

Church History (57): Andrew Fuller

Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), was an English Particular Baptist whose views on the gospel, brought him in direct conflict with many views of his day, and had a lasting impact upon the Modern Missions Movement.

I. Andrew Fuller

1. *His life and death.* "Fuller was born February 6, 1754, in a simple farmhouse at Wicken, Cambridgeshire. Andrew was the youngest of three sons born to Robert and his wife Philippa. None of the boys received anything beyond the most rudimentary education. Andrew, however, was naturally gifted with a sharp mind. While still young, he was pressed into the demanding work of maintaining the farm. The discipline and work ethic instilled by the unrelenting burdens of a dairy farm remained a part of Fuller's character long after he was called to Baptist ministry" (Brewster).¹ While both of his parents were Christians, his mother was the primary religious influence. The Fuller family attended the Particular Baptist Church in Soham, a village near Wicken, pastored by John Eve (d. 1782). "Theologically, Pastor Eve was committed to High Calvinism. As Fuller remembered his ministry, Eve 'had little or nothing to say to the unconverted.' I, therefore, never considered myself as any way concerned in what I heard from the pulpit" (Brewster).² Fuller later testified, that he became concerned for his soul at age fourteen. This led him to read some classic treatises such as John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. He also read Ralph Erskine's *A Gospel Catechism for Young Christians*. "Armed now with more direct information on the necessity of a personal conversion, Fuller struggled for several years with whether or not he had come to faith. Following the hyper-Calvinistic teaching of the Soham Baptist Church, he devoted his spiritual energy to seeking evidence that God had moved upon his soul in regeneration. In the parlance of the day, he was seeking a 'warrant' to believe. Each repeated failure to find spiritual peace led to increasing despair in Fuller's life" (Brewster).³

I was like a man drowning, looking every way for help, or, rather, catching for something by which he might save his life. I tried to find whether there was any hope in the divine mercy, any in the Savior of sinners; but felt repulsed by the thought of mercy having been so basely abused already. In this state of mind, as I was moving slowly on, I thought of the resolution of Job, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.' I paused and repeated the words over and over. Each repetition seemed to kindle a ray of hope, mixed with determination, if I might, to cast my perishing soul upon the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, to be both pardoned and purified; for I felt that I needed the one as much as the other. I was not then aware that any poor sinner had a warrant to believe in Christ for the salvation of his soul; but supposed there must be some kind of qualification to entitle him to it. Yet I was aware that I had no qualifications. Yet it was not altogether from a dread of wrath that I fled to this refuge; for I well remember that I felt something attracting in the Savior. 'I must—I will—yes—I will trust my soul, my sinful, lost soul in His hands. If I perish, I perish!' However it was, I was determined to cast myself upon Christ, thinking, peradventure, He would save my soul; and if not, I could be but lost. In this way I continued above an hour, weeping and supplicating mercy for the Savior's sake. My soul has it still in remembrance and is humbled in me! And as the

¹ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 9-10

² Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 10-11

³ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 12-14

eye of the mind was more and more fixed upon Him, my guilt and fears were gradually and insensibly removed.⁴

Andrew Fuller was baptized the following month, April 1770. In the fall of the same year, a controversy struck the church. When a sinning member of the church was disciplined, the question was raised about the "power of men to do the will of God, and to keep themselves from sin." Pastor Eve affirmed that men were responsible for their actions, and was eventually voted out by the Hyper-Calvinistic majority. "Eve's crime, as his hyper-Calvinist congregation saw it, was that he had betrayed the key principle of that theological system. He had allowed too much power for sinful man to carry out the will of God" (Brewster).⁵ As the church was left without a pastor, several men rotated preaching responsibilities. Eventually Fuller was asked to preach, which he did. "He delivered his first sermon on Ps 30:5 and spoke 'for about a half an hour, with considerable freedom.' A further attempt in the coming weeks was not so successful, and for more than a year afterward Fuller refused all opportunities to preach. But early in 1773, Fuller relented to the pleas of the congregation and delivered another message. This time he both saw and felt evidence of the Lord's favor. The effect on the congregation was so great that Soham Baptist Church recognized that God had raised up a pastor from within their midst. Although he was only 19, Fuller began to speak regularly on Sundays, until the church formally extended him a call to ministry in January 1774" (Brewster).⁶ Soon after, the young pastor married Sarah Gardiner, a member of the church. "Sarah Fuller gave birth to 11 children before eventually dying of complications from childbirth. Of those children, only two survived into adulthood. One daughter, Sally, died at age six. Her illness and death were particularly grieving to the parents. The rest died in early infancy" (Brewster).⁷ "Two years after the death of his first wife Fuller married Ann Coles. They had six children. Of these six, three daughters died in infancy. Another, also called Sarah, died just over a year after her father. The remaining two were sons. All told, Fuller had seventeen children, of whom ten died in infancy" (Nettles).⁸

