

# Andrew Fuller and Fullerism : A Study in Evangelical Calvinism.

## 4. FULLER AS A THEOLOGIAN

IT remains now to consider Fuller's importance as a theologian. To do so we must seek to understand his significance for his own day, assess his place as a Christian apologist, and discover the permanent value of his thought.

### 1. Fuller as a prophet of evangelical Calvinism

Without doubt Fuller's first claim to recognition arises from the part which he played in liberating his denomination from the tyranny of hyper-Calvinism. The closing years of the eighteenth century and the opening years of the nineteenth were marked by a new upsurge of spiritual life resulting in astonishing advance, contrasting forcibly with the state of affairs described in the first article. His contemporaries—friend and foe alike—were quick to discern that the man primarily responsible for this new outlook and spirit among Particular Baptists was the author of *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. Why should Fuller and his theology have made such an impact upon the thinking of Particular Baptists in this country (to say nothing of his influence upon Calvinists of other denominations here and in America)? The relevance of this question is the more obvious when we remember that he was by no means the first or the only one to resist the insidious influence of hyper-Calvinism. Even during the dark days of hyper-Calvinist supremacy there were individuals and influential individuals at that, who refused to bow the knee to Gill and Brine, and who kept alive in various degrees a moderate evangelical Calvinism. Among them we may mention Andrew Gifford (d.1784), the friend of Whitefield and author of a pamphlet *The Living Water* (1746) appealing to the unconverted to seek God's grace. Alverey Jackson of Barnoldswick published in 1752 a tract, *The Question Answered*, in which he maintained that faith is the duty of those who hear the gospel. Despite his attitude to the Baptist Mission, Benjamin Beddome (1717-98) of Bourton-on-the-Water was a moderate, so too before his change of views was John Martin of Shepshed, and above all Robert Hall senior. Among the Independents who challenged hyper-Calvinist views were Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge. These were precursors of Fuller who paved the way for his doctrine of a gospel worthy of all acceptance. Even so their impact was less forceful and widespread than his, and

though they ensured that the wick was alight it was Fuller who fanned the smoking wick into a blaze. Why was he so successful and his impact so effective in reviving the churches? There are a number of reasons.

In the first place he was able to provide *a complete and positive theology of salvation*. He had a remarkable facility for seeing things whole, that is in perspective. Others had attacked this or that aspect of hyper-Calvinism. It was Fuller's distinction that he demolished the foundations of false Calvinism, and did not merely knock down a few bricks from the edifice. Furthermore he provided in its place a biblically based, balanced, and well thought out doctrine. Its two great emphases, neglected by the hyper-Calvinists but essential to the health of the Church, were *holiness* and *evangelism*. Moreover, this doctrine was hammered out on the anvil of his own experience. Whether sinners should be exhorted to repentance and faith was not merely an academic question to him, but a living issue of fundamental importance.

Another factor in the success of "Fullerism" was the time of its appearance. At the very time when Fuller was working out and propagating his doctrine, others including a group of young ministers of outstanding ability and growing influence were thinking along lines similar to his own. Younger men like John Ryland, especially under the influence of Edwards and through their reading of Howe and Baxter, were beginning to revolt against the tyranny of the Protestant scholasticism in which they had been reared. In other words Fuller provided a theology such as thinking men were seeking. He was able to give clear and adequate expression to the ideas that they themselves were coming to embrace, and further to form those inchoate feelings and thoughts into a theological unity. It had take a long while to realize just how damaging and insidious extreme Calvinism could be, but it was providential that when its presuppositions and implications were beginning to be questioned on a scale more widespread than before, a man of Fuller's calibre was forthcoming for such a task.

Rénan made the point that even though a man reacts against his age he is still a child of his age. This has some bearing on Fuller's success. The end of the eighteenth century was a time of restlessness, adventure, discovery, and of the stirring of new ideas. It is certain, therefore, that the note of revolt sounded by Fuller was a welcome one in many quarters. Yet that in itself could never account for the impact made by "Fullerism" on a denomination which even today is given to resisting change simply because it is change. Along with the spirit of revolt, and the element of newness in "Fullerism," was an essential conservatism. His incurable conservatism, in fact, was one of Fuller's greatest assets in his struggle with hyper-Calvinism. He was able to show men who looked above all

for "soundness" of doctrine, and whose dread of Arminianism was almost pathological, that what he was proclaiming was no new doctrine but the faith of the fathers.

