

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# 'The Oracles of God': Andrew Fuller and the Scriptures

MICHAEL HAYKIN

At the end of the eighteenth century there occurred a remarkable renewal among the English Calvinistic Baptists. For most of that century the evangelistic flame which had once burned brightly in Baptist circles in the days of John Bunyan (1628–1688) and Benjamin Keach (1640–1704) had been largely doused by the waters of hyper-Calvinism. But in the 1780s the old flame began to be rekindled following the publication of Robert Hall's *Help to Zion's Travellers* (1781) and Andrew Fuller's *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1784). It was especially the latter work that brought home to Baptist pastors the need of presenting to all men the obligation of repentance and faith in Christ, an emphasis which had often been lacking in eighteenth century Baptist preaching up until that point. The years that followed not only saw the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, which sent out William Carey (1761–1834) to India, but also tremendous growth among the Baptists at home. Now, without a doubt, the theological mainspring behind this growth was Andrew Fuller (1754–1815).<sup>1</sup>

Fuller, whom William Wilberforce (1759–1833) once graphically described as 'the very picture of a blacksmith',<sup>2</sup> had no formal theological training, but, by grace and arduous study, he became 'the soundest and most creatively useful theologian' in the history of the English Calvinistic Baptists.<sup>3</sup> The soundness and usefulness of his theological work is nowhere more evident than in *The Gospel Its Own Witness* (1799),<sup>4</sup> the definitive eighteenth century Baptist response to Deism. Much of this book is given over to an examination of the nature and inspiration of Scripture, since this was one of the leading points in question between the Deists and their Christian opponents. As such, Fuller's book occupies a key place in what Tom J. Nettles has recently described as 'the bibliological evolution of the English Baptists'.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, an attempt is made to place Fuller's view of the nature of Scripture as found in *The Gospel Its Own Witness* in its historical and theological context. This entails, first of all, a brief treatment of *The Age of Reason* (1794, 1795) by Thomas Paine (1737–1809), for it was this book which sparked the writing of *The Gospel Its Own Witness*. Then, alongside the examination of *The*

*Gospel Its Own Witness*, some attention is given to two other works of Fuller, *The Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth* (1796) and *Letters on Systematic Theology* (1814), since both of these works involve responses to Paine's view of the Scriptures.

### 1. *The Age of Reason* (1794, 1795)

In the last few hundred years there have been few books which have generated as much controversy as Paine's *The Age of Reason*.<sup>6</sup> Its author was a warm advocate and brilliant popularizer of a variety of radical causes: the abolition of slavery, the American and French Revolutions, and Deism. Although Paine had been raised a Quaker, by the time he came to write the first part of *The Age of Reason* in 1794 he could state with regard to his religious views:<sup>7</sup>

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. . . . I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

The Deism which Paine sought to propagate by means of the popular press was certainly nothing novel in the 1790s. The first significant English work to advocate Deism had been *Christianity not Mysterious* by John Toland (1670–1722), which was published in 1696. Paine's importance lies in the fact that he was the first to seek to communicate Deistic beliefs to the common man.<sup>8</sup>

The leading proponents of Deism, men such as Toland, Anthony Collins (1676–1729) and Matthew Tindal (1655–1733), typified an age sick of and disgusted with the religious wars and controversies of the two preceding centuries. But, in regarding the Bible as the true source of these controversies and wars, these men went much further than most. They sought a religion shorn of its dependence on revelation and the miraculous, in which only that which could successfully weather rational criticism need be affirmed as religious truth. Moreover, the advent of Newtonian physics, with its understandable emphasis on rational inquiry, tended to bolster the confidence of the Deists in human reason.

*The Age of Reason* displays this Deistic perspective to the full. Paine disputed Christianity's claim that it is founded directly upon divine revelation. Due to the fact that human language is regularly in a state of flux and because of the variety of problems presented by translation from one language into another, Paine believed that special revelation in a written form is simply not possible.

The Word of God cannot exist in any written or human language. . . . Human language is local and changeable, and is therefore incapable of being used as the means of unchangeable and universal information.<sup>9</sup>

But he goes on to assert:<sup>10</sup>

There is a Word of God; there is a revelation. The Word of God is the creation we behold and it is in *this word*, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man. . . . The creation is the Bible of the Deist. He there reads, in the handwriting of the Creator himself, the certainty of His existence and the immutability of His power, and all other Bibles and Testaments are to him forgeries.

Consequently, all that can be known about God is to be obtained through the exercise of human reason in the examination of God's works in nature.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Paine regards the only sure foundation for such an examination to be the world-view of Newtonian science, in which God was viewed as the First Cause of the universe and a wise clockmaker, whose finished work needed only a little tinkering on rare occasions. In such a world-view the Biblical affirmations about God's rule of and intervention in history seemed irrelevant to Paine, even blasphemous. As Paine asserts:<sup>12</sup>

We can know God only through His works. . . . The principles of science lead to this knowledge; for the Creator of man is the Creator of science, and it is through that medium that man can see God, as it were, face to face. . . . It has been by wandering from the immutable laws of science, and the light of reason, and setting up an invented thing called revealed religion, that so many wild and blasphemous conceits have been formed of the Almighty.

