

From Scripture to Ministry:
Mary Fletcher on Formation and Pastoral Practice

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Introduction

Biblical interpretation within the Methodist movement emerged in close connection with the practices of preaching, teaching, and spiritual formation. From its earliest days, Methodists understood Scripture not merely as a source of doctrine but as a living authority directed toward the shaping of Christian life.¹ John Wesley's oft-repeated concern for the care of souls reflects a theological vision in which interpretation was inseparable from pastoral responsibility and communal discipline: Scripture was read to awaken faith, direct obedience, and form holy living within gathered societies. Yet within this interpretive and ecclesial framework, women were rarely invited into formal discussions of biblical and theological interpretation. While scholarship has increasingly recognized women's roles in early Methodism, their work as interpreters of Scripture—especially as exercised through pastoral practice—has often been overlooked, even as they actively participated in the pastoral life of the movement. This article takes Mary Fletcher (née Bosanquet, 1739–1815) as a case study for examining how biblical interpretation sustained women's pastoral ministry within early Methodism. By recovering Fletcher's scriptural practice, it reconsiders women's participation in Methodist interpretive and ecclesial life and argues that Scripture functioned not merely as a devotional text, but as a formative authority for pastoral care, communal formation, and ministry beyond formal office. Fletcher matters for contemporary ministry practice because her example shows how biblical interpretation can shape faithful communities through lay leadership and disciplined Christian practice, even within ecclesial spaces often assumed to be male-dominated.

Mary Fletcher was a significant figure in early Methodism, exercising sustained pastoral ministry through teaching, spiritual guidance, and engagement with Scripture. Raised within an Anglican context, she became closely associated with the Methodist movement during the evangelical revival and was deeply involved in the organization and care of Methodist societies. Although she is best known for her 1771 Apology defending women's preaching,² Fletcher's authority was not confined to public controversy. Rather, it was grounded in her ongoing responsibility for the spiritual formation of others. As a laywoman without formal theological training or ordination, she nonetheless engaged Scripture extensively in letters, devotional writings, and exegetical notes, reading the Bible in direct relation to the moral, spiritual, and communal needs of Methodist life. Her ministry was thus exercised through sustained

¹ John Wesley's famous declaration in the *Preface to Sermons on Several Occasions* (1746), "Let me be *homo unius libri*" (a man of one book), encapsulates his view of the Bible as the ultimate authority for faith and practice. See John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984–), 105 (hereafter *WJW*).

² See Rupert E. Davies, E. Gordon Rupp, and A. Raymond George, eds., *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 4 (London: Epworth, 1966), 168–71.

interpretive labor oriented toward instruction, discipline, and the cultivation of holiness, making her biblical engagement an integral expression of pastoral practice within early Methodism.

Despite this breadth of activity, Fletcher has most often been remembered primarily for her defense of women's preaching and her visibility as a lay preacher. Such emphasis, however, has tended to obscure a more enduring dimension of her work: her sustained engagement with Scripture as part of pastoral ministry. This article demonstrates that Fletcher's contribution to biblical interpretation is best understood through her pastoral ministry as a woman within early Methodism. While she has often been celebrated as a heroic figure in debates over women's preaching, her interpretive work reveals a form of pastoral reading shaped by Methodist theology and practice. By pastoral reading, I mean an approach to Scripture oriented toward the formation of faith, obedience, and holiness within a communal setting, in which interpretation itself functions as a pastoral act exercised in responsibility for the spiritual care of others rather than as an abstract theological system later applied to life.

Scripture in Practice

Biblical interpretation within early Methodism was not conceived as a detached intellectual exercise but as an essential dimension of pastoral ministry directed toward the formation of Christian life. This orientation emerged within the broader intellectual and theological transformations of the eighteenth century, a period in which Enlightenment approaches increasingly subjected Scripture to rational, historical, and literary analysis. Modern scholarship has described this shift in complementary ways: Hans Frei characterizes it as a detachment of biblical narrative from its theological subject matter;³ Henning Graf Reventlow traces the displacement of Scripture's normative authority by ethical rationalism;⁴ and Michael C. Legaspi highlights the growing tendency to read the Bible as a literary or historical artifact rather than as a formative religious text.⁵ These developments altered how Scripture was approached across Europe, even where its formal authority was not explicitly denied.