Something must be said, too, concerning those associated with Fuller, for the story of this spiritual revival was essentially the story of team work. While it is impossible to question Fuller's place as the theologian of the movement, he was certainly fortunate in his friends and colleagues, men such as Ryland and Sutcliff, for instance, and Carey. "Fullerism" provided the theological basis and justification for the Baptist Mission, and to that extent the B.M.S. can be said to owe its existence to Fuller. On the other hand the effective spread of "Fullerism" and its consequent usefulness and revivifying influence throughout the country were only possible because there was a Baptist Mission. Carey's heart-searching plea to Fuller in May, 1792, leading to the formation of the Mission that autumn, not only forced Fuller to work out the implications of his doctrine, but in a sense forced the whole denomination to a decision. Once that step was taken, those churches which supported the Mission were committed to a policy of evangelism at home as well as abroad. There was no going back. Fuller's own extensive preaching tours on behalf of the Mission spread the blaze.

Many of those who accepted his theology were in key positions so far as the dissemination of that theology was concerned. A new era, for instance, in ministerial training was beginning. A collegiate training was replacing the long-established practice of pastoral apprenticeship, and new colleges were founded—Horton, Bradford (1804), Abergavenny (1807), and Stepney (1810). It is significant that future leaders of the denomination were coming under the influence of teachers with an evangelical outlook. Again the influence of the pulpit was tremendous. One of the greatest preachers of his day was Robert Hall (1764-1831) who, in three important towns, Cambridge, Leicester and Bristol, exerted a powerful influence. In London were John Rippon (1750-1836) at Carter Lane, Abraham Booth (1734-1806) at Prescot Street, who despite differences with Fuller was in the main of the same mind, and Joseph Ivimey (1773-1834) at Eagle Street. Ryland (1753-1825) as pastor of Broadmead and as president of the Academy, made a great impact on the churches of the West Country. William Steadman (1764-1837), too, before going north made a strong evangelical impact on the southern and western parts of the country. Among those responsible for the spread of "Fullerism" in the north were John Fawcett, Abraham Greenwood, Jackson's successor at Barnoldswick, Thomas Langdon (1755-1824), and Charles Whitfield (1748-1821) of Hamsterley. In Scotland Christopher Anderson (1782-1852) did a similar work, while in Birmingham Samuel Pearce's (1766-99) influence was felt long after his early death.

All this serves to underline what has already been suggested, namely that Fuller provided thinking men with a theology such as they were seeking, true to Scripture and experience, and based upon the great insights of the past without being stifled by its thought forms. To have done this at such a critical point in the life of a denomination is no mean achievement. Such was Fuller's achievement.

## 2. Fuller as a champion of Christian orthodoxy

Any attempt to assess Fuller's place as a theologian must take into account his importance as an apologist. Living as he did in the Age of Reason, it is not surprising that he came into conflict with the various forms of rationalism which were endangering the gospel in his day. Error he maintained is sinful, the result of man's rejection of God's revelation and the substitution of human reason as the final authority. He lived at a time "when the writings of Volney, Gibbon, and especially of Thomas Paine, fostered by the political effects of the French Revolution, had deteriorated the morals of the people, and infused the poison of infidelity into the disaffected portion of the public." Rationalism even infected the thinking of many who considered themselves defenders of Christianity, such as Vidler the Universalist, and the Unitarians Theophilus Lindsey (1723-1808) and Joseph Priestley (1733-1804). Fuller's controversies with Vidler and with the Socinians have already been mentioned. Socinianism, he claimed, was very near to infidelity in its fundamental tenets and in its moral tendency. In reply to its advocates who insisted that theirs was a purer form of Christianity, he showed that in actual fact Socinianism was unfavourable to genuine piety and to every branch of vital practical religion.

The most outstanding of Fuller's works of Christian defence was *The Gospel its own Witness* (1799), occasioned by Paine's *Age of Reason* (1795), though directed against Deism and rationalism generally. Widely read and of great usefulness in counteracting the "poison of infidelity," it was far more than just another of the numerous replies to Deism published during the eighteenth century. The minds of some of the most gifted men the Church could produce were devoted to the defence of the Christian revelation, the most notable being William Law (1686-1761) the non-juror and mystic, Joseph Butler (1692-1754) bishop first of Bristol then of Durham, and William Paley (1743-1805). Masterly as much of this apologetic was as a vindication of the gospel from the criticisms of the Deists, its very approach meant that it was to a large extent unsatisfying. What it amounted to when all was said and done, was an acknowledgment that a special revelation is not improbable, that miracles are not to be dismissed as incredible, and that the light of

reason is not so clear and unambiguous as to justify a rejection of Christianity. At the very most it was only able to demonstrate that the balance of probability was in favour of the Christian revelation. It had nothing to say about the finality and uniqueness of the gospel, the chief glory of Christianity. Fuller on the other hand, by an approach that was bold and positive, showed not only that rationalism is weighed in the balances and found wanting, but also that the gospel carries along with it its own evidence, and bears the marks of its divine origin. Butler in a significant sentence in the *Analogy* has indicated the principles upon which any such positive apologetic must rest. For "presumptive proof" of the truth of a "supposed revelation" two requirements must be satisfied. The revelation must be clearly shown to be "more consistent with itself," and have a "more general and uniform tendency to promote virtue, than all circumstances considered, could have been expected from enthusiasm and political views." This, in fact, is the argument of *The Gospel its own Witness*.