Though filled with great sorrow, Fuller's seven years at Soham were times of theological study and clarity. As Fuller studied his Bible and the works of men such as Bunyan and other English Puritans, his preaching increasingly changed from Hyper-Calvinism to a more balanced Calvinism. "Predictably, and exactly as Fuller had feared, some in his congregation took exception to their pastor's new direction. If some of Fuller's congregation were offended by their pastor's theological shift, the lost in his community responded favorably to a more fervent appeal. Soon the Baptist Church at Soham began to attract more hearers than could comfortably fit in their tiny building" (Brewster).⁹ Eventually other pastor friends, sought to encourage him to leave Soham for the Baptist Church at Kettering. "Finally convinced that the path of duty lay with Kettering, Fuller yielded to their repeated calls and became the pastor of Kettering Baptist Church in October 1782. Fuller served this congregation for over 33 years. From this town, hardly an influential locale, he became the most prominent Particular Baptist theologian of his era" (Brewster).¹⁰ "On the Lord's Day, May 7, 1815, he heard his congregation singing in the chapel and called to his daughter, Sarah. He said, 'I wish I had strength enough.' She asked, 'To do what, Father?' Fuller replied: 'To worship, child. My eyes are dim.' His family helped raise him in the bed. He continued in an attitude of worship for nearly an hour, clasped his hands, fixed his eyes upwards, fell back, and died. In his funeral oration for Fuller, T. N. Toller, the Congregationalist

⁴ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 14-15

⁵ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 19

⁶ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 21

⁷ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 21-22

⁸ Tom Nettles, *The British Particular Baptists*, 2:129

⁹ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 26

¹⁰ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 28-29

minister in Kettering, said, 'Fuller died as a penitent sinner at the foot of the cross'" (Nettles).¹¹ "Thus died this devoted servant of Christ, May 7, 1815, in the sixty-second year of his age."¹²

2. *His theology and controversies.* Andrew Fuller not only wrote against Hyper-Calvinism, but also Deists and Socinians. "Fuller did not ignore the broad issues of the day. He accepted the challenge of Deists and Socinians, thoroughly mastered their writings and fired off replies so perceptive and to-the-point that his opponents found their arguments clearly weakened" (Nettles).¹³ In 1799 he published his treatise against Deism, *The Gospel Its Own Witness; or, The Holy Nature and Divine Harmony of the Christian Religion Contrasted with the Immorality and Absurdity of Deism*. Deism was a product of the Enlightenment (the Age of Reason), which elevated man's reason above the revelation (Scripture) of God. In 1802, he published his first treatise against Socinianism, *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared, As to Their Moral Tendency*, which was followed by *Socinianism In-defensible on the Ground of Its Moral Tendency*, and then finally, his *Doctrine of Universal Salvation Refuted*.

