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Andrew Fuller—Evangelical Calvinist

THE title of Evangelical Calvinist, applied to Andrew Fuller or to any other, may seem to some to be a contradiction in terms. Calvinism is regarded as a cold-blooded scheme of election, predestination and reprobation, while evangelism is conceived as the warm-hearted and tender commendation of the Divine grace. It is the signal merit of Andrew Fuller, the bicentenary of whose birth is celebrated this year, that he demonstrated that a man can be both a Calvinist and an Evangelical.

Andrew Fuller claimed to be a genuine Calvinist. A conversation between Fuller and a certain clergyman is recorded by Dr. Ryland in his *Memoirs of Fuller*.¹ When asked about the different shades of Calvinism Fuller said: "There are three which we commonly describe, namely the *high*, the *moderate*, and the *strict* Calvinists. The first are, if I may so speak, more Calvinistic than Calvin himself; in other words, bordering on Antinomianism." The second group, or moderates, he goes on to describe as "half-Arminian, or, as they are called with us Baxterians." The third class is those who really hold the system of John Calvin. "I do not believe every thing that Calvin taught," said Andrew Fuller, "nor any thing because he taught it; but I reckon strict Calvinism to be my own system."

It was in a high Calvinist environment that Fuller received his first Christian instruction. Much of the preaching in the Church puzzled him as a boy, for it was in no way directed to the unconverted. During the spiritual conflict that led up to his conversion he was greatly concerned to know whether he had any right to believe in Christ. He says that he entertained the notion of needing some warrant or previous qualification to come to Christ.

A theological controversy in the Soham church brought young Fuller face to face with the main issues involved in the high Calvinism and genuine Calvinism differences. A member of the church was seen by Fuller to be an excessive drinker, but when spoken to about his fault the only excuse given was, "I cannot help myself. I am not my own keeper." This seemed to Fuller to be a feeble excuse, and he informed Mr. Eve, the minister of the church. Mr. Eve said that man was able to keep himself from open sins, though he had no power to do things spiritually good. As far as outward acts were concerned, man had power both to obey the will of God and to disobey it.

¹ Pp. 566-567.

The church took up the matter, first as an issue of discipline, and then as a question of theology. The offender was excluded from membership, his excuse being regarded as an aggravation of the offence. The theological debate on "the power of sinful men to do the will of God and to keep themselves from sin"² caused a serious division in the Church, and resulted in Mr. Eve leaving. Fuller, regarded by the members as "a babe in religion,"³ was not particularly involved in the theological controversy, but he was greatly exercised in mind and heart by the whole matter. He said: "I never look back upon these contentions but with strong feelings. They were to me the wormwood and the gall of my youth; my soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. But though, during these unpleasant disputes, there were many hard thoughts and hard words on almost all hands, yet they were ultimately *the means of leading my mind into those views of Divine truth which have since appeared in the principal part of my writings.*"⁴ The words in italics are particularly significant in tracing the development of Fuller's theology.

In the controversy many members of the church said that the records of Scripture proved that the best men in the sacred story never assumed that they had power to keep themselves from evil, but prayed for keeping grace. Without it earth would be filled with wickedness and men would be devils. The restraint of evil must be ascribed entirely to God, and never to man. Mr. Eve in reply made a distinction between internal power and external power. As far as things spiritually good were concerned man had no power. Nevertheless, a certain external obedience to God could be rendered. He supported his case also with texts, pointing out that the Bible contained many exhortations which assume that we have power to give heed to them. "If we had no power to comply with them," he asked, "why were they given us?"⁵

As a result of this controversy Andrew Fuller found himself beginning to discern the horns of a dilemma. If man were an accountable being, some kind of power must belong to him. "If we were like stocks or stones or literally dead, like men in a burying ground, we should with no more propriety than they be commanded to perform any duty; if we were mere machines, there could be no sin chargeable upon us."⁶ On the other hand, the plain affirmation of the Bible was that "the way of man is not in himself."⁷ The best of men do not reckon their goodness to be a consequence of their own wisdom and their own effort. They

² A. G. Fuller, *Memoirs*, p. xx. (One volume edition of Fuller's Works.)

³ *Ibid.* p. xx. ⁴ *Ibid.* p. xxxi.