Early Methodism arose within—and in critical engagement with—this changing interpretive landscape. John Wesley was attentive to contemporary intellectual currents and engaged selectively with historical and literary scholarship, as seen, for example, in his appreciation of Robert Lowth's (1710–1787) lectures on Hebrew poetry.⁶ Yet for Wesley, Scripture was never merely a historical or literary object. It remained a living authority directed

³ Frei argues that eighteenth-century biblical interpretation, particularly in England and Germany, increasingly detached biblical narratives from their intrinsic theological subject matter under the pressure of Enlightenment debates, including the Deistic controversy, thereby altering how Scripture was understood and used. See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 51–65.

⁴ Reventlow traces the transition from late medieval to Enlightenment thought in England, arguing that as Scripture's authority receded within philosophical and political reasoning—particularly through the rise of deism—it was increasingly replaced by ethical rationalism as the governing framework for moral judgment. See Henning G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 414.

⁵ Michael C. Legaspi argues that in the modern period, skeptics, rationalists, and advocates of emerging scientific methods increasingly challenged the Bible's authority by treating it as a literary and historical object rather than as a normative religious text. See Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

⁶ See *WJW* 22: 32.

toward the awakening of faith, the correction of conduct, and the cultivation of holiness within gathered societies. His treatment of wealth, for instance, illustrates this pastoral use of Scripture. Interpreting 1 Timothy 6:9, Wesley reads the desire “to be rich” not simply as a warning against luxury, but as a spiritual danger that turns the heart away from true happiness in God.⁷ Scripture thus served as a moral and pastoral criterion by which ordinary practices—money, possessions, habits, and desires—were examined and ordered toward holy living.⁸

This Wesleyan mode of interpretation provides the pastoral framework within which Mary Fletcher’s scriptural practice can be understood. Born into the wealthy Bosanquet family, Fletcher occupied a social world defined by privilege and economic security. Her father, Samuel Bosanquet (1700–1765), was a prominent merchant and governor of the Royal Exchange Assurance, and her brother, Samuel Bosanquet II (1744–1806), later became a director of the Bank of England. Yet Fletcher’s writings consistently depict wealth and social refinement not as sources of spiritual stability but as obstacles to faithful obedience. From an early age, she interpreted Scripture as a direct measure of her own life. She recalled that at the age of five she was already concerned about her “eternal welfare” and “frequently inquired...whether such and such things were sins.”⁹ Dissatisfied with the Church Catechism, she observed that “there appeared to be a great difference between the description of a Christian given in the word of God, and those who walk under that name,”¹⁰ a realization that generated sustained spiritual anxiety rather than complacent assent.

Fletcher’s autobiographical reflections reveal how this interpretive posture was sharpened through lived experience. Describing her exposure to elite social life at Bath, she wrote:

When I was twelve years old, we went to Bath for three months. Here I met with many dissipations...only when in the midst of the ballroom I used to think, if I know where to find the Methodists, or any who would show me how to please God, I would tear off all my fine things, and run through the fire to them.¹¹

This passage illustrates not merely youthful zeal but a pastoral reading of Scripture applied reflexively to social context: wealth, fashion, and leisure are evaluated through biblical categories of obedience and holiness. Fletcher’s interpretive instincts are similarly evident in a later letter to her niece, where she reflects on honor, reputation, and satisfaction through the biblical figure of Haman:

⁷ John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler & Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 455.

⁸ Wesley interprets 1 Tim 6:9—“They that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare”—as a warning directed not merely at excessive luxury but at any desire that exceeds basic provision. Such persons, Wesley argues, are in danger “to sin,” since the desire “to be rich” is, in effect, a desire for money. This desire, in turn, draws the believer into temptation and spiritual ruin, redirecting the heart toward earthly pleasure rather than true happiness in God. As Wesley affirms, “there is one God, so there is one religion and one happiness for all men.” No alternative path—including money or the desire for riches—can lead to this happiness. For further reference, see John Wesley’s sermon “The Danger of Riches,” *WJW* 3:227–246.

⁹ Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher: Consort and Relict of Rev. John Fletcher: Compiled from Her Journal and Other Authentic Documents* (New York: B. Waugh and T Mason for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1832), 11.