Moral and textual criticisms of the Scriptures especially abound in the second part of *The Age of Reason*. For instance, Paine cited the differing genealogies in Matthew and Luke as what appeared to him to be a glaring example of the falsity of the Scriptures.

If these men, Matthew and Luke, set out with a falsehood . . . in the very commencement of their history of Jesus Christ, and of whom and what he was, what authority . . . is there left for believing the strange things they tell us afterward? If they cannot be believed in their account of his natural genealogy, how are we to believe them when they tell us he was the Son of God begotten by a ghost, and that an angel announced this in secret to his mother?<sup>13</sup>

Underlying this criticism is Paine's belief that:<sup>14</sup>

Truth is a uniform thing; and as to inspiration and revelation, were we to admit it, it is impossible to suppose it can be contradictory.

The only portions of Scripture which contain any truth about God are, according to Paine, certain chapters of Job and Psalm 19. In the

'The Oracles of God': Andrew Fuller and the Scriptures  
words of Paine, they are:<sup>15</sup>

True *deistical* compositions. for they treat of the *Deity* through His works. They take the book of creation as the Word of God, they refer to no other book, and all the inferences they make are drawn from that volume.

Paine's broadside against the Scriptural foundations of Christianity did not go unanswered.<sup>16</sup> Franklyn K. Prochaska has noted at least thirty rejoinders which saw the light of day before 1800.<sup>17</sup> However, in listing these rejoinders and examining some of them, Prochaska curiously overlooks those made by the Calvinistic Baptist, Andrew Fuller.

## **2. *The Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth (1796)***

When, towards the close of 1794, John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825) wrote and asked Fuller if he had yet seen *The Age of Reason* (presumably the first part), Fuller replied:<sup>18</sup>

You ask, if I have seen Paine's *Age of Reason*. I have not. You do not know what reading is to me; one hour would bring on the headach. A newspaper is as much as I can read at a time. I could do many things, if strength would allow it. Plans of various works have entered my mind; but all must be dropped, or nearly so, for want of strength. Reading is worse to me, than thinking or writing.

'The headach' to which Fuller refers in this passage was a result of a minor paralytic stroke in 1793. This stroke left him with a tendency to severe headaches for the rest of his life. But by the middle of 1796 Fuller had found the strength to read and digest Paine's work. For on 1 June 1796, at the annual ministerial meeting of the Northamptonshire Association, Fuller preached a sermon which contained his first public response to Paine and *The Age of Reason*. Entitled *The Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth*, it takes Hebrews 5:12–14 for its text.<sup>19</sup> At the very beginning of the sermon Fuller gives a general statement about the nature of Scripture. Commenting on the phrase 'the oracles of God' (Hebrews 5:12), he states that it is a phrase 'strongly expressive of [the] Divine inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures.'<sup>20</sup> In them God speaks and conveys knowledge about himself which can be obtained from nowhere else.<sup>21</sup> Fuller thus implies that Paine is sadly mistaken if he thinks that his unaided reason can reflect on the realm of nature and thereby derive sufficient and accurate knowledge about God. 'Reason,' Fuller insists, 'as it exists in depraved creatures, is not a proper standard of truth.' Thus, the need for a better standard, one that was infallible, 'the oracles of God.'<sup>22</sup> There are some truths

about God and his work in the Scriptures which pose no substantial problems for the human reason to comprehend. Yet, there are others 'which utterly surpass our understanding, but which require to be believed as matters of pure revelation.'<sup>23</sup> Of the latter, Fuller sees the doctrine of the Trinity as a good example.<sup>24</sup>

Fuller proceeds to emphasize that the search for truth about God must begin at and be rooted in the Scriptures.

Many religious people appear to be contented with seeing truth in the light in which some great and good man has placed it; but if ever we enter into the gospel for purpose, it must be by reading the word of God for ourselves, and by praying and meditating upon its sacred contents. It is 'in God's light that we must see light' [cf. Psalm 36:9]. . . . The writings of great and good men are not to be despised, any more than their preaching; only let them not be treated as oracular. The best of men, in this imperfect state, view things *partially*, and therefore are in danger of laying an improper stress upon some parts of Scripture, to the neglect of other parts of equal, and sometimes of superior importance. . . . If we adopt the principles of fallible men, without searching the Scriptures for ourselves, and inquiring whether or not these things be so, they will not, even allowing them to be on the side of truth, avail us, as if we had learned them from a higher authority. Our faith, in this case, will stand in the wisdom of man, and not in the power of God. . . . Truth learned only at second-hand will be to us what Saul's armour was to David; we shall be at a loss how to use it in the day of trial.<sup>25</sup>

Fuller here differentiates between the views of fallible men, albeit good men, and the truth of God in Scripture. The views of fallible men are, at best, unable to provide nourishment necessary for genuine spiritual growth, partial perspectives on the truth, and inadequate to support the believer in a time of trial. By contrast, Scripture enlightens the believer, brings balance and perspective to his life, and provides him with a wholly adequate defence against the testings of life. Fuller clearly presupposes that the fallibility which characterizes the writings of all Christian authors is completely absent from Scripture.<sup>26</sup>

At the conclusion of this sermon, Fuller comments on the theological scene facing himself and his fellow pastors.

