

# A Pastor Admonishing Pastors Andrew Fuller

Conference on the Church for God's Glory  
Dr. David Saxon  
Maranatha Baptist University  
May 23, 2022

In the late 18th century, Andrew Fuller became known as the go-to pastor among the Particular Baptists for ordination sermons. Among the sermons preserved in Fuller's collected works, Fuller preached nearly one fifth of them on the occasions of the ordination of younger colleagues.<sup>1</sup> What is particularly interesting about this is that Fuller had no formal training as a pastor, and by the time he was preaching most of these sermons, he had distinctly and intentionally rejected the dominant theology of the Particular Baptist denomination in which he had grown up.

Why did his generation of Particular Baptist churches often turn to him to advise their aspiring young pastors? While Fuller's path did not include formal education, it did lead him to wide reading and deep thinking on the pastor's role and responsibilities. The Lord gifted Fuller to be a leader in theological transition and development, which led to the practical results of transforming the Particular Baptist denomination relative to its view of the pastor's role relative to his congregation and community and relative to its view of the church's role in evangelizing the world.

My purpose today is twofold. First, I will give reasons that we should listen to Fuller as the evangelical Particular Baptist churches listened to him two hundred and fifty years ago. Second, having established that he is a voice worth listening to, we will consider key themes of his ordination sermons.<sup>2 3</sup>

Of course, such sermons do not equate with theological education or serve as a substitute for it. If I may use an analogy, the coach's pep talk right before the team takes the court or field cannot replace the months of work in getting in shape and learning the game. However, in the thousand details involved in months or years of preparation, it can be very helpful to have the coach pinpoint the key points needed right before entering the competition. Despite hundreds of hours on

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Gunton Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller with a Memoir of His Life*.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent resource on this theme is Michael A. G. Haykin and Brian Croft, *Being a Pastor: A Conversation with Andrew Fuller* (Evangelical Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> The first half of this talk is condensed from my MacDonald Lectures on Andrew Fuller given at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in February 2020. The second half is expanded from a portion of those lectures.

working on proper defensive stance during basketball practice, nevertheless I found it extremely helpful to have the coach look me in the eye and say, “Stay low tonight and focus on his chest, or number four will blow by you.” Fuller gave these young pastors theological pep talks from which we can distill what he thought was most crucial if they were to minister successfully in their new charges.

First, consider why we can profit from listening in.

## **Why We Should Listen to Fuller**

First, Fuller’s theological journey out of Hyper-Calvinism commends him to us as a trustworthy guide.

Born in 1754, Fuller grew up in a godly Particular Baptist home. When Fuller was seven, his family joined the Particular Baptist church in Soham, in Cambridgeshire, in east-central England. John Eve had been the pastor of the church for about a decade when little Fuller arrived. Fuller loved his pastor and always regarded him as a good and godly man. Eve, however, brought to the church a very high Calvinism that led, in his case, to a non-evangelistic Hyper-Calvinism.

Though taken to church faithfully, Fuller helped his dad on the farm, was active in local sports, and paid very little attention to Eve’s preaching. Fuller later wrote that he “never considered myself as any way concerned in what I heard from the pulpit.”<sup>4</sup> Salvation was for the elect, and he had no reason to think he was one of them.

By God’s grace, at age 14, Fuller stumbled upon John Bunyan’s autobiography, which led him to *Pilgrim’s Progress* and a collection of *Gospel Sonnets* by Ralph Erskine, an evangelical Calvinist pastor in Scotland. By age 15, Fuller was confused. He had learned from Pastor Eve about the holy God, the atoning work of Christ, the drawing work of the Spirit, and the beauty of a holy Christian life. He desired these things, but he also thought he could have them only if he were elect. The high Calvinism Eve taught, as Fuller understood it, encouraged him to look inward to see if God were at work in him, thus providing evidence that he was elect. It would be presumptuous to believe if he were not predestined to do so. Conscious of his sin, however, it seemed utterly presumptuous to him to look inward and see anything God would want to save.

He went several months in desperate agony of spirit, fearing the wrath of God but not knowing how he could find peace. His own testimony is heart-breaking:

---

<sup>4</sup> Peter Mordern, *The Life and Thought of Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (London: Paternoster, 2015), 44.

