

# Andrew Fuller and Fullerism : A Study in Evangelical Calvinism

## 1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DOCTRINE

IT is not surprising that in a century which could produce such spiritual giants as Whitefield and the Wesleys, there were other truly great men, whose names are but little known to us today, and whose greatness has been overshadowed by that of the Wesley brothers. Though the contribution of the founders of Methodism to the Christian Church was outstanding in every way, it is salutary to remember these other champions of evangelical religion in the eighteenth century. One of the most notable of them was Andrew Fuller. Born in 1754, of humble parents, he received no formal education, yet by the grace of God and sheer hard work became a respected leader among the Particular Baptists, and an able defender of Christian orthodoxy against the rationalist tendencies of his day. Amongst Baptists he will always be remembered as a great missionary statesman, the friend of William Carey, one of the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society, and its first secretary. This study, however, is primarily concerned with his importance as a theologian. Ryland considered him "the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to the Baptist denomination,"<sup>1</sup> while W. T. Whitley spoke of him as a "great theologian."<sup>2</sup> Theologically his main interest was the doctrine of salvation. So far as he was concerned, salvation was the fundamental theme of religion, and certainly it was the main theme of the theology which he worked out and expounded. Any system of theology or philosophy which appeared to him to undermine the gospel of salvation, or to prejudice the honour and glory of the Saviour, he vigorously exposed. Hence the numerous controversies in which he was involved throughout his life.

This doctrine of salvation, or "Fullerism" as it came to be called, is important for a number of reasons and will well repay careful study. It is for instance, a matter of interest and significance that "Fullerism" was worked out in the context of a busy pastorate. Fuller was not technically a scholar at all, but then theology is not merely, perhaps not even primarily, an academic discipline. The tremendous theological problems that he grappled

with are essentially problems of life and experience. It was because he was a pastor that he was compelled also to be a theologian. Again, "Fullerism" represents the attempt of an eighteenth century Calvinist to rethink his doctrine in the light of the changing thought climate of the age. Its teaching did not outrage the moral sense, at the same time doing justice to the greatness and forethought of God.

The greatest merit of "Fullerism" however, is that it provided the theological basis for the missionary movement of Carey, and for the evangelical outreach of the churches at home. It showed the compatibility of evangelical missionary endeavour with Calvinistic theology. Indeed, it proved that Calvinism itself as distinct from the "false-Calvinism" which was common in the eighteenth century, was essentially a missionary theology. Carey, Fuller and the other founders of the B.M.S. were not concerned about the salvation of the heathen because they were better than their creed, but because they were true to their creed. In fact, "Fullerism" became "a revivifying impulse north, south, east and west,"<sup>33</sup> in a section of the Christian Church which had been scarcely touched by the Methodist movement. Later we shall examine the various aspects of Fuller's doctrine in an attempt to understand his importance as a theologian. In this article however, some account is called for, of that theology which was largely responsible for the spiritual paralysis and decay amongst Particular Baptist churches. Then, we must trace the stages by which Fuller came to work out his doctrine of salvation, noticing various influences upon his thinking.

Historians are agreed that religious life in England was at a very low ebb during the greater part of the eighteenth century. Even N. Sykes who feels that to a considerable degree the lethargy of the Church of England and of the Protestant Dissenters has been exaggerated and even caricatured, in order to bring out more brightly the Methodist Revival, admits that "a temper of pessimism had replaced the earlier optimism" and that "the eighteenth century witnessed a marked decline of the religious fervour of its predecessor amongst all Churches."<sup>34</sup> In the Established Church scepticism, apathy, worldliness, nepotism, pluralities and many other kindred evils abounded. This was the Age of Reason, and under the influence of Deism the supernatural in Christianity was whittled down to the barest minimum. Philosophy under the influence of Locke and Hume became sceptical. Arianism was rampant and affected every religious body, especially the Presbyterians. Both Arianism and Socinianism worked havoc among churches of the General Baptist persuasion. Indeed, as A. C. Underwood has said, the Dissenters generally, instead of advancing after the Toleration Act of 1689, "stagnated and even retreated."<sup>35</sup> This was in all, a period of narrow introspection, theological hair-splitting, irrelevant contro-

versy and heresy hunting. In short, it was a time of spiritual stagnation.