⁵ A. G. Fuller, *Op. cit.*, p. xxxi.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. xxxi. ⁷ *Jeremiah* x, 23.

ascribe it to God "Who worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure."⁸

Joseph Diver, a friend of Andrew Fuller in the Soham Church, also had some consciousness of the dilemma, but he tended to emphasise Divine grace to the exclusion of human responsibility. He suggested that all the precepts of the Bible should be turned into prayers rather than used as proof texts of human sufficiency. "All our conformity to the Divine precepts is of grace," he told his young friend. "It will never do to argue from our obligations against our dependence, nor from our dependence on grace against our obligations to duty. If it were not for the restraining goodness and preserving grace of God, we should be a kind of devils, and earth would resemble hell."⁹

The problem thus posed of determining exactly the relation between the grace of God and the responsibility of man in the salvation of the race is at the heart of Calvinist controversy. Andrew Fuller saw clearly what had not been seen in his denomination for a long time, that it was necessary to say something about *both*. To emphasise the first at the expense of the second is to create the stiff hyper-Calvinism which paralysed the Particular Baptists in the latter part of the eighteenth century. To emphasise human responsibility only is to veer towards Arminianism or humanism. Because he does emphasise both, balancing them over against one another, Fuller may rightly be given the name of Evangelical Calvinist.

In thinking of Fuller as a Calvinist not enough attention has been given to his knowledge of John Calvin's writings. When the Kettering man's works are read with this in mind certain interesting conclusions may be formed. (i) He does not object to the label "Calvinist," providing it is used in terms of John Calvin. (ii) He defends Calvin and Calvinism, and treats the Genevan as authoritative, often at those points where he (Fuller) differed from the eighteenth century high Calvinism. (iii) Calvin's writings are quoted, (iv) his words are frequently echoed, and (v) his leading doctrines are expounded and defended. Some of the evidence for these conclusions must be offered.

(i) Although Andrew Fuller was no lover of labels which neatly classified men, yet he was willing, for the sake of convenience, to be described as a "Calvinist." He made this plain in his *Reply to the Observations of Philanthropos*, when he wrote: "I never desire to affix to an honest man a name by which he would not call himself. For my own part, though I never mean to set up any man as a standard of faith, and though in some things I think differently from Calvin, yet as I agree with him in the main, . . . and

⁸ *Philippians* ii, 13.

⁹ A. G. Fuller, *Op. cit.* p. cxi.

as it served to avoid unnecessary circumlocution, I have used the term Calvinist, and have no objection to being so called by others."¹⁰

(ii) Fuller is prompt to defend Calvin and Calvinism against unfair criticism. In his *Reply to Dr. Toulmin* he says that criticism and scorn have been poured upon Calvinism. "Preachers, writers, and reviewers, of almost every description have thought themselves at liberty to inveigh against the gloomy, licentious, and blasphemous doctrines of Calvin!"¹¹ Yet little hurt has come to Calvinist Christians as a result of these misrepresentations, for their deeds speak more loudly than the critics' words.

In discussing the inevitable case of Servetus, Fuller points out that "persecution for religious principles was not at that time peculiar to any party of Christians, but common to all, whenever they were invested with civil power. It was an error, and a detestable one, but it was the error of the age."¹²

Fuller charges his critics with not knowing Calvin as well as they ought. In Part III of *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*, he says: "Neither Augustine nor Calvin, who each in his day defended predestination, and the other doctrines connected with it, ever appear to have thought of denying it to be the duty of every sinner who has heard the Gospel to repent and believe in Jesus Christ."¹³ Further on he suggests that the critics would have to call Calvin's writings Arminian! In the Letter on Calvinism he states that Booth's opinions on imputation and substitution are not those of Calvin or of Calvinists during the sixteenth century.¹⁴

(iii) On a number of occasions the writings of Calvin are quoted by Fuller. There are eight references to the Institutes, quotations being in the main identical with Norton's translation. There are six other brief references to writings of Calvin, mainly Commentaries. The Commentary on the Fourth Gospel takes up three of these references.

