

# Marriage and Family in the Life of Andrew Fuller

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In the memoir he wrote about his father, Andrew Gunton Fuller (1799–1884) rightly observed, “There is no division of a man’s life so marked and characteristic as that which is made by the door of his own house, on the two sides of which are witnessed sometimes two distinct men, and always two distinct phases of character which act and react on each other.”<sup>1</sup> While many men do not give the same level of energy and attention to their families as they do to their public pursuits, the younger Fuller argued that this tendency was not true of his father, Andrew Fuller (1754–1815).<sup>2</sup> The following study will look at Fuller as a father and husband,

demonstrating that he was as exemplary in his domestic life as he was in his better-known public ministry.

## **A DEVOTED FATHER**

J. W. Morris provides an excellent window into Andrew Fuller’s experience at home:

In domestic life, he was calm and tranquil, reposing in the bosom of his family with great contentment and satisfaction. No man more enjoyed the softened pleasures of “home, sweet home,” or entered with greater feeling into its interests and concerns; yet he never returned from his numerous fatiguing journeys to indulge himself in ease ... but solely with a view of renewing and multiplying his efforts in another form.<sup>3</sup>

His memoirs reveal that such efforts sprang from the heart of a devoted father. Fuller was dedicated to training his children in the ways of the Lord, as is evidenced in various diary references to family worship and spiritual conversations.<sup>4</sup> As his children grew older, his letters encouraged their faith and offered wisdom amidst their trials.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his life, Fuller remained committed to the spiritual welfare of his children, exhibiting a love that his son called “remarkably intense.”<sup>6</sup>

His wayward son, Robert (1782–1809), put this love to its greatest test.<sup>7</sup> On May 12, 1796, Fuller

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wrote regarding Robert, “I know not whether he be a real Christian.”<sup>8</sup> In the following years, Fuller arranged work for Robert on numerous occasions only to see his son desert the opportunities and embarrass his father multiple times.<sup>9</sup> After one such incident, Fuller wrote in his diary, “I perceive I have great unhappiness before me, in my son, whose instability is continually appearing.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the absence of any change in Robert’s attitude, Fuller remained hopeful.<sup>11</sup>

After years of wandering, Robert eventually joined the Marines and set sail for Lisbon, an occasion that prompted him to write his father seeking forgiveness. Fuller replied graciously, “You may be assured that I cherish no animosity against you. On the contrary, I do, from my heart, freely forgive you.”<sup>12</sup> The compassionate father then took this opportunity to plead once more with his son to come to Christ:

My dear son! I am now fifty-five years old and may soon expect to go the way of all the earth! But before I die, let me teach you the good and the right way ... You have had a large portion of God’s preserving goodness; or you had, ere now, perished in your sins ... Nevertheless, do not despair! Far as you have gone, and low as you are sunk in sin, yet, if from hence, you return to God by Jesus Christ, you will find mercy.<sup>13</sup>

Regretfully, Robert’s response to this letter is unknown. Instead, his father received news a few months later that his son had perished off the coast of Lisbon. The following Sunday, Fuller preached a passionate sermon about God’s willingness to justify even the worst sinner through Christ. Thinking of his wayward son, Fuller began to weep in the pulpit as he referenced the Lord hearing Jonah from beneath the waves.<sup>14</sup> Fuller knew that God could save his dear son, but he feared that Robert had continued to spurn the Lord until it was too late.

Andrew Gunton Fuller, who was privy to information that his father apparently never

knew, recorded an encouraging conclusion to the story. Many years later, a man who served alongside Robert in the Marines told him, “We were exceedingly intimate, and opened our minds much to each other. He was a very pleasing, nice youth, and became a true Christian man.”<sup>15</sup> It appears that his father’s faithful prayers and passionate pleas toward his son were not in vain. While Fuller was likely unaware of this grace until his own death, the promise of a joyous reunion awaited him nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

This story gives a glimpse into Andrew Fuller the father. He prayed fervently for his children and counseled them toward Christ through intentional conversations. He modeled spirituality to them and encouraged them in their faith.<sup>17</sup> In addition to leading the home as a father, Fuller also sought to honor the Lord in his marriage.