This was a cause of unspeakable concern and sorrow to Andrew Fuller, as frequent entries in his diary as well as his public utterances, clearly show.<sup>6</sup> A tree is known by its fruit, and a man's theology is inevitably reflected in his whole outlook and conduct. Consequently, historians have rightly blamed the hyper-Calvinism which was all but universal among Particular Baptists of the period, for the spiritual deadness of their churches. This was indeed, Fuller's own verdict. The exponents of this theology (the "non-invitation, non-application scheme" as Ivimey called it), did not hold the doctrine of election any more strongly or logically than other Calvinists. Nor is it true to say that they held the supralapsarian form of the doctrine while the moderates were sublapsarianists.<sup>7</sup> What in fact distinguished the false Calvinism with which Fuller had to contend, from true Calvinism, was the fact that it was characterised by a number of false emphases which led inevitably to the obscuring of the great evangelical truths of Christianity, to the abandonment of evangelism in any shape or form, and to the general deterioration of vital religion.

This tradition of hyper-Calvinism among Baptist churches started with John Skepp, who in 1710 became minister of the Curriers' Hall church, in London. The chief prophets of the movement, however, were two Kettering men, John Brine (1703-65), Skepp's successor at Curriers' Hall, and John Gill (1697-1771), described by Spurgeon as "the Coryphaeus of hyper-Calvinism."<sup>8</sup> Both were so afraid of Arminianism and Pelagianism that they made no attempt to awaken the consciences of the unconverted. lest they robbed God of the sole glory of their conversion. Neither was a dangerous Antinomian, though both were called such because of the tendency of their teaching. Fuller considered them both "great and upright men," and Spurgeon, a successor to Gill, maintained that if Gill's followers never went beyond their master they would not go very far astray. The truth seems to be, that in the writings of these and other leading teachers of the hyper-Calvinist school, are to be found statements, emphases and tendencies, in themselves unfortunate, misleading, and even false, but considered in the light of their whole theology, mere blemishes. Such blemishes in themselves are to be deplored, since they had the effect of stifling all evangelistic endeavour in the ministries of their authors. However, the real damage was done by their disciples, who stressed and exaggerated these defects with disastrous consequences so far as the outlook and spiritual life of church-members were concerned. In order to understand aright the character of hyper-Calvinism, and appreciate the reasons for Fuller's revolt, it will be helpful to review briefly the leading ideas of the system.

(1) It was a commonly accepted *inference from the doctrine of the divine decrees*, that it was wrong for Christians to pray for the salvation of their neighbours, ministers for that of their hearers, or parents for that of their children, lest they should prove to be not of the elect, since salvation was intended only for the elect. Indeed, anything directed to the salvation of others was discouraged for that very reason. This was to substitute the *secret* for the *revealed* will of God as their rule of life and action, a most dangerous thing to do. Here is an instance of the disciples going beyond their teachers, for both Gill and Brine had emphasized the dangers of this mode of thinking. Brine in *The Certain Efficacy of the Death of Christ Asserted* (1743), and Gill in *The Cause of God and Truth* as well as in his *Body of Divinity*, distinguished between God's *commanding will*, revealed in His Word, which is the rule of men's duty, and His *decreeing will*, which is the rule of His own actions.<sup>9</sup> The popular high-Calvinist interpretation of the decrees, however, took little or no account of such a distinction. Consequently a doctrine which should have a humbling effect on thought and conduct frequently led to spiritual pride, introspection, and even practical antinomianism, as well as to an abandonment of evangelistic zeal and effort.

(2) Another common yet misleading doctrine of hyper-Calvinism was the idea that *nothing spiritually good could be the duty of the unregenerate*.<sup>10</sup> Consequently they were never urged to repent, to believe, to pray, or for that matter to do anything else that was spiritually good. Underlying this mode of thinking was the belief that the same thing cannot be the duty of man and the gift of God, a plausible yet false interpretation of the great principle enunciated by Augustine, *gratia non est gratia nisi omnino gratuita* (grace is not grace unless it is altogether free). A preacher who enforced the duties of religion on either "sinners" or "saints" was regarded as "preaching the law." Some preachers indeed compromised, allowing repentance and faith to be duties but not immediate ones, and directed the unregenerate to pray rather for the Holy Spirit to enable them to repent and believe, though their viewpoint did not differ essentially from that of the extremists. Hyper-Calvinists evaded the plain meaning of the New Testament evidence by allowing their exegesis to be governed by doctrinal pre-suppositions instead of building their doctrine upon the foundation of sound exegesis. Gill, for instance, went to great lengths to explain away the meaning of "all" wherever it occurs in connection with the universal proclamation of the gospel, and studiously avoided the direct commands and exhortations in the Bible, to repent and believe on Christ and be saved.<sup>11</sup>

(3) Very closely related to the doctrine which denied that faith is the duty of those who hear the gospel, was that which asserted