But Fuller's greatest controversy concerned the prevailing Hyper-Calvinism of his day, though he was not the only one to oppose it. "One of the many to address the point was an Independent Minister, Abraham Taylor, in a pamphlet titled *The Modern Question Concerning Repentance and Faith* (1742). A few months after his ordination, Fuller made a trip to London. As he searched the secondhand booksellers' wares, he discovered Taylor's booklet" (Brewster).¹⁴ Taylor took a more traditional view regarding the free offer of the gospel and man's responsibility to believe. "Fuller's personality was not given to sudden change, and especially not in matters of theology. He continued to study and read all that he could find that related to the intersection of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. As time passed, he became increasingly convinced that hyper-Calvinism was untenable in the light of Scripture" (Brewster).¹⁵ The issue concerned: "Is unregenerate man under spiritual obligation to repent of sin and believe in Christ upon hearing the gospel? And, parallel to that, is the gospel minister to call upon such sinners for evangelical faith and repentance" (Nettles)?¹⁶ To both of these questions, Fuller now answered in the affirmative. Yes, it was man's responsibility to believe the gospel, and yes, the minister is to call upon sinners to believe. Without doubt, the greatest help to Fuller in these regards was the writings of Jonathan Edwards. This was especially true of Edward's treatise, *The Freedom of the Will*. "Fuller and his entire circle of friends found the key to their perplexity within the writings of Jonathan Edwards. Theologically and philosophically, he presented impeccably coherent and compelling arguments for the congruence of man's helpless responsibility with God's just sovereignty" (Nettles).¹⁷

Fuller's fullest defense of his evangelical Calvinism, was written in 1781 and published in 1785 by the name, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation, or the Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ*. This was soon followed by, *A Defense of a Treatise Entitled The Gospel of Christ Worthy of All Acceptation, containing A Reply to Mr. Button's Remarks*. Fuller's *Gospel Worthy* is divided into three parts: Part I is introductory, wherein "the subject is shown to be important, stated, and explained." Part II provides various arguments to prove "faith in Christ is the duty of all who hear or have opportunity to hear, the gospel." Part III answers various objections to which are added "concluding reflections" and an appendix, "on the question, whether a holy disposition of heart be necessary, in order to believing." This

¹¹ Tom Nettles, *The British Particular Baptists*, 2:139

¹² Memoirs, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 1:102

¹³ Tom Nettles, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 1: xi

¹⁴ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 24-25

¹⁵ Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 35

¹⁶ Tom Nettles, *The British Particular Baptists*, 2:101

¹⁷ Tom Nettles, *The British Particular Baptists*, 2:118

treatise was the product of "a ten-year process of thinking, reading, preaching, discussing, and agonizing. His basic contention throughout the whole is that no particular aspect of God's grace diminishes man's responsibility to believe. Neither unconditional election, effectual calling, nor a special design in the atonement gives warrant to the unbelief of any sinner. His friends, his opponents, much of his writing, his practical ministry, and his public reputation arose from the distinctive ideas and practical implications contained in that work." (Nettles).¹⁸

(1) The responsibility of man to believe. It had become popular among the Hyper-Calvinists, to deny what was called "duty faith." This meant, non-elect sinners had no responsibility or duty to repent and believe. This view finds some expression in John Gill, but was popularized by men such as William Huntington (1745-1813). Against this view, Fuller maintained it was every sinner's duty, who heard the gospel, to repent and believe it. Fuller provided several "arguments to prove that faith in Christ is the duty of all men who hear, or have opportunity to hear, the gospel."¹⁹ "I. Unconverted sinners are commanded, exhorted, and invited to believe in Christ for salvation." "It is here taken for granted that whatever God commands, exhorts, or invites us to comply with, is the duty of those who whom such language is addressed. If, therefore, saving faith be not the duty of the unconverted, we may expect never to find any addresses of this nature directed to them in the Holy Scriptures. We may expect that God will as soon require them to become angels as Christians, if the one be no more their duty than the other." "II. Scripture expressly describes sinners as obeying or disobeying the gospel." "Those who comply in the way of salvation are represented, in so doing, as exercising obedience; as 'obeying the gospel,' 'obeying the truth,' and 'obeying Christ.' They very end of the gospel being preached is said to be for 'obedience to the faith among all nations'; and so those who refuse to believe are described as 'those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.'" "III. Unbelief is represented as a heinous sin and is punished by God." "It is taken for granted that whatever is not a sinner's duty, the omission of it cannot be charged on him as a sin, nor imputed to any depravity in him. If the inability of sinners to believe in Christ were of the same nature as that of a dead body in a grave to rise up and walk, it would be absurd to suppose that they would on this account fall under the Divine censure. No man is reprov'd for not doing that which is naturally impossible; but sinners are reprov'd for not believing, as it's owing to their criminal ignorance, pride, dishonesty of heart, and aversion from God." "IV. Other spiritual exercises, which sustain an inseparable connection with faith in Christ, are represented as the duty of men in general." "Sinners are expected to love God, fear God, humble themselves, and sorrow for their sin, all of which like faith, are spiritual exercises. And so, if sinners are responsible to obey God's law, which is spiritual, they are obligated to obey His gospel."