## **MARRIAGE TO SARAH GARDINER**

Fuller never wrote a treatise on marriage but his general attitude on the subject is discernible in his various writings. In his commentary on Genesis, for example, he points out that because the first woman was made from man, men should “consider their wives as part of themselves, and love them as their own flesh.”<sup>18</sup> As such, a wife ought to be “treated as a friend, as naturally an equal, a soother of man’s cares, a softener of his griefs, and a partner of his joys.”<sup>19</sup> During his first pastorate in Soham, Fuller discovered such a friend in a young woman named Sarah Gardiner (1756–1792).

Fuller married Sarah on December 23, 1776. She was a member of the church at Soham, whom Ryland described as “a very amiable and excellent woman.”<sup>20</sup> Little is known about her other than scant references in her husband’s diary and her role in an episode detailed below. Sarah gave birth to eleven children over the course of their marriage, eight of whom did not reach adulthood. Sarah and Andrew had a healthy marriage founded on a mutual love of God. On one particular day, Fuller noted in his journal that he had enjoyed “some interesting conversation with

my wife, on little faith, great depravity, a great Saviour, and genuine love to God, from a spiritual discernment of his glory, and delight in the character of the true God.”<sup>21</sup> The breadth of topics covered that particular morning leads one to believe that such conversations were a regular aspect of their life together.

Sarah Fuller’s character as a wife and mother is evident in the way she walked with her husband through the difficult trial of losing their daughter, who bore her mother’s name. Young Sarah (1779–1786) became sick in December 1785 with what appeared to be the measles. Fuller recorded several heart-warming spiritual conversations that he and his wife had with their daughter during this painful season.<sup>22</sup> One particular night, the young girl admitted that she feared her future because she had sinned against the Lord. Fuller replied lovingly, “True my dear, you have sinned against the Lord; but the Lord is more ready to forgive you, if you are grieved for offending him, than I can be to forgive you, when you are grieved for offending me; and you know how ready I am to do that.”<sup>23</sup> He then proceeded to tell his daughter about the Lord’s mercy to the dying thief, which seemed to cheer her soul. It is apparent his wife had similar conversations with their dying daughter as well.<sup>24</sup>

Young Sarah died on May 30, 1786. Her poor father was so afflicted with grief over this pending loss that he was confined to his bed during her final days.<sup>25</sup> After her funeral, he wrote in his diary, “I feel a solid pleasure in reflecting on our own conduct in her education; surely, we endeavored to bring her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and I trust our endeavors were not in vain.”<sup>26</sup> Note that Fuller uses plural pronouns in this statement, reflecting a united effort from the two parents in caring for their daughter.

Sadly, the young girl’s mother was destined to meet an early and tragic end to her life as well. On July 10, 1792, Fuller wrote in his diary, “My family afflictions have almost overwhelmed me; and what is before me I know not! For about a month past, the affliction of my dear compan-

ion has been extremely heavy.”<sup>27</sup> Soon after, he wrote to Ryland, “Through the effect of her hysterical complaints, Mrs. Fuller is, at this time, as destitute of reason as an infant.”<sup>28</sup> Though she was pregnant, the precise cause of these episodes is unknown, rendering the effects of her condition all the more heart breaking.<sup>29</sup> Fuller reports that her mind was unstable and she feared her own family, even accusing them of holding her hostage from her true family. At other times, she was so desirous of her husband’s company that he could scarcely leave her presence.<sup>30</sup> Save for a brief interval in her final weeks, she continued in this state for three months (June to August 1792), never fully recovering.<sup>31</sup> After giving birth to a daughter on August 23, 1792, Sarah Gardiner Fuller died in her home in the presence of her husband.<sup>32</sup> Fuller reflected on her passing with these words, “Poor soul! What she often said is now true. She was *not* at home...I am *not* her husband...these are *not* her children...but she has found her home...a home, a husband, and a family better than these.”<sup>33</sup>