The present age seems to be an age of trial. Not only is the gospel corrupted by those who bear the Christian name, but, of late, you well know, it has been openly assailed. The most direct and daring opposition has been made to the very name of Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

Fuller's audience would have had little difficulty in identifying the perpetrator and nature of this open assault on the Christian faith: Paine and his *The Age of Reason*. Indeed, only a few sentences later Fuller explicitly refers to Paine's book by name. Fuller believes that the reason for the popularity of Paine's book lies not so much in the

book itself, but in the fact that 'the turn or temper of the present age is peculiarly in favour of infidelity.'<sup>28</sup> But Fuller has no fears for the ultimate safety of the Church.

I am not going to alarm you with any idea that the *church is in danger*; no, my brethren; the church of which we, I trust, are members, and of which Christ, and Christ alone, is the Head, is not in danger; it is built upon a rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. . . . Nevertheless, it becomes us to feel for the souls of men, especially for the rising generation; and to warn even good men that they be not unarmed in the evil day.<sup>29</sup>

Fuller's concern for 'the rising generation' found partial expression in the following year, when the Northamptonshire Association sent out its annual circular letter to its member churches. It was written by Fuller's close friend John Sutcliff (1752–1814), pastor of the Baptist Church in Olney,<sup>30</sup> and addressed the subject of *The Divinity of the Christian Religion*. In particular, the letter sought to display the divinely inspired nature of the Bible. Surely it is no coincidence that Sutcliff was requested by his colleagues, including Fuller, to draw up such a letter at this particular point in time. Addressed to the members of the Baptist churches in the Northamptonshire Association, it plays an important rôle in Fuller's desire decisively to repel Paine's attack against Christianity on the very field of battle which the latter had chosen, namely, the mind of the common man. Noteworthy are the following remarks on inspiration which Sutcliff makes near the beginning of the letter.

Some will probably ask, 'What do you mean by inspiration?' To such we reply: it is a supernatural influence upon the mind of a rational creature, enabling him to think, and if necessary to speak, or write, in such a manner as he could not have done without it. True, it admits of various degrees. When the writer was treating upon a subject with which he was previously acquainted, he only needed the Spirit of inspiration to assist his recollection, and secure him from error and mistake. But on many occasions, the Divine Spirit suggested the thoughts and ideas immediately to the mind of the penman of the sacred page. How this was done, we know not. Nor is it necessary we should. We hear that a certain fact is asserted. The credit we give to it, is not founded on, or proportioned to, the ease with which we comprehend it, but the evidence by which it is supported. What we here assert is, that the Bible was written under such an influence as we have now described. Should satisfactory evidence be given of this, the natural consequence will be, that it contains a revelation of the mind and will of God, and ought to be our guide in matters of religion.<sup>31</sup>

Fuller, as will be seen, fully concurred with Sutcliff's view that there are 'degrees' of inspiration and that the Holy Spirit so directed the writing of Scripture as to exclude the incorporation of error.

### **3. *The Gospel Its Own Witness* (1799)**

A more complete expression of Fuller's concern for 'the rising generation' did not appear for another two years. But when it did appear as *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, it soon became one of the most popular of Fuller's books. It went through three editions by 1802, and was reprinted a number of times in the next thirty years. Wilberforce regarded this work as the most important of all Fuller's writings,<sup>32</sup> while a more recent writer, E. F. Clipsham, has described it as the most outstanding of Fuller's apologetical works.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

The work has two parts. The first compares and contrasts the moral effects of Christianity and Deism, while the second aims at demonstrating the divine origin of Christianity from the general consistency of the Scriptures.

If the Scriptures can be proved to harmonize with historic fact, with truth, with themselves, and with sober reason, they must, considering what they profess, be Divinely inspired, and Christianity must be of God.<sup>35</sup>

In the first part Fuller reiterates that nature has limitations as a vehicle of revelation.

