

Why Read Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) Today?

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Near the beginning of the funeral sermon that John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825) preached for Andrew Fuller in 1815, Ryland described Fuller as “perhaps the most judicious and able theological writer that ever belonged to our [i.e. the Calvinistic Baptist] denomination.” Although Fuller was Ryland’s closest friend and confidant, his judgment is by no means skewed. Joseph Belcher, the editor of the final edition of Fuller’s collected works, believed that his works would “go down to posterity side by side with the immortal works of the elder president Edwards [i.e. Jonathan Edwards, Sr.],” while Charles Haddon Spurgeon once described Fuller as “the greatest theologian” of his century.

What contributed to these judgments, which this writer wholeheartedly endorses?

Well, first of all, there is the fact that Fuller penned the definitive response to High Calvinism that had crippled his fellow Baptists in *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (first edition, 1785). A preliminary draft of this work was written by 1778. In what was roughly its final form it was completed by 1781. Two editions of the work were published in Fuller’s lifetime. The first edition, published in Northampton in 1785, was subtitled *The Obligations of Men Fully to Credit, and Cordially to Approve, Whatever God Makes Known, Wherein is Considered the Nature of Faith in Christ, and the Duty of Those where the Gospel Comes in that Matter*. The second edition, which appeared in 1801, was more simply subtitled *The Duty of Sinners to Believe in Jesus Christ*, a subtitle which well expressed the overall theme of the book. There were substantial differences between it and the second edition (1801), which Fuller freely admitted and which primarily related to the doctrine of particular redemption. The work’s major theme remained unaltered, however: ‘faith in Christ is the duty of all men who hear, or have opportunity to hear, the gospel’. This epoch-making book sought to be faithful to the central emphases of historic Calvinism while at the same time attempting to leave preachers with no alternative but to drive home to their hearers the universal obligations of repentance and faith.

With regard to Fuller’s own ministry, the book was a key factor in determining the shape of that ministry in the years to come. For instance, it led directly to Fuller’s wholehearted involvement in the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in October 1792 and the subsequent sending of the Society’s most famous missionary, William Carey (1761-1834), to India in 1793. Fuller also served as secretary of this society until his death in 1815. The work of the mission consumed an enormous amount of Fuller’s time as he regularly toured the country, representing the mission and raising funds. On average he was away from home three months of the year. Between 1798 and 1813, moreover, he made five lengthy trips to Scotland for the mission as well as undertaking journeys to Wales and Ireland (1804). He also carried on an extensive correspondence on the mission’s behalf.

Fuller’s commitment to the Baptist Missionary Society was not only rooted in his missionary theology but also in his deep friendship with Carey. Fuller later compared the

sending of Carey to India as the lowering of him into a deep gold-mine. Fuller and his close friends, Sutcliff and Ryland, had pledged themselves to ‘hold the ropes’ as long as Carey lived. No wonder, Carey would say of Fuller: “I loved him.”

His demolition of High Calvinism revealed Fuller to be an indefatigable and fearless Baptist theologian and minister, characteristics revealed in other vital areas of theological debate. In 1793 he issued an extensive refutation of the Socinianism of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)—*The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems examined and Compared, as to their Moral Tendency*. Due to the vigorous campaigning of Priestley, Socinianism, which denied the Trinity and the deity of Christ, had become the leading form of heterodoxy within English Dissent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Fuller’s rebuttal of Socinianism well displays the Christocentric nature of eighteenth-century Evangelical thought. Fuller ably showed that the early Church made the divine dignity and glory of Christ’s person ‘their darling theme’.

In 1800 Fuller published *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, the definitive eighteenth-century Baptist response to Deism, in particular that of the popularizer Thomas Paine (1737-1809). This work was one of the most popular of Fuller’s books, going through three editions by 1802 and being reprinted a number of times in the next thirty years. William Wilberforce (1759-1833), who admired Fuller as a theologian and who once graphically described him as ‘the very picture of a blacksmith’, considered it to be the most important of all of Fuller’s writings. The work has two parts. In the first, Fuller compares and contrasts the moral effects of Christianity with those of Deism. The second part of the book aims to demonstrate the divine origin of Christianity from the general consistency of the Scriptures.

Yet another vital controversy in which Fuller engaged was that with the Sandemanians, the followers of Robert Sandeman (1718-1771), who distinguished themselves from other eighteenth-century Evangelicals by a predominantly intellectualist view of faith. They became known for their cardinal theological tenet that saving faith is ‘bare belief of the bare truth’. In a genuine desire to exalt the utter freeness of God’s salvation, Sandeman had sought to remove any vestige of human reasoning, willing or desiring in the matter of saving faith.

In his *Strictures on Sandemanianism* (1810) Fuller makes a couple of telling points. First, if faith does concern only the mind, then there would be no way to distinguish genuine Christianity from nominal Christianity. A nominal Christian mentally assents to the truths of Christianity, but those truths do not grip the heart and re-orient his or her affections. Then, knowledge of Christ is a distinct type of knowledge. Knowing him, for instance, involves far more than knowing certain things about him, such as the fact of his virgin birth or the details of his crucifixion. It involves a desire for fellowship with him and a delight in his presence.

But Fuller was far more than an apologist and mission secretary. Alongside his apologetic works, Fuller exercised a significant pastoral ministry at Kettering. During his thirty-three years at Kettering, from 1782 to 1815, the membership of the church more than

doubled (from 88 to 174) and the number of ‘hearers’ was often over a thousand, necessitating several additions to the church building. Perusal of his vast correspondence—today housed in the Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, the University of Oxford—reveals that Fuller was first and foremost a pastor. And though he did not always succeed, he constantly sought to ensure that his many other responsibilities did not encroach upon those related to the pastorate.

One other of Fuller’s literary works deserves mention. His *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce* (1800) recount the life of his close friend, Samuel Pearce (1766-1799) of Birmingham. In some ways modeled after Jonathan Edwards’ life of David Brainerd, it recounted the life of one whom Fuller regarded as a model of Evangelical spirituality. Through the medium of Fuller’s book Pearce’s extraordinary passion for Christ—which led to his being labeled the ‘seraphic Pearce’ by contemporaries—and his zeal for missions had a powerful impact on his generation.

Fuller had remarkable stores of physical and mental energy that allowed him to accomplish all that he did. But it was not without cost to his body. What he called a ‘paralytic stroke’ in 1793 left him rarely free of severe headaches for the rest of his life. And in his last fifteen years he was rarely well. Taken seriously ill in September 1814, his health began to seriously decline. By the spring of the following year he was dying. He preached for the last time at Kettering on 2 April 1815 and died 7 May. He was 62.

His funeral was attended by an immense crowd which one estimate put at 2,000 persons. At Fuller’s request, his old friend, John Ryland, preached the funeral sermon. Based on Romans 8:10, it included a brief account of Fuller’s final days and the following declaration made by Fuller in his last letter to Ryland. ‘I have preached and written much against the abuse of the doctrine of grace’, Fuller wrote, ‘but that doctrine is all my salvation and all my desire. I have no other hope than from salvation by mere sovereign, efficacious grace through the atonement of my Lord and Saviour’.

The importance of his theological achievements was noted during and after his life. The College of New Jersey (1798) and Yale (1805) awarded him a DD, both of which he declined to accept. As has been noted, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) did not hesitate to describe Fuller as ‘the greatest theologian’ of his century, while A. H. Newman (1852-1933) said that ‘his influence on American Baptists’ was ‘incalculable’. Without a doubt, he was the greatest theologian of the late eighteenth-century transatlantic Baptist community.