

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY



SOUTHWESTERN  
JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

## *Andrew Fuller and the Doctrine of Revelation*

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Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) was a Baptist pastor who lived in Western England during the eighteenth century. He was a faithful pastor for over forty years, but perhaps his most enduring contributions for Christ were his founding of the Baptist Missionary Society and his published theological works.<sup>1</sup> Fuller's published theological writings responded to perceived challenges from particular theological movements as he mainly addressed individuals he believed to be in error on a particular subject.<sup>2</sup> His only significant venture into writing a systematic theology was his *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, which was never completed.<sup>3</sup> According to Fuller, having a consistent system was important, but the system must always be subject to Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The doctrines of revelation, both general and special, appear to

<sup>1</sup>Despite his lack of formal schooling and unlike many other evangelicals of his day, Fuller had a high view of learning and theological study. The general trend among evangelicals was to be active and evangelizing, sometimes to the point of ignoring learning. D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Boston, 1989), 12. Fuller was largely self-educated, having left school at an early age. His theological learning was largely gained during his early pastorate at Soham. Peter J. Morden, "Andrew Fuller: A Biographical Sketch," in *"At the Pure Fountain of Thy Word": Andrew Fuller as an Apologist*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 1-11. See also a brief, but helpful biography: Phil Roberts, "Andrew Fuller," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 2001), 34-51. Fuller's efforts in mobilizing Baptists for missions are celebrated in Ronald W. Thomson, *Heroes of the Baptist Church* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1948), 111-16. Fuller's Biblicism appears to be one of the reasons he was featured by Bush and Nettles in *Baptists and the Bible*, which was written to highlight the tradition and continuance of a high view of and reliance upon Scripture. Their work serves to highlight Fuller's doctrine of special revelation in a polemical manner, since the challenge during the conservative resurgence was largely over the degree to which the Southern Baptist Convention would be defined by faithfulness to the content and intent of Scripture. L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, revised and expanded ed. (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 91-100.

<sup>2</sup>For example see: Michael A. G. Haykin, "Andrew Fuller and the Sandemanian Controversy," in *"At the Pure Fountain of Thy Word,"* 229.

<sup>3</sup>Unlike many evangelicals in his day, Fuller did not eschew theological systems. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 58.

<sup>4</sup>*The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller: With a Memoir of His Life, By Andrew Gunton Fuller*; ed. Joseph Belcher vol. 1, *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1988), 684-90. (All subsequent works contained in this three-volume set published by Sprinkle are listed in the following way: author's name, title of the individual work, a reference to *Complete Works*, volume number, and page number.) Andrew Fuller, *Sermons and Sketches*, in *Complete Works*, 1:164-68. Similarly, Fuller approves of creedal statements, but

have a particularly important place in Fuller's theology as three of the nine published *Letters on Systematic Divinity* relate to revelation. Though Fuller's full systematic work was never completed, it is possible, at least with some doctrines, to work through Fuller's pastoral and polemical writings to find the necessary elements of a well-developed theology.

This essay demonstrates the extensive development of Andrew Fuller's doctrine of revelation and its essentiality to his ministry. Fuller's explanations of general and special revelation are considered, as well as the role of those doctrines in his polemical and pastoral ministries. Like an archaeologist assembling the scattered shards of an old clay pot, this paper is an attempt to piece together Andrew Fuller's doctrine of revelation from his published works and show its relevance to his ministry.

### General Revelation

Fuller's view on general revelation was consistent with a contemporary, evangelical understanding. General revelation is God's self-revelation to all humans through the created order.<sup>5</sup> There are several critical elements in understanding a doctrine of general revelation: first, whether God's character is accurately revealed through the created order; second, whether humans can perceive God's character in the created order; third, what implications this perception has for the development of natural theology and accountability to God's moral law.

Fuller argues for general revelation before he argues for special revelation in his *Systematic Divinity* because, he wrote, "It would be improper, I conceive, to rest the being of God on Scripture testimony; seeing the whole weight of that testimony must depend upon the supposition that he is, and that the sacred Scriptures were written by holy men inspired by him."<sup>6</sup> The ability, therefore, to recognize at least some characteristics of God through the created order was necessary.

The existence of general revelation was clearly foundational to Fuller's understanding of revelation.<sup>7</sup> He wrote,

always under the subjection of Scripture. *Andrew Fuller, Essays, Letters, Etc. on Ecclesiastical Polity*, in *Complete Works*, 3:449-51. Fuller believed that having a consistent theological system was important, but he was also a "thoroughgoing Biblicist." Paul L. Brewster, *Andrew Fuller: Model Pastor-Theologian*, Studies in Baptist Life and Thought (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 45.

<sup>5</sup>Russell D. Moore, "Natural Revelation," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, et al. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 71. See also: Stanley J. Grenz, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, eds. David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 54-55; David W. Jones, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 207.

<sup>6</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:695.

<sup>7</sup>In this, Fuller was typical among evangelicals of the day. Bebbington notes that evangelicals of the day saw a "law-governed universe around them. Order had been established by the Creator. . . . Natural theology was important. There were abundant evidences in the world of God's design." Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 57-60.

The evidence which is afforded of the being and perfections of God by the creation which surrounds us, and of which we ourselves are a part, is no more superseded by [special] revelation than the law is rendered void by faith. All things which proceed from God are in harmony with each other.<sup>8</sup>

Fuller held that both the observed order in creation as well as an internal witness provides an unmistakable knowledge of God.<sup>9</sup> The internal message of general revelation is sufficiently manifested through “the desire . . . which every human being feels of having justice done to him from all other persons.”<sup>10</sup> Thus the divine law was written on the hearts of men and the divine nature was revealed in the created order such that, according to Fuller, individuals who failed to accept the reality of God should have been reproved rather than reasoned with, because they have simply denied what was apparent in creation.<sup>11</sup>

Fuller’s acceptance of the reality of general revelation was a necessary prerequisite for his belief that humans could rightly perceive something of the character of God through the created order. This, however, seemed to argue against the necessity for special revelation since God’s existence and character could be established apart from Scripture. Fuller anticipated this argument and quickly dispelled this conclusion. He wrote, “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. . . .”<sup>12</sup> Special revelation was necessary because humans have a constitutional opposition to truth, which was consistent with Fuller’s reformed understanding of total depravity.<sup>13</sup> Special revelation was also necessary because of the effects of the fall blurring the presentation of God in creation. Fuller wrote, “[T]he light afforded by the works of nature and the continued goodness of God, . . . though sufficient to leave the world without excuse, does not express his *whole* will, nor convey what it does express so *advantageously* as by [special] revelation.”<sup>14</sup> Fuller demonstrated that while

<sup>8</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:696.