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 do it; yet I was aware that I had no qualifications. On a review of my resolution at that time, it seems to resemble that of Esther, who went into the king's presence, *contrary to law*, and at the hazard of her life. Like her, I seemed reduced to extremities, impelled, by dire necessity to run all hazards, even though I should perish in the attempt. 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 determined to cast myself upon Christ, thinking, peradventure, he would save my soul.<sup>5</sup>

Fuller found a Savior happy to receive him. He continues,

In this way I continued above an hour, weeping, and supplicating mercy for the Saviour's sake: (my soul hath it still in remembrance, and is humbled in me!) and as the eye of the mind was more and more fixed upon him, my guilt and fears were gradually and insensibly removed.<sup>6</sup>

Fuller was born again, like Spurgeon 81 years later, at the age of 15.

During the next three years, an antinomian controversy wracked the church, eventuating in the resignation of Pastor Eve. Eve discovered to his chagrin that his teaching that all goodness in man flows from God's grace had led his congregation to the conclusion that believers could not be required to be obedient, since disobedience simply revealed that God had not provided the necessary grace. Fuller will later often remark that Hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism meet at this precise point: both believe that responsibility implies ability. Arminians see that man is responsible and conclude that he must be able; hyper-Calvinists see that man is unable and conclude that he must not be responsible.

The Soham church asked 19-year-old Fuller to assume the pastorate. This speaks both to the giftedness of the young Fuller and the scarcity of pastors in the Particular Baptist denomination in England. He officially endorsed the very high Calvinism that had chased even Eve away, but he had deep misgivings and gave himself to close study of the Scriptures.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs*, xviii.

<sup>6</sup> *Memoirs*, xviii. See also Mordern, 46.

A humorous step in his developing convictions occurred at his ordination on May 3, 1774. Robert Hall, Sr., of Arnesby, some 80 miles away, attended and listened to Fuller's account of the High Calvinism of Pastor Eve. Hall recommended that Fuller read Edwards on the will. Fuller determined to do so. He sought out the Edwards work recommended to him by Hall and found *Veritus Redux* by John Edwards of Cambridge. It was fine, but he didn't see how it had anything to do with High Calvinism. It would be two years before he discovered that he had the wrong John Edwards.

Meanwhile, Fuller gave himself to reading. He read Gill's *Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, from which he learned a great deal. He also began working through the writings of John Bunyan, who had gained fame in nearby Bedfordshire. Fuller was struck by the differences between Gill and Bunyan. He was initially inclined to follow Gill but further reading in the 17-century Baptists and especially Puritans like John Owen and John Goodwin led to considerable doubt. Finally coming upon *The Freedom of the Will* by the American Jonathan Edwards, Fuller discovered what he came to consider a philosophically satisfying foundation for an evangelical Calvinism. He would subsequently devour the writings of Edwards and the later Edwardsean school of thought and make regular appeal to them.

Fuller's ability to break free from modes of thought that he had grown up with and that dominated Particular Baptist theology in London and central England is astonishing. By the fifth year of his Soham pastorate, despite leading a congregation that remained entrenched in Antinomian Hyper-Calvinism, Fuller had written the bulk of his *A Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, a ringing affirmation of evangelical Calvinist themes.

That year—1779—Fuller slowly began introducing gospel invitations into his preaching. His friend John Ryland, Jr., reported, "A tinge of false Calvinism infected some of the people, who were inclined to find fault with his ministry, as it became more searching and practical, and as he freely enforced the indefinite calls of the gospel."<sup>7</sup> This led to conflict with his Soham congregation, some of whom thought it presumptuous for a 25-year-old to tinker with time-honored traditions.

In 1782 Fuller accepted the call to the Particular Baptist Church in Kettering, 60 miles west of Soham in Northamptonshire. The Kettering folks had already embraced evangelical views and were thrilled when Fuller greeted them on his first Sunday with these words:

I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the gospel to all who will hear it. And, as I believe the inability of men to spiritual things to be wholly of the moral, and therefore of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Mordern, 71.

criminal kind—and that it is their duty to love the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him for salvation, though they do or no—I, therefore, believe free and solemn addresses, invitations, calls, and warnings to them, to be not only consistent, but directly adapted, as means in the hands of the Spirit of God to bring them to Christ. I consider it as a part of my duty, which I could not omit without being guilty of the blood of souls.<sup>8</sup>