*the necessity of a warrant in order to believe.*<sup>12</sup> Such a warrant, as the word itself indicates, is a qualification conferring on a man the right to believe. Before anyone was entitled to exercise faith in Christ, it was necessary for him to possess what was termed a "divine principle" in his soul. Conviction of sin with its accompanying mental distress was the usual evidence or sign of such a work of grace in a person's life, on account of which he was able to regard himself as one of the elect, and warranted therefore to believe in Christ. Both Gill and Brine considered the gospel to be addressed not to sinners *as sinners*, but *as sensible sinners*, though as Fuller pointed out, Christ's promise of rest was made to men and women, not as heavy laden, but as coming to Him with their burdens.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, this whole idea of a warrant entitling a man to believe, involved a radical re-interpretation of the nature of faith and conversion. Gill and Brine themselves regarded faith in the New Testament sense, as sheer trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Under the influence of the doctrine of the necessity of a warrant however, faith came to be thought of rather as a "persuasion of our interest in Christ and in all the benefits and blessings of His mediation." Such was the view of Mr. L. Wayman of Kimbolton, the author of *The Further Inquiry*, and one that became fairly widespread. Unbelief on the other hand, was the name given to "those fears which occupy the minds of Christians, lest they should miss of salvation at last." This teaching not only reduced a man's conversion to a supposed revelation that he was one of the elect, but led to religious introspection, so that an awakened sinner instead of directing his attention to Christ, would turn his mind inward, to search for evidences of his "conversion."

(4) The evangelical nature of the gospel was further undermined by the doctrine of *Adam's incapacity to believe, or to perform things spiritually good, even before the Fall.*<sup>14</sup> The principle of holiness possessed by man in innocence, it was held, was essentially different from that possessed by believers in Christ. Consequently the gospel, its requirements and its blessings, could in no way concern those children of Adam who were not of the company of the elect. Brine held this viewpoint, defending it with vigour against Alverey Jackson. Gill who formerly held it, abandoned it in contending with the Arminians.

(5) *The law and the gospel were frequently set in the sharpest opposition to one another*, and regarded as completely incompatible with each other. The unregenerate were held to be under a covenant of works, and consequently neither faith nor any other spiritual exercise could be required of them, since such spiritual exercises were marks of the covenant of grace. Conversely believers who were under the covenant of grace felt they had nothing to do with the requirements of the law, and Moses, as the law was

termed, was derided as the enemy of Christ. That this doctrine could easily lead both to theoretical and also to practical antinomianism is clear. More frequently still it led to spiritual lethargy and the failure to invite, command, or exhort men to repent and come to Christ.

(6) Another unscriptural and unevangelical notion of hyper-Calvinism was the doctrine of *eternal justification*. It was commonly alleged that when the Scriptures declare repentance to be necessary to forgiveness, they do not mean forgiveness itself, but a sense of it in the mind. The thing itself was supposed to exist in the secret purpose of God. Justification was considered by many as a gracious purpose in the mind of God, not to impute sin but the righteousness of Christ to an elect sinner. Brine who argued for eternal justification in *Motives to Love and Unity* and also in *A Defence of the Doctrine of Eternal Justification*, distinguished between justification *in foro divino* (in God's court) and justification *in foro conscientiae* (in the court of one's conscience). In God's sight, "even whilst the elect are unconverted they are actually justified and freed from all sin by the death of Christ."<sup>15</sup>

(7) The doctrine of *particular redemption* is one of the foundation doctrines of Calvinism, and means that the peculiar blessings of redemption are imparted only to the elect. As Fuller was to insist, this does not in any sense deny the *sufficiency* of Christ's death as an atonement for the sins of the whole world. Such, however, was the general assumption made by many of the hyper-Calvinist school.<sup>16</sup> Moreover the atonement was commonly interpreted as the literal payment of a debt, and in terms of the crudest substitutionary theory.

(8) Closely associated with this crudely literal doctrine of substitution was a *doctrine of imputation*,<sup>17</sup> which in its presentation was often extravagant and misleading. Language was used which if vivid and forceful was at the same time most inaccurate, and frequently gave rise to an attitude of mind in its exponents, which was at variance with the spirit of the gospel. This conception of imputation may be traced to Dr. Tobias Crisp (1600-43), an Arminian turned Calvinist, who with the characteristic zeal of a convert, went beyond Calvin at a number of points. Many of his statements while admitting of an orthodox interpretation, were open to the charge of going beyond the truth. These statements suggested a literal transfer of character. Thus Christ was called a "transgressor of the law," and described as "guilty." He was said to be "a sinner, truly a sinner, the greatest of sinners" by imputation. On the other hand, Christians made "righteous" by imputation were described as "fulfillers of the law." The unfortunate implication of this unguarded language was that those who re-

garded themselves as elect and therefore righteous by imputation, felt that they were entitled to *claim* the benefits of salvation as their *right*. Conversely the sufferings of Christ were described and thought of quite literally as punishment for His imputed sins.