<sup>9</sup>Fuller himself enjoyed observation of nature, particularly as it reflected God’s character. In a somewhat hagiographic account of Fuller’s character that is included at the end of Morris’ *Memoirs of the Life and Writing of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, Morris writes that, “He [Fuller] was a disciple of nature, and loved the order established in her empire.” J. W. Morris, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Rufus Babcock, 1st American, from the last London ed. (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1830), 308.

<sup>10</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:18. Fuller’s argument here is notably consistent with many apologetic arguments about so-called natural law. For example: C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 3–8.

<sup>11</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:697.

<sup>12</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:19.

<sup>13</sup>Fuller, *Dialogues and Letters between Crispus and Gaius*, in *Complete Works*, 2:662. Fuller also states this explicitly in Article I of his Confession of Faith, presented to the church in Kettering, reprinted in Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 181.

<sup>14</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:20.

God's character was demonstrated in nature, humans were limited in their ability to perceive it, which brought into question what place natural theology had in Fuller's doctrine of general revelation.

Fuller held no hope that man could develop salvific knowledge of God from the observation of creation. He wrote,

Instead of returning to God and virtue, those nations which have possessed the highest degrees of [general revelation] have gone further and further into immorality. There is not a single example of a people, of their own accord, returning to the acknowledgment of the true God, or extricating themselves from the most irrational species of idolatry, or desisting from the most odious kinds of vice. Those nations where science diffused a more than ordinary lustre were as superstitious and as wicked as the barbarous, and in many instances exceeded them.<sup>15</sup>

So, for Fuller, the corrupt nature of humans due to the fall still allowed them to perceive some of the attributes of God and to understand sufficiently that had a duty to believe in him and otherwise would be condemned. However, the perversity of the human heart caused humans to reject a true understanding of God. Reliance on human reason that came through scientific observation alone tended to lead people farther away from God.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Fuller held that natural theology was never designed to be sufficient for humans to have a right knowledge of God. He wrote, "Even in innocence man was governed by a revealed law. It does not appear that he was left to find out the character or will of his Creator by his reason, though reason, being under the influence of rectitude, would lead him, as he understood the mind of God, to love and obey it."<sup>17</sup> For Fuller, there was sufficient information in the created order to reveal the Creator and to convict men of their sin, but natural theology was never intended to be sufficient for humans. Special

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 2:19. Bebbington notes, "there was in the eighteenth century and long into the nineteenth no hint of a clash between Evangelical religion and science." Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 57. Against a twenty-first-century backdrop where there appears to be significant friction between conservative theology and scientific understandings, understanding this relative peace between natural science and revealed religion is important in understanding the Paine's accusations and Fuller's rebuttal. Bebbington's conclusions about a positive relationship between evangelicalism and the Enlightenment are largely confirmed in Michael A. G. Haykin, "Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment: A Reassessment," in *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, eds. Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 37-60. Sell deals with Bebbington's thesis obliquely and presents a more muddled view of the impact of the Enlightenment and the relative acceptance of it among evangelicals. Alan P. F. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550-2000*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005) 70-110. It seems safest to conclude that Bebbington may have been overly strong in his generalization, but Fuller still appears to have been on the positive end of the spectrum in his acceptance of Enlightenment thought.

<sup>16</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:692-93.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 1:697.

revelation was a part of God's plan from the very beginning.<sup>18</sup>

Fuller's position on general revelation was consistent with an orthodox, evangelical view. His doctrine of general revelation was a significant part of his overall theology, since discussion of the nature of general revelation was a large part of several controversies, mainly his interaction with Deism, but also in his engagement with Socinianism. For Fuller, general revelation was sufficient for conviction and condemnation, but not sufficient to provide a means of reconciliation to the Creator. Any insistence that human reason was able to assemble from the created order sufficient knowledge of God to provide a means of reconciliation to God was rejected by Fuller. For Fuller, general revelation is helpful but special revelation was necessary to restore man to God.

### Special Revelation

Fuller's doctrine of Scripture is the most significant element of the broader doctrine of special revelation, since the other forms of special revelation are confirmed through Scripture and because it is the aspect of special revelation that Fuller wrote about most frequently. Special revelation is God's self-revelation through particular means to particular people for a particular purpose.<sup>19</sup> A doctrine of Scripture as special revelation contains at least five essential elements: inspiration, inerrancy, authority, sufficiency and interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

Fuller believed that special revelation, particularly through Scripture, was absolutely necessary because of the limits of human reason. According to Fuller, even before sin came into the world it was necessary for God to reveal his law by means beyond the created order.<sup>21</sup> Fuller accepted that special revelation was not limited to Scripture. Before Moses wrote the Pentateuch, it was necessary for God to communicate specially to humans in order to empower faith. Fuller wrote that the salvation of some who did not know of Jesus is proof, "not of there being another way of acceptance with God than that which the gospel reveals, nor of its being possible without faith to please God; but that faith may exist while as yet there is not explicit revela-

<sup>18</sup>Fuller's understanding of the universe being governed by natural laws is consistent with other evangelicals of his day. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 58-59.

<sup>19</sup>David S. Dockery and David P. Nelson, "Special Revelation," in *A Theology for the Church*, eds. Daniel L. Akin, et al. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 118-20. See also Grenz, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 109; Jones, *Biblical Ethics*, 209.