In 1785 Fuller’s friends prevailed upon him to publish *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, which he was reluctant to do because he knew it would thrust him into the middle of the controversy over “The Modern Question”: should believers offer the gospel indiscriminately to all men? A half century of hyper-Calvinist skepticism about general invitations was under assault—partly spurred on by the Evangelical Awakening that had swept England but had been fiercely opposed by many high Calvinist Particular Baptists. The brilliant book was a bombshell that did indeed propel Fuller to the head of the evangelical Calvinist wing of the denomination and brought him into collision with the leading Hyper-Calvinists, several of whom pastored significant London churches. He will spend the final thirty years of his life defending evangelical Calvinism against the Hyper-Calvinists on the one hand—who regarded him as a traitor—and the Arminian Baptists on the other hand, men like Abraham Taylor, who appreciated the direction he had moved but didn’t think he had gone far enough.

Of course, this theological odyssey will commend Fuller to you as a mentor in proportion to your agreement with him in his evangelical Calvinist conclusions. If you prefer high Calvinism or less Calvinism, you may regret that he followed this path. I, for the most part, find his theology extremely attractive, which is to say, biblical, and willingly sit at his feet.

Nevertheless, may I suggest that this theological journey portrays Fuller as a man who was unwilling to imbibe any theological proposition without thorough biblical investigation. Perhaps, I have not made it sufficiently clear, but while Fuller was reading Bunyan, Owen, Edwards, and scores of other authors, he was also devouring the Scriptures and meditating on them intensely. He did so conscious of his own weakness but also of his responsibility. Fuller wrote in his diary, “Lord, thou hast given me a determination to take up no principle at second-hand; but to search for everything at the pure fountain of thy word. Yet, Lord, I am afraid, seeing I am as liable to err as other men, lest I should be led aside from truth by mine own imagination.”<sup>9</sup> Fuller was here struggling with a tension that all

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Nettles, “Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)” in Michael A. G. Haykin, *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910*, Vol. 2 (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2000), 116.

<sup>9</sup> *Memoirs*, xxviii.

thoughtful Baptists have faced. He was a priest before God and determined to reason out the issues for himself. This was a sacred responsibility. Nevertheless, the safest place to discover theological truth is in connection with venerable church historical traditions. If we seek to reinvent the wheel, we will usually drift off into error.

As we will later see, a key part of the advice he often gave young pastors was not to rest on theological conclusions that they had not personally investigated. Of course, no one can verify every theological proposition personally before one begins preaching or teaching. Life is too short, and no one ever achieves sufficient breadth of knowledge not to lean on others for some things. But beginning at the core of one's faith and working outward, pastors are responsible to go to the source. And that's what Fuller models so powerfully. Of course, one can test everything by Scripture and largely endorse one's theological tradition—there's no particular virtue in change for change's sake. But Fuller—like Martin Luther, Adoniram Judson, Alexander Carson, and many others in church history—showed his fidelity to Scripture by strikingly critiquing his inherited tradition and finding it wanting. This bold stand on *sola scriptura* is a model for every pastor, whether he follows Fuller's evangelical Calvinism or not.

Second and more briefly, we should listen to Fuller because he practiced what he preached. Although obviously not a perfect man—Fuller was a passionate person who struggled with impatience and bouts of sadness, bordering on depression—he nevertheless exemplified the great themes he taught others in his pastoral, personal, and broader ecclesiastical life.

As a pastor, Fuller had to learn how to preach expository messages and was not a naturally gifted orator. After about 1790—fifteen years into his forty years of pulpit ministry—he committed to expository preaching through books of the Bible, and his preaching became noticeably better. People urged the publication of several of his sermon series, and his influence widened as he became a sought-after preacher among the evangelical Particular Baptist churches. Commitment to the Scriptures, commitment to the hard work of study, and commitment to improving his delivery all paid dividends and put him in a position to advise young preachers on their craft.

From the beginning, Fuller devoted himself to getting to know his people. Kettering had about 3500 people, and most were involved in the wool trade. After 1785—the year Fuller arrived—new, large textile factories in the north began to drive the small markets, like Kettering, out of business. The economy suffered, and the town shrunk to a little over 3000 people by 1795. The alternative was shoemaking, but Northampton was already the center for that. Life in Kettering was tough.

