

Editorial: Continuing to Learn from Andrew Fuller (1754-1815)

Stephen J. Wellum

In this issue of *SBJT*, we continue and finish our investigation into various aspects of the life and ministry of the important pastor-theologian from eighteenth-century Baptist history, Andrew Fuller. As noted in the previous issue [see *SBJT* 17.1 (2013)], our reason for doing so is to follow Scripture's exhortation to learn lessons from those who have preceded us in the Christian life. Just as the apostle Paul served as a role model for Timothy and exhorted him to

emulate his life, ministry, and doctrine as he followed Christ (see e.g., 2 Tim 3:10-13), thus passing on the baton to the next generation of leaders so that they would become, by God's grace, more faithful gospel ministers, so we are to learn from godly leaders from the past. One reason why the study of church history is so important, not only in regard to ideas and theological doc-

trines but also people, is that it helps us learn from the positive examples of godly men and women who have lived their lives in faithfulness to Christ and the gospel (and sadly, we also learn what *not* to believe, be, and do from negative examples!). In the crucible of the real world, our Christian lives are tested and challenged, and learning how people in the past responded to various challenges, helps us today respond in a more biblically faithful manner.

In our last issue, our primary focus was on the life and ministry of Andrew Fuller as a husband, father, and pastor. After giving a biographical sketch of his life, Andrew Fuller, as a family man and pastor, was discussed with the goal of learning lessons from his life for us today. Fuller was no armchair theologian; instead he served, ministered, and lived in the real world, facing all of its difficulties and challenges, and faithfully discharging his responsibilities as a Christian man and pastor. In this issue of *SBJT*, our concentration is more on the theology of Fuller and how he serves as

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an excellent role model in his biblical fidelity, sound theology, courageous defender of the faith, and gospel visionary.

It is important to remember that Andrew Fuller lived at a crucial turning point in Western history. He was an heir of the Reformation and Reformation theology, but he lived during the Enlightenment period which experienced a growing secularization and disintegration of the Christian worldview on western culture, an impact which continues to our day. The challenges he faced were slightly different than previous eras. No doubt, it is true that “there is nothing new under the sun,” but it is also true that different eras pose distinctive challenges for the church and this is certainly true of the Enlightenment era. In the Reformation period for example, the debate was not over the Christian faith as the true faith; it was more over the issue of where God had spoken and thus *sola Scriptura* vs. the Bible’s authority plus the role of the church magisterium in constructing doctrinal beliefs.

However, with the rise of the Enlightenment, the very foundation of *sola Scriptura* and thus Christian theology was questioned as human autonomy and self-sufficiency was championed. It was for this reason that the church had to respond carefully to this new challenge. So, on the one hand, the church had to respond to the influence of such views as Socinianism which sought to undermine *all* sound doctrine, while, on the other hand, she had to respond to the rise of deism and Enlightenment epistemologies. Fuller was certainly not the only pastor-theologian to do so, but his response is significant and important in its own right, as Michael Haykin’s article in this issue nicely outlines and discusses. Even though Fuller was busy in his life and pastoral ministry, he knew it was necessary to respond to these unique challenges. He, unlike so many, did not retreat from the challenge and simply let the world go by. He knew that false ideas and denials of the truth would sooner than later impact the church. It was for this reason that he took it upon himself to respond to various theological errors both inside and outside the church

in order to make sure that his people, as well as the larger Christian church, would not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine and taken captive by “hollow and deceptive philosophy” rooted in human, fallible thinking rather than on Christ (see Col 2:8). In Fuller’s biblical and theological response to these growing and serious attacks upon the Christian faith, we find a powerful example of a Christian leader who took seriously Scripture’s exhortation to contend for the faith (Jude 3) and one who was always able to give a reason for the hope and truth of the gospel message (1 Pet 3:15-16). We must learn to follow his example today. We must ever be vigilant in our proclamation and defense of the truth of God’s Word. Fuller realized, which we must never forget, that until Jesus comes, theological doctrines must be defended anew with biblical-theological fidelity, vigor, and vigilance.

Yet, what is so instructive about Fuller’s theological response to error is that he always does so, not as an end in itself, but as a means to the end of upholding the glory of our Triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ. Tom Nettles’s very helpful discussion of Fuller’s famous, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, nicely illustrates this point. In responding to biblical and theological heresy, Fuller’s goal was always to exalt Christ and to proclaim him as the only Lord and Savior. In this way, Fuller is a “gospel-centered” man in the true sense of that expression. His life, ministry, and theological work—whether it was in his home, in the church, or in debate with those outside the church—was always done to hallow the name of our great Triune covenant Lord, to see Christ’s kingdom brought to this earth in a greater way, and to experience God’s will being done in his life and in the church in a greater way, as he eagerly waited for the coming of our Lord Jesus. It is my prayer that if one lesson is to be learned from the life and ministry of Andrew Fuller, it is this one, for God’s glory and the good of the church.