These then were the leading ideas and emphases of hyper-Calvinism. It is obvious that in such a theological climate as they produced, any real evangelism was impossible. Fuller, by challenging these basic assumptions held by many of his fellow Baptists, was able to recall his section of the Church to an evangelical doctrine of salvation and to a fervent missionary presentation of the gospel. We must now trace the steps by which he worked out his doctrine of a gospel worthy of all acceptance. Undoubtedly the two most decisive factors in the rise of "Fullerism" were his own keen independent judgment and his thorough-going submission to the teaching of Scripture. Ryland speaks of his "originality,"<sup>18</sup> though probably "independence" would have been a more accurate word, for he was not original in the sense of originating powerful new insights and ideas. His lack of flashes of insight, however, was more than compensated for by his refusal to accept ideas at second hand, and his thorough and painstaking examination of all the available evidence on any subject. He was not a man to take things for granted. Cherished ideas and presuppositions which others considered beyond investigation were submitted to the closest scrutiny and only accepted if proved to be valid. Probably his Fen upbringing had a great deal to do with his fearless and persistent independence. Certainly he never forgot his youthful resolve never to be an imitator.<sup>19</sup>

Two qualities which he possessed in good measure, namely common-sense and perspicuity, helped him to apply this determination to his theological thinking with real success. His theological independence must be considered in the closest relation to his dependence on the teaching of Scripture. At the beginning of 1780, in "a solemn vow or renewal of covenant with God," he declared, "Lord, thou hast given me a determination to take up no principle at second-hand; but to search for everything at the pure fountain of thy word."<sup>20</sup> Everything was measured by the standard of Scripture, whether it was the teaching of Dan Taylor, Calvin, Vidler or Edwards, or for that matter his own speculative thinking. It was, in fact, because he found that his own and the commonly accepted doctrine of justification "did not quadrate with the Scriptures," that he began an intensive study of the doctrine of salvation, which led ultimately to the publication of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. Three other factors had a bearing on the development of his theology—his own experience, his link with the Northamptonshire Association, and his study of the writings of Jonathan Edwards.

## (i) His early religious experience

Though still only a young man of twenty-one, by the time of his ordination as pastor of the Soham church in the spring of 1775, he had already begun to face up to questions which are usually the concern of mature philosophers and theologians. Although at this stage he was only groping for light and truth, he had begun to realise the need for a theology which was consistent with Scripture and the demands of common-sense, which recognised the sovereignty of God, yet at the same time allowed for human responsibility. He was in fact, forced to think about these matters on account of four things.

(a) *His own personal religious experience culminating in his conversion and baptism in 1770.*<sup>21</sup> Brought up in the Soham church under Mr. Eve, a preacher "high in his sentiments or tinged with false Calvinism," he heard little or nothing of Christ's offer of salvation to sinners. By reading and reflection he was sometimes "strongly impressed in a way of conviction," especially regarding the boyhood signs of lying, cursing and swearing, when he became extremely unhappy. His reading was confined to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Grace Abounding*, and to Ralph Erskine's *Gospel Sonnets*, which caused him to weep much but led to no "radical change" of heart. Whenever he experienced such convictions he believed himself to be converted, especially when in his depression a text of Scripture was suggested to his mind—a sure sign to a hyper-Calvinist of "a promise coming immediately from God." Such was his experience between 1767 and 1769, and realising that sin's dominion over him had increased rather than diminished, he concluded that though a converted man, he must be a backslider. In the autumn of 1769 however, his conviction of sin was so strong that the very idea of forgiveness seemed futile, and he was on the point of giving himself up to despair and sin, believing that he could but be lost. The thought, however, made him shudder. "I could not," he said, "bear the thought of plunging myself into endless ruin." It was then that Job's resolution, "though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," occurred to him, and remembering the case of Esther who *contrary to the law*, that is without a "warrant," entered the king's presence at the hazard of her life, he determined to flee to Christ for refuge, though he might perish in the attempt. Thus he found salvation. His pre-conversion and conversion experience show clearly the springs of his revolt against the theology of the day, and the origin of his own doctrine of salvation. His own experience of the grace of God in salvation did not tally with the commonly accepted doctrine. At three points in particular the orthodox structure began to be undermined: the falsity of the doctrine of the necessity of a warrant to believe was



demonstrated, faith was shown to be not a persuasion of a man's "interest" in Christ, but a coming to Him and a believing in Him, and conversion was seen to consist essentially in a change of outlook and conduct.

