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Andrew Fuller and Ministerial Removals.

FOR those who share the system of Church order known as Independency few matters are of more serious concern just now than that of ministerial removals. Although the urgency of this question arises very largely from the changed nature of modern conditions, the question itself is by no means new. In some very intimate correspondence with his friend John Sutcliff, Andrew Fuller reveals how desperate was his anxiety over this problem one hundred and fifty years ago. The letters form part of the "Isaac Mann" collection, a summary of which has recently been appearing in these pages. Deferring any observations I may have until later, the following is the text of the letters, in which will be found a complete account of Fuller's plight and most interesting experiment.

First, the concluding part of a letter from "Soham, 13. March, 1781."

"The place where we worship being not our own, and our continuance in it very precarious, I of late try'd to get our people to purchase a strong, convenient dwelling-house which might have been bought and fitted up for, I think, less than £100, but the design is dropped for want of unanimity."

Sutcliff writes a note on this letter "Answered Ap. 2."

And now the text of the three subsequent letters of Fuller's :

"DEAR BROTHER,

"I remember in your last letter you requested me when anything relating to my departure from Soham occurred to give you a line by post. I will now inform you what has taken place since I wrote to you last. On July 12 we had a Church meeting. I then told the Church to expect my Departure from them in three months. They and I were very unhappy. The Place was truly a *Bochim*! I told them I was determined if I knew it to do nothing but what was Duty—that it seem'd to me, all things considered my duty to depart, but I did not desire to be my own Judge. I offered to be set down by any two or three honest judicious impartial persons, it signified nothing to me whether they were ministers or private Christians. The next Lord's Day they agreed to accept this motion and nominated three *ministers* who we all supposed were strangers to the case, and who therefore could not be subjects of pre-possession. As it could not be by a personal interview, we proposed each to *write* our own Tale, and that there might be no misrepresentations in either, agreed mutually to inspect and sign each others letters. I was requested to write mine first. I did so, and

read it before the Church on the Lord's Day following. But when they had heard my tale, which they owned to be very candid, they despaired of writing to it, and so the design of settling things by arbitration was dropped.

"I continue far from happy, yet not so generally distressed as I was some weeks ago. I know not but I must remove at Michaelmas, yet can't tell how I shall get through it. Some how, it so unmans me: I have not the understanding, resolution or Spirit of a Man. I see no prospect of my continuance, yet after all I am not without my fears of offending the Lord in departing. I don't perfectly know that I should not Sin, nor I don't know that I should. I am still an unhappy man. The Lord undertake for me! If I could see after all that 'tis my Duty to abide I would not remove.

"Should be glad to hear from you, and how things are with you. If you review my last to you, you will find there a request which yet lies unanswered. Viz.: your thots. on this question—In what manner may we now warrantably expect Divine direction? Am better in health than when I wrote last. Wife and child pretty well. Accept our love to self and Mrs. Andrews. I remain as heretofore, your Affectionate Brother,

"ANDW. FULLER."

Soham, 15. Aug. 1781.

(Addressed—Rev. Mr. Sutcliff, Olney, Buckinghamshire. A note is added in Sutcliff's hand, "Received Mr. Fuller. Ansd. Sep. 29. 81. A full sheet sent.")

"DEAR BROTHER,

"I received yours, and thank you for your observations; they have been of use to me in my delicate affairs. Respecting myself I have a long while been tossed to and fro with uncertainty. At length the Church accepted an offer I gave them about three months ago of settling things by *arbitration*. Three persons (two of whom were ministers), were nominated, whom we thought honest, wise and impartial. To them two or three weeks ago we sent each an account of our case. We received answers from each about a week ago. One was thought to justify my removal, another condemned it, and a third declared he could not tell what was Duty in this case. These letters were read over at our Church meeting which you see left us but just where we were before. We then agreed for I and an officer of the Church to take all the letters on the subject and lay them before Mr. Robinson, of Chesterton, and to be determined by what he should think to be Duty. unless what he should urge as the reasons for his opinion should appear to us both to be

wrong. His opinion after investigating our affair for three or four hours was for me to continue at Soham for one year at least to try whether I could subsist with their proposed advance, and if I could, then longer. As such I shall stay and try my uttermost, and let the Lord do with me as seemeth him good! I enjoy peace of conscience in reflecting on my conduct in this affair and I trust I shall have peace let come on it what will. Under the numerous veerings of Providence I can only exclaim 'O——' [indecipherable].

