

Editorial: Learning from the Life and Ministry of Andrew Fuller

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In the Pastoral letters, the apostle Paul repeatedly encourages his young pastor-apprentices, Timothy and Titus, to follow his example as he follows the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, in the well-known passage of 2 Timothy 3, Paul not only warns Timothy about the difficult and challenging task of Christian ministry in the “last days” (3:1); he also encourages him to follow carefully the Scripture since it is God’s own breathed-out word (3:14-17) and to emulate the example of his life and

ministry (3:10-13). Timothy, in other words, was not only to obey Scripture (which, obviously, is first and foremost); he was also to learn lessons from the teaching, life, and example of the great apostle, as Paul rightly and properly followed the Word of the Lord and the Lord of the Word. Not surprisingly, this pattern which Timothy was to follow was to be reproduced in Timothy to those God had placed under his pastoral

leadership. Timothy, then, was not only to follow the example of Paul, he was also to serve as Paul did for him, namely, as a role model for God’s people entrusted to his shepherding care. This is why Paul commands Timothy—“Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim 4:12, NIV).

The Scripture’s important emphasis on the need for godly leaders, the incredible significance of biblically faithful and Christ-exemplifying role models, provides warrant for Christians to learn from those who have preceded us. One reason why the study of church history is of value is that it helps us learn from the positive examples of godly men and women who have preceded us, who have lived out their lives in faithfulness to Christ and the gospel, and who have stood strong in the face of opposition and various challenges. Even though historical circumstances change, a study of positive role models in church history helps Christians today better to take up our cross and to follow Christ. With this in mind, our focus for the next two issues of *SBJT*

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is to learn lessons from the life and ministry of an incredibly important individual from eighteenth-century Baptist history, Andrew Fuller.

Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) serves as a role model for Christians today in many different ways. Not only was he a husband, father, and pastor, he was also an excellent theologian, defender of the faith, and gospel visionary. 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. As a pastor and theologian, he faced difficult challenges both from within the church and without, yet he faithfully responded to them with biblical fidelity, theological acumen, gospel zeal, and pastoral heart and sensitivity.

From within the church, Fuller is famous for responding to an unbalanced affirmation of God's sovereignty so much so that the Great Commission was being neglected by many in the church. In responding to this challenge, Fuller powerfully expounded a proper biblical balance between God's sovereign rule over the world and in salvation alongside human responsible action, while simultaneously calling the church to gospel proclamation and world missions. In his first and most influential book, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785), Fuller not only called the church to missionary action, he also, along with fourteen other men, including the famous William Carey, formed the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) on October 2, 1792, to which he tirelessly devoted his time and energy throughout his entire life. The impact of Fuller in the formation of the BMS is easily underestimated. As Michael Haykin rightly contends, from a merely human perspective, if Fuller's theological works had not been written, people such as William Carey would not have gone to India. Fuller's theology and call to action was the mainspring behind the formation and early development of the BMS, and it was from the BMS that other missionary organizations were established. Due to Fuller's

theology, influence, and godly example, a new era in missions had begun as the Christian faith was increasingly spread outside of the West, to the regions of Africa and Asia.

However, Fuller did not merely battle issues from within the church. As a faithful pastor and minister of the gospel he also sought to protect the people of God from errors and challenges to the gospel from outside the church. During his life the impact of the Enlightenment was increasingly experienced and felt, especially in the academic world. But Fuller, in obedience to Scripture, was quick to oppose anyone who denied or sought to undermine central biblical doctrines. For example, he attacked Socinianism, one of the most significant threats to sound doctrine in his day in his work, *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared, as to Their Moral Tendency* (1793). He contended for the full authority of Scripture over against human reason and authority. He took on the popular Thomas Paine and his version of deism in *The Gospel its Own Witness* (1799), by arguing that human reason and the "light of nature" was not sufficient for knowledge and truth, as many in the Enlightenment era taught. In addition, he opposed a growing trend towards universalism in *Letters to Mr. Vidler, on the Doctrine of Universal Salvation* (1802), which Fuller rightly contended rejected biblical teaching and ultimately undermined the exclusivity and glory of Christ's cross work. In all these works, Fuller wrote as a pastor/scholar with a love for the Triune God and the gospel, and he did all of this while serving in a busy pastoral ministry.

From such a man, there are many lessons to learn about living the Christian life and doing the Christian ministry. Fuller was no armchair pastor or theologian; instead he served, ministered, and lived in the real world, facing the toughness of life, and faithfully discharging his responsibilities as a minister of the gospel. In the next two issues of SBJT, it is our goal to learn from this man—not to idolize him—but instead to learn to stand on his shoulders in order to become better and more faithful gospel ministers of our Lord Jesus Christ.