(b) *The controversy in the Soham Church.*<sup>22</sup> This "unhappy affair" took place in the autumn of that same year, and occasioned a breach between pastor and people which terminated in his leaving them. Though a mere lad of sixteen, Fuller was "much concerned" in this episode. One of the members was guilty of drinking to excess. Fuller being one of the first to hear of it spoke to him of the evil of his conduct. His answer was that he was not his own keeper, a "base excuse" so it seemed to the indignant youth, who replied that he *could* keep himself from such sins as these. Fuller was told that he was young and did not understand the deceitfulness of his own heart. The offender was excluded by the church-meeting, which went on to debate the theological implications of the incident. Whereas the pastor distinguished between *internal* and *external* power, allowing that men have no power to do what is spiritually good, but maintaining that they could yield external obedience, the members insisted that such a view was tantamount to arrogating to ourselves the power of keeping ourselves from evil. They backed up their case with texts such as Psalm 19: 13, Jeremiah 10: 23, and 2 Chronicles 32: 31. The details of the controversy are well enough known. It is sufficient here to notice that these contentions which Fuller confessed were the wormwood and gall of his youth, were ultimately the means of leading him to "those views of divine truth" which afterwards appeared in his writings.

(c) *Fuller's friendship with Joseph Diver.*<sup>23</sup> Baptized at the same time as Fuller was a "wise and good man," about forty years of age, named Joseph Diver. He had for a number of years given himself to reading, reflection, and the search for truth. A very close friendship between Diver and Fuller sprang up, which only ended with Diver's death in 1780. Diver, who soon became the leading deacon in the Soham church, more than anyone else encouraged young Fuller to become a preacher and set his feet on the path to the ministry. Fuller always valued his advice and opinion. So far as Fuller's theological search was concerned, Diver was not able to throw a great deal of light on the problems which were perplexing his young friend. He provided however, something infinitely more valuable; he was prepared to encourage a young man who was trying to clear his mind on important issues. Above all he was a sympathetic listener, and Fuller knew that he could think aloud in Diver's company without being condemned as a heretic, or dismissed as too young to dabble in high theology. Diver always allowed the

younger man to think his own way through the mazes of doctrinal subtlety, only offering his own point of view when he thought it would help.

(d) *His early reading.*<sup>24</sup> Fuller's earliest reading was almost entirely confined to Bunyan and Ralph Erskine. Between his baptism and ordination however, he made a study of Brine and Gill, reading the latter's *Cause of God and Truth*, as well as part of his *Body of Divinity*. At the time of the Soham controversy he thought he had discovered the clue to the dispute in Gill's distinction between *the power of our hand* and *the power of our heart*, though he was soon disillusioned about this. One thing soon became evident as he waded through Gill, and that was that Gill's system was very different from that of Bunyan, though his assumption at this stage was that though Bunyan was a "great and good man," he was not so clear in his understanding of the gospel as Gill, since he "held with the free offer of salvation to sinners without distinction." About 1774 he became perplexed with the theological subtleties of John Johnson of Liverpool who denied that God had decreed to permit sin, and taught that the purposes of grace would have been executed upon the elect had there been no fall. Fuller was impressed by his concern to vindicate the Creator from the charge of being the author of sin, though not by his idle speculations.

A few months after his ordination two other works came his way which were concerned with the very problem which was occupying his attention. The first was a pamphlet entitled *The Modern Question*, by Dr. Abraham Taylor, which proved that the exhortations of John the Baptist, Christ and His apostles, to men and women to repent and believe, were concerned with spiritual repentance and faith, "inasmuch as they were connected with the remission of sins." The other work was a sermon on Romans 10: 3, by John Martin, entitled *The Rock of Offence, the Sinner's Last and only Refuge*, on the causes and consequences of not submitting to the righteousness of God. Such unbelief he maintained, is the result of wilful ignorance, pride and prejudice. "Our want of power (to trust in Christ) is, generally speaking, want of will, and want of love." Fuller recognised the force of the argument. Both books in fact caused him much heart-searching, impressing on him yet more urgently the need for a satisfactory doctrine of salvation.

## (ii) Fuller and the Northampton Association

Fuller's ordination brought him into contact with the Northampton Association, which covered a much larger area than the county of Northamptonshire. This contact marks the second stage in Fuller's theological pilgrimage. Robert Hall of Arnsby and other

ministers belonging to the Association took part in his ordination, thus beginning a relationship which played an important part in the moulding of his theology. There were three main ways in which this relationship was of help to him : (a) it provided a contact with other ministers whose thinking was tending in the same direction as his own, (b) it provided an evangelical atmosphere conducive to such thinking, and (c) it introduced him to the writings of Jonathan Edwards, the New England theologian, philosopher and revivalist. These three factors were so closely inter-related in Fuller's experience that it would be misleading to consider them separately. On his ordination day the main topic of conversation with Hall had been the controversy at Soham. The theological question underlying this controversy was one about which Hall himself had done a great deal of thinking. Hall, a convinced Calvinist and therefore a firm believer in the "sovereign freeness of grace" and the necessity and efficacy of divine influence in man's salvation, yet refused to follow those of his fellow Calvinists who made the "moral impotence" of sinners an excuse for slighting the call of the gospel. In a sermon (later enlarged and published as *Help to Zion's Travellers*), preached before the Association at Northampton, on May 26th, 1779, Hall dealt with many of the practical and doctrinal stumbling blocks which were hindering the progress of "Zion's traveller," revealing that he too had been confronted with the very questions which troubled the young Fuller, and was answering them in much the same way.