<sup>20</sup>Other aspects of a doctrine of special revelation could be discussed and are often discussed in theology textbooks. For the purposes of this paper, these five elements of a doctrine of special revelation show Fuller's position and form the major points of argumentation for Fuller during the controversies he addressed. Fuller himself outlines five different points that could have been addressed in his *Systematic Divinity*: truth, consistency, perfection, pungency, utility. Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:699-702. The five elements chosen for this paper match more closely the aspects of a doctrine of Scripture addressed in contemporary systematic theology texts.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:696-97.

tion of the Savior.”<sup>22</sup> Though God could send “a ray of Divine revelation shot athwart the darkness of paganism into the minds of the Eastern magi, and [lead] them to worship the new-born Saviour,” still those that did not have any written revelation and even those that had only the Old Testament were considered by Fuller to be standing “on much lower ground than those under the New Testament.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Scripture was not the only means of special revelation, but it was the most important to Fuller.

Scripture was considered special revelation by Fuller because it was inspired by God. Fuller wrote, “It is certain that those who wrote the books which compose the Old and New Testaments profess to have been Divinely inspired.”<sup>24</sup> Fuller held that the inspiration of the writers was in different degrees. Authors of the history recorded in Scripture were preserved from error and faults in their writings while prophets were given the unique ability to communicate future events accurately.<sup>25</sup> Among the faults that Fuller believed to be absent from the Bible are affectation, vanity, a spirit of presumptuous speculation, or excitation of levity. Fuller wrote of the human authors, “As men, they were subject to human imperfections; if, therefore, they had not been influenced by Divine inspiration, blemishes of this kind must have appeared in their writings, as well as in those of other men.”<sup>26</sup> Still, according to Fuller, inspiration was not to be considered mere mechanical dictation.

Fuller found a place for both the divine and human author in the origination of Scripture. He wrote,

It is true that, having been communicated through human mediums, we may expect them, in a measure, to be humanized; the peculiar turn and talents of each writer will be visible, and this will give them the character of variety; but, amidst all this variety, a mind capable of discerning the Divine excellence will plainly perceive in them the finger of God.<sup>27</sup>

The human authors were aware that they were inspired, but this did not lead to an absolute uniformity in style or tone.<sup>28</sup> It certainly did not prevent different perspectives being evidenced in the gospel narratives. Were it not for these statements from Fuller about the differing styles of the human authors, he might have been subject to a charge of mechanical dictation as he wrote, “The Old and New Testaments are dictated by one and the same Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> His remarks were intended to affirm the consistency between the testaments, but could easily be misread. However, Fuller was affirming the

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 1:698.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 1:699.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:71.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 2:68.

<sup>28</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:699.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 1:700.

verbal inspiration of Scripture. It is also clear that according to Fuller, plenary inspiration was also to be affirmed, for “the denial of the proper inspiration of the Scriptures, with the receiving of some part of them true, and the rejecting of other parts” demonstrated a lack of faith.<sup>30</sup>

The inerrancy of Scripture was necessarily tied with his view of its inspiration. For Fuller, the Bible was inerrant because it was inspired. God would not have inspired men artistically and yet left them to communicate errors mixed with divine truth. Fuller’s view on the inerrancy of Scripture was affirmed explicitly in the confession of faith he presented to the church in Kettering prior to his call. He affirmed that more revelation beyond general revelation was required for salvation, writing, “And such a revelation I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, without excepting any one of its books, and a perfect rule of faith and practice.”<sup>31</sup> The inerrancy of Scripture was a result of inspiration as it involved the Holy Spirit protecting each human author and “preserving him from error.”<sup>32</sup> In his *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, Fuller claimed that Scripture must necessarily be without error if it was to be counted as God’s revelation, but he left it to the skeptics to prove that there are errors in Scripture rather than trying to absolutely prove its inerrancy.<sup>33</sup>

Inspiration and inerrancy were significant to Fuller because salvation hung on the authority of Scripture.<sup>34</sup> For Fuller, the authority of Scripture was rooted in and flowed out of the supernatural qualities of Scripture. There was no Christianity, in the eyes of Fuller, apart from a thorough appreciation of the importance of Scripture. He wrote, “If we may judge of the nature of true piety by the examples of the prophets and holy men of old, we may conclude with certainty that an affectionate attachment to the Holy Scriptures, as the rule of faith and practice, enters deeply into the spirit of it.”<sup>35</sup> In line with the Reformers, Fuller found the final solution to any controversy in the pages of Scripture. He noted, “The sacred Scriptures contain the decisions of the Judge of all, both as things and characters, from which there is no appeal: nor is it fit there should be; seeing they are not only formed in wisdom, but perfectly accord with truth and equity.”<sup>36</sup>

The authority of Scripture was limited to those things about which it speaks. Fuller wrote, “It is no dishonor to the Scriptures that they keep to their professed end.”<sup>37</sup> The professed end of Scripture was to speak of God

<sup>30</sup>Fuller, *The Calvinist and Socinian Systems Examine and Compared as to Their Moral Tendency*, in *Complete Works*, 2:224.

<sup>31</sup>This is from Article II of Fuller’s confession of faith, reprinted in Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 182.

<sup>32</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:699.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:699-700.

<sup>34</sup>See Fuller’s comments on the role of the Word of God in regeneration. Fuller, *Regeneration by the Word of God*, in *Complete Works*, 1:666.

<sup>35</sup>Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:195.

<sup>36</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:702.

<sup>37</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:88.



and to lead men to salvation. Fuller noted that even in recounting the various histories that involved the plan of God, events that may have secondary causes were often reported as being done by the hand of God directly because the purpose of Scripture was to recount God's work in the world. Thus in 2 Kings 17:18, the people of Israel were scattered by God's hand, but this was done through various invading nations as recorded in 2 Kings 24:2-4.<sup>38</sup> The history recorded in Scripture was "that of the church or people of God: other nations [were] introduced only in an incidental manner."<sup>39</sup> This did not invalidate the authority of Scripture, but spoke to the purposes of Scripture.