¹⁰ Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

There is yet another resource—applause, glory, an honourable name, and will not make him happy?—No, it will not... Then said Haman, “Yet all this profited me nothing...”—Poor Haman.¹²

Here Fletcher brings together Matt 19:22–23 and 1 Cor 13:3 through the narrative of Esther, interpreting Haman as an exemplar of inward disorder produced by pride, envy, and frustrated desire. Scripture, in this reading, exposes the spiritual cost of unholy temper and functions as a guide for self-examination rather than abstract moral judgment. Fletcher consistently associates outward excess with inward disorientation, arguing that conformity to social prestige produces spiritual dissatisfaction rather than peace.

This interpretive conviction found concrete expression in Fletcher’s commitment to plainness as a discipline of holiness. Echoing Wesley’s insistence that believers must “lay aside all needless ornaments” and become “patterns of plainness,”¹³ Fletcher treated modest living as an embodied response to Scripture. She warned that “there is no medium: they who are conformed to the fashions, customs, and maxims of the world, must embrace the spirit also...for the friendship of this world is enmity with God.”¹⁴ Such statements reveal a hermeneutic in which biblical texts directly govern moral posture and daily practice. Plainness was not aesthetic preference but theological obedience.

Crucially, Fletcher’s pastoral reading extended beyond personal discipline into communal formation. In the household and orphanage, she oversaw, plainness became a shared practice shaped by biblical conviction: “As to avoid conformity to the world, we thought it best to have but one dress...and ourselves, with the whole family, wore nothing else.”¹⁵ This practice exemplifies the Methodist conviction that Scripture is rightly interpreted when it shapes communal patterns of life. Fletcher read biblical exhortations concerning modesty and holiness as directives not only for individual conscience but for pastoral governance. Her approach mirrors Wesley’s own insistence that Scripture must be lived before it can be rightly understood.

The seriousness of this interpretive posture is underscored by Fletcher’s lifelong renunciation of wealth. According to William H. Withrow, in the final year of her life Fletcher spent less than twenty shillings on herself, and over many years her total expenditure on dress amounted to no more than five pounds.¹⁶ Such restraint was not ascetic display but the fruit of a sustained pastoral reading of Scripture, tested and confirmed through lived practice.

Taken together, these texts and practices demonstrate that Fletcher’s engagement with Scripture functioned as pastoral interpretation in action. As Anna M. Cruickshank observes, Fletcher’s autobiographical writings sought “to vindicate her unconventional and often controversial life choices and in doing so to testify to the goodness of God.”¹⁷ Yet what is at stake is more than personal vindication. Fletcher’s life and writings reveal a mode of biblical interpretation in which Scripture governs desire, disciplines practice, and forms communal life. In this sense, her ministry exemplifies a distinctly Methodist understanding of interpretation as a

¹² Mary Fletcher, *An aunt's advice to a niece: in a letter to Miss ****** (Leeds: printed by J. Bowling, and sold by J. Binns, in Briggate. MDCCLXXX. 1780), 11.

¹³ *WJW* 3:382.

¹⁴ Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

¹⁶ William H. Withrow, *Makers of Methodism* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1898), 175.

¹⁷ Joanna Cruickshank, “Friend of my Soul: Constructing Spiritual Friendship in the Autobiography of Mary Fletcher”, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 32, No. 3, 373–87, (2009), 375.

pastoral act—one exercised not primarily through public controversy, but through sustained engagement with Scripture in the care and formation of Christian communities. Fletcher's example therefore presses beyond historical recovery: it raises a continuing question for contemporary ministry about how Scripture may function as a formative authority in communities shaped by lay leadership, pastoral care, and practices of faithful living.