Hall soon became "father and friend" to Fuller, indeed at the ordination he recommended to him Edwards's *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will*, as "the most able performance on the power of man to do the will of God." Unfortunately Fuller confused Edwards with Dr. John Edwards of Cambridge, whose *Veritas Redux* he read, though it did not exactly answer to Hall's recommendation. It was not till 1777 that he discovered and rectified his mistake.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile he became acquainted with two other ministers, John Sutcliff of Olney, and John Ryland then of College Lane, Northampton, who like Hall were beginning to question the hyper-Calvinism of the day. Thus encouraged, the young pastor applied himself with vigour, determination and prayer, to a thorough examination of the scriptural teaching on the subjects perplexing him, particularly the doctrine of justification. He soon came to realise that since justification is the opposite of condemnation, and since condemnation is the same as *being under the curse*, justification must mean *being under grace*. The notion of eternal justification is therefore without biblical foundation. The preaching of the Baptist, of Christ and His apostles, and the teaching of the second Psalm similarly convinced him of the falsity of the "non-invitation, non-application" kind of preaching. Accordingly, during his closing

years at Soham a change took place in his own manner of preaching, as he became increasingly certain of the truth of his new doctrine.<sup>26</sup>

### (iii) Fuller and Jonathan Edwards

Apart from the Bible and his own religious experience, the principal influence on Fuller's thinking was that of Jonathan Edwards. In 1777 he read the *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will*, and thereafter a considerable number of Edwards's works, especially the *Treatise concerning the Religious Affections*, the *Life and Journal of David Brainerd*, the *Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer*, the *Treatise on Original Sin*, his *Remarks on Important Theological Controversies*, and his *Sermon on Justification*.<sup>27</sup> One reason why Edwards made such an impression on Fuller's thinking, was that he brought him not only theological enlightenment but personal spiritual edification as well. Indeed, he became to Fuller a kind of *pastor pastorum*, loved and respected by one whom he had never seen. Some account of the nature and extent of his influence on Fuller's thinking must now be given.

(a) Before all else *Edwards showed Fuller the possibility of an evangelical Calvinism*, at a time when his own study, reflection and experience were leading him in the same direction. Edwards and his followers, like Bunyan, while remaining faithful to the main emphases of Calvinism were concerned with the salvation of sinners and the practical aspects of Christianity. Moreover, they clearly experienced the blessing of God on their ministries. Fuller's first impressions of New England theology gained between 1777 and 1781, certainly encouraged him to persevere in those studies which were leading him to break with the hyper-Calvinism in which he had been nurtured, and adopt the point of view expressed in *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.

(b) Edwards's *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will* provided Fuller with *a philosophical basis for his doctrine of a gospel worthy of all acceptance*. The influence of this book was, in fact, probably the most powerful and important extra-biblical influence upon him. This was principally because he read it at a time when he was working out his theology, and was urgently seeking some such basis for his evangelical thinking as the *Inquiry* provided. The missing link, or to change the metaphor, the key that unlocked the door into evangelical freedom for Fuller, was Edwards's distinction between *moral* and *natural* ability.<sup>28</sup> Natural ability, or "the enjoyment of rational faculties, bodily powers and external advantages," is that which makes a man accountable to God. Moral ability on the other hand, is "a disposition to use our natural ability to right purposes." A lack of this disposition means that we *cannot* love and

obey God as we ought, since "a man, while he continues under the dominion of aversion to another is as incapable of doing him a kind action as if he were literally bound in chains." Nevertheless, it is blameworthy, for it amounts to an *unwillingness* to believe, and "a bad will, or an evil disposition of heart, itself is wickedness."<sup>29</sup> This distinction became one of the foundation stones of Fuller's doctrine. It provided a cogent answer to Arminian cavillings about the Calvinist doctrine of liberty undermining all true morality; it effectually silenced the convenient excuses of those who refused to obey either law or gospel, because they were "not able"; and above all, it left ministers with no alternative but to impress upon their hearers the universal obligation of repentance and faith.