The authority of Scripture was to be received "for all the purposes for which it professes to be written."<sup>40</sup> Fuller listed several purposes in the *System of Divinity*: bringing men to salvation, bringing joy to the redeemed, illuminating the mind, bringing men to worship, providing wisdom for living, keeping believers from evil.<sup>41</sup> Fuller viewed Scripture as being both authoritative for these purposes and sufficient in its revelation for each intended purpose. Fuller wrote,

If the sacred writings be not received for the purposes for which they were professedly given, and for which they were actually appealed to by Christ and his apostles, they are in effect rejected; and those who pretend to embrace them for other purposes will themselves be found to have passed the boundaries of Christianity, and to be walking in the paths of infidelity.<sup>42</sup>

It is evident that the inspiration and authority of Scripture were essential Christian doctrines by Fuller's calculus, as was the sufficiency of Scripture.

For Fuller, the Word of God was sufficient for its purpose, which was to bring men to the saving knowledge of God. Fuller wrote, "There is nothing in the sacred Scriptures to gratify idle curiosity; but much that commends itself to the conscience, and that interests the heart. They are a mirror into which he that seriously looks must, in a greater or less degree, see his own likeness, and discover what kind of character he is."<sup>43</sup> Scripture illuminated the sin in a man and pointed him toward Christ. On the other hand, though science and philosophy could educate men in many things, Fuller wrote, "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."<sup>44</sup> That which God intended to reveal to man regarding salvation and godliness was revealed in Scripture.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 2:70.

<sup>39</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:703.

<sup>40</sup>Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:196. Original was italicized.

<sup>41</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:702.

<sup>42</sup>Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:231.

<sup>43</sup>Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity*, in *Complete Works*, 1:701.

<sup>44</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:88.

Though Fuller recognized that the Bible was not a text on science, it pointed humanity toward greater learning in the sciences. Fuller wrote, "And though their attention be mainly directed to things which pertain to the life to come, yet, by attending to their instructions, we are also fitted for the labours and sufferings of the present life."<sup>45</sup> Fuller went on to discuss how Scripture--contra Paine's accusations--encouraged Christians to engage in the study of all things.<sup>46</sup> Yet, at the same time, the Christian must know Scripture to know truth about God. In one sermon Fuller preached, "We may learn other things from other quarters; and things, too, that may subserve the knowledge of God; the knowledge of God itself must here be sought, for here only [in the Scriptures] it can be found."<sup>47</sup> Scripture was inspired, inerrant, authoritative and sufficient, but it still must be interpreted properly in order to gain its benefit.

For Fuller, the process of interpretation of Scripture was to begin with a right attitude in approaching the text and with prayer.<sup>48</sup> In his response to Thomas Paine, Fuller wrote, "Let us but come to the Scriptures in a proper spirit, and we shall know, of the doctrine whether it be of God; but if we approach them in caviling humour, we may expect not only to remain in ignorance, but to be hardened more and more in unbelief."<sup>49</sup> The proper attitude was one that sought to understand Scripture on the terms that it presented itself. For Fuller, the interpreter of Scripture either accepted Scripture as authoritative and inspired, or was required to reject Scripture altogether. The process of choosing certain parts of Scripture to consider as authoritative undermined its usefulness. In response to the selective authority of Scripture granted by the Socinians, Fuller wrote, "To be sure we may all go on, killing one Scripture testimony and stoning another, till, at length, it would become an easy thing to assert that there is not an instance in all the New Testament in which our opinions are confronted."<sup>50</sup> The interpretation of Scripture had to begin with Scripture on its own terms in order to be effective.

Interpretation of Scripture was also to be conducted in a manner that reflected the author's intent and not the mere words of the text,<sup>51</sup> since in Fuller's doctrine of Scripture, applying a wooden reading to the text was not acceptable because one may follow the letter of the law and yet fail to do that

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>In those days prior to the Darwinian shift, which has caused a great deal of animus between many antagonistically atheistic scientists and fundamentalists seeking to defend a version of a revealed religion, there was a much greater harmony between adherents of science and revealed religion. In fact, during the Enlightenment phase there was active discourse and harmony between evangelicals and scientists. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 57-60.

<sup>47</sup>Fuller, *Sermons and Sketches*, in *Complete Works*, 1:160-61.

<sup>48</sup>The importance of prayer in the interpretation of Scripture is illustrated by Fuller's comments on the subject matter of sermons. Fuller, *Thoughts on Preaching*, in *Complete Works*, 1:714-15.

<sup>49</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:74.

<sup>50</sup>Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:206.

<sup>51</sup>Fuller, *Thoughts on Preaching*, in *Complete Works*, 1:713.

which God actually commands. Scripture was to be interpreted in light of the context in which it was written, in order to determine the principle and then to apply that principle to the contemporary context.<sup>52</sup> Fuller held that the Bible was pointed at internal conformity to God's moral law rather than external conformity, so finding the true meaning of Scripture was essential for determining doctrine as well as for preaching.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, interpretation of Scripture moved toward the principle that directed a behavior, not to the superficial practice.<sup>54</sup> The normative, rather than the regulative principle, was to drive interpretation. Thus, though voluntary societies were not mandated in Scripture, they could be formed for godly purposes.<sup>55</sup>

Fuller believed in the perspicuity of Scripture. All believers were capable of reading the text and determining whether a doctrine is in error or not.<sup>56</sup> Yet, Fuller also believed that there could be some differences in interpretation of Scripture between believers without a need for division or strife.<sup>57</sup> For peace in the body of Christ, all five aspects of special revelation--inspiration, inerrancy, authority, sufficiency and interpretation--were significant as they were used for discipleship and apologetics.

Fuller's doctrine of special revelation, particularly of Scripture appears to be well-developed, though it must be pieced together from a number of sources. Fuller's doctrine of special revelation was built upon his understanding of general revelation. Both doctrines impacted the polemical ministry of Fuller significantly, as he dealt with challenges from within and without the body of Christ.