Fuller was obviously quite confident in his wife’s salvation, having observed her piety up close for over fifteen years of marriage. After her death, he reported that she was resigned to the will of the Lord during the lucid moments of her affliction and often spoke to friends about how she regretted not having served God better.<sup>34</sup> Near the one-year anniversary of her death, Fuller wrote a poem in her memory, which reflects the quality of their marriage:

There once did live a heart that cared for me;  
I loved, and was again beloved in turn.  
Her tender soul would sooth my rising griefs [sic],  
And wipe my tears, and mix them with her own.  
But she is not! And I forlorn am left,  
To weep unheeded, and to serve alone.<sup>35</sup>

### **MARRIAGE TO ANN COLES**

On July 18, 1794, Fuller wrote in his diary that he was praying through Proverbs 3:5-6 as

he considered the possibility of marrying again. He wrote, "I have found much of the hand of God guiding me to one in whom I hope to find a helper to my soul."<sup>36</sup> This one was Ann Coles (d. 1825), the daughter of Reverend William Coles of Ampthill, who pastored the Baptist church at Maulden. Fuller married Ann on December 30 of the same year, recording in his diary that he felt "a satisfaction that in her I have a godly character, as well as a wife."<sup>37</sup>

The two would have six children together, three of whom died in infancy. After the death of the first child, a daughter named after her mother, Fuller wrote a touching poem about her that included the following lines:

Oh! Our Redeemer and our God—our help  
In tribulation—hear our fervent prayer!  
To Thee we now resign the sacred trust,  
Which thou, erewhile, didst unto us commit.  
Soon we must quit our hold, and let her fall;  
Thine everlasting arms be then beneath!  
In Thee a refuge may she find in death,  
And in thy bosom dwell, when torn from ours!  
Into thy hands her spirit we commit,  
In hope ere long to meet and part no more.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to losing the three young children, their daughter Sarah, named after Fuller's first wife, died in 1816 shortly after her father's death, having demonstrated a remarkable piety in her final years.<sup>39</sup> Two sons survived their father: William, about whom little is known, and Andrew Gunton Fuller, who became a pastor and biographer of his father's life.<sup>40</sup> This particular memoir provides the most information about Ann Fuller.

The younger Fuller called his mother, "One of the noblest and truest mothers, as well as the best of wives, to whom my father, not less myself, owed a large measure of what was worth living for."<sup>41</sup> He continued, "She was a true helpmeet to her husband, not only as an amanuensis, but a discreet adviser, and tenderly mindful of his health and comfort amidst his multifarious

labours."<sup>42</sup> The younger Fuller recalls a particular story about his mother that illustrates her piety. One day, as a young boy, he found his mother pacing her bedroom and praying aloud. When the young boy inquired to whom she was talking, she replied, "To God, my child, about you."<sup>43</sup> She then knelt beside her son and explained "such a practical lesson in the spirit of prayer as could never be forgotten."<sup>44</sup>

Andrew and Ann Fuller appeared to have had a happy marriage, where each supported the other.<sup>45</sup> However, in his study of Fuller as a pastor-theologian, Paul Brewster has suggested that Fuller was so devoted to the Baptist Missionary Society in his later years that he may have been guilty of neglecting his family.<sup>46</sup> Brewster quotes Ann in a letter to Ryland after Fuller's death in which she laments her husband's workload and its negative impact on his family and health. While it is true that Fuller was intensely devoted to the work of the mission, perhaps to a fault at times, a single letter from his grieving widow should not provide the sole assessment of his character as a husband and father. The picture that has emerged in this study reveals a man who remained faithful to his family in spite of his various responsibilities. Furthermore, it should be noted that in the same letter, Ann concludes, "I must testify [his domestic character] to have been, ever since I had the happiness of being united to him, of the most amiable and endearing kind."<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As Andrew Fuller himself once observed, "The characters of men are not so easily ascertained from a few splendid actions as from the ordinary course of life, in which their real dispositions are manifested."<sup>48</sup> This statement provides a helpful perspective on Fuller's attitude toward his family. Fuller was a loving father, who sought the spiritual well-being of his children through prayer and spiritual instruction. He was a faithful husband, who cared for the women to whom he was successively married. While his numerous public commit-

ments consistently pulled him away from his family, it appears that he predominately ministered to them with as much zeal as he pastored his church, defended the faith, and promoted the cause of international missions. In as much as this assessment is true, Andrew Fuller serves as an admirable model for young men today who are seeking to balance the responsibilities of ministry and family life. He was committed to knowing God and making him known throughout the world, and yet, he recognized that his greatest potential for the kingdom was amongst those entrusted to his care in his very own home.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Gunton Fuller, *Andrew Fuller* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1882), 7.

