

THE LIFE, THEOLOGY, AND WORLD

IMPACT OF ANDREW FULLER

JULIE ABINGTON

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The Life of Andrew Fuller

Andrew Fuller was born on February 5, 1754 in Cambridgeshire, England. His parents were poor Baptist farmers. It was a pivotal time in England in both the political and theological arenas. Politically speaking, England was on the verge of becoming a great world power. Theologically speaking, it was a time when the Particular Baptists of England were greatly affected by high Calvinism. The high Calvinists were opposed to evangelism done in an open and indiscriminate manner. They thought that preaching to the masses with a call to repent did a disservice to God and His sovereignty. It was in this high Calvinist context that God raised up the evangelical Calvinist, Andrew Fuller.¹

In 1769, Andrew Fuller became a genuine believer in Christ. He was baptized and joined the church in Soham where his family attended. Fuller never received formal theological training, but his extraordinary gifting was apparent as he began preaching in the church at age 17. When he was only 21 years old, he was formally given the position of pastor at the church in Soham. During his first years of shepherding, Fuller remained within high Calvinism. In 1781, he was introduced by another pastor to the writings of Jonathan Edwards. Due to the influence of Edwards, Fuller then formally rejected the claims of high Calvinism.² He married Sarah Gerdiner the year after he became pastor and served as pastor at Soham until 1782. He then moved to pastor the church in Kettering, Northhamptonshire and remained there until his death in 1815. Andrew and Sarah Fuller had 11 children together. A total of 8 of their 11 children died in infancy or early childhood and just two months before the Baptist Missionary Society was formed in Fuller's home (October 1792) he lost his wife Sarah as well³. The extreme suffering and perseverance he exhibited during his lifetime are a remarkable testimony, making his theological contributions even more astonishing.

¹ George & Dockery, p.35

² George & Dockery, p.35

³ Piper, p.3

Andrew Fuller's deep concern for evangelism and world missions led to the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society on October 2, 1792. Fuller and a small assembly of pastors, including William Carey and John Thomas who later went to India joined together to form the society. This band of brothers would serve as the main "rope-holders" for Carey and Thomas while they were in India. It has been said they were bound by an oath that "while we lived, we should never let go of the rope." ⁴ For more than 21 years, Fuller served as the main promoter, fundraiser, and thinker of the society and held the office of Secretary until his death. He traveled continuously to raise support for the BMS. All the while, Fuller remained a faithful pastor to his flock at home with his expository preaching. He was absent from his congregation frequently due to his enormous responsibility with the society, but it did not embitter them. He labored endlessly to raise his family, pastor his church, engage the current doctrinal issues, and lead the Baptist Missionary Society. ⁵

To recognize his contributions in theology, Princeton University awarded him a D.D. in 1798 and Yale did the same in 1805. He turned down the Princeton degree because he felt he was too academically inadequate, but later accepted Yale's honor, even though he never once used the title. Andrew Fuller contracted tuberculosis and passed away at age 61 on May 7, 1815. ⁶

The Theology of Andrew Fuller

Andrew Fuller's 18th century high Calvinist background greatly impacted his theology, as did his role as a pastor. Many of his questions grew out of his original beginnings within high Calvinism and the experiences of the people in his congregation. His theology was mostly polemical, combating the errors of his day and standing for truth. He was also deeply concerned for world missions and evangelism, and that thread can be

⁴ Piper 4, as taken from Morden

⁵ Piper, p.5

⁶ George & Dockery, p.37

seen throughout all of his theology. Andrew Fuller was a loyal Calvinist, even though some tried to rule him out of the domain. He believed in the doctrine of total depravity and believed that it implied the rest of the Calvinistic doctrines. “If men be utterly depraved, they lie entirely at the discretion of God either to save or not to save them.”⁷ Fuller believed in unconditional election and effectual calling. Fuller also believed that regeneration does in fact precede faith and proposes seven reasons as to why this is true.⁸

The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation marked the beginning of Fuller’s polemical writings. In this three part masterpiece, Fuller argues that it is the duty of all men to believe in the Gospel and that it is the duty of all Believers to proclaim and preach the Gospel call to sinners. In this work he called for indiscriminate Gospel preaching, something that the high Calvinists of his day were highly opposed to. The high Calvinists of Fuller’s time believed in the doctrine of eternal justification, meaning that the elect were justified from eternity even before conversion. They also believed that only those persons with a warrant of faith, or some sign that they were of the elect should be urged to put their faith and trust in Christ. They used the doctrine of eternal justification as an excuse to not openly call all men to believe in the Gospel. Instead, they waited upon some evidence of election before telling people to believe in Christ.⁹