"I hope you nor any of the ministers whom I consulted at Kettering will think your judgment slighted in this matter. I think the difference between your judgment and that of the Arbitrators arose wholly from your hearing the Cause barely on one side. True, I am not conscious that I omitted any one circumstance that might give a favourable idea of the Church's case; yet I am not ignorant of the deceit of all hearts and of what an aptness there is in us to dwell in our thoughts on that part of a subject that makes for us, and forget the others. Pray for me my dear Brother that I may enjoy contentment. It may be best for me. Affliction's school may be most instructive to me. Give my love to Mrs. A. Accept the same to yourself.

"I remain, dear Brother, Yours affectiony.,
Soham, 16. Oct. 1781.

"A. FULLER."

(Addressed—Rev. Mr. Sutcliff, Olney, Bucks. To be left at Mr. Ansell's, Cambridge. Note added by Sutcliff—"Recd. Mr. Fuller, Ansd. Jany. 5. 82.")

"Soham, Sep. 27, 1782.

"MY DEAR BROTHER,

"I have not heard from you now for some time. I feel a desire to receive a letter from you on more accounts than one. I should be glad to know how you do, and whether things are happy with you at Olney. I feel also exceedingly unhappy on my own account. The time now draws nigh in which I must do something. Notwithstanding some faults of the Church where I am (and who are without?) there seems such a union as cannot be dissolved. My love to them did not appear so great till bro't to the tryal. I am very unhappy. I wonder what 'tis that makes my brethren in the ministry so confident of the propriety of my removal. Removals are certainly solemn things, and what ought not to be trifled with on any account, and I doubt not but that you and others of my brethren consider them so. I am inclined to think that there are many removals that are verily criminal. What then you can see in my case that should cause you to decide upon that seemingly without a doubt

I really cannot tell. It is true I do think of removing. My judgment leans that way—but yet I should be much happier if I could be entirely satisfied of its propriety. If you could afford me any relief I should be glad. Your letter about this time last year on this subject did me much good. Do write by post as soon as you have received this.

“Have you received what I have done on the Mod. Question? I forgot to tell you of the main end for which I sent it to you, viz. : that you should make remarks on a separate sheet of paper where you see any mistakes or defects, and transmit them to me in a letter. Mr. John Ryland expected it after you. My wife and children are out on a visit. Were all pretty well last Lord’s Day except my little girl (the eldest). She is very much brought down with a fever. With love to Mrs. Andrews,

“I remain, Your affectionate Brother,

“A. FULLER.”

(Addressed: Rev. John Sutcliff, Olney, Bucks. Note added by Sutcliff: “Recd. Mr. Fuller, Sep. 29. 82. Ansd. Oct. 5.”)

So ends Fuller’s account of his arbitration experiment. Without presuming to discuss our present system of ministerial removals, it is of interest, I think, to note what are the cardinal points in the approach and experience of so great a Baptist as Fuller. They seem to me to be three:—

I. THE PRIORITY OF DUTY.

This is very explicit in each of these letters. Whatever shall be his future course Fuller is determined that, so far as he can judge, it shall be according to the will of God. Nor will he accept his own opinions or feelings as the final expression of that will. He confesses that so far as his own impressions go it seemed his “duty to depart,” yet in the same letter boldly affirms, “If I could see after all that ’tis my Duty to abide I would not remove.”

And this, surely, is fundamental. It is the initial glory of any man’s ministry that he can start with the firm assurance that God has put him there. It is easy, I know, to say that this must at all cost be conserved in any modification of Church government that we may contemplate, for its possibility seems to presuppose a rigid independency. It seems arguable, in Fuller’s case, that he was willing to forgo his independency. Certainly in his first two attempts at arbitration he lays down no previous qualification about accepting their final decision. It is true that in the case of Mr. Robinson, Fuller lays down the condition of acceptance—“unless what he should urge as the reasons for

his opinion should appear to us both (i.e., Fuller and the Soham Church) to be wrong." But this presumably means that *both* must dissent from Mr. Robinson's judgment to reject it, which would imply that Fuller previously agreed not to stand out alone. In which case a third-party decision was to be for him, almost without question, the will of God. At any rate, even if he did not forsake his own independency of judgment in this matter, it was the extravagance of his disinterestedness (though well-meant) that was his weakness. The will of God in any minister's removal is surely finally operative in his own mind, and it was because Fuller did not sufficiently take account of that that the final state of his mind was as bad, if not worse, than when he started.

This, however, is no judgment upon auxiliary organisation. Plainly we need it to co-ordinate an increasingly complex state of affairs, and it is desirable that it should become more and more efficient to cope with growing needs. But the principle seems to be that while the decision finally rests between the minister who undertakes the responsibility and the Church that calls him, his own mind and that of the individual Church should be willing to give a larger and more important share in their consideration to the relevant organisation of the denomination as being in itself a factor in expressing to them the will of God.