(c) *Edwards confirmed Fuller's doctrine of salvation at a number of points, especially regarding the nature of faith and Christian experience.* The influence of the *Treatise concerning the Religious Affections* is easily detected, for instance, in the Association circular *The Excellence and Utility of Hope*<sup>30</sup> (1782), and in the Association sermon *The Nature and Importance of Walking by Faith*<sup>31</sup> (1784). The only reliable evidence of grace in the heart, and therefore of election, is a change of nature, outlook and conduct. The "impression" of Scripture passages upon a man's mind provided no evidence of saving grace, unless accompanied by a tendency to humble, sanctify and lead him to God. Faith, in fact, is nothing less than a belief and acceptance of the gospel. Edwards's teaching on faith was later to help Fuller when he challenged the Sandemanian idea of faith as merely *notitia* (notional understanding), by stressing its holy nature. Seven pages of his *Strictures on Sandemanianism* are in fact devoted to a quotation from Edwards, showing that spiritual knowledge is essentially "sensible knowledge" and not simply "notional understanding."<sup>32</sup>

(d) Fuller himself acknowledged that *his greatest human instruction on the subject of justification was received from President Edwards.* The latter's *Discourse on Justification by Faith Alone* was a kind of authoritative text-book from which he received much help and light.<sup>33</sup> Having abandoned Gill's doctrine of eternal justification, Fuller came to regard justification as a "forensic term," a "judicial thing," the "act of a judge." That is to say, Edwards and Fuller were in agreement as to the nature of justification, and certainly in the following particulars Fuller followed his teacher.

1. Justification involves not only "acquittance from wrath," which is simply its negative aspect, but also, positively "admittance to a title to that glory which is the reward of righteousness."<sup>34</sup>

2. We are not justified by any "works" of our own, not even by our sincere obedience, but altogether and only by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.<sup>35</sup>

3. Rewards, even to the extent of different degrees of glory, are compatible with the doctrine of justification *sola gratia*. God regards our good deeds "in Christ," and rewards them "for Christ's sake."<sup>36</sup>

4. Faith is the only condition of justification and salvation, not as being in itself meritorious, but as that which unites us with Christ.<sup>37</sup>

5. That faith which is the *sine qua non* of justification implies repentance.<sup>38</sup>

(e) *Yet another point at which Edwards's influence was felt was with regard to Christ's atoning death*, though here the influence was indirect, being mediated through the writings of his followers. With Edwards's theological system as a foundation, his disciples, notably his son Jonathan, worked out a "governmental" theory of the atonement. Like the Arminian theologian Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) they denied that the atonement was the payment of a debt. It was rather a satisfaction to the general justice of God, establishing the authority of the divine law, supporting the divine government, at the same time making it possible for God to exercise his mercy in the pardon of sinners. So far as Fuller was concerned, it was once again largely a matter of making explicit what he had already come by reflection and the study of the Bible to believe. It was not until his controversy with Dan Taylor (1787) that he came to reject the usual hyper-Calvinist interpretation of particular redemption in terms of a *quid pro quo* doctrine of substitution: i.e., one of exact numerical equivalence. Such a view, he realised, exposed the doctrine of salvation through the death of Christ to the charge of immorality, and also made salvation a matter of right rather than of grace.<sup>39</sup> Recognising therefore, that Christ's death in itself was a sufficient atonement for the sins of the world, and placing the particularity of redemption in the sovereignty of its application, he reached a fresh understanding of the atonement, following closely the doctrine being propounded by the New England theologians.

(f) *Edwards helped Fuller reach a clearer understanding of imputation*. The word *impute* properly means to charge, reckon, or place to the account of someone that which belongs to him. Thus many hyper-Calvinists taught a literal transfer of our sins to Christ, and of his merits to us. Following Crisp they spoke of Christ being guilty by imputation, and believed in the possibility of a transfer of character. Such was Fuller's view at the time of his controversy with Taylor. He had not then given much thought to the subject, however, and when he began to consider it closely, in the light of Edwards's teaching on justification, he abandoned a *real* for a *figurative* interpretation, understanding it as the reckon-

ing of sin or righteousness to another's account *as though* it were his own. Only the beneficial or detrimental effects and consequences can be transferred. The application of this concept to the doctrine of justification was straightforward enough, but it was a long time before he was completely clear in his own mind about its application to the doctrine of original sin and the relation between Adam and his posterity. It is not surprising therefore that Abraham Booth misunderstood him, for between 1787 and 1802 his ideas underwent a change.<sup>40</sup> Without attempting a detailed account of his change of views, we may note that his final opinion was essentially the same as that of Edwards's *Treatise on Original Sin*, though he made surprisingly little use of its reasoning in reaching his conclusions, his main help coming rather from the president on justification.