<sup>2</sup> While scholars have produced several studies of Andrew Fuller in recent years, his personal life has received little attention. In Peter Morden's detailed study, Fuller's family is barely mentioned, with his first wife, Sarah Gardiner, not even making the Index. See Peter Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth-century Particular Baptist Life* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003). Likewise, Paul Brewster provides only brief interaction with Fuller's family life in his helpful study, *Andrew Fuller: Model Pastor-Theologian* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 21–22, 162. The most thorough discussion of Fuller's family life currently in print can be found in Tom Nettles' chapter entitled, "Andrew Fuller (1754–1815)" in *The British Particular Baptists, 1638–1910* (ed. Michael A. G. Haykin; 2 Vols.; Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2003), 2:128–132, 134–140.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (ed. Rufus Babcock; 1st American ed.; Boston, MA: Lincoln & Edmands, 1830), 308. Reflecting on Fuller's domestic life, Morris remarked, "It is by the facility with which superior minds descend from their elevation, and mingle with us in the ordinary occurrences of life, that under one view we estimate their greatness." Morris, *Memoirs of*

*the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Fuller wrote of his daughter, Sarah, whose story is told below, "I used to carry her in my arms into the fields, and there talk with her upon the desirableness of dying and being with Christ." John Ryland, *The Work of Faith: the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope, Illustrated in the Life and Death of the Rev. Andrew Fuller, Late Pastor of the Baptist Church at Kettering, and Secretary to the Baptist Missionary Society...Chiefly Extracted from His Own Papers* (Charlestown, MA: Samuel Etheridge, 1818), 268.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include the two letters addressed to his daughter, Mary, when she was away at Northampton for school. These letters are found in Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 301–302.

<sup>6</sup> Fuller, *Andrew Fuller*, 68.

<sup>7</sup> A full account of Mr. Fuller's efforts to guide Robert can be found in Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 283–290 with additional information supplied by Fuller, *Andrew Fuller*, 68–73. This story is also summarized in *Sketches of the Lives of three Children of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (Philadelphia, PA: American Sunday School Union, 1839), 7–28, and in Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Armies of the Lamb: The Spirituality of Andrew Fuller* (Dundas, ON: Joshua Press, 2001), 283–288.

<sup>8</sup> Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 284.

<sup>9</sup> Ryland records these various details faithfully. In May 1796, Fuller sent Robert to London to work in a warehouse owned by close friend William Burls (1763–1837) but his son wasted the opportunity. In 1797, his father found work for him in Kettering but Robert spurned it to join the army. After he was discharged from the army, his father arranged yet another situation for him, but he enlisted with the Marines instead. There were numerous departures and much disappointment for the father, including the time that he received false report of his son's death. However, each time Robert returned to his father, he was met with affection. Nonetheless, this grace seemed to have little impact on the young man who possessed "a habit of roving." Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 285.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Ryland, he commented, “Even while I knew not where he was, I felt stayed on the Lord, and some degree of cheerful satisfaction, that things would end well.” Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 285.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 288. The portion of this letter that Ryland preserved reveals that Andrew Fuller was full of compassion for his son, and yet he was also willing to speak difficult truths to him.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>15</sup> Fuller, *Andrew Fuller*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Morden points out, “This ending is not as implausible as it first appears, as letters written by Robert to his father and half-sister Sarah (which are now lost), together with a report from the ship’s captain, gave Fuller himself some hope that his son had come to repentance and faith at the end of his life.” Morden, *Offering Christ to the World*, 113. Haykin comments fittingly, “Andrew Fuller’s many prayers for his wayward son were answered and that verse from Psalm 126 powerfully illustrated: ‘They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.’” Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 259.