Fuller became friends with John Ryland Jr., Robert Hall, William Carey, and John Sutcliff and these men proved to be a great influence in his life. It was through these men that Fuller was also introduced to the writings of Jonathan Edwards. He began to see how the claims of high Calvinism conflicted with scripture. Fuller then formally rejected the claims of high Calvinism and advocated open Gospel preaching to all sinners. It was in this work that Fuller took the best of evangelical Calvinism and combated the errors of

⁷ Fuller, as quoted in Nettles, p.224

⁸ Nettles, p.224

⁹ Weaver, p.1

high-Calvinism, and the outcome was what became known as “Fullerism” in Baptist and Congregational settings.¹⁰

The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation or the Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ is the main theological work of Andrew Fuller. It is in this work that Fuller answers what was known as *The Modern Question, whether it be the duty of all men to whom the gospel is published to repent and believe in Christ*.¹¹ The high Calvinists reasoned that it was cruel to require of a man what is beyond his power to perform, and that the sinner is under no obligation to come to Christ because it is beyond his ability. Practically speaking, faith in Christ was not the duty of the non-elect. And following from that, there should be no indiscriminate preaching to the masses to repent and believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹²

Is faith in Christ the duty of all men, regenerate and non-regenerate? To answer this question, Fuller first examines what faith is in *Part I of The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. At this time, some regarded faith as a persuasion of their own interest in Christ, more or less that they should believe in the goodness of their own state. If that is in fact saving faith, then following from that it is not the duty of non-regenerate sinners to believe in Christ, for they are not interested in Christ and therefore, it cannot be their duty to believe a lie. But Fuller draws attention to the fact that the proper object of our saving faith is not our own interest in Christ, but rather the glorious Gospel of our God. And from that, the conclusion can be made that it is the duty of every man to believe what God reveals. To show this Fuller states his objections. First, nothing can be an object of faith except that which God reveals. And God has revealed to us the Gospel of His Son, not the interest that any individual has in Christ. Second, the Scriptures show that faith terminates on something without us, Christ and the truths of Him. But if faith is a

¹⁰ Weaver, p.1

¹¹ Nettles, p.248

¹² Piper, p.9

persuasion of our being in a state of salvation, it terminates principally on something inside of us. Third, to believe oneself to be in a state of salvation is inferior to actual saving faith. Faith fixes itself on the Glory of God in Christ, not our own happy state. Fourth, Fuller shows examples in Scripture that the faith Jesus commends in the New Testament is shown to terminate on his all-sufficiency and not as a persuasion that the individual was interested in Divine favor.

In Part II of the *Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, Fuller lists six arguments that are backed and supported primarily with Biblical proof texts. 1) Unconverted sinners are commanded, exhorted, and invited to believe in Christ for Salvation in the Bible. 2) Every man is bound to receive and approve what God has revealed. 3) The Gospel, though not a Law but a message of Grace, requires obedience and included in that, saving faith. 4) The lack of faith in Christ is due to Man's depravity and is revealed in Scripture as a heinous sin. 5) God has inflicted the punishment for non-believing sinners on the Lord Jesus Christ. 6) Other spiritual exercises in addition to faith are required by Biblical texts, and are the duty of all men. Fuller examines many Biblical proof texts within these six arguments to advocate and promote open evangelism.¹³ They serve as his final appeal to the unbiblical high Calvinists who were using their own logic to move from Biblical ideas to unbiblical inferences.

To answer the high Calvinist objection, Fuller addresses the distinction between natural inability and moral inability that he learned from the writings of Jonathan Edwards. Natural inability is due to physical hindrances, such as a "lack of rational faculties, bodily powers, or external advantages" and moral inability is due to the "lack of inclination because of an averse will."¹⁴ Natural inability removes obligation, but moral inability does not. This moral inability is the kind that the Bible is referencing when it

¹³ Fuller uses the texts of Psalm 2:11-12, Isaiah 55:1-7, Jeremiah 6:16, John 12:36, John 6:29, 5:23 and they are explained in Part II pp. 343-366.