It is one thing for nature to afford so much light in matters of right and wrong, as to leave the sinner without excuse; and another to afford him any well-grounded hope of forgiveness, or to answer his difficulties concerning the account which something within him says he must hereafter give of his present conduct. . . . It is one thing to leave sinners without excuse in sin, and another thing to recover them from it. That the light of nature is insufficient for the latter, is demonstrated by melancholy fact. . . . It was, I doubt not from a close observation of the different efficacy of nature and Scripture, that the writer of the *nineteenth Psalm* (a Psalm which Mr. Paine pretends to admire), after having given a just tribute of praise to the former, affirmed of the latter, 'The law of Jehovah is perfect, converting the soul' [Psalm 19:7].<sup>36</sup>

Paine's admiration of Psalm 19, Fuller implies, fails to take account of all its verses. According to Fuller, the Psalmist was cognizant of the need for both general and special revelation. Due to the inherent limitations of the created realm in displaying God's nature as Saviour, an inscripturated revelation, 'the law of Jehovah', was required.



In the second part of Fuller's treatise, he takes a close look at what Paine regards as inconsistencies in the Scriptural record. Fuller notes that:<sup>37</sup>

[The authors of Scripture] discover *no anxiety to guard against seeming inconsistencies*, either with themselves or one another. In works of imposture, especially where a number of persons are concerned, there is need of great care and caution, lest one part should contradict another; and such caution is easily perceived. But the sacred writers appear to have had no such concern about them. Conscious that all they wrote was true, they left it to prove its own consistency. Their productions possess consistency; but it is not a studied one, nor always apparent at first sight.

Scripture is indeed consistent with itself, but that consistency is not always readily apparent. Fuller was well aware of some of 'the sticky problems of biblical phenomena',<sup>38</sup> but the way in which these problems were approached was critical. As the above passage implies, there had to be a willingness to spend time in seeking a resolution for each of the apparent inconsistencies of Scripture.<sup>39</sup> More importantly, Fuller continued, the Scriptures had to be read from the right perspective, namely, that of a humble dependence on the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Mr. Paine's spirit is sufficiently apparent in his pages, and that of the sacred writers in theirs. So far from writing as they wrote, he cannot understand their writings. That which the Scriptures teach on this subject is sufficiently verified in him, and all others of his spirit: 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned' [1 Corinthians 2:14].<sup>40</sup>

Fuller never disparaged the importance of scholarship in the study of the Scriptures,<sup>41</sup> but he regularly stressed its insufficiency if it were not coupled with an openness to the Holy Spirit as the illuminator of his Word. For instance, at the ordination of a Robert Fawcner in 1787, Fuller addressed the newly ordained pastor thus:<sup>42</sup>

The apostle exhorts that we 'be not drunken with wine, wherein is excess; but *filled* with the Spirit' [Ephesians 5:18]. The word 'filled,' here, is very expressive; it denotes, I apprehend, being *overcome*, as it were, with the holy influences and fruits of the blessed Spirit. How necessary is all this, my brother, in your work! Oh how necessary is 'an unction from the Holy One!' [1 John 2:20]. It is this that will enable you to enter into the spirit of the gospel, and preserve you from destructive errors concerning it. . . . We shall naturally fall in with the dictates of that spirit of which we are full. It is for want of this, in a great measure, that the Scriptures appear strange, and foreign, and

difficult to be understood. . . . It is no breach of charity to say, that if the professors of Christianity had more of the Holy Spirit of God in their hearts, there would be a greater harmony among them respecting the great truths which he has revealed.

Again, in his criticism of some of the views of Robert Robinson (1735–1790), one of the very few eighteenth century Calvinistic Baptists who strayed from orthodoxy,<sup>43</sup> Fuller stated:<sup>44</sup>

There are truths in the Holy Scriptures—truths, too, which constitute the essence and glory of the gospel—truths the discernment and belief of which form the essence of true religion, which cannot be admitted without an answerable disposition; and . . . this disposition must be produced by the Holy Spirit.

Paine's attack on Christianity was not limited to the idea of an inscripturated revelation, but also encompassed some of the foundational truths of the Christian faith. For instance, he used current astronomical knowledge to attack the doctrine of the atonement.

Our ideas, not only of the almightiness of the Creator, but of His wisdom and His beneficence, become enlarged in proportion as we contemplate the extent and the structure of the universe. The solitary idea of a solitary world rolling or at rest in the immense ocean of space gives place to the cheerful idea of a society of worlds so happily contrived as to administer, even by their motion, instruction to man. We see our own earth filled with abundance, but we forget to consider how much of that abundance is owing to the scientific knowledge the vast machinery of the universe has unfolded.

But, in the midst of those reflections, what are we to think of the Christian system of faith that forms itself upon the idea of only one world, and that of no greater extent, as is before shown, than twenty-five thousand miles? An extent which a man walking at the rate of three miles an hour, for twelve hours in the day, could he keep on in a circular direction, would walk entirely round in less than two years. Alas! what is this to the mighty ocean of space, and the almighty power of the Creator?

From whence, then, could arise the solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on His protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple?