(g) The *Humble Attempt* provided him with an *optimistic eschatology*, which encouraged his missionary thinking. That this tract exerted a powerful influence upon Fuller and his friends in the Northamptonshire Association, inspiring the 1784 Prayer Call, is generally recognised. It should not be forgotten, however, that Edwards's plea for fervent prayer arose from his conviction that Antichrist's downfall was imminent, and consequently the future of the Church was bright with promise and opportunity. Fuller was impressed not only with the practical call to prayer, but with the entire eschatology underlying it, which however strange it may seem to us, certainly was an inspiration and incentive to him.

Such in brief is the background to our study of "Fullerism." An account of Fuller's theology as expounded in *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, in his sermons and expositions, and in his practical and controversial writings, will be given in later articles. An attempt will then be made to assess his importance as a theologian.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cited by E. A. Payne, *Baptist Quarterly*, xi, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> W. T. Whitley, *Baptist Quarterly*, I. (Oct., 1922), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, London, 1959, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> N. Sykes, *The English Religious Tradition*, London, 1953, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, London, 1947, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Ryland, *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope, illustrated in the life and death of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 2nd. edn. (1818), pp. 106-7, and Fuller, *Works* (five volume ed., London, 1837), vol. iv, pp. 566ff.

<sup>7</sup> Calvinists equally orthodox and equally evangelical have always been found in both schools of thought. Calvin himself favoured the sublapsarian interpretation while Beza his successor held the supralapsarian view. The former held that God in his decree of election considered man as *creatus et lapsus* (created and fallen), the latter as *creabilis et labilis* (about to be created and liable to fall). Too much ought not to be made of this

distinction, since the former did not maintain that God passed his decree of election *after* man had actually been created and had fallen, but that men were considered in the divine mind from all eternity, in the decree of election, as if they were created and fallen.

<sup>8</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries*, London, 1876, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Brine, *The Certain Efficacy of the Death of Christ Asserted* (1743), p. 151, and Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth*, 3rd edn., London, 1772, p. 154, and *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, London, 1796, vol. i, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> See Fuller, *Works*, vol. ii, p. 47, and Brine, *Motives to Love and Unity among Calvinists*, 2nd edn. (1754), pp. 17, 28.

<sup>11</sup> e.g., *The Cause of God and Truth*, pp. 42, 53, 72, 317, 339.

<sup>12</sup> Brine, *Motives to Love and Unity*, pp. 38-9.

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, *Works*, vol. ii, p. 549n.

<sup>14</sup> Brine, *Motives to Love and Unity*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> Fuller held (*Works*, ii. 531) that nine out of ten high-Calvinists thought like this.

<sup>17</sup> See Fuller, *Works*, vol. ii, pp. 510-11.

<sup>18</sup> Ryland, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

<sup>19</sup> Fuller, *Works*, i. clix.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, i. xxxvi.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, i. x-xviii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, i. xix-xxii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, i. xixff.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, i. xxix-xxx.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, i. xxix.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, i. xxxi-xxxiv.

<sup>27</sup> He also read Bellamy's *True Religion Delineated*. Bellamy was a disciple of Edwards.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards was not the first to make this distinction. It is to be found in *A Discourse of Natural and Moral Impotency* by Joseph Truman (1631-71).

<sup>29</sup> The first edition of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, contained at the end Fuller's general observations on the subject. See pp. 185-196 of the copy in the library of the B.U. Council, which is a reprint made in 1833, of the original (unrevised) edition of 1785. See also pp. 85, 147.

<sup>30</sup> *Works*, iv. 553-566.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, iv. 1-25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 391-6.

<sup>33</sup> See Fuller, *Works*, iv. 222ff.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *Works* (London, 1834, edn. in two vols., pub. Westley & Davis), i. 623, cf. Fuller, *Works*, iv. 224 and i. 637.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 635 cf. Fuller, *Works*, iv. 238, v. 586.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 635, i. 642-3, i. 646, cf. Fuller, *Works*, i. 32, iii. 87, iv. 80, 85, 86, v. 632-5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 624ff., 640, cf. Fuller, *Works*, iv. 230.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, i. 647, cf. Fuller, *Works*, iv. 230-1.

<sup>39</sup> Fuller, *Works*, i. 110-116, ii. 547, iii. 461.

<sup>40</sup> There seem to have been three stages in this change of viewpoint:  
(a) His earlier view, that the union between Adam and his posterity was such that we are actually accountable for his disobedience.

(b) Between 1787 and 1799 he rejected this opinion, and was even considering an interpretation of imputation altogether in terms of "treatment." See his reply to a correspondent (v. 590-93) and an undated MS. (v. 602-5).

(c) His mature view is to be found in *Dialogues, Letters and Essays* (1806), ii. 455ff.