### Revelation in Polemical Ministry

In every polemical work Fuller sought to engage the ideas of his opponent and compare them to Scripture.<sup>58</sup> The greatest compliment Fuller offered was that an argument was biblical. The most significant attack was when he said that an argument was unbiblical.<sup>59</sup> Fuller reserved his strongest

<sup>52</sup>Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Twelve Letters to a Friend*, in *Complete Works*, 1:626-28.

<sup>53</sup>Fuller, *Thoughts on Preaching*, in *Complete Works*, 1:712.

<sup>54</sup>Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Complete Works*, 1:626-28.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:629-37.

<sup>56</sup>Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:227.

<sup>57</sup>Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Complete Works*, 1:637. In some ways, Fuller appears to be using a theological triage method similar to that outlined in Mohler's article: R. Albert Mohler, "The Pastor as Theologian," in *A Theology for the Church*, eds. Daniel L. Akin, et al. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 927-34.

<sup>58</sup>Brewster, *Andrew Fuller*, 48. Alan Sell cautions twenty-first-century readers from reading a modern liberal denial of the nature of Scripture into the attacks on Scripture from the deists and others like the Socinians. Their denials of the full authority or full inspiration of Scripture still generally (though Paine may be an exception) held Scripture in a fairly high regard. Few of them would have actually said that Scripture is morally evil, as some liberals tend to do today. Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 86-87.

<sup>59</sup>One reason this was so important in Fuller's argumentation was that arguing biblically prevented the charge of bigotry, such as those that were levied against him by the

polemical language for individuals who either mangled the Bible through bad interpretation, as several of his opponents did, or attacked Scripture outright, as did Thomas Paine. Of Vidler, his universalist opponent, Fuller scathingly wrote, "Except in the productions of a certain maniac in our own country, I never recollect to have seen so much violence done to the word of God in so small a compass."<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Fuller's tone when responding to Paine was severe. He wrote, "We have evidence upon oath that 'religion was his [Paine's] favourite topic when intoxicated;' and, from the scurrility of the performance, it is not improbable that he was frequently in this situation while writing his 'Age of Reason.'"<sup>61</sup> Fuller was much more amicable toward his controversial opponents whom he felt were faithfully engaging the text of Scripture, even if he thought they read it wrongly.<sup>62</sup> Fuller's concern in polemics was to present Christ rightly through Scripture rather than to promote his own advantage, as demonstrated in his dealings with Deism, Socinianism and Sandemanianism.

There had been deists in England before Fuller's time, but they had mainly been suppressed by the state church.<sup>63</sup> In Fuller's day, the deists were

Socinians. Fuller argues, "If we be attached to principles on account of their being *ours*, or because *we* have adopted them, rather than because they appear to us to be taught in the holy Scriptures . . . we are subject to the charge of bigotry." Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:182-83. If an argument is consistent with Scripture, then the charge of bigotry cannot stand. This point is hugely important for contemporary Christians, particularly as the charge of bigotry is being levied for doctrinal positions that have never been questioned and which are clearly scriptural.

<sup>60</sup>Fuller, *Letters to Mr. Vidler on Universal Salvation*, in *Complete Works*, 2:301.

<sup>61</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:37.

<sup>62</sup>In Fuller's debate with Sandemanianism, he is actually complimentary of his opponents' reliance on Scripture: Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Complete Works*, 1:623. There is no specific quote, but Fuller's tone of argumentation with Abraham Booth is much more kind than that with opponents of Scripture. Fuller was frustrated with Booth's method of arguing at times, but seemed genuinely to respect Booth's attempt to read Scripture. See the Fuller, *Six Letters to Dr. Ryland Respecting the Controversy with the Rev. A. Booth*, in *Complete Works*, 2:699-715. An illustration of this respect may be found in the somewhat comical scene during Fuller's fictional debates with characters representing Booth, Ryland, and himself. In this scene the characters are discussing the nature of Christ's substitution in salvation. James, who represents Fuller, has just declared that above all, the debaters each agree that Christ has made substitution and is worthy of worship. Then Fuller introduces a narrative comment stating, "James here paused, and wept; and both John [Ryland] and Peter [Booth] wept with him." Fuller, *Conversations between Peter, James, and John*, in *Complete Works*, 2:687. Clearly Fuller understood himself to be a brother in Christ with Booth, though they disagreed significantly and publically.

<sup>63</sup>For a thorough introduction to the deistic movement in England preceding and during Fuller's time, see: James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680-1750*, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); John Orr, *English Deism: Its Roots and Its Fruits* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1934); Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 111-43. Orr's analysis is, perhaps, a bit dated, but is very helpful and thorough. Sell provides the most concise summary of Deism and discusses Fuller's interaction with Deism particularly. Herrick's volume tends to be a bit more focused on the argumentation of the Deists, but it is helpful in understanding the trend of the movement.

able to participate more fully in the public debate because their version of faith was protected under The Act of Toleration, just like the Dissenters.<sup>64</sup> Fuller thus deemed it important to engage in apologetics against Deism because of its vocal challenge to orthodoxy and the progress of the gospel. The most significant proponent of Deism in Fuller's day was the American revolutionary Thomas Paine. Paine published *The Age of Reason* in two installments in 1794-1795. The first part of Paine's treatise was written without access to Scripture, just prior to his arrest and imprisonment for his role in the French Revolution. Paine's goal in the first part of *The Age of Reason* was to defend Deism from the charges of atheism and also to attack revealed religions, particularly Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Once he was released from prison, because of the uproar and response caused by the first part of *The Age of Reason*, Paine published the second part, which was a more detailed assault on the Christian religion, particularly on the nature of Scripture.

Though Paine's rejection of Christianity focused on a rejection of special revelation, it also relied on an improper view of general revelation. Paine believed that human reason could reliably determine truth about the Creator through revelation. Paine wrote, "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."<sup>66</sup> Paine recognized the order in the world and that consistency in a religious system was necessary. However, he also claimed that truth could be found in the "ever-existing word of God that we behold in His works."<sup>67</sup> Paine and Fuller agreed that the character of God was evident in the created order, and they both agreed that humans could perceive the nature of God in the created order. However, Paine held that the fall was a myth and the rational ability of humanity was in no way diminished through the noetic effects of sin.<sup>68</sup> In fact, Paine required that any revelation be directly accessible to all humans equally, which was his basis for accepting only general revelation as legitimate.<sup>69</sup> Like neo-orthodox theologians in a later time, Paine declared that revelation was by definition "something communicated *immediately* from God to man."<sup>70</sup> Thus Paine allowed for general revelation, viewing it

<sup>64</sup>Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680-1750*, 2. Emerson allows this more indirectly, but focuses on the caustic attitude of the Puritans as a cause for the rise of deism. Roger L. Emerson, "Heresy, the Social Order, and English Deism," *Church History* 37 (1968): 389-403.

