

Fletcher, William Warde (1879–1947)

LESTER DEVINE

Originally trained as a secondary history teacher, a career long Adventist educator, Lester Devine, Ed.D., has taught at elementary, secondary and higher education levels and spent more than three decades in elected educational leadership positions in two divisions of the world Church, NAD (1969-1982) and SPD (1982-2005). He completed his forty years of denominational service with a term as director of the Ellen G. White/Adventist Research Centre at Avondale University College in Australia where his life-long hobby of learning and presenting on Adventist heritage issues became his vocation.

William Fletcher was an evangelist, teacher, church administrator, and author. He challenged the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary.

Early Life

Born in Latrobe, Port Sorrell, Tasmania, on December 14, 1879 to parents Helen and William Fletcher,¹ William Warde Fletcher worked as a draper, dealing in textiles and cloth goods, when he joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in September 1900.²

Career

Fletcher initially worked as a colporteur and subsequently (1904-05) was in charge of the book department at the Echo Publishing Company. Transitioning, untrained, to evangelistic work in 1905, he went to Singapore in 1906. He later served as an evangelist in Adelaide, South Australia, and was ordained to the ministry in 1912, where he served as president of the South Australian Conference from 1912-1914. Following a brief period in departmental work at the Australasian Union Conference he became the vice-president of that Union in 1915 and later (1916-19) having accepted a call from the General Conference,³ president of the India Union Mission, field secretary, and then chair of the Southern Asia Division (1920-22). On his return to Australia he again



William Fletcher

Photo courtesy of Lester Devine.

engaged in evangelism and was one of the officers of the Australasian Union. He also served as a Bible teacher at Avondale College from 1924-1926.

Family

On February 7, 1909 Fletcher married Mabel Geraldine Lewes at Mt Pleasant, Singapore.⁴ They were to have three children: Helen (1909), born in Singapore, Margaret (1911), born in Adelaide, South Australia, and John (1920), born in India.⁵

Doctrinal Divergence

In 1925, Fletcher delivered a series of Bible studies on the sanctuary at the Annual Council of the Australasian Union Conference. So well were these received that the president of the Union, John E. Fulton, commented: “while covering controverted points, the lessons were of a deeply spiritual and informational character, holding to the affirmative side. We all felt richly blessed by the re-examination of this great Bible truth. How the message for these times is emphasized by this wonderful subject! What light God has shed upon His people for these last days! - That all of God's people may benefit, by some of these precious thoughts, we have invited Brother Fletcher to write up some matter on the sanctuary question during the coming college vacation.”⁶ Further specific commendations and words of appreciation for the Bible studies were spoken by L.D.A. Lemke, F. A. Allum, W. O. Johanson, W.H. Pascoe, and E. Rosendahl, all significant leaders in the Church.⁷

However, by the late 1920's Fletcher was having a number of doctrinal difficulties. After setting out his views before church leaders in Australia, Fletcher was given six months paid leave of absence to permit further study. In May 1930, he traveled to Washington D.C. There, in a series of meetings with General Conference leaders, his issues of concern were discussed. While neither side was able to convince the other, the meetings were cordial and a gracious spirit prevailed—a credit to the leaders of the time and a characteristic of W.W. Fletcher to the end of his life. He published his views in *The Reasons for My Faith: An Appeal to Seventh-day Adventists, Concerning Vital Truths of the Gospel*.⁸ He articulated his views in three propositions:

1. That it was the immediate unveiled presence of God as manifested in the Holy Shekinah that constituted the inner apartment of the earthly sanctuary the most holy place, and that consequently when at the time of his ascension the Lord Jesus Christ sat down at the right hand of God, thus “appearing in the presence of God for us,” He entered the most holy place of the heavenly sanctuary. There can be no place in heaven more holy than the place of the unveiled presence of the Almighty God.
2. That in the typical service of the earthly sanctuary the sprinkling of the blood upon the altar and before the veil represented the expiation of sin, and not its transfer into the sanctuary.

3. That it is necessary to modify our view that the Testimonies are to be regarded as having the authority of a direct revelation from God.⁹

The papers he presented to both the Australasian Union Conference and the General Conference are contained in his book. The responses of both those bodies are included, along with further elaboration from Fletcher.¹⁰

At heart, Fletcher was an evangelical Adventist who was in some respects ahead of his time, and while many of his views are still not congruent with Seventh-day Adventist theology, more recent scholarship has provided a more complete understanding of the issues which troubled Fletcher and provided a more substantial rationale than was available in the 1930s.¹¹

Later Life

Fletcher left church employment in late 1930s and subsequently worked in association with the Sydney Bible Training Institute and the Free Evangelical Fellowship. Until the end of his life he considered himself a faithful Adventist in all the other doctrines and teachings of the Church, writing near the end of his book, "I thank God with all my heart that teachings that so stirred and blessed me when I first heard the advent message still hold good in what I regard as the mainlines and fundamental conclusions. We have not followed cunningly devised fables in preaching the swiftly approaching second advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no message more needed today than this."¹²

William Warde Fletcher died suddenly on December 10, 1947 in his sixty-seventh year while on vacation with his wife, Mabel. Pastor H. E. Piper, who conducted his funeral along with representatives from the Sydney Bible Training Institute and the Free Evangelical Fellowship wrote: "Pastor Fletcher was a Christian gentleman and was greatly loved and respected throughout the field."¹³

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4. G. F. Jones, "Singapore," *Australasian Record*, April 12, 1909, 4.

5. William Ward Fletcher Biographical Information.

6. John E. Fulton, "Our Recent Council," *Australasian Record*, September 14, 1925, 8.

7. "Impressions Made by the Council," *Australasian Record*, September 14, 1925, 7.

8. W. W. Fletcher, *The Reasons for My Faith. An Appeal to Seventh-day Adventists, Concerning Vital Truths of the Gospel* (Sydney, Australia: William Brooks, 1932).
9. Ibid.,10.
10. Ibid.
11. For example see Richard Hammill, "Reflections on the Adventist Typological Interpretation of the Mosaic Tabernacle and its Cultus," South Pacific Division Heritage Centre, Avondale College of Higher Education, Cooranbong, NSW, Australia.
12. W. W. Fletcher, *The Reasons for My Faith*, 173-174.
13. H. E. Piper, "William Warde Fletcher obituary," *Australasian Record*, January 19, 1948, 7.

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