(2) The inability of man to believe. Like Edwards (and others) before him, Fuller distinguished between natural and moral inability. By natural Fuller meant "the lack of rational faculties, bodily powers, or external advantages." "Inability of this kind, excuses its subject of blame. The law of God itself requires no creature to love Him, or obey Him, beyond his natural powers which he possesses. If the inability of sinners to believe in Christ, were of this nature, it would undoubtedly form an excuse in their favor. But the inability of the sinner is moral. It assumes a depravity of heart or the sinful dispositions of our hearts, which arises from the original apostacy of human nature, and is the result of an insuperable aversion of mind to that which is holy or godly."²⁰ "There is an essential difference between an ability which is independent of the inclination, and one that is owing to nothing else. It is just as impossible, no doubt, for any person to do that which he has no mind to do, as to perform that which surpasses his natural powers; and hence it is that the same terms (inability) are used in the one case as in the other. Those who were under the dominion of envy and malignity 'could not speak peaceably;' and those who

¹⁸ Tom Nettles, *The British Particular Baptists*, 2:102-103

¹⁹ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:343-366

²⁰ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:376

have 'eyes full of adultery cannot cease from sin.' Hence, also, the following language, 'How can ye, being evil, speak good things?' "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them.' 'The carnal mind is enmity against God; and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.' 'They that are in the flesh cannot please God.'"²¹

Some have supposed that, in attributing physical or natural power to men, we deny their *natural depravity*. Through the poverty of language, words are obliged to be used in different senses. When we speak of men as *by nature* depraved, we do not mean to convey the idea of sin being an essential part of human nature, or of the constitution of man as man: our meaning is that it is not a mere effect of education and example; but is, from his very birth, so interwoven through all his powers, so ingrained, as it were, in his very soul, as to grow up with him, and become natural to him. On the other hand, when the term *natural* is used as opposed to *moral*, and applied to the powers of the soul, it is designed to express those faculties which are strictly a part of our nature as men, and which are necessary to our being accountable creatures. By confounding these ideas, we may be always disputing, and bring nothing to an issue.²²

(3) The provision of God for sinners in the gospel. According to Fuller, as every sinner is responsible to believe the gospel when heard, so it is the responsibility of every minister to offer the gospel to every sinner. This has been called the free-offer of the gospel, and it entails freely offering Christ Himself, and all of His benefits, to every sinner. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel (the good news of who Christ is and what He has done) to every creature" (Mk. 16:15). "The work of the Christian ministry is to preach the gospel, or to hold up the free grace of God through Jesus Christ, as the only way of a sinner's salvation. This is, doubtless, true; and if this be not the leading theme of our ministrations, we had better be any thing than preachers. 'Woe unto us, if we preach not the gospel!'"²³ And yet, according to Fuller, preachers are not only to proclaim the facts of the gospel, but urge and exhort sinners to believe it and embrace Christ for themselves. "This was the practice of Christ and His apostles. It will not be denied that they preached the gospel; yet they warned, admonished, and entreated sinners to 'repent and believe;' to 'believe while they had the light;' to 'labor not for the meat that perishes, but for that which endures unto everlasting life;' to 'repent, and be converted, that their sins might be blotted out;' to 'come to the marriage supper, for that all things were ready;' in fine, to 'be reconciled unto God.'"²⁴