<sup>65</sup>A. J. Ayer, *Thomas Paine* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 141. It is important to remember when dealing with Thomas Paine that he was not primarily an original thinker, but a popularizer. Therefore, while his writing is punchier than other more intellectually detached deistic writers, it tends to be a quick read, designed for the so-called common man to read.

<sup>66</sup>Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, in *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, ed. William Van der Weyde, Patriots' ed., vol. VIII (New Rochelle, NY: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925), 84.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 7.

as sufficient, but also as the total extent of God's self-revelation to humans. This view was instigated by a denial of the effects of sin in the world and an excessively positive view of human reason. Fuller's rebuttal of Deism would have been incomplete had his doctrine of general revelation not been so fully developed.

In addition to his exaltation of human reason and emphasis on general revelation, Paine also explicitly attacked Scripture with an attempt to show that the text of the Bible was immoral, textually unreliable, and full of inconsistencies.<sup>71</sup> Fuller's polemical response to Paine in *The Gospel its Own Witness* provided a clear demonstration of Fuller's doctrine of special revelation and the importance of the doctrine in controversy. Paine's objective in *The Age of Reason* was to go "through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder and fell trees." Paine laid out the challenge that Fuller accepted: "Here 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."<sup>72</sup> Though not exhaustively so, it appears that Fuller structured *The Gospel its Own Witness* to attack Paine's *The Age of Reason* point by point. In his response, Fuller sought to show that there was harmony in revelation, not just between the Old and New Testament, but also between general revelation and Scripture.<sup>73</sup> Fuller recounted numerous times that Scripture clearly spoke in unison with the historical record, with nature, and with itself, despite Paine's accusations. During his rebuttal of Paine, Fuller emphasized the fulfillment of prophecy in Scripture,<sup>74</sup> the resonance of Scripture with morality derived from the reason according to Enlightenment standards,<sup>75</sup> the internal consistency of Scripture,<sup>76</sup> the compatibility of scriptural doctrines

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 100-01. Gregg Allison notes the nature of the debates about the inerrancy of Scripture during the time leading up to Fuller's ministry. Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 112-14. There were assaults on the nature of Scripture by theologians such as Hugo Grotius, German biblical critics, and a host of English Deists. Though Fuller responds in detail to Thomas Paine, the first part of *The Gospel its Own Witness* recounts the history of English Deism before it gets to the details of Paine's *Age of Reason*. Though many evangelicals took the authority of Scripture for granted, Mark Noll notes that a defense of scriptural authority was particularly important during the eighteenth-century rise of evangelicalism "since the weight of other ancient Christian authorities declined so rapidly for so many." Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 266. Fuller was a contemporary of Schleiermacher, though it is not apparent that the two had any contact, that fact gives some indication of the theological temperature of the day.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 215.

<sup>73</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:18.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 2:58-63.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 2:63-68. This particular chapter demonstrates Fuller's approach, but it is much less helpful for contemporary apologetics because the morality assumed is culturally conditioned and really represents more of a Christian ethical schema than would be acceptable among atheists today. This was, however, particularly significant in Fuller's context since one of Paine's attacks on Scripture was that it promoted immorality. See, for example, Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 135-36.

<sup>76</sup>Fuller, *The Gospel Its Own Witness*, in *Complete Works*, 2:68-74.

with reason,<sup>77</sup> and the compatibility of Scripture with natural revelation, particularly the magnitude of the creation.<sup>78</sup> Each one of these arguments dealt with a specific challenge against Scripture presented by Paine. Fuller's final goal was to show, "[Special] 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>79</sup> Fuller could not have so clearly and effectively confronted Paine's version of Deism without a well-developed doctrine of special revelation.

In writing against the Socinians, Fuller noted similarities between a deistic approach to revelation in general.<sup>80</sup> The Socinians had a similar approach to the condition of man that allowed them to value human reason as able to perceive truth in the created order that would supplant the authority of Scripture.<sup>81</sup> The Socinians held sin to be human frailty rather than an offense against God and counted the fall of Adam as myth.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, like Paine, Socinians did not think that human ability to perceive God in creation and the ability to reason from those perceptions to moral truth had been diminished. The Socinians of Fuller's day argued that humans had the ability to construct sufficient knowledge of God from the created order such that their worship, even when it related little to the Christian doctrine of salvation and neglected the true nature of Christ, was still acceptable to God.<sup>83</sup> Priestley, one of Fuller's main Socinian opponents, specifically taught that there was sufficient good in humans to demonstrate the virtue necessary to be acceptable to God.<sup>84</sup> Since general revelation was overly emphasized in Socinianism, and its worth for human knowledge of God exalted, it became a point of attack for Fuller. The goal in developing and presenting a doctrine of revelation was to emphasize the insufficiency of general revelation. Thus Fuller's attempt to ensure the need for special revelation, particularly Scripture, was made clear to his audiences.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 2:74-84.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 2:84-97.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 2:97.

<sup>80</sup>Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:224. Sell notes that Priestley considered it slanderous that Fuller intimates a connection between Priestley's reading of revelation and that of deists. Sell is substantially critical of Fuller's rebuttals both against the Deists and against the Socinians. Alan P. F. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005), 121.

<sup>81</sup>Of a Socinian attempt to explain away inspiration of the authors of Scripture, Fuller writes, "Not this is not only 'making the reason of the individual the sole umpire in matters of faith,' but virtually rendering [special] revelation unnecessary. If the reason of the individual is to sit supreme judge, and insist that every doctrine which [special] revelation proposes shall approve itself to its dictates or be rejected, the necessity of the latter might as well be totally denied." Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:224.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 2:117.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 2:162-64.