Fuller maintained a notebook in which he recorded the names and various information about every family in his church. He visited them regularly. Among them were a number of poor people, especially as the Kettering economy declined, and he had a special burden for them.

The church had 88 members when Fuller became pastor and 174 at his death in 1815. It had accepted 232 new members and had 146 come off the roll via death, moving away, or discipline. This does not tell the whole story, however. As Fuller gained fame as a writer, people from the other churches in town and from the surrounding villages often came to hear him. On a given Sunday after 1805, attendance might be over 1000. It was typical of Particular Baptist churches of that era to have attendance of four or five times the actual membership. The building was enlarged in 1786, and then a new structure was built in 1805 to handle the growing crowds.

At the end, as his health began to fail, Fuller had help from an assistant pastor, but for most of those years, he bore the burdens of pastoring this flock while at the same time writing a number of good books, carrying on massive correspondence, and spending a great deal of time supporting Baptist missions.

As an outgrowth of his decisive shift to evangelical Calvinism, Fuller became an ardent supporter of evangelism and missions. He was one of the key mentors of William Carey, his church hosted the famous Northamptonshire Baptist Association meeting in May, 1792, at which Carey preached “Expect Great Things, Attempt Great Things,” and it was at the home of one of Fuller’s deacons that the men met who launched the Baptist Missionary Society later that year.<sup>10</sup> Fuller was elected as the First Secretary of the BMS and served dynamically in that role for the remaining twenty-three years of his life.

Fuller’s missions advocacy and urgent and ardent work on behalf of Carey and the Serampore Mission powerfully testify to the reality of Fuller’s theological convictions. The shift to evangelical Calvinism was not an ivory tower, intellectual exercise but reflective of a deep, heartfelt commitment to the Great Commission. Pastors who model what they proclaim command assent from their listeners, and pastors within the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Particular Baptist fold wanted to listen to Fuller.

Finally, Fuller was a faithful family man, which often involved enduring considerable suffering in that 18<sup>th</sup>-century context. He and his first wife Sarah had eleven children together, but eight of them died young. After sixteen years of a sweet marriage, Sarah died, her final illness involving periods of insanity in which she did not recognize her own husband. The agony of that illness, her death, and

---

<sup>10</sup> The deacon, Beeby Wallis, had recently passed away, so technically the meeting was held in the home of his widow.

the death of the child she had just borne, occurred during the summer of 1792, the very year Fuller was so active in starting the BMS.

God gave Fuller a second, godly wife in 1794, Ann, who would serve alongside him for the last twenty years of his life. Ann bore Fuller six more children, but three of them died in infancy. In all, Fuller buried twelve children and one wife; one of the sons he buried rebelled against the faith and disgraced the family (although he may have gotten saved toward the end of his wild life). One of his sons later wrote a biography of his father, and all of his surviving children appear to have pursued Christ as their father taught them to do.

In short, Fuller is worth listening to because he was a real pastor, going through all the ups and downs involved in trying to balance family, church, and many other responsibilities. As young pastors listened to him, they heard an authentic voice, not a general a mile behind the lines but a fellow soldier in the trenches. While we live in a different time, I believe we can benefit from listening to him as well.

## **What Fuller Has to Tell Us**

Fuller's ordination sermons canvass a fair amount of ground, primarily because most of them are expositions of various texts. Exposition, faithfully carried out, will shape our agenda, and it did for Fuller. Nevertheless, certain key themes emerged with regularity, themes that Fuller tended to find in every text that he used to address new pastors. I will briefly canvass the passages Fuller used<sup>11</sup> and how he developed those passages and then develop the key themes from the sermons as a whole.

He preached "On an Intimate and Practical Acquaintance with the Word of God" from Ezra 7:10: "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments." Ezra is an example of the "ready scribe" that every pastor should be.<sup>12</sup>

Jeremiah was his example when he preached "Ministers Appointed to Root out Evil and to Cultivate Good" from Jeremiah 1:10: "I have this day set thee over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, and to build, and to plant." After noting that "this language, my brother, is not in every sense applicable to the present occasion" (fortunately), he

---

<sup>11</sup> These passages are in canonical order.

