching what time the Spirit did signify when he testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ and the *glory which should follow*. To whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us, they ministered the things

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<sup>19</sup>Benson typically does not insert quotation marks around his direct quotations of Scripture. They have been added for clarity.

declared unto you, by them who preached the gospel unto you which *the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.*"

Matt. 11:11, "Amongst those born of a woman there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist, yet the *least* in the Kingdom of God is *greater than he.*"

Luke 9:27, "There be some . . . who shall not taste of death till they shall see the Kingdom of God come with power."

See also Ps. 68:18, 2 Tim. 1:10, Gal. 4:12,<sup>20</sup> Heb. 8:10–11.<sup>21</sup>

2. It will also appear that the first is true from hence. —<sup>22</sup> (I would not be understood as asserting the Holy Spirit does not work repentance, etc.; or that he does not enlighten men's minds and give manifestations of himself. This he may do without taking up his *residence in the heart*. This we may have, without being *baptized with the Holy Spirit*, without receiving *the Holy Ghost*.)

1) It cannot be denied but that many of the *Jews* had remission of sins, the favour of God, and his love shed abroad in their hearts. See Exod. 34:6, Ps. 32, Isa. 1 and 18. Indeed, almost all the Psalms breathe a spirit of love and joy in a pardoning God. John the Baptist preached repentance and remission of sins (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3). Luke 1:77, "To prepare the way of the Lord, *by giving the knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins.*" Our Lord while upon earth forgave the sins of many whose diseases he healed (as Matt. 9:2–6, Luke 7:48–49). — But the Holy Ghost was not given till after Christ's exaltation, it follows the *Holy Ghost given* is different from the *pardon of sins*, etc.; *this* may be where *that* is not.<sup>23</sup>

2) Many texts speak of them as *distinct things*.

As Acts 2:38, ". . . be baptized for the *remission of sins* and ye *shall* receive the *gift of the Holy Spirit*. . . . The promise is . . . to as many as the Lord shall call."

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<sup>20</sup>The reference is clear in the manuscript, but does not appear to be on topic.

<sup>21</sup>Orig., 'Heb. 8:20–21'; a mistake.

<sup>22</sup>This and several following dashes may indicate elisions from Benson's longer letter to Wesley; this cannot be confirmed because the relevant pages of draft letter are missing.

<sup>23</sup>This distinction and temporal separation of justification from regeneration is at the heart of Benson's proposal, and specifically rejected by Wesley in his reply; Telford, *Letters*, 5:215.

Acts 8, the Samaritans believed Philip preaching concerning the Kingdom of God, but did not receive the Holy Spirit till Peter and John went and prayed with them.

Acts 19:2, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?"

Eph. 1:13–14, "In whom *having believed* (πιστευσαντες) ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise which is the earnest of your inheritance."

Acts 3:19ff, "Be converted, *for the blotting out of your sins* (οπως αν ελθωσιν), *that the times of refreshing may come* from the presence of the Lord" (which must mean the Holy Ghost).

Luke 3:3, "John came preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"; and in the 16<sup>th</sup> verse says, "one mightier than I cometh [. . .] he shall baptize you with the *Holy Spirit and fire*."

See Matt. 3:12; Titus 3:5–6.

3) From experience: (1) negatively, — who of us can with *justness* and *propriety* apply to himself the above mentioned texts of Scripture, taking them in their *plain, obvious, literal* sense, undisguised by the false *glosses of men*? And many more, such as,

John 17:20[–23], "Neither pray I for these alone, but for all that shall believe on me through their word . . . that they all may be one. As thou Father art *in me*, and *I in thee*, that they also may be *one in us*. . . . The glory thou hast given one I have given them that they may be one, as we are one. *I in them and thou in me*, and they may be perfected in *one*. . . ."

Rom. 8, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *hath made me free from the law of sin and death*. . . . As many as are *led by the Spirit of God* are the sons of God. Ye are in the Spirit *if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you*. . . . The Spirit itself *beareth witness* with our spirit that we are the sons of God. . . . He maketh intercession for us with *unutterable groanings*." See the whole chapter.

"Eye hath not seen . . . the things God hath prepared for them that love him, but he *hath* revealed them to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searcheth all things, the *deep things of God*. . . . The spiritual man *discerneth all things*, yet he himself is discerned of no man" (1 Cor. 2[:9–15]).