The work is in two parts, the first being concerned with the respective tendencies of Christianity and Deism to promote virtue. The starting point of this comparison is the recognition that men possess such a sense of right and wrong that, "whenever they attempt to disparage the former, or vindicate the latter, they are reduced to the necessity of covering each with a false guise. They cannot traduce good as good, or justify evil as evil." Thus when the love of God is derided it is derided as *fanaticism*, and theft, murder, and cruelty are defended as *wisdom* or *good policy*. In this way the slave trade was defended in Parliament. In contrast to Deism which either denies or overlooks the moral character of God, acknowledging no moral standards but men's inclinations, and while confessing a Supreme Being declines to worship and serve him, Christianity is "a living principle of virtue" in those who accept it, and a source of happiness to individuals and society. The second part shows that whereas rationalism is false since it clashes with fact, reason, or with itself, and often with them all, the divine origin and authority of the religion of the Bible is clear from its harmony with historic fact, with truth, with itself and with sober reason. This is seen in the fulfilment of prophecy, the agreement of the gospel with the dictates of an enlightened conscience and with its own professions, and its consistency with sober reason and the modern understanding of the magnitude of creation. The discovery of the magnitude of creation in fact, far from undermining the gospel, confirms its truth and enhances its glory.

The strength of Fuller's apologetic was due largely to its positive character. Though he exposed rationalist inconsistency and absurdity with skill and incisiveness, his main concern was always to show the glory of the gospel. He had no brief to defend the actions,

beliefs or practices, of any particular Christian group or individual, and was frequently able to show that the Christianity attacked by the rationalists was not really Christianity at all. Moreover, he insisted, Christianity is not primarily an intellectual system, consisting of propositions about God, man, and the universe, which needs to be proved and defended, but a gospel to be accepted, God's provision for man's deepest needs. Only believers, those who have put the gospel to the test, are competent to judge its worth.

Fuller did not disparage reason. His distinction between *right* reason and *our own* reason, that is between reason as *the fitness of things* and reason as *our power or capacity of reasoning*, is important. Though inadequate for a satisfactory knowledge of God, the light of nature is not opposed to the gospel, but points in the same direction. Nor, since God is a God of order not chaos, could it be otherwise. There is a necessary harmony between the divine revelation in creation and that in the gospel, between the works and the word of God.

Discrediting the shallow optimism of rationalism based upon an inadequate and one-sided view of God, which exalted his love at the expense of his holiness, and completely ignored his moral government of the world, Fuller replaced it with an optimism which was more securely based. The rationalist understanding of man with its gross underestimate of the seriousness of sin and its unrealistic confidence in human ability was also defective. An increase of knowledge was widely regarded as the universal panacea, but as Fuller was quick to point out, this could only cure those ills arising from ignorance, not those arising from intention. In fact with increased knowledge men have not become more just, benevolent or temperate. Hume's idea that happiness consists in having one's inclinations gratified is equally unrealistic. True happiness, Fuller insisted, must include peace of mind, must be perpetual, and must meet the necessities and relieve the miseries of human life. Only the gospel, taking into account as it does, the holiness as well as the love of God, and recognising that man though fallen was made in God's image, and may be forgiven and restored to fellowship with his Maker, is able to offer such happiness. Man's happiness, though it is not the final end of God's moral government, has an important place.

A particularly interesting and important aspect of Fuller's apologetic is his teaching concerning morality. Its starting point is the "principle which no man will be able to eradicate from his bosom, or even to suppress, but at great labour and expense," namely that "if there is a God he ought to be worshipped." Conscience bears witness to our accountability to God, and morality therefore must be grounded in the character of God. Rationalism with its various conflicting standards of morality, based for the most part on self-

love, "excludes God from morality," which it grounds in man. Consequently it is fundamentally defective. Christianity by contrast is characterised both in doctrine and practice by a "moral beauty," which is a clear sign of its divine origin.

### 3. The permanent value of Fuller's theology

There is no denying that much of Fuller's theology makes strange reading today. Quite apart from questions of vocabulary and style, the very issues that seemed so important to him have little meaning for us. For instance the long involved arguments on such matters as substitution and imputation leave us bewildered, and at the same time relieved that we do not live in the eighteenth century. Yet, this is not to say that Fuller's theology is outmoded and without relevance for us. Few, if any, to be sure, would wish to advocate "Fullerism" in its eighteenth century dress. At the same time many of his underlying insights and emphases are essential for an adequate presentation of the gospel in this or any other generation. In particular the following aspects of his thought deserve to be mentioned.