And, on the other hand, are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent and a redeemer? In this case, the person who is irreverently called the Son of God, and sometimes God Himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of deaths, with scarcely a momentary interval of life.<sup>45</sup>

Paine admits that 'it is not a direct article of the Christian system, that this world that we inhabit is the whole of the habitable creation.'<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, he is confident that:<sup>47</sup>

To believe that God created a plurality of worlds, at least as numerous as what we call stars, renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous, and scatters it in the mind like feathers in the air.

In his reply to Paine's reasoning, Fuller does not attempt to controvert the hypothesis that God has created a multitude of inhabited worlds in the universe.

Mr. Paine seems to wish to have it thought that the doctrine of a multiplicity of inhabited worlds is a matter of *demonstration*; but the existence of a number of heavenly bodies, whose revolutions are under the direction of certain laws, and whose returns, therefore, are the objects of human calculation, does not prove that they are all inhabited by intelligent beings. I do not deny that, from other considerations, the thing may be highly probable; but it is no more than a probability.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, if he is forced to choose between this hypothesis and the Scriptural record, Fuller has no hesitations as to his choice. He would continue to affirm Scriptural infallibility, for:<sup>49</sup>

If it were even to prove fallacious, [it] has no dangerous consequences attending it, and . . . if it should be found a truth, [it] involves our eternal salvation.

But Fuller really does not believe it has to come down to such a choice; for while the Scriptures 'do not teach the doctrine of a multitude of inhabited worlds, . . . neither do they teach the contrary.'<sup>50</sup> Scripture's silence on this matter well illustrates why the Scriptures were given.

They were not given to teach us astronomy, or geography, or civil government, or any science which relates to the present life only, therefore they do not determine upon any system of any of these sciences. There are things upon which reason is competent to judge, sufficiently at least for all the purposes of human life, without a revelation from heaven. The great object of revelation is to instruct us in things which pertain to our everlasting peace; and as to other things, even the rise and fall of the mightiest empires, they are only touched in an incidental manner, as the mention of them might be necessary to higher purposes.<sup>51</sup>

The Scriptures do not seek to provide mankind with a comprehensive volume of knowledge, but primarily deal with 'things which pertain to our everlasting peace.' What is included in the Scriptures is designed

to enable men and women find salvation, and not to gratify their curiosity about a host of other subjects.<sup>52</sup> This scope and purpose of the Scriptures must consequently be kept in mind when they are being interpreted.

The Scriptures are written in a *popular* style, as best adapted to their great end. If the salvation of philosophers only had been their object, the language might possibly have been somewhat different; though even this may be a matter of doubt, since the style is suited to the subject, and to the great end which they had in view; but being addressed to men of every degree, it was highly proper that the language should be fitted to every capacity, and suited to their common modes of conception. They speak of the foundations of the earth, the ends of the earth, the greater and less lights in the heavens, the sun rising, standing still, and going down, and many other things in the same way. If deists object to these modes of speaking, as conveying ideas which are inconsistent with the true theory of the heavens and the earth, let them, if they can, substitute others which are consistent: let them, in their common conversation, when describing the revolutions of evening and morning, speak of the earth as rising and going down, instead of the sun, . . . and see if men, in common, will better understand them, or whether they would be able even to understand one another.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, although the primary emphasis of the Scriptures has to do with its saving truths, it does not follow that the veracity of other facts mentioned in Scripture is in any way lessened. They may not be as important, but they are just as true.

A true believer, so far as he understands it, *does* believe all Scripture truth; and to discredit any one truth of the Bible, knowing it to be such, is a damning sin.<sup>54</sup>

The conclusion to *The Gospel Its Own Witness* weaves together a number of the main ideas which Fuller has been stressing throughout the book: the limitations of nature as a vehicle of revelation, the need for special revelation, the salvific purpose of God's Word.

When you have ascended to the height of human discovery, there are things, and things of infinite moment too, that are utterly beyond its reach. Revelation is the medium, and the only medium, by which, standing, as it were, 'on nature's Alps', we discover things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, and of which it never hath entered into the heart of man to conceive.<sup>55</sup>

#### **4. *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (1814)**

The year before he died, Fuller began work on a systematic theology in the form of a series of letters to John Ryland, Jr. Due to ill health

and the numerous demands on his time, Fuller never completed this 'connected view of the gospel' as he described it.<sup>56</sup> But of the nine letters he did write, three of them specifically considered the issues raised in his rejoinder to Paine fifteen years earlier. The first, the fifth letter in the series, details 'The Necessity of a Divine Revelation.' Essentially Fuller reasserts what he had already expressed in both *The Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth* and *The Gospel Its Own Witness* regarding the relationship of nature and God's Word, and the insufficiency of the former to provide saving knowledge of God.<sup>57</sup> The second, the sixth letter in the series, is devoted to 'The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures.' It begins by looking at what the human authors of Scripture profess their writings to be. From such texts as 2 Samuel 23:2-3, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21, Fuller concludes:<sup>58</sup>

We must, therefore, either admit these writings to be the word of God, or consider them as mere imposture. . . . If their writings be not what they profess them to be, they are imposture, and deserve to be rejected. There is no consistent medium between faith and unbelief.