2 Tim. 1:14, "The Holy Ghost *dwelleth in us*."

1 John 2:20[-27], “Ye have an *unction* from the Holy One, and ye *know all things*. . . . The unction *abideth in you*.”

2 Cor. 1:22, “Who hath also sealed us, and given us the earnest of the Spirit.”

[Gal. 2:20,] “I *live not*, but Christ *liveth in me*.”

1 John 4:13, “We know *we dwell in him and he in us*, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

Eph. 4:30, Gal. 4:6, 1 Cor. 3:16, Acts 1:4–6, etc.

<sup>24</sup><(2) Pos>itively, you have known many of the children of God who after re<joicing> in <a sen>se of pardon, etc., have been convinced of the *necessity of something m<ore*, which> they earnestly sought, and after *such discoveries of their hearts* as they had not before <had any> idea of, after going through a *dreadful <scene> of temptations of various kinds*, the Lord showed faithful to his word, came *suddenly* to his *temple*. This with one voice they declare to be *very different from* and superior to what they experienced in consequence of pardon.

[3.] This will ascertain the meaning of those scriptures which speak of the kingdom of God. — John the Baptist and our Lord, while upon earth, always declared “the kingdom *is at hand*.” They never speak of it as actually commenced, till at the day of Pentecost. In the meantime people are directed to prepare and wait for the reception of it by repentance and believing the gospel, whereby they received remission of sins and a degree of peace and joy in believing. And is not this all that the generality now look for? Are they any more <than John’s> disciples? What have they which the Jews had not? John had not? [This is] a plain proof they know nothing of the kingdom of God (Matt. 11:11). No wonder persons do not grow in grace. They miss the mark. We cannot grow but by having an *indwelling God*.

[4.] This accounts *scripturally and reasonably* for what you have called the “second gift,” etc. And on *these principles*, the *expediency and necessity* of it may (I will venture for it) be fully *evinced*. . . . This has thrown a *surprising light* upon a variety of

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<sup>24</sup>Small portions of the manuscript have disintegrated starting at this point. The portions shown in <brackets> are reconstructed, drawing on the longer draft version.

passages in Scripture which I could never understand before, so that it appears like a *new book*. I am fully convinced I have hitherto been only one of *John's disciples*. I have hitherto known nothing of the *grand characteristic and distinguishing privilege of the gospel dispensation*. And yet have *spoke as [if] in!* . . . Glory be to God, for the hope to glory <he> hath opened to my view, which I trust to possess.

Adieu. I am, etc.

Will you be so kind as to offer this, with my best wishes, to the consideration of Mr. Charles Wesley, Mr. Jones,<sup>25</sup> Mr. [John] Whitehead, Mr. [William] Hitchens, Mr. [James] Rouquet, Mr. Southcote,<sup>26</sup> and our friends at Kingswood, and anybody else you may think proper. I must own I am fully persuaded of the truth of this doctrine, and that no one is partaker of the kingdom of God till he is born not only of water (baptized for the remission of sins) but *of the Spirit* (baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire). — Then it is true, “if any man is in Christ he is a *new creature*; *old things are done away, behold all things are become new.*”<sup>27</sup> — And also, he that is thus born of God *sinneth not*, “because his seed remaineth in him, and he *cannot sin.*”<sup>28</sup> — Then is he “kept by the *power of God through faith unto salvation.*”<sup>29</sup>

Write soon, as convenient. I am, dear sir,

Yours very affectionately, J. Benson

[P.S.] Be so kind to acquaint me how they all go on at Kingswood. How do the boys do which came with me? — Are they contented and do they learn well? How many ministers in this our day are like Apollos, “teaching diligently the *things of Jesus*—knowing only the *baptism of John*”!<sup>30</sup>

Addressed: “To Mr. Alex[ander] Mather / At the New-Room, Horse Fare / Bristol”

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<sup>25</sup>Likely John Jones (1711–85).

<sup>26</sup>J. Southcote; see his letter to John Wesley (Jan. 9, 1772), *Arminian Magazine* 8 (1785): 114.

<sup>27</sup>2 Cor. 5:17.

<sup>28</sup>1 John 3:9.