<sup>12</sup> Haykin and Croft, 120-127.

nevertheless develops two obvious points of application: contend against evil and work to build up the church.<sup>13</sup>

He preached “The Work and Encouragement of the Christian Minister” from Matthew 25:21: “His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.” Fuller uses a pattern found in many of the sermons when he describes the work of a Christian minister—to be a good and faithful servant—and then gives important motives for the discharge of our trust: the Lord’s approbation and future joy. That model of issuing an exhortation and then providing scriptural motives to obey the exhortation likely shows Fuller’s acquaintance with Puritan preaching, where it is found quite commonly.<sup>14</sup>

He preached “Spiritual Knowledge and Love Necessary for the Ministry” from another favorite Puritan text, John 5:35: “He was a burning and a shining light.” He spoke of spiritual knowledge (shining light) and love (burning light) as necessary (1) In the great work of preaching the Gospel. (2) In presiding in the Church of God. (3) In the private duty of visiting the people. And (4) In one’s whole demeanor through life.<sup>15</sup>

He preached “Pastors Required to Feed the Flock of Christ” from John 21:16: “Feed my sheep.” He exhorted the young ordinand to love Christ and feed the people.<sup>16</sup>

He preached “The Qualifications and Encouragement of a Faithful Minister Illustrated by the Character and Success of Barnabas” from Acts 11:24: “He was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith; and much people was added to the Lord.” Ministers need to be good, filled with the Spirit, and men of faith; the encouragement, then, is that God will save souls through your ministry.<sup>17</sup>

He preached “The Pastor’s Charge” from Acts 20:28: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Again, he expounds the exhortation: take heed. And then he develops the impressive motives by which it is enforced: we are appointed overseers, and Christ’s own blood purchased the church.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Haykin and Croft, 128-133.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 151-159.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 111-119.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 108-110.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 87-107.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 208.

He preached “Ministerial and Christian Communion” from Romans 1:12: “That I may be comforted with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.” In a warm sermon, Fuller speaks of ministers comforting people, people comforting ministers, and both being comforted by their mutual faith.<sup>19</sup>

He preached “Ministers Fellow Labourers with God” from 1 Corinthians 3:9: “We are labourers together with God.” Make no mistake: pastoring is labor; but be encouraged and energized: it is laboring with God!<sup>20</sup>

“Preaching Christ” was the obvious theme from 2 Corinthians 4:5: “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake.”<sup>21</sup>

A somewhat surprising ordination sermon was “Faith in the Gospel a Necessary Prerequisite to Preaching It” from 2 Corinthians 4:13: “We believe, and therefore speak.” His sermon looked at the subject matter of the Christian ministry—what we believe—and the necessity of believing the Gospel before preaching it.<sup>22</sup> (One wonders who the young man was who called for this ordination sermon!)

He preached “Ministers and Churches Exhorted to Serve One Another in Love” from Galatians 5:13: “By love serve one another.” Fuller first exhorted the pastor to love his church. He then exhorted the church to love its pastor.<sup>23</sup>

He preached “The Nature of the Gospel, and the Manner in which It Ought to Be Preached” from Colossians 4:3-4: “Praying, for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, [...] that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.” Notice the manner in which the Gospel ought to be preached, with faithfulness, fearlessness, earnestness, clarity, and affection; and motives to this duty of preaching the gospel as it ought to be preached (he points to good examples, bad examples, and the promised effects).<sup>24</sup>

He preached “Affectionate Concern of a Minister for the Salvation of His Hearers” from 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8: “We were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: so, being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls,

---

<sup>19</sup> Haykin and Croft., 200-203.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 139-144.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 161-167.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 181-186.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 196-199.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 145-150.

because ye were dear unto us.”<sup>25</sup>This is another warm-hearted description of how a true shepherd loves his flock.