(iv) There are many echoes of words of Calvin in various places in the writings of Fuller. Their respective Commentaries on Genesis have many things in common, particularly in the early chapters. For example, in commenting on *Genesis i. 26*, Calvin declares¹⁵ that Paul "made this image to consist in 'righteousness and true holiness'," while Fuller,¹⁶ who distinguishes the image as partly natural and partly moral, says, "the latter consisted in 'righteousness and true holiness'." Again, they are in agreement about God's shutting the door of the Ark,¹⁷ and about the Flood

¹⁰ Fuller's *Works*, p. 210. ¹¹ Fuller's *Works*, p. 114.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 75. ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 167 ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 323.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. I, p. 94.

¹⁶ Fuller's *Works*, p. 349.

¹⁷ Calvin, Vol. I, p. 272; Fuller, p. 362.

being a type of baptism.¹⁸ They agree about the rainbow existing before it is made a token of the covenant.¹⁹

The most remarkable parallel between the sixteenth century Reformer and the eighteenth century Baptist is in the first article of the Confession of Faith which Fuller offered the church at Kettering on October 7th, 1783, on the occasion of his induction as minister. Almost every word can be found in Calvin's Commentary on *Psalm xix*. The similarity is best seen when the two passages are set out in parallel columns. Words and phrases common to both are in italics.

Fuller

*"When I consider the heavens and the earth, with their vast variety, it gives me to believe the existence of a God of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness, that made and upholds them all. Had there been no written revelation of God given to us, I should have been without excuse if I had denied or refused to glorify him as God."*²⁰

Calvin

"When a man, from beholding and contemplating the heavens has been brought to acknowledge God he will learn also to reflect upon and to admire his wisdom and power . . . In the first verse, the Psalmist repeats one thing twice, according to his usual manner. He introduces the heavens as witnesses and preachers of the glory of God, attributing to the dumb creatures a quality which, strictly speaking does not belong to it, in order the more severely to upbraid men for their ingratitude, if they should pass over so clear a testimony with unheeding ears . . ."

"When we behold the heavens we cannot but be elevated by the contemplation of them, to Him Who is their great Creator; and the beautiful arrangement, and wonderful variety . . . cannot but furnish us with an evident proof of His providence. Scripture, indeed, makes known to us the time and manner of the creation; but the heavens themselves, although God should say nothing on the subject, proclaims loudly and distinctly enough that they have been fashioned by his hands: and this in itself abundantly suffices to bear testimony to men of His glory. As soon as we acknowledge God to be the Supreme Architect Who has erected the beauteous fabric of the universe, our minds must necessarily be ravished with wonder at

¹⁸ Calvin, Vol. I, p. 273; Fuller, p. 363

¹⁹ Calvin, Vol. I, p. 299; Fuller, p. 364.

²⁰ The whole Confession is given in Dr. Ryland's *Memoirs of Fuller*, pp. 99-109.

his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power.

"Although God should not speak a single word to men yet the orderly and useful succession of days and nights eloquently proclaims the glory of God and that there is now left to men no pretext for ignorance."²¹

(v) What Fuller would call "the leading sentiments" of John Calvin are regularly defended and expounded in the Kettering man's writings. Election and predestination are never doubted. In his Confession of Faith, given at Kettering, in Article VIII, it is explicitly stated, "I believe the doctrine of eternal, personal election and predestination."²² The doctrine is emphasised in various ways in different writings, and defended against the usual criticism of caprice. This criticism is dealt with at length in the introductory remarks in the first Letter in *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Compared*. Dr. Priestley is quoted as having used the words "arbitrary predestination," and Fuller comments: "The term *arbitrary* conveys the idea of caprice; and, in this connexion, denotes that in predestination, according to the Calvinistic notion of it, God resolves upon the fates of men, and appoints them to this or that without any *reason* for so doing. But there is no justice in this representation. There is no decree in the Divine mind that we consider as void of reason. . . . The sovereignty of God is a wise, and not a capricious sovereignty."²³

While insisting on the Divine decrees as an article of faith, Fuller is very careful about their treatment. He says in his Diary for 30th August, 1780, "We have bewildered and lost ourselves by taking the decrees of God as rules of action."²⁴

Andrew Fuller shocked his Baptist contemporaries by his evangelical zeal, but it was a kind of shock therapy which brought new life to the denomination. His earliest preaching experiences encouraged him to invite his hearers to receive the word of grace, and his first book was a full-scale justification of this practice. It is interesting to notice how he was most careful to make plain to the church at Kettering at the beginning of his ministry there, that it was his intention to address sinners and invite them to come to Christ. As a man of rugged honesty he would not have the congregation think he believed something other than he did, and so in his Confession of Faith he stressed this in Articles XI, XII, and XV.