<sup>84</sup>Fuller notes that Priestley makes claims to the contrary, but his argumentation refutes his statements. Ibid., 2:201-02.

Socinians sought to claim Scripture as an authority, in order to place themselves within the stream of traditional Christianity, but still they rejected certain teachings of Scripture.<sup>85</sup> The Socinians preached a selective fallibility of the Bible. That is, they taught that certain of the parts of the Bible are true and therefore authoritative, though parts must be ignored as full of human error. Priestley, Fuller's main opponent in the discussion of Socinianism, wrote:

The writers of the books of Scripture were *men*, and therefore *fallible*; but all that we have to do with them is in the character of *historians* and *witnesses* of what they heard and saw. . . . Like all other historians, they were liable to mistakes with respect to things of small moment, because they might not give sufficient attention to them; and with respect to their *reasoning*, we are fully at liberty to judge of it, as well as that of any other man, by a due consideration of the propositions they advance, and the arguments they allege. For it by no means follows, because a man has had communications with the Deity for certain purposes, and he may be depended upon with respect to his account of those communications, that he is in other respects more wise and knowing than other men.<sup>86</sup>

Fuller rejected these assertions by Priestley, because, he wrote, "If the Scriptures profess to be Divinely inspired, and assume to be the infallible standard of faith and practice, we must either receive them as such, or, if we would be consistent, disown the writers as imposters."<sup>87</sup> The problem, as Fuller aptly observed, was that a selective acceptance of biblical content puts the reason of the individual into the position of ultimate authority over the Word.<sup>88</sup> If the individual human was the authority over Scripture, then there would be nothing left of the text but a shell of tradition.<sup>89</sup> Socinianism was more dangerous to a doctrine of special revelation than Deism, because the error was more subtle and thus more likely to trip a careless Christian into an egregious error. A carefully crafted doctrine of special revelation was even more important to Fuller's defense of orthodoxy against the challenges of Socinianism than it was to his defense against Deism.

In addition to Socinianism and Deism, Sandemanianism was another competing theology of Fuller's day that was generally harmful to a doctrine

<sup>85</sup>By way of illustration, see: Wayne A. Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 282-84.

<sup>86</sup>Joseph Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part II* (Birmingham, UK: Pearson and Rollason for J. Johnson, London, 1787), 36. Cited in Fuller, *Calvinist and Socinian Systems*, in *Complete Works*, 2:197.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:196.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:201.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:206.



of special revelation. Sandemanianism was characterized mainly by the belief that bare faith in the bare facts of the gospel was sufficient for salvation.<sup>90</sup> A characteristic of Sandemanianism, which perhaps contributed to the misreading of the nature of saving faith, was an overly wooden reading of Scripture.<sup>91</sup> Fuller had a profound respect for the reliance of the Sandemanians on Scripture for authority, preferring the Sandemanian misinterpretation of Scripture to the Socinian denial of Scripture. Fuller commented, "Even in those things wherein they appear to me to misunderstand the Scriptures, there is a regard toward them which is worthy of imitation."<sup>92</sup> It was good to read and rely upon Scripture as the final authority for matters of life and practice, but Fuller recognized the potential error in bad hermeneutics.

On hermeneutics Fuller wrote, "To require express precept or example, or to adhere in all cases to the literal sense of those precepts which are given us, in things of a moral nature, would greatly mislead us."<sup>93</sup> Failing to implement the principle of the Word would be nearly as dangerous as ignoring the Word entirely. Fuller spent several pages demonstrating ways that the regulative principle for worship and an excessively literal interpretation of Scrip-

<sup>90</sup>Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Complete Works*, 1:566.

<sup>91</sup>There was a somewhat anti-metaphysical bent among evangelicals during the eighteenth-century as a reaction to the Enlightenment. Bebbington notes, "Aversion to imposing theoretical structure on scripture probably grew over time, culminating in Simeon's dictum, 'Be Bible Christians, not system Christians'. Systems were not only distant from the facts; they were also bound to generate difference of opinion." Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 58. This appears to be related to the emphasis on the literal reading of Scripture, apart from system, by the Sandemanians, including their demand for absolute unanimity in interpretation of Scripture within a congregation. Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Complete Works*, 1:636-37. Additionally, in Scotland during the time of the rise of the relatively small Sandemanian sect (it never exceeded 1000 members), Thomas Reid's Scottish Common-Sense philosophy was en vogue. Bebbington reports that in the eighteenth-century, evangelicals were involved in the new philosophies of the day, including acceptance of Reid's philosophy, through the works of Thomas Chalmers and John Witherspoon. It seems possible, therefore, that the epistemology that Reid introduced may have made inroads into the Scottish evangelical movement known as the Sandemanians, thus leading them to look for a plain sense reading of Scripture at the expense of a more comprehensive, systematic reading of Scripture. Bebbington writes, "This realism, or common-sense view, allowed that certain basic axioms of thought are grasped intuitively. It enabled Evangelicals to express in a fresh way their belief in the accessibility of God." Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 59. McGowan is much more skeptical about any positive influence from the Enlightenment philosophy, particularly Reid's Scottish Realism, noting the Reid himself was not an evangelical, but rather a minister in the Church of Scotland who identified with the moderate party in the Kirk. A. T. B. McGowan, "Evangelicalism in Scotland from Knox to Cunningham," in *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, eds. Michael A. G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 79-80. McGowan's conclusions, however, do not eliminate the possibility that the Sandemanians could have been infected by the attitudes of Thomas Reid's philosophy. There is a strong possibility that Glas or Sandeman may have come into contact with Scottish Common Sense Realism, particularly through the work of Thomas Chalmers. However, no clear link can be found and further pursuit of this is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>92</sup>Fuller, *Strictures on Sandemanianism*, in *Complete Works*, 1:623.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:624.

ture were damaging to the Christian life.<sup>94</sup> An overly literal hermeneutic was dangerous for Christian community, as well. Since the bare testimony of Scripture was to be accepted among Sandemanians, only one reading could ever be considered viable. Therefore, the Sandemanians required unanimity in all church decisions. If a decision was deemed scriptural by the majority, and a certain party in the church did not agree, then that party was deemed to be in opposition to Scripture. Fuller commented, “But who is to judge whether the reasons of the dissentients be Scriptural or not? The *majority*, no doubt, and an opposition to their opinion is an opposition to *the Word of God*.”<sup>95</sup> This meant that there were occasions when people were excluded from a Sandemanian congregation in order to enforce the unanimity within the unity of the local body. Fuller’s conflict with Sandemanianism illustrated how important his doctrine of Scripture was for evangelical renewal. The conflict between Fuller and the Sandemanians demonstrated that it was not merely overt attacks on Scripture that were considered dangerous, but that any misreading of Scripture must be corrected.