He preached “Habitual Devotedness to the Ministry” from 1 Timothy 4:15-16: “Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that they profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” Timothy was to give himself to the Scriptures. Why? The salvation of eternal souls is at stake.<sup>26</sup>

He preached “Hold Fast the Gospel” from 2 Timothy 1:13: “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>27</sup>

He preached “The Young Minister Exhorted to Make Full Proof of His Ministry” from 2 Timothy 4:5-6: “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.” Ministers are called to be servants. What does this service entail? Vigilance, patience, activity in evangelism, and fidelity.<sup>28</sup>

He preached “The Influence of the Presence of Christ on a Minister” from 2 Timothy 4:22: “The Lord Jesus Christ be with thy spirit.” There can be no effective pastoral ministry apart from the presence of Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup>

He preached “Ministers Should Be Concerned Not to Be Despised” from Titus 2:15: “Let no man despise thee.” Conduct yourself, he says to the young preacher, such that no one despises you in the pulpit, or in the work of preaching the gospel; in your behavior in the Church, and among your fellow Christians; and in your general deportment in the world.<sup>30</sup>

This brief survey shows Fuller as a preacher who mined texts for practical truths for pastoral ministry.

Second, consider key themes that Fuller returned to again and again in these sermons.

---

<sup>25</sup> Haykin and Croft, 176-180.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-175.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-207.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-195.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-170.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-138.

First and most obviously, Fuller focuses on the personal religion of the aspiring minister. In the first sermon I cited, preached in Bedfordshire in 1787, Fuller encouraged Robert Fawcner,

The studying of divine truth as preachers rather than as Christians, or, in other words, studying it for the sake of finding out something to say to others, without so much as thinking of profiting our own souls, is a temptation to which we are more than ordinarily exposed. If we studied divine truths as Christians, our being constantly engaged in the service of God would be friendly to our growth in grace. . . . But if we study it only as preachers, it will be the reverse. Our being conversant with the Bible will be like surgeons and soldiers being conversant with the shedding of human blood, till they lose all sensibility concerning it.<sup>31</sup>

Earlier in the same sermon, Fuller urged that attention be given to a personal walk with Christ. Through interactions with men, we may improve our “gifts and parts; but it is conversing with God that must brighten our graces.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, having gifts can be a great temptation and destroy a man’s usefulness if the man does not take heed unto himself spiritually. “A man may have gifts, so as to shine in the eyes of the multitude, almost as bright as he does in his own eyes; and yet possess little or nothing of *spiritual* light—light, the tendency of which is to transform the heart.”<sup>33</sup>

What will make a pastor useful to his church and to the kingdom of Christ in general is spiritual character. “I think it may be laid down as a rule, which both Scripture and experience will confirm, that eminent spirituality in a minister is usually attended with eminent usefulness.”<sup>34</sup> Fuller suggests three ways this spirituality can be maintained in a minister’s life.

First, beware of thinking large thoughts about yourself. Humility is crucial to usefulness in ministry. “Hundreds of ministers have been ruined by indulging a thirst for the character of the great man, while they have neglected the far superior character of the good man.”<sup>35</sup> As a man who became a pastor at 19, published one of the most important books in Baptist history at 30, established a reputation as the greatest polemicist and controversialist of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, and

---

<sup>31</sup> Haykin and Croft, 103.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

eventually achieved a stature in which evangelical Calvinism—a theology that was already venerable by his time—became known as Fullerism, Fuller was continually learning the importance of humility. His difficult bouts with depression, especially in the late 1880s, which were a dark time in his life, were mostly the result of excessive introspection. Feelings of unworthiness and self-doubt are often ironic indicators of the lurking sin of pride, just as joyful confidence often points to recognition that God is the one doing the work. Fuller seems to have made major strides in learning this lesson by 1790, and his admonitions to humility come across—like Paul’s directions for gaining contentment in Philippians 4—as hard-won spiritual lessons. So, first, Fuller says, avoid thinking large thoughts of yourself.

Second, this humility will manifest itself in the minister’s life through love. The pastor will see himself on the same level as his people and thus be able to minister effectively among them. Fuller used Paul as an example of this truth: “The apostle Paul did not value himself upon those things wherein he differed from other Christians; but upon that which he possessed in common with them—charity, or Christian love.”<sup>36</sup> If Fuller ever thought, “Why am I pouring my enormous gifts into these poor, illiterate Kettering tradesmen?” he hid it well. Such a thought obviously does not accord well with loving others as one loves oneself.

The minister, third, must not only study the Scriptures but live upon them.

The best way to hold fast the truth as a minister is to live upon it as a Christian. Attempt to keep it anywhere but in your heart, and it will go. If it be merely in the memory, it is not safe. He that is reasoned into the truth may be reasoned out of it. It is living upon the truth as a Christian that will cause the heart to be established with grace.<sup>37</sup>

A substantial portion of every ordination sermon relates not to official duties of the pastorate but to the private relationship that a pastor must maintain with his Lord. He often addresses the minister’s prayer life, and he urges the pastor to be attentive to his wife and children, cultivating a solid home base for ministry.