¹⁴ As quoted in Piper, p.13

states, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”¹⁵ Fuller was not convinced to reject high Calvinism due solely to Edwards. However, the more and more he read Scripture he saw the distinction to be clearly and fully contained within it, and thus it was Scripture that was his ultimate reason for rejecting the claims of high-Calvinism. Edward’s distinctions merely helped him to grasp what he saw in Scripture.¹⁶

“He that, from the Constitution of his nature, is absolutely unable to understand, or believe, or love a certain kind of truth, must of necessity, be alike unable to shut his eyes against it, to disbelieve, to reject, or to hate it. But it is manifest that all men are capable of the latter; it must therefore follow that nothing but the depravity of their heart renders them incapable of the former.”¹⁷

Another movement of the day that Fuller spoke out against was Sandemanianism. A man named Robert Sandeman began the movement in the 1750’s. It became known as a predominately intellectualist view of faith. It is important because it deals with the nature of justifying faith. The Sandemanians insisted that faith consisted solely of an intellectual belief in Jesus as the Christ and that he died and rose for sinners. They spoke of it as “bare faith” and “bare persuasion of the truth.”¹⁸ Even though Sandeman had a legitimate desire to exalt the freeness of God’s salvation, he sought to take away any aspect of human reason, will, or desire in the subject of saving faith. Saving faith was reduced merely to an intellectual agreement to the Gospel of Christ. Sandeman thought that if faith had any

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:14, Romans 8:8

¹⁶ Piper, p.14

¹⁷ Fuller, Vol. II, p. 378

¹⁸ Haykin, p.2

kind of movement in the will, mind of affections, that it would be an act or work and would compromise the doctrine of justification by faith alone.¹⁹ Flowing from that, faith does not consist of any goodness or newness of soul. Sandeman did not see faith as following regeneration, because that would be acting out of a renewed heart and would be justified by the goodness of what one does. ²⁰Many people opposed Sandeman, but Andrew Fuller was the one who responded forthrightly to his views. In 1810, Fuller published a series of letters that he wrote to a comrade in regards to the movement, the *Strictures on Sandemanianism*. Fuller identified with Sandeman in the fact that for many professing Christians, their faith had been reduced to their own subjective experience of Christ, and not faith in Christ Himself. Fuller concludes that the solution does not lie in going to the other extreme and rejecting the subjective altogether. ²¹ Fuller found the reasoning of Robert Sandeman to be unbiblical. Fuller used Scripture ²² to deny that faith is merely a persuasion of one's intellect, but rather it is a "holy fruit of regeneration which has in it the good impulse to 'work through love.'"²³ The intellect is most definitely involved in genuine conversion, but the affections are vital as the person delights in the Savior and His love for sinners made evident on the cross.

The World Impact of Andrew Fuller

Andrew Fuller's main work in theology was soteriological. The impact of his theology can be found in the enormous application to evangelism and missions. His daily work was primarily apologetic in nature, contending for truth among the errors of his day. He was willing to deal with the complex questions of conversion and salvation. He took a stand against the two opponents of evangelical Calvinism and fought for a genuine Biblical understanding of these doctrines that was necessary for the life of the church and

¹⁹ Piper, p.16

²⁰ Piper. P.16

²¹ Haykin, p.3

²² John 6:28-29, John 1:12, John 6:35

²³ Piper, p.17

evangelism. He saw the deadly implications of the movements and rose to the challenge in defending the truth. Both of the major movements Fuller refuted, the anti-missionary hyper-Calvinist movement and the mechanical and rationalistic Sandemanian movement, were lethal to the health of churches and the spread of the Gospel. Hyper-Calvinism demolished the necessity of missions, evangelism, and true Gospel preaching and Sandemanianism attacked the true essence of faith. Fuller helped to restore a proper view of faith that is crucial for missions and a proper view of preaching that is crucial for missions. As Piper points out, “The battle was distinctly exegetical and doctrinal even though the all-important outcomes were deeply experiential and globally practical.”²⁴ Fuller’s major work, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, provided a missionary theology and motivation for world evangelism to a people who were church oriented and Calvinistic.

Another important issue that Andrew Fuller exposed is the crucial relationship between the doctrinal faithfulness of the church and the cause of world missions. Many Christians today try to remove the necessity of solid, Biblical theology from world missions. “Everywhere you turn there is pressure to believe that missions depends on not disputing about doctrine.”²⁵ Fuller demonstrated that the defense of truth in the areas of faith and preaching in no way thwarted the cause of missions, but instead advanced and launched the greatest missionary movement in world history. His theology drove the foundation of the Baptist Missionary Society. It was this society that sent and supported William Carey in India and resulted in the spread of the Gospel to nearly all the coastlands of the world. Throughout his life, Andrew Fuller sought to know and experience Christ as Biblically as possible and in turn, left a lasting impact on the world for Christ and the cause of world missions.

²⁴ Piper, p. 6

²⁵ Piper, p.19

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