Pastoral Calling in Practice

Mary Fletcher's pastoral reading of Scripture was not confined to personal piety or moral self-regulation, but was embodied in the practical ordering of Christian life and community. Her writings show how biblical discernment shaped the management of her household, the nurture of spiritual discipline, the care of vulnerable persons, and the formation of Methodist fellowship. Through these practices, Fletcher sought to discern and enact what she understood as God's will, especially in moments of conflict, displacement, and pastoral responsibility. In 1761, at the age of twenty-one, Fletcher's commitment to Methodist discipline—manifested most visibly in her plainness of dress and religious devotion—brought her into direct tension with her upper-class family. Her parents, members of the Established Church, feared that her religious commitments would influence her younger brothers and sought her removal from the household. Fletcher recorded her mother's concern in explicitly vocational terms:

My dear mother had sometimes expressed a belief, that it would be better for the family if I were removed from it, lest my brothers, who were younger than me, should be infected by my sentiments and example.¹⁸

Her father's response was more explicit still:

There is a particular promise which I require of you, that is, that you will never, on any occasion, either now or hereafter, attempt to make your brothers what you call a Christian.¹⁹

These episodes mark an early instance in which Fletcher interpreted familial rejection through the lens of scriptural obedience. Removed from her parents' home, she took lodgings accompanied by a maid, yet the separation remained emotionally costly. She later reflected, "My mother was frequently giving me little things; and every renewed mark of kindness made the wound to bleed afresh."²⁰ Rather than leading to withdrawal or resignation, this loss intensified Fletcher's orientation toward what she perceived as divine calling. The absence of an earthly home redirected her affections toward a life ordered by trust in Christ's faithfulness—a theme that recurs throughout her autobiographical reflections.

By 1763, Fletcher's pastoral reading of Scripture took institutional form. After relocating to Leytonstone, she established a household that functioned both as a refuge for widows and orphans and as an open house for prayer and religious instruction. The household began modestly, including Sarah Ryan, her maid, and Sally Lawrence, a young orphan, but grew steadily. By 1768, it numbered more than thirty residents, and later expanded to nearly fifty, prompting a move to Yorkshire to accommodate its growth. Fletcher consistently interpreted this

¹⁸ Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

expansion not as personal achievement or philanthropic ambition but as obedience to scriptural calling discerned through prayer and practice.

Such undertakings were widely regarded as unconventional, particularly for a woman operating outside formal ecclesiastical authority in eighteenth-century England. Fletcher encountered sustained opposition, yet she framed her actions through Scripture rather than social justification. Drawing directly on Pauline exhortation in 1 Timothy 5:10, she wrote:

I desired not to be idle, but employed as those described by St. Paul to Timothy: “If she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saint’s feet, and diligently followed after every good work”. I can hardly express with what power these words would come to my mind. It seemed to me, the Lord had planned out all my way, and I only wished so to walk.²¹

Here Scripture functions not as abstract moral guidance but as vocational authorization. Fletcher reads Paul as speaking directly into her circumstances, shaping both her sense of calling and her concrete decisions. Her pastoral reading is thus discernible not only in what she believed but in how she ordered communal life.

The pressures facing Fletcher’s household extended beyond social disapproval to physical threat. She recorded an incident in which mobs gathered at her home following society meetings, throwing dirt and shouting violently. In the face of such hostility, she interpreted events through Scripture and divine protection rather than fear: “We were as on a desert alone, but the Lord was with us, and preserved us beneath his love’s almighty shade.”²²

Even amid opposition, Fletcher maintained theological clarity regarding the nature of good works. She affirmed:

If she hath lodged strangers; if she hath brought up children; if she has relieved the afflicted; and diligently followed after every good work. Yet I was truly sensible no work was good but as being done in the will and order of God.²³

This insistence reflects a distinctly Methodist pastoral logic: action is justified not by visibility or social approval but by obedience to God’s ordering will. Fletcher repeatedly summarized this conviction in biblical terms, writing simply that “love is the end of the commandment.”²⁴ Her emphasis on love aligns closely with early Methodist teaching, particularly the conviction that love of neighbor is inseparable from love of God. As John Wesley preached:

The love of Christ constrains us, not only to be harmless, to do no ill to our neighbour, but to be useful, to be zealous of good works, as we have time to do good unto all men, and be patterns of all of true genuine morality, of justice, mercy, and truth. This is religion, and this is happiness, the happiness for which we were made.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 22.

²² Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary*, 39.

²³ Ibid, 40.

²⁴ Ibid, 83.

²⁵ John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, 536.