This brings us to Fuller's views on the atonement, and how a particular atonement can be consistent with universal appeals and offers. Fuller addressed these questions most fully in his *Reply to Philanthropos*. In Section IV (on the death of Christ), Fuller reduced "all that is necessary to be said upon this subject to two questions: First, had our Lord Jesus Christ any absolute determination in His death to save any of the human race? Secondly, supposing such a determination to exist, is this consistent with indefinite calls and universal invitations?"²⁵ Fuller then provided seven arguments in favor of the first point (the definite nature of the atonement). "The above are some of the reasons which induce me to think there was a certain, absolute, and consequently limited, design in the death of Christ, securing the salvation of all those, and only those, who are finally saved."²⁶ He then turned to the second question: "On the consistency of the limited extent of Christ's death, as stated above, with universal calls

²¹ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:376-377

²² Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:378

²³ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:386

²⁴ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:386

²⁵ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:489

²⁶ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:494

and invitations." "The provision made by the death of Christ is of two kinds: 1. A provision of pardon and acceptance for all who believe. 2. A provision of grace to enable the elect to believe."²⁷ In other words, according to Fuller, it was the purpose of God that Christ should suffer sufficiently for all men, and efficiently for some men. Christ suffered sufficiently for "the salvation of the whole world, were the whole world to embrace it," and yet, "the peculiarity which attends it consist not in its insufficiently to save more than are saved, but in the sovereignty of its application."²⁸ "If the atonement of Christ excludes a part of mankind *in the same* sense as it excludes fallen angels, why is the gospel addressed to the one any more than to the other? The message of wisdom is addressed to *men*, and not to devils. The former are invited to the gospel supper, but the latter are not. These facts afford proof that Christ, by His death, opened a door of hope to sinners of the human race as *sinners; affording a ground for their being invited, without distinction, to believe and be saved*. But as God might send His Son into the world to save men, rather than angels, so He may *apply* His sacrifice to the salvation of some men, and not of others."²⁹

There is no contradiction between this peculiarity of design in the death of Christ, and a universal obligation on those who hear the gospel to believe in Him, or a universal invitation being addressed to them. If God, through the death of His Son, has promised salvation to all who comply with the gospel; and if there be no natural impossibility as to a compliance, nor any obstruction but that which arises from aversion of heart; exhortations and invitations to believe and be saved are consistent; and our duty, as preachers of the Gospel, is to administer them, without any more regard to particular redemption than to election; both being secret things. If that which sinners are called upon to believe respected the particular design of Christ to save them, it would then be inconsistent; but they are neither exhorted nor invited to believe any thing but what is revealed, and what will prove true, whether they believe it or not. He that believes in Jesus Christ must believe in Him as He is revealed in the gospel, and that is as the Savior of *sinners*.³⁰

Calvinists maintain that though the death of Christ be a most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, of infinite value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world—and though on this ground the gospel is to be preached to all mankind indiscriminately—yet it was the will of God that Christ, by the blood of the cross, should efficaciously redeem those only who were from eternity elected to salvation and given to Him by the Father. This is called particular redemption, and in proof of the doctrine, among others, the following Scriptures are alleged: John 17:2; 10:11, 15; 11:52; Titus 2:14; Eph 5:25; Rev 5:9.³¹

3. *His influence on modern missions.* On October 2, 1792, Fuller and Willian Carey (1761-1834) founded *The Particular Baptist Society of Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen* (later called *Baptist Missionary Society*). Fuller served as secretary of this Society until his death (1815), and Carey left for India as its first missionary (1793). Fuller wrote of Carey's departure to India to a friend: "Our undertaking to India appeared to me like a few men, who were deliberating about the importance of penetrating into a deep mine, which had never before been explored. We had no one to guide us, and while we were thus deliberating, Carey, as it were said, 'Well, I will go down if you will hold the rope.'"

²⁷ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:596

²⁸ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:374

²⁹ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:374

³⁰ Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, 2:374

³¹ Andrew Fuller, as quoted by Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 191