There are, though, Fuller continues, degrees of inspiration in the Scriptures.

Though all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, it does not follow that it is so in the *same sense* and *degree*. It required one degree of inspiration to foretell future events, and another to narrate facts which fell under the writer's knowledge. The one required less exercise of his own judgement, the other more. Inspiration, in the latter case, might be little more than a Divine superintendence, preserving him from error, and from other defects and faults, to which ordinary historians are subject.<sup>59</sup>

Here, Fuller is essentially reproducing Sutcliff's statements in *The Divinity of the Christian Religion*. Fuller, like Sutcliff, emphasizes that the Scriptures are free from error and that the process of their inspiration was not a mechanical one. Elsewhere Fuller also states that the English translation of the Bible should be regarded as 'subject to imperfection' because it is 'a human performance.'<sup>60</sup> Consequently, his statement in the text cited above regarding the lack of error in the Scriptures probably should be understood as a reference to the autographs. Fuller's reiteration of Sutcliff's point regarding the 'degrees' of inspiration is also noteworthy. For a little further on in this same letter Fuller can speak of the Old and New Testaments as being 'dictated' by the Spirit.<sup>61</sup> His earlier statement about the 'degrees' of inspiration certainly precludes a literal understanding of this latter expression. The way in which Fuller is using the term 'dictated' would appear to be very similar to the way that it was used by John Calvin (1509-1564), for whom:<sup>62</sup>

[The term 'dictated'] is simply a theological metaphor conveying the thought that what is written in Scripture bears the same relation to the mind of God which was its source as a letter written by a good secretary bears to the mind of the man who dictated it—a relation, that is, of complete correspondence, and thus of absolute authority.

Fuller proceeds to argue for the inspiration of the Scriptures from their truth, consistency, perfection, pungency, and utility. He concludes the letter with a few comments on Psalm 19:7–11. The choice of this Scriptural text is not accidental. Paine, as we have seen, had a high admiration for the first six verses of this psalm. Fuller, however, refuses to concentrate on these six verses to the exclusion of the next five. For verses 7–11 indicate that:<sup>63</sup>

The book of nature declares the 'eternal power and Godhead' of the Creator; but that of Scripture represents his whole character; not only as the Creator; but as the Moral Governor and Saviour of men. Hence it is 'able to make us wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 3:15). . . . The opinions of the greatest men, formed merely from the works of nature, are full of uncertainty, and but ill adapted to instruct the illiterate part of mankind in their best interests; but the sacred Scriptures contain the true sayings of God, which may be safely depended upon.

Fuller here links together a number of themes which we have already encountered in his earlier writings. The burden of the Scriptures is shown to be the doctrine of salvation. Then, the doctrine of Scriptural infallibility is revealed to have salvific implications: because the Scriptures are a reliable source of divine truth, they are 'able to make us wise unto salvation.' The seventh letter also touches on this main purpose of the Scriptures. 'The sacred Scriptures are full of Christ, and uniformly lead to him.'<sup>64</sup> Scripture is important to Fuller because it points him to Christ in a way that nothing else can.

The significance of these *Letters on Systematic Divinity* should not be underestimated. They represent the fruit of a lifetime's reflections on the purpose and nature of Scripture.

## 5. Conclusion

In the second part of *The Age of Reason* Paine makes the following boast:<sup>65</sup>

I have now gone through the Bible [that is, the Old Testament], as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder and fell trees. There they lie; and the priests, if they can, may replant them. They may, perhaps stick them in the ground, but they will never make them grow.

Twenty years later, Fuller assessed Paine's boast thus:<sup>66</sup>

A few years ago, a certain infidel braggadocio pretended to have gone through the wood and cut down the trees, which the priests, he said, might stick in again, but they would not grow! And have the sacred Scriptures been less in request since that time than they were before? Rather have they not been much more so? Infidelity, by overacting its part, has given itself a wound; and its abettors, like Herod, have been eaten of worms, and have died. But the word of the Lord has grown and been multiplied.

The years between the publication of the second part of *The Age of Reason* in 1795 and the writing of these words in 1814 had seen great growth not only among the Baptists, but also among other denominations such as the Anglicans, Methodists and Congregationalists. And accompanying this growth was a corresponding demand for God's Word. The British and Foreign Bible Society was founded in 1804 to help meet this need, and by 1814 it had distributed over 950,000 Bibles.<sup>67</sup> But Fuller also has in view important events beyond the home front. For in India the translation projects of Carey, Joshua Marshman (1768–1837) and William Ward (1769–1823) were beginning to bear fruit. In the year in which Fuller wrote the words cited above Carey sent him 'a list of twenty-six versions of Scripture, finished or then in the press, or in the course of translation.'<sup>68</sup> Thus Fuller could declare immediately preceding his assessment of Paine's boast: 'May the blessing of God attend the various attempts to translate and circulate the sacred Scriptures.'<sup>69</sup> This is the prayer of a man wholly committed to an infallible Word and fully aware that the extension of the Saviour's kingdom is intrinsically linked to that Word.