II. THE PASTORAL RELATION.

The principle of the priority of duty may seem a precarious one. Its very individualism lays itself open to the danger of mistaking a whim for a conscience. Two things in Fuller made that impossible. First, of course, his most manifest sincerity. But more than that, his relation with his people. So far as his present Soham pastorate was concerned the will of God meant for him a most sacred bond between himself and his Church. To his flock, at Christ's bidding, he had utterly given himself, and in that fellowship had found the seal. True it is that it had definitely become strained, to his great unhappiness. Yet in his last letter he readily confesses—"Notwithstanding some faults of the Church where I am (and who are without?) there seems such a union as cannot be dissolved. My love to them did not seem so great till bro't to the tryal." To regard that fellowship lightly, or to dissolve it without the most serious consideration would be to slight the will of God. Hence his very first move was to consult his people and to share with them his inmost thoughts about removing.

Every true ministry is a mutual thing. The ministry is the pastoral relation. The pastor is doing his work at the point at which he touches his people, and at which they together minister

to the community at large. It is the pastoral relation which any denominational organisation is purposed to serve. The readjustment of denominational machinery may seem wise as occasion arises, but at all times is the true disposition and mutual purpose of both ministers and people primary and essential. The challenge of Fuller's case here, then, obviously is that any call for a modification of the ecclesiastical system implies at the same time a serious reconsideration by both ministers and people of the sacredness and importance of their relation to one another.

III. THE COMPLETE ABSENCE OF ANXIETY ABOUT GETTING ANOTHER CHURCH.

Here we come to the point where Fuller's case seems to differ so much from our own. Fuller's concern lay solely within the pastoral relation. Should it be continued or terminated? Our problem is largely outside the pastoral relation—the accommodation of pastors in need of churches, and churches in need of pastors. In other words, Fuller's anxiety was to reach a decision about leaving; ours is to facilitate settling. Unlike the modern need, Fuller seems to have no anxiety whatever about getting another Church.

It is important then, to ask "Why?" Several answers suggest themselves. For one thing Fuller was an exceptionally able man, and was fairly well-known, and was, moreover, fairly young, so that settlement would present few difficulties. Or his failure to worry may be put down to his faith. But true though that may be, I rather think Fuller would disavow any greater measure of faith than that of his brethren. No, I rather think the cause lies in a fact little mentioned in these letters. I mean the strong Association life. These were days of growing vitality for the Northamptonshire Association, which included such stalwarts as Robert Hall (Sen.), the Rylands and Sutcliff. These, too, were the days of Carey's awakening, for only two years before the first of Fuller's letters he had been deeply impressed by his first Association meeting, at Olney, and had been thrilled by Fuller's sermon on "Be not children in understanding." This Association embraced Churches so wide apart as St. Albans and Lincoln. And there was a corporateness about their assemblies. They belonged to one another, and their kinship was a living thing. While there is no evidence here to prove that another sphere awaited Fuller should he leave Soham, there is every indication in the circumstances and spirit of the Northamptonshire Association to believe that Fuller need entertain no anxiety.

It would be extravagant to make the analogy from this that anxiety about all ministerial settlements could be allayed by the

deeper bond of common life between individual churches. But there is much truth in it, none the less. Intimacy grows chiefly by association, even between ministers and churches. And what is more important, it stimulates the sense of the "body." Ministerial removals depend largely upon the corporateness of denominational life. Most of the sects express this by organisation. But the true life lies in the spirit that animates the body.

Fuller's case does, at any rate, hint this to our modern problem, that a great deal of denominational cohesion may be fostered through the already existing organisation of the Associations. It is inescapably true that any effective system rests upon the understanding and spontaneous responsiveness of the individual Churches. That, surely, can be more naturally stimulated within the smaller areas, because within them the actual intimacy of "association" is effected. We have something of its counterpart in our area superintendencies, where the efficiency of the whole rests upon each superintendent's knowledge of his own particular district. But all administration waits at the last upon the disposition, and the knowledge, and the happy co-operation of individual ministers and churches. In the ideal inter-relation, then, of Associations and denomination, the quickening of the spirit, the awakening of interest, and the spreading of information, can receive more practical stimulation in the smaller sphere where the actual contacts are made.

At any rate, it is not without significance that the whole background of this experiment, and the sphere of every one of its participating personalities and churches, lay within the strong and inspiring fellowship of the one Association, for any organisation with respect to ministerial removals must pre-suppose sympathy, understanding and co-operation from the rank and file of the ministry and the churches.

F. G. HASTINGS.

STOURBRIDGE about 1831 had an antiquarian in William Scott who compiled memoirs of dissenting churches there and in the vicinity. His second part contains four or five pages devoted to the Baptist church, as is shown by a Calendar published by the Rev. F. A. Homer in the *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* for October, 1935. It is not stated where the manuscript is to be seen.