The NT, of course, has specific instructions for pastors, husbands, wives, employers and employees, parents and children. Interestingly, though, the specifics of these instructions are always rooted in great fundamental realities. A boss who pursues godliness is in a position to be a good boss; a godly parent can be a good

---

<sup>36</sup> Haykin and Croft, 90.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

parent; similarly, a godly pastor can be an effective and faithful pastor. And godliness has the same components for all people.

When Fuller advises pastors about public duties, he urges the pastor to keep his focus on Christ as the Chief Shepherd of the church. Humility again is the key. Fuller says he has observed “on the part of ministers ... an abuse of their office of ruling, a fondness for power, aspiring to the exercise of dominion over their brethren. It has always grated in my ears”—Fuller writes—“to hear such language as this: ‘*My church,*’ ‘*my deacons,*’ etc., as if churches were made for them, rather than they for churches. Do not emulate this empty swell.”<sup>38</sup> Fuller was a big man, in many senses of the word, but he emphatically rejected big-man leadership models.

The church is to be constructed as a habitation for God. “It must be God’s house, not yours. Beware that you go not about it as Nebuchadnezzar went about Babylon. ‘This is the house which I have built’—this is my house!”<sup>39</sup> The corollary of keeping one’s focus on God and considering oneself merely a lowly servant in God’s service is, perhaps ironically, great boldness. If this is God’s work, what does it matter what man thinks of it? “Shall we cowardly desert the truth, or shun the avowal of it, merely lest the indifferent should call us bigots, or infidels, or enthusiasts?<sup>40</sup> There is not a more dangerous foe to the truth than indifference.”<sup>41</sup> Focusing on the glory of God frees the minister from concerning himself with consequences.

You must not calculate consequences as they respect this life. If you would preach the Gospel as you ought to preach it, the approbation of God must be your main object. What if you were to lose your friends and diminish your income; nay, what if you lose your liberty, or even your life—what would this all be, compared with the loss of the favour and friendship of God? Woe unto us, if we shun to declare any part of the counsel of God! He that is afraid or ashamed to preach the whole of the gospel, in all its implications and bearings, let him stand aside; he is utterly unworthy of being a soldier of Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Haykin and Croft, 188.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>40</sup> *Enthusiasts* was the 18<sup>th</sup>-century word for fanatics, or, more precisely, for those who thought they had direct, extra-biblical access to revelation.

<sup>41</sup> Haykin and Croft, 206.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

If you will forgive an autobiographical note—nearly 20 years ago I was driving some visiting professors to the airport from Maranatha. They had come for a Faculty Summit. We were enjoying good fellowship in the van. A controversial theological interpretation came up for discussion, and I heard myself say, “I don’t think I would ever become convinced of that, since it would certainly mean my losing my position at Maranatha.” The other men graciously remained silent, but almost immediately the import of what came out of my mouth—and thus from my heart—sank in. I had made my employer—and thus myself—more important than fidelity to God’s Word. Those words have haunted me ever since, and it has been my prayer that they would not be true of me. I’m thankful to teach at a place where I can be transparently honest in the classroom. But, if push came to shove, hedging my message to keep my job would, in Fuller’s words, be “utterly unworthy of being a soldier of Jesus Christ.”

In preparing sermons, as I suggested earlier, Fuller urges the young ministers to think for themselves. Don’t borrow other men’s systems of interpretation wholesale. Investigate, dig, burrow down into the Scriptures, searching for treasures. Not every preacher had the mind and gifts that Fuller had, but this advice is sound nevertheless: “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—however great, however respected. Dare to think for yourself.”<sup>43</sup>

Of course, because Fuller was so well read, enemies accused him of simply parroting his sources. His key ministry peers and allies were John Sutcliff, John Ryland, Jr., and Samuel Pearce. Having outlived both Pearce and Sutcliff, in the year of Fuller’s death, he wrote to Ryland:

We have some, who have been giving out, of late, that if ‘Sutcliff, and some others, had preached more of Christ, and less of Jonathan Edwards, they would have been more useful.’ If those who talk thus, preached Christ half as much as Jonathan Edwards did, and were half as useful as he was, their usefulness would be double what it is. It is very singular that the Mission to the East should have originated with men of these principles; and without pretending to be a prophet, I may say, if it ever falls into the hands of men who talk in this strain, it will soon come to nothing.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Haykin and Croft, 121.