His entire theology was characterised by a keen awareness of the *unfathomable mystery in the nature and purposes of God*, together with a humble *dependence on the divine revelation*. The attempt to make Christianity rational, to remove all mystery and miracle from it, to prove, understand, and reconcile with reason, what God has revealed, is rebel man's attempt to disparage the authority of the Creator and assert his own. Certainly man relying on his unaided reason has successfully provided a god made after his own image and according to his own desires. But this is not the God of the Bible, in fact it is not God at all. We can only find God as he permits himself to be found; we can only know him as he chooses to reveal himself.

Despite the logical bent of his mind, *Fuller was able to resist the tendency to produce an intellectually consistent system with no place for antinomy or paradox*. While others set law and gospel, faith and works, over against one another in opposition, he accepted both. He held in tension divine sovereignty and human freedom even though he could not reconcile them, since Scripture and experience convinced him of the truth of both. Again, rejecting the doctrine of a double decree, he maintained that the damnation of the lost is altogether due to their sin. This insight, that truth and experience cannot be fitted into a logical straight-jacket, is perhaps one of the most valuable contributions Fuller was able to make to Christian thinking.

Of permanent significance is *Fuller's conception of man*. Always defined in relation to his Creator, man is seen neither as god nor as a mere automaton. A creature dependent on God for his every

breath, he is the same time the crowning glory of creation, with a dignity and responsibility not shared by the rest of creation. Made in the image of God, he is though fallen still answerable to God, still the object of God's love, and has the prospect of a glorious purpose designed for him by the Creator. He starts life under a disadvantage, yet he is still a man not a beast, nor is there any question of his having been created sinful, or of his being condemned for the sin of anyone else. His will is at once *free* and *enslaved*, but his slavery is a *moral* slavery, and therefore his fault rather than his misfortune.

Many of the soteriological errors confronting Fuller are in one form or another a perennial danger to the Church's faith. Fuller's answers are therefore of lasting significance. The natural tendency to Pelagianism is a constant threat to the truth of salvation *sola gratia*, demanding an equally constant insistence on the primacy of grace in man's redemption, especially on the necessity of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. Again, the Sandemanian error is one of which we need always to beware. There is indeed an intellectual element in faith, but faith is above all, as Fuller reminded us, something "cordial" and holy, a heart-felt trust or confidence in Jesus Christ. Nor can we be reminded too often that justification and innocence are not identical, that the believer is still a sinner albeit a forgiven sinner, without any *claim* on the mercy of God. There is no forgiveness apart from repentance, and certainly no once-for-all forgiveness covering sins past, present and future, and exempting the believer from the requirement of penitence and faith.

To be true to the New Testament understanding of salvation, we must like Fuller, make the *death of Christ* the centre of gravity of our thinking, at the same time acknowledging as he did, that all Christ did and does is relevant to our salvation. The emphasis must be upon the Christ who died rather than upon the fact of his death considered in itself. His interpretation of the cross was almost exclusively in terms of substitution, though it was free of the distortions frequently involved in such a theory. The principle of substitution itself, however, was an essential part of the apostolic gospel, and must have a place in any adequate interpretation of the cross. One weakness of his presentation of Christ's saving work, due largely to the stern legal bent of his mind, is the fact that it is almost entirely in terms of law rather than love. The picture of a king pardoning and restoring rebel subjects is a fair representation of one aspect of biblical teaching, but we miss the yearning of a father's heart for his prodigal son, which is the essence of the gospel. Fuller lacked the kind of sensitive awareness which we find in Edwards, of the Saviour's broken heart and "sympathetic substitution."

Two further aspects of Fuller's doctrine of salvation must be mentioned. He preserved the New Testament relationship between soteriology and eschatology, making the *παρουσία* an integral part of Christ's redeeming activity, the climax of salvation, instead of the embarrassing orphan child of theology without a legitimate place in the scheme of salvation. The other matter concerns his understanding of the place of the Church in God's purpose of salvation. He believed that the Church is the redeemed community, the company of the saved, the fellowship of believers. But this does not mean that it exists for the enjoyment of its own salvation. It is by its very nature, he emphasized, a missionary community. It exists to reveal God's love to the world. Mission is not merely part of the Church's task, it is an essential part of its nature, and the Church's neglect of its missionary calling can only lead to spiritual death.

This brief survey of Fuller's theology has shown him as a thinker of strength and soundness of judgment, who having himself experienced the grace of God through the gospel, recalled his own generation to the central truths of that gospel. So long, therefore, as the gospel of Christ is God's word to man, Fuller's doctrine of salvation will have relevance for the Church and the world.

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