<sup>29</sup>1 Pet. 1:5.

<sup>30</sup>Acts 18:25.

### Joseph Benson's Draft of His Letter to John Wesley<sup>31</sup>

[Dec. 1770]

Reverend sir,

Ever since I enjoyed a sense of the pardoning love of God, I have been convinced of the possibility and indeed necessity of experiencing something vastly superior to anything I had possessed. This I was led to expect chiefly, I suppose, from a consideration of what you urged respecting the doctrine of Christian Perfection. It appeared clear beyond dispute that such a state was promised in Scripture. Your arguments in many places seemed quite conclusive. I saw I might as well deny the Bible as deny it to be attainable.<sup>32</sup> Besides I felt a want in my heart. I had not rest. I was not happy, unless now and then when I had manifestations of God's love. But I could not in every point adopt your doctrine itself, any more than the means of attaining it. Sanctification appeared in Scripture a gradual work and perfection a point we were exhorted continually to aim at and endeavour after—and that in whatever state of grace we were, and to which none of the scriptural saints profess to have attained (Heb. 6:1; and Phil. 3:10). On the contrary, the instances you introduced received what they had experienced instantaneously. This confounded me. As did your brother's preaching and that of many others who spoke very differently on that point.

About a year ago it was often suggested to my mind "I have not the Spirit!" The reason was my experience did by no means answer the plain texts of Scripture which described the state of those who were possessed of it. I was therefore led frequently to pray "Lord give me thy Spirit." I found my heart particularly drawn out when meditating upon those words, "How much more shall my Father give his Holy Spirit, etc." When I went to Oxford last, I had fully purposed to devote all my time and attention to this and wait for it. But I found employment of another kind prepared for me. I returned to the college [Trevacca] with the same purpose. When I got home I found all things apparently in a strange situation. Mr. Fletcher had been very close with the students and insisted upon

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<sup>31</sup>This manuscript is held in The Methodist Archive and Research Centre, The John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester, PLP 7/12/8. The transcription is published with permission of the University Librarian.

<sup>32</sup>The underlining in this transcription indicates material that is not reproduced in the extract given above.

it [that] neither himself nor they were believers. This had almost disposed some to leave the college. These were hard sayings. Others acknowledged they had only the *drawings* of the Father. My Lady [Huntingdon] asserted no one in the college *knew the Lord*. Most of them had experienced very clearly the pardon of sin. This they stood to. I was distressed what to do. My sentiments (which I told Mr. Fletcher) [were that] there was weak as well as strong faith; that we might have the former, though not the latter. With regard to myself, I said I <had received<sup>33</sup>> a degree of faith, but at the same time was satisfied my faith could by no means bear the test of many passages in Scripture. Thus we continued. I was sometimes even tempted to give up all religion, and inclined to think it was all imagination. I knew however God would hear prayer; here I fixed and cried, "I know nothing, but would not oppose the truth. Lord, teach me!" In this disposition I was till last Saturday morning, when I was considering the subject and took up your sermon on Christian Perfection, and reading that part which respects the privileges of Christians as superior to Jews,<sup>34</sup> when the following truths appeared in great evidence to my mind, and the more I search the Scripture the more I am convinced of them. I earnestly entreat you to give them an unprejudiced and candid consideration, which their importance certainly deserves. For my part, I know nothing in earth or heaven any way comparable to them. I again beseech you, do not hastily decide. Consider them again and again. Every well-disposed soul to whom I have propounded them falls in with them at once.

1. A person may believe on Christ for the remission of sins and yet not have *received in the proper sense, the Holy Ghost*.
2. The receiving the Holy Ghost is that great privilege of the new covenant which distinguishes it from and renders it vastly superior to the old.

[1.] The second proposition appears plain from these among a variety of other scriptures.

Joel 2:28–29, "And it shall come to pass afterwards, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall proph-

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<sup>33</sup>The top left edge of this page is missing. This is a reconstruction of the likely text.

<sup>34</sup>I.e., John Wesley, Sermon 40, *Christian Perfection* (1741), II.7–8, *Works*, 2:107–8.

esy” (speak to edification) [. . .] “and also upon my servants [. . .] will I pour out my spirit” in those days.<sup>35</sup> This St. Peter declares to be the standing privilege of the gospel dispensation, though it did not commence till the day of Pentecost. This is plain from the following texts.