<sup>44</sup> Mordern, 293.

The balanced position he is espousing is this: learn from others, including the key thinkers of the great theological systems; you probably can't learn too much from Jonathan Edwards, for instance. But the Scriptures stand in judgment over everything Edwards said, so that they alone are the authority for your life. Don't just embrace a system because someone smarter than you taught it. You have an anointing from the Holy Spirit, and you will be held accountable both for what you believe and what you teach others.

When you enter the pulpit, preach earnestly and practically, but most of all, preach doctrinally. It is the great doctrines of the faith that will change hearts and produce evangelical obedience. Furthermore, make sure the people understand what the authority is for your message. Passages from two ordination sermons make this point quite clearly:

Give Scriptural proof of what you teach. Do not imagine that mere assertion will do. Evidence ought to form the body of your discourses. Such expressions as "I say," uttered in the most magisterial tones, will, after all, prove nothing except the unwarrantable confidence of the preacher.<sup>45</sup>

Do not advance sentiments without being able to support them by Scripture evidence. Many content themselves with assertions without proof, and make vehemence supply the place of evidence. But this will cause you to be despised by men of understanding.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, and most of all, urge people to come to Christ with all your might and trust God to do the work. As Fuller was recognized as the great theologian of duty faith, and then as Fuller traversed the British Isles proclaiming Christian missions, he became known as a preacher who emphasized evangelism and who urged pastors to preach on evangelism. In a sermon preached in the last decade of his life, Fuller said,

The gospel is a feast, and you are to invite guests. You may have many excuses and refusals. But be you concerned to do as your Lord commands. And when you have done your utmost, there will still be room. Dwell on the freeness, and fulness, and all-sufficiency of his grace, and how welcome

---

<sup>45</sup> Haykin and Croft, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 135.

even the worst of sinners are, who, renouncing all other refuges, flee to him.<sup>47</sup>

As ministers go about this great work, they can be confident that God will go before them, actually doing the work. “God, we may be certain, will not labour in vain; and if we labour with him, neither shall we.”<sup>48</sup>

Allow me to summarize by listing the key principles Fuller advanced in these sermons:

- 1) The first priority in being a pastor is being a Christian. Godliness goes before usefulness.
- 2) Giftedness can puff us up and destroy our usefulness for Christ.
- 3) The great key to using our gifts properly is humility.
- 4) This humility begins in the privacy of our own thoughts. We dare not think great thoughts of ourselves. Let me add that this dynamic is somewhat similar to how we handle money. Riches can be very dangerous for believers because of their obvious ability to create self-confidence and a worldly mindset. But Paul’s main concern is about the *desire* for riches. The poor person who sits and thinks about what it would be like to have money has fallen into the same snare riches set for the financially successful. Similarly, pondering at length how much we lack giftedness and comparing ourselves to superstar ministers who seem to have everything we lack is not very different from the pride of thinking we’re the superstars.
- 5) Humility expresses itself through loving others.
- 6) Go to the Scriptures first to learn and practice personal godliness and then to prepare spiritual meals for others. God forbid we be chefs who are spiritually malnourished.
- 7) Christ is the Head of every local church. Remember who the church belongs to as you lead it.
- 8) Because the church belongs to Christ who has promised himself to build it, serve and lead with great boldness.
- 9) A key part of this boldness is doing what is right without constantly calculating consequences.
- 10) Know theology but preach the Bible. Don’t be enslaved to any human system of interpretation.

---

<sup>47</sup> Haykin and Croft, 166.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 144.

- 11) Invite people to Christ. As Warfield encouraged a Princeton student body about a century after Fuller, our job is merely to blow the trumpet. But one never knows when God will use the blast to wake the dead.<sup>49</sup>
- 12) Remember, finally, Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 15:10 (and many other places) that we serve but God does the work and therefore deserves all the glory. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give the glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and *faithfulness!*" (Psalm 115:1)

---

<sup>49</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Religious Life of Theological Students*.