Within this theological framework, Fletcher's pastoral labor appears not as exceptional activism but as disciplined obedience shaped by Scripture. Although women's public speech was widely contested in the eighteenth century, Fletcher resisted the title of preacher, stating that it was "not my call, I have many duties to attend to."²⁶ She referred to her gatherings as meetings rather than sermons, a rhetorical strategy that allowed her to speak freely while minimizing offense. Nevertheless, she established Methodist societies for women, oversaw an orphanage, and regularly addressed religious assemblies.

Fletcher's refusal of clerical titles did not signal theological hesitation but pastoral clarity. As Brett C. McNelly has observed, women in early Methodism were "keenly aware that their actions cut against the grain of accepted feminine behaviour" as they responded to divine calling.²⁷ Fletcher's sustained ministry exemplifies this dynamic. As Annie E. Keeling later reflected, even as "a childless widow, aged and infirm, and far removed from her early home and her own kinsfolk," Fletcher "knew nothing of neglect or isolation."²⁸ Her life embodied the Methodist conviction that Scripture, when rightly read, summons believers into concrete practices of goodness ordered by divine love.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that Fletcher's engagement with Scripture functioned as pastoral interpretation enacted through obedience. Scripture governed desire, authorized vocation, disciplined practice, and sustained communal life. In this sense, Fletcher's ministry exemplifies the movement traced throughout this article: from Scripture to practice, not as abstract theory, but as lived pastoral reading exercised within the care and formation of Christian communities.

Conclusion: Pastoral Reading and Contemporary Contexts

The pastoral reading of Scripture exemplified by Mary Fletcher belongs to a specific historical and ecclesial context, shaped by early Methodist theology, discipline, and communal life. Any attempt to draw contemporary significance from her practice must therefore proceed with caution. Fletcher did not articulate a theory of biblical interpretation for later contexts, nor did she anticipate the cultural, social, or ecclesial realities of contemporary communities beyond eighteenth-century Methodism. Nevertheless, her example offers a historically grounded account of how Scripture functioned as a formative authority within pastoral ministry—an account that may serve as a point of reflection for present-day contexts in which the relationship between biblical interpretation and lived practice remains contested. In contemporary Asian American congregations, for instance, women frequently nurture Christian life through small-group teaching, prayerful counsel, intergenerational care, and the quiet coordination of communal support; Fletcher's example helps name such work as a form of scripturally shaped ministry rather than merely informal service.

In particular, Fletcher's integration of Scripture, pastoral responsibility, and communal formation may resonate with some Asian American Christian communities in which Christian life is sustained through relational forms of ministry: small-group Bible reading, prayer, intergenerational care, hospitality, and lay guidance. Without suggesting direct continuity,

²⁶ Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher*, 119.

²⁷ Brett C. McNelly, "Mothers in Christ: Mary Fletcher and the Women of Early Methodism" in *Religion, Gender, and Industry: Exploring Church and Methodism in a Local Setting*, edited by Geordan Hammond and Peter S. Forsaith (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 129-130.

²⁸ Annie E. Keeling, *Eminent Methodist Women* (London: C.H. Kelly, 1889), 81.

Fletcher's pastoral reading invites reflection on how Scripture might be read not primarily as an object of academic mastery or clerical control, but as a shared resource for shaping Christian life within communities navigating cultural negotiation, migration, and marginality.

At the same time, Fletcher's example cautions against romanticizing practice or collapsing interpretation into moral activism. Her insistence that good works are valid only insofar as they are ordered by God's will underscores a Methodist conviction that Scripture must govern both desire and action. For contemporary readers, including those in Asian American contexts, her pastoral reading suggests that the enduring question is not merely who is authorized to interpret Scripture, but how interpretation functions within the concrete work of forming faithful lives and communities.

By recovering Fletcher's engagement with Scripture as pastoral practice, this study does not propose a model to be replicated uncritically. Rather, it offers a historical lens through which to reconsider the relationship between Scripture, ministry, and lived faith. In this sense, Fletcher's ministry exemplifies the movement traced throughout this article—from Scripture to practice—not as abstract theory, but as a disciplined, communal, and pastorally accountable way of reading the Bible in service of Christian formation. For ministry contexts today, the practical takeaway is that biblical interpretation becomes formative when it is embodied in habits of care, shared discernment, and faithful responsibility within the life of the community.