<sup>17</sup> Additional information about his life as a father is available in the helpful booklet, *Sketches of the Lives of three Children of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*. This booklet contains memoirs of Robert Fuller, the young Sarah Fuller, whose story will be told in the following section, and a second daughter named Sarah Fuller, who died shortly after her father’s death.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Fuller, *Expository Discourses on the Book of Genesis* in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (ed. Joseph Belcher, 1845; repr. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), III, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 271.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> What is striking about the parents’ approach to their daughter is that they clearly valued the condition of her soul over the health of her body. When Fuller first learned of his daughter’s sickness, he wrote of his children, “Oh! I could give up their bodies; but I want to see piety reigning in their souls, before they go hence, and are no more seen.” Months later, he

concluded about young Sarah, “I think I could willingly submit to God in all things, and bear whatever he should lay upon me, though it were the loss of one of the dear parts of myself, provided I could but see Christ formed in her.” Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 267.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Ryland, Fuller noted, “Yesterday, my wife had pretty much talk with her, and seemed much satisfied of her piety, and resigned to her death.” Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 263. Such maternal instruction was likely similar to what Fuller himself had received as a young boy from his mother. Concerning Andrew Fuller’s mother, Andrew Gunton Fuller noted, “She was a woman of excellent Christian character, to whose influence the fact is largely due that all her children became consistent members of Baptist churches.” Fuller, *Andrew Fuller*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Fuller wrote in his diary, “As I lay ill in bed, in another room, I heard a whispering. I inquired and all were silent ... all were silent! ... but all is well! I feel reconciled to God. I called my family round my bed ... and blessed a taking as well as a giving God.” Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 270.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>29</sup> After her death, Fuller wrote an account of her final days and sent it to her father. The details that follow come from this letter, which Ryland includes in full. Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 272–277.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 273. Remarkably, the Baptist Missionary Society would be founded in October of the same year. One can only imagine the strain upon Fuller at the juxtaposition of these two events.

<sup>31</sup> The interval in her sickness provides some touching moments worthy of mention. One night when Fuller wept in her presence, she seemed to be restored to her senses for a brief time. Instantly, she recognized her husband, kissed him, and began to apologize to him for her conduct. The two stayed up for the whole night talking and reflecting, as she gave instructions to him about various domestic matters. The following

morning, she also recognized her son, Robert, and had a sweet conversation with him. Unfortunately, this period of respite lasted less than a full day, and she sunk back into despair by that evening, never to recover her strength again. Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 274–275.

<sup>32</sup> The daughter, whom they named Bathoni, died about three weeks later. Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 276.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

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

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 282. Ryland received this poem from Mrs. Fuller after her husband's death. She shared that the two of them stayed up all night watching their dear child the night before she died, feeling hopeless to help her. The following morning, Fuller penned these lines. The child was twenty months old when she died.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Fuller lost the use of her limbs in 1811 and remained in pain for the rest of her life. Ryland remembers her as an amiable child, who practiced integrity and possessed a tender conscience. During her sickness, she frequently sought opportunities to speak to her friends and family about their own spiritual welfare, even instructing Robert Hall Jr. to make special appeal to her friends at her pend-

ing funeral. Such piety comes by the grace of God but can no doubt also be attributed to the home in which she was raised. Sarah Fuller died on June 11, 1816, at the age of nineteen. An account of her illness and character can be found in Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 291–294, as well as in *Sketches of the Lives of three Children of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 73–87.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Gunton Fuller pastored congregations in Middlesex, Worcestershire, and London over the span of his thirty years of pastoral ministry. For more information on him, see J. H. Y. Briggs, "Fuller, Andrew Gunton" in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730–1860* (ed. Donald M. Lewis; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 1:415.

<sup>41</sup> Fuller, *Andrew Fuller*, 75.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Fuller wrote of his wife, "I have found my marriage to contribute greatly to my peace and comfort, and the comfort of my family; for which I record humble and hearty thanks to the God of my life!" Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 284.

<sup>46</sup> Brewster, *Fuller: Model Pastor-Theologian*, 162.

<sup>47</sup> Ryland, *Life and Death of The Rev. Andrew Fuller*, 282, 283.

<sup>48</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 93.