**MICHAEL HAYKIN** is Professor of Church History at Central Baptist Seminary, Toronto.

#### NOTES

- 1 Norman H. Maring, 'Andrew Fuller's Doctrine of the Church' in Winthrop Still Hudson, ed., *Baptist Concepts of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), pp. 71–72. For the life of Fuller, the classic study is that of John Ryland, Jr., *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope, illustrated: in the Life and Death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (2nd. ed.; London: Button & Son, 1818). For more recent studies, see Arthur H. Kirkby, *Andrew Fuller (1754–1815)* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1961); Jack Milner, 'Andrew Fuller' *Reformation Today*, 17 (Jan–Feb 1974), pp. 18–29.
- 2 Cited Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 505.
- 3 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1947), p. 166.
- 4 *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. and revised Joseph Belcher (1845 ed.; repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1988) II, pp. 1–107.

- 5 'Baptists and Scripture' in John D. Hannah, ed., *Inerrancy and the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 323–324.
- 6 *The Age of Reason* was published in two parts, the first part appearing in 1794 and the second in the following year. For a discussion of the details surrounding its publication, see Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Man of Reason. The Life of Thomas Paine* (London: The Cresset Press, 1960), pp. 230–232.
- 7 *The Age of Reason*, introd. Philip S. Foner (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, Inc., 1974), p. 50. On the life and thought of Paine, see David Powell, *Tom Paine: The Greatest Exile* (London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985); Ian Dyck, ed., *Citizen of the World. Essays on Thomas Paine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1988).
- 8 Samuel Edwards, *Rebel! A Biography of Tom Paine* (New York/Washington: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1974), pp. 186–187, 192–193; Edward Royle, ed., *The Infidel Tradition from Paine to Bradlaugh* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), p. 3.
- 9 *Age of Reason*, pp. 63, 68. See also *ibid.*, pp. 97–98, 182.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 185. See also *ibid.*, pp. 69, 98.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 187–188.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 188, 190.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 158. For a recent and plausible solution to the differences in these genealogies, see R. B. Nettelhorst, 'The Genealogy of Jesus,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 31 (1988), pp. 169–172.
- 14 *Age of Reason*, p. 158.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 70. Paine presumably has in mind only the first six verses in Psalm 19. The subject of Psalm 19:7–11 is Scripture. On Paine's view of Psalm 19 as a 'Deistical Psalm' see also his 'To John Mason' [*The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, collected and ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: The Citadel Press, 1969), II, p. 814, n. 21].
- 16 Paine maintained that he wrote *The Age of Reason* in order to stem the tide of atheism in revolutionary France [*Age of Reason*, pp. 49–50; *Letter to Samuel Adams* (*Complete Writings*, II, p. 1436)]. But most of it reads more like a diatribe against Christianity than against atheism.
- 17 'Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* Revisited', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33 (1972), pp. 561–576. For another study of responses to Paine's *The Age of Reason*, see Richard H. Popkin, 'The Age of Reason versus The Age of Revelation. Two critics of Tom Paine: David Levi and Elias Boudinot' in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment* (Newark: University of Delaware Press/London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987), pp. 158–170.
- 18 Cited Ryland, *Life and Death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, p. 227.
- 19 *Works*, I, pp. 160–174.
- 20 *Ibid.*, I, p. 160.
- 21 *Ibid.*, I, pp. 160–161.
- 22 *Ibid.*, I, p. 161.
- 23 *Ibid.*, I, p. 163.
- 24 *Ibid.*, I, p. 163. Fuller's choice of 1 John 5:7 at this point as Biblical support for the doctrine of the Trinity is an unfortunate one, since this text is uniformly recognized as a later interpolation. Fuller is aware of the discussion about the authenticity of this text, but he believes it to be genuine. See his *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (*Works*, I, pp. 708–709).
- 25 *Works*, I, p. 164.
- 26 Cf. Fuller's statement in *On An Intimate and Practical Acquaintance with the Word of God* (*Works*, I, p. 483):  
 Learn your religion from the Bible. Let that be your decisive rule. Adopt not a body of sentiments, or even a single sentiment, solely on the authority of any man. . . . Dare to think for yourself. Human compositions are fallible. But the Scriptures were written by men who wrote as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.