The emphasis that Fuller placed on human responsibility, and

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, Vol. I, pp. 308, 309.

²² Ryland, *Op. cit.* p. 103.

²³ Fuller, *Works*, p. 52.

²⁴ Quoted by Ryland, *Op. cit.* p. 141.

on man's inability to respond as a "criminal inability,"²⁵ is to be found also in Calvin, in the Institutes. In Book II, chapter 8, section ii, we read: "Whatever His demands from us may be, as He can only require what is right, we are under a natural obligation to obey. Our inability to do so is our own fault."

Man's response to the invitation to repent and to come to Christ is not simply a wise human decision, a balancing of the arguments for and against, and thinking that those for are more cogent. The decision is itself a work of grace. In his *Exposition of Passages relating to the Unpardonable Sin*, Fuller writes: "The only efficient cause of a sinner's being brought to repentance, and so to forgiveness, is the almighty and sovereign influence of the Holy Spirit."²⁶

Fuller justifies his evangelism over against his Calvinism mainly in terms of a humble confession that man does not know everything. He believes that there is a consistency between the Divine decrees and human responsibility, but doubts whether he personally can explain it. "Whether it can be accounted for at all, so as to enable us clearly to comprehend it, I cannot tell. Be that as it may, it does not distress me: I believe in both, because both appear to me to be plainly revealed."²⁷

This same point is made in Part III of *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation*. He says that if he finds two doctrines in the Bible which seem to clash he does not regard it as right to hold to the one and despise the other. It is necessary to take both. "The truth is, there are but two ways for us to take: one is to reject them both, and the Bible with them, on account of its inconsistencies; the other is to embrace them both, concluding that, as they are both revealed in the Scriptures, they are both true and both consistent, and that it is owing to the darkness of our understandings that they do not appear so to us."²⁸

Fuller is insistent that his calling sinners to repentance is not something utterly new in Calvinistic writers. He points out that there was no writer of eminence before the eighteenth century who wished to deny the duty of man in general to believe in Christ. He counters the criticism that his teaching tended to introduce the doctrine of general redemption, and says, concerning the death of Christ: "If I speak of it irrespective of the purpose of the Father and the Son as to the objects who should be saved by it, referring merely to what it is in itself sufficient for, and declared in the gospel to be adapted to, I should think I answered the question in a Scriptural way in saying, it was for sinners as sinners. But if

²⁵ *Op. cit.* p. 106. (Fuller's Confession of Faith.)

²⁶ Fuller, *Works*, p. 506.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 229.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 168.

I have respect to the purpose of the Father in giving his Son to die, and to the design of Christ in laying down his life, I should answer, It was for his elect only."²⁹

It is right that attention should be given again to Andrew Fuller and his thought at the time of the bicentenary of his birth. He combines in his massive theology some of the great insights of Christendom. There are those assurances which come from a profound belief in the sovereignty of God, Whose purposes are certain and never fail; there is also that tender concern for souls which is of the essence of love. Andrew Fuller, the Evangelical Calvinist, has something important to teach an age that is so uncertain of itself as this one is.

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²⁹ Fuller, Works, p. 313.

Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru (Transactions of the Welsh Baptist Historical Society) 1952-53, has articles by Dr. T. Richards on Baptist registers in Somerset House; there are also biographical notes on William Harries (1830-1897), David Thomas (1756-1840), and an account of the church at Ffynnon, Pem.

The Public Worship of God, by Henry Sloane Coffin. (Independent Press, 12s. 6d.)

The first English edition, in 1950, of this excellent book was noticed in this journal at the time of its publication. Now a second impression (four shillings dearer) has been issued, and to all who share in any way in the conduct of religious services it may be warmly commended as one of the most useful, readable and enriching books of its kind on this important subject. It deserves a wide and continuing circulation.