John 7:38[-39], “He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. This he spake of the Spirit which they who believed on him *εμελλον λαμβνειν οι πιστευσαντες εις αυτον· ουπω γαρ ην πνευμα αγιαν οτι Ιησους ουδεπω εδοξασθη.*”<sup>36</sup>

John 14:15ff, “If ye love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you forever, even the spirit of truth which the world cannot receive because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him, but ye know him, for he *abideth with you*” (this he did already) “and shall be in you. I will not leave you orphans. I come unto you. In that day ye shall know that *I am in the Father and you in me and I in you*. He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father. And I will love him and manifest myself to him. If any man love me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode with him. [. . .] He shall teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance.”

[John] 16:7, “It is expedient for you that I go away, if I go not away the Comforter<sup>37</sup> will not come. . . . I will send him.”

1 Pet. 1:9[ff], “. . . of which salvation the prophets . . . searched diligently, searching what time the Spirit did signify when he testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ and the *glory which should follow*. To whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us, they ministered the things declared unto you, by them who preached the gospel unto you which *the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.*”

Matt. 11:11, “Amongst those born of a woman there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist, yet the *least* in the Kingdom of God is *greater than he.*”

Luke 9:27, “There be some . . . who shall not taste of death till they shall see the Kingdom of God come with power.”

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<sup>35</sup>Benson typically does not insert quotation marks around his direct quotations of Scripture. They have been added here for clarity.

<sup>36</sup>“ . . . were afterwards to receive. For the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

<sup>37</sup>Page 2 of the draft letter ends here. Page 3 is missing; the abridged form in Benson’s letter to Mather is shown, indented. Italics in the abridged form are retained here, though they certainly would have been less prevalent in the draft.

See also Ps. 68:18, 2 Tim. 1:10, Gal. 4:12, Heb. 8:10–11.

2. It will also appear that the first is true from hence. — (I would not be understood as asserting the Holy Spirit does not work repentance, etc.; or that he does not enlighten men's minds and give manifestations of himself. This he may do without taking up his *residence in the heart*. This we may have, without being *baptized with the Holy Spirit*, without receiving *the Holy Ghost*.)

1) It cannot be denied but that many of the *Jews* had remission of sins, the favour of God, and his love shed abroad in their hearts. See Exod. 34:6, Ps. 32, Isa. 1 and 18. Indeed, almost all the Psalms breathe a spirit of love and joy in a pardoning God. John the Baptist preached repentance and remission of sins (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3). Luke 1:77, "To prepare the way of the Lord, *by giving the knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins*." Our Lord while upon earth forgave the sins of many whose diseases he healed (as Matt. 9:2–6, Luke 7:48–49). — But the Holy Ghost was not given till after Christ's exaltation, it follows the *Holy Ghost given* is different from the *pardon* of sins, etc.; *this* may be where *that* is not.

2) Many texts speak of them as *distinct things*.

As Acts 2:38, ". . . be baptized for the *remission of sins* and ye shall receive the *gift of the Holy Spirit*. . . . The promise is . . . to as many as the Lord shall call."

Acts 8, the Samaritans believed Philip preaching concerning the Kingdom of God, but did not receive the Holy Spirit till Peter and John went and prayed with them.

Acts 19:2, "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?"

Eph. 1:13–14, "In whom *having believed* (πιστευσαντες) ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise which is the earnest of your inheritance."

Acts 3:19ff, "Be converted, *for the blotting out of your sins* (οπως αν ελθωσιν), *that* the times of refreshing *may come* from the presence of the Lord" (which must mean the Holy Ghost).

Luke 3:3, "John came preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"; and in the 16<sup>th</sup> verse says, "one mightier than I cometh [. . .] he shall baptize you with the *Holy Spirit and fire*."

See Matt. 3:12; Titus 3:5–6.

3) From experience: (1) negatively, — who of us can with *justness* and *propriety* apply to himself the above mentioned texts of Scripture,

taking them in their *plain, obvious, literal* sense, undisguised by the false *glosses of men*? And many more, such as<sup>38</sup>

[John 14:20,] “In that day ye shall know that I am in the Father and you in me and I in you.”