- 27 *Works*, I, p. 172.
- 28 *Ibid.*, I, p. 172.
- 29 *Ibid.*, I, p. 172.
- 30 There has been very little research done on the life and ministry of Sutcliff. There is an early biographical sketch by Fuller attached to his funeral sermon for Sutcliff: *The Principles and Prospects of a Servant of Christ* (*Works*, I, pp. 325–334). For a more recent biographical study, see Kenneth W. H. Howard, 'John Sutcliff of Olney'. *The Baptist Quarterly*, 14 (1951–1952), pp. 304–309. For one aspect of Sutcliff's thought, see Michael A. G. Haykin, 'Can we Pray and Work for Worldwide Revival? Revival—The Perspective of John Sutcliff (1752–1814)', *Reformation Today*, 104 (July–August 1988), pp. 9–17.
- 31 *The Divinity of the Christian Religion* [Circular Letter of the Northamptonshire Association, 1797].
- 32 According to Kirkby, *Andrew Fuller*, pp. 13–14.
- 33 E. F. Clipsham, 'Andrew Fuller and Fullerism: A Study in Evangelical Calvinism. 4. Fuller as a Theologian', *The Baptist Quarterly*, 20 (1963–1964), p. 271.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 35 *Works*, II, p. 58.
- 36 *Ibid.*, II, p. 19.
- 37 *Ibid.*, II, p. 72.
- 38 L. Ross Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible. The Baptist doctrines of biblical inspiration and religious authority in historical perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 430. See, for instance, Fuller's *Passages Apparently Contradictory* (*Works*, I, pp. 667–684).
- 39 As Fuller said in another context [*Habitual Devotedness to the Ministry* (*Works*, I, pp. 506–507)]: 'You may read the Scriptures a hundred times over, and yet be only on the surface, far from having fathomed them. . . . The Scriptures were always considered a deep mine, even when they consisted of only the five Books of Moses.'
- 40 *Works*, II, p. 73.
- 41 See, for example, *Habitual Devotedness to the Ministry* (*Works*, I, p. 506); *The Young Minister Exhorted to Make Full Proof of His Ministry* (*Works*, I, p. 520). See also the comment of John H. Watson, 'Baptists and the Bible as Seen in Three Eminent Baptists', *Foundations*, 16 (1973), p. 248.
- 42 *The Qualifications and Encouragement of a Faithful Minister Illustrated by the Character and Success of Barnabas* (*Works*, I, pp. 138–139).
- 43 On the sad story of Robinson's theological career, see especially Graham W. Hughes, *With Freedom Fired. The Story of Robert Robinson, Cambridge Nonconformist* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 1955).
- 44 *Strictures on Some of the Leading Sentiments of Mr. R. Robinson* (*Works*, III, p. 604). Cf. the following statement made by Thomas Scott (1747–1821), the biblical commentator, on 24 May 1794 in a letter to John Ryland, Jr.:  
If we once think ourselves competent to understand the Bible by dint of our own sagacity, and skill in languages and criticism, without an immediate and continual dependence upon the teaching of the Holy Spirit, we are within a few paces of some dreadful downfall. Witness [Martin] Madan, . . . and R. Robinson; who in their several publications . . . either expressly disavow, or tacitly pass by the mention of such a dependence. [Cited John Scott, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Scott* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1822), p. 247]. See also Watson, 'Baptists and the Bible', pp. 248–249.
- 45 *Age of Reason*, pp. 88–90.
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 48 *Works*, II, p. 86.
- 49 *Ibid.*, II, p. 86.
- 50 *Ibid.*, II, p. 88.

## Churchman

51 *Ibid.*, II, p. 88.

52 Cf. Fuller's comments *a propos* Genesis 1 in his *Expository Discourses on the Book of Genesis* (*Works*, III, pp. 2–3):

The account given by Moses relates not to the *whole creation*, but merely to what it immediately concerns us to know. God made angels; but nothing is said of them. The moon is called one of the *greater lights*, not as to what it is in itself, but what it is *to us*. The Scriptures are written, not to gratify curiosity, but to nourish faith. They do not stop to tell you *how*, nor to answer a number of questions which might be asked; but tell you so much as is necessary, and no more.

53 *Works*, II, pp. 88–89.

54 Cited Maring, 'Doctrine of the Church', p. 77.

55 *Works*, II, p. 97.

56 *Ibid.*, I, p. 684.

57 *Ibid.*, I, pp. 696–697.

58 *Ibid.*, I, p. 699.

59 *Ibid.*, I, p. 690.

60 *The English Translation of the Bible* (*Works*, III, p. 810).

61 *Works*, I, p. 700.

62 J. I. Packer, 'Calvin the Theologian' in G. E. Duffield, ed., *John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1966), p. 163.

63 *Works*, I, p. 701.

64 *Ibid.*, I, p. 703.

65 *Age of Reason*, p. 156.

66 *Works*, I, p. 702.

67 Roger H. Martin, *Evangelicals United. Ecumenical Stirrings in Pre-Victorian Britain, 1795–1830* (Metuchen, N.J./London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1983), p. 92.

68 F. Deaville Walker, *William Carey: Missionary Pioneer and Statesman* (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), p. 232.

69 *Works*, I, p. 702.