John 17:20[–23], “Neither pray I for these alone, but for all that shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one. [...] I in them and thou in me.”

Rom. 8:2[ff], “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath freed me from the law of sin and death.” [ver.] 9, “But ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit; if the Spirit of God dwell in you. And if any have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” [ver.] 14–16, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the Spirit of bondage again unto fear, but ye have received the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The same Spirit beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.” [ver. 26, “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities, for we know not [what] we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered.”

1 Cor. 2:9–10, and to the end of the chapter.<sup>39</sup>

1 Tim. 1:14, “And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”

1 John 2:20[–27], “Ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and know all things.”

1 Cor. 3:16, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwelleth in you.”

2 Cor. 1:22, “Who hath sealed us, and given us the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.”

Eph. 4:30.

The whole of St. John’s first epistle, especially the fifth chapter.

(2) Positively, some of the children of God whom I have known and many you have known, after having long rejoicing in the privilege of remission of sins, were convinced of the necessity and of receiving some-

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<sup>38</sup>The surviving leaves of the draft letter pick up again at this point.

<sup>39</sup>Quoted in abridged form: “Eye hath not seen . . . the things God hath prepared for them that love him, but he *hath* revealed them to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searcheth all things, the *deep things of God*. . . . The spiritual man *discerneth all things*, yet he himself is discerned of no man.”

thing more, promised as they conceived in Scripture. This they earnestly sought, and after such discoveries of their own hearts as they never had before any idea of, after going through a dreadful scene of trials of various kinds and temptations from the power of darkness, trouble, and distress, the Lord who is faithful to his promises, came suddenly to their hearts and made them the temple of [the] indwelling God. This with one voice they declare as very different from and vastly superior to what they experienced in consequence of the remission of sins, while they had what was called the first love.

[3.] This will ascertain the meaning of those passages of Scripture which speak of the kingdom of God. — John the Baptist, our Lord's disciples, and himself always declared “the kingdom of God is at hand.” They never mention it as actually commenced, till at the day of Pentecost. In the meantime people are directed to prepare for it by repenting and believing the gospel, whereby they received remission of sins, their hearts drawn out in love to God, and a degree of peace and joy in believing. And is not this all that the generality now look for or experience? Is not this all that those called gospel ministers know anything at all about or point out to others? Are they any more than John's disciples? Like Apollos who taught diligently of thing of Jesus, knowing only the baptism of John.<sup>40</sup> They indeed exhort people to a conformity to the will of God, but how? Not by declaring and maintaining they must receive the Holy Ghost to dwell in their hearts or they can never attain to such a conformity, and that in a very different manner from what they have hither to experienced. I could ask who do actually grow in grace in consequence of such directions? Where is the man who, after twenty years experience, is one whit nearer the mark, supposing they have not received this power. Nay, it is well if they are not in general ten time more carnally minded. And no wonder. They have missed the mark. They are not directed in that only way it is <possible, the way<sup>41</sup>> the infinitely wise God hath pointed in his Word.

[4.] This accounts scripturally and reasonably for what you have called the “second gift,” etc. And on these principles, the expediency and necessity may (I will venture for it) be fully evinced. This I am persuaded

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<sup>40</sup>Cf. Acts 18:25.

<sup>41</sup>A two-inch section of the first line at the top of the page is missing. The general sense is clear but exact wording is uncertain.

is a key to the whole Scripture, and renders them consistent with themselves. It hath, I assure you, opened such a scene of things to my view as I never beheld. Oh how much more fully to possess them! I cannot look into the New Testament without discovering continually confirmations of my sentiments and seeing it as a new book. Oh my dear sir, I am convinced I am only one of John's disciples. I have hitherto known nothing of the grand characteristic and distinguishing privilege of Christians. And yet I have pretended to preach the gospel, without the Spirit of Christ! And in some degree God may have been with me and blessed his own word, as far as it was truly set forth. What might we expect if he was in us? Glory be to his name, I <now<sup>42</sup>> feel an expectation of knowing by happy experience that everyone that asketh receiveth. I know, I feel, I want that <gift> he hath promised will make me a Christian, happy and useful.

Adieu, honoured sir, and believe me to be  
Your obedient servant

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<sup>42</sup>There are two small tears on the edge of the page, but this and the following missing words can be reconstructed with sufficient certainty.