Fuller’s doctrine of revelation was essential to his polemical ministry. However, as was negatively illustrated in his polemical encounter with Sandemanianism, there were significant pastoral implications to the doctrine of revelation--particularly the doctrine of Scripture.

### Revelation in Pastoral Ministry

Fuller demonstrated the centrality of Scripture in his role as a pastor, through his reliance on Scripture for preaching, teaching and devotional use.<sup>96</sup> When writing and speaking to young pastors, Fuller encouraged preaching a chapter-by-chapter exposition of the Bible. This, he argued, was vital because, “In going over a book, I have frequently been struck with surprise in meeting with texts which, as they had always occurred to me, I had understood in a sense utterly foreign from what manifestly appeared to be their meaning when viewed *in connexion with their context*.”<sup>97</sup> The pastor must study the Word in order to understand it before he can rightly expound it. Yet, the understanding of the Bible must come through a dependence upon God.<sup>98</sup> Despite the centrality of Scripture to Fuller’s preaching ministry, he saw the need to move beyond bare exposition into discourse on doctrines. Fuller wrote, “There is a great variety of *subjects*, both in doctrinal and practical religion, which require to be illustrated, established, and improved; which cannot be done in an exposition.”<sup>99</sup> This preached doctrine, though, had to begin in biblical exposition before it moved beyond it.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 1:625-29.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 1:637.

<sup>96</sup>General revelation played little role in Fuller’s pastoral ministry except, perhaps, to provide a doctrinal grounding for the necessity of Scripture.

<sup>97</sup>Fuller, *Thoughts on Preaching*, in *Complete Works*, 1:712.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 1:713.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 1:714.

Fuller's sermons demonstrated both the centrality of the Word to his ministry, as well as his facility with the whole of Scripture. Each of the sermons began with a central text, as was the custom of the day. Fuller then typically constructed his sermon based on the structure of the text. For example, in his 1809 sermon, "Jesus the True Messiah," Fuller had four main points, each of which was drawn from a key phrase in the text of Psalm 40:6-8. In this sermon, Fuller was preaching apologetically to Jews, seeking to prove Christ's messiahship. He did this by weaving together many texts and allusions from the Old Testament in order to call them to repentance in faith and give them confidence that the message of the Old Testament continued in the New.<sup>100</sup>

In some sermons Fuller demonstrated what might be considered a historical-grammatical approach to the text. For example, in his sermon "The Gospel the Means of Universal Peace," Fuller used as his text Malachi 4:5-6. Instead of beginning directly with exposition, Fuller preceded the discussion of the text itself with an introduction to Malachi and then an explanation of some of the prophetic claims made by the text that were later fulfilled by John the Baptist. After this introduction of several pages, Fuller transitioned into a three-point exposition of the text of the verses themselves.<sup>101</sup> Though only two examples from the many provided in his collected works, which form a small sample of his preaching ministry, these examples show that the text drove the message and not the reverse. They also demonstrate that Fuller sought to proclaim the apparent meaning of Scripture, and not an interpretation which he imposed on the text. Fuller's sermons relied on an authoritative and inspired text that provided a unified message for his preaching ministry.

Fuller also demonstrated the importance of Scripture in his ministry because he spent time and energy reconciling passages that appear to conflict. Harmonizing difficult passages was apparently a part of his ministry performed for the benefit of his readers. These harmonizations, detailed and helpful, served to equip men to deal with the deistic accusations, as well as other doctrinal controversies. In one case, Fuller harmonized John 5:40 and John 6:44, 45, 64, and 65. The apparent contradiction among these passages was that the first says that men *will not* come to Christ; the second says that men *cannot* come to Christ unless drawn by God. By way of explanation, Fuller unpacked the difference between natural and moral ability explaining that unless God enabled man through regeneration, he both cannot morally and will not naturally come to Christ.<sup>102</sup> In this example, a system helped Fuller to interpret and demonstrate the unity of Scripture but the system was still subject to Scripture.

In another, much simpler, example, Fuller compared the content of Genesis 8:22 and 45:6. In the first, the pattern of harvest was promised for-

<sup>100</sup>Fuller, *Sermons and Sketches*, in *Complete Works*, 1:210-20.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:253-66.

<sup>102</sup>Fuller, *Apparent Contradictions*, in *Complete Works*, 1:667-69.

ever to continue. In the second, five years without harvest were promised. Fuller noted there is a difference between a general rule as in the first, and a specific judgment on a specific nation as in the second.<sup>103</sup> This example showed that even small details of apparent contradiction were significant to Fuller. More examples could be considered. However, the significance is not the actual resolution of the apparent conflicts, but rather the fact that Fuller spent the time carefully to resolve at least thirty different examples of apparent contradictions. Fuller understood that the authority of Scripture depended on its consistency. Therefore he sought to remove the difficulties caused by apparent contradictions in order to help people have “a perception of the particular beauty of God’s word, as well as a general persuasion of its harmony.”<sup>104</sup>

Fuller demonstrated the importance of Scripture in the Christian life by his example and by his urging. In a response to a query from a believer, Fuller wrote urging a regular, scheduled time of Bible reading every morning that preceded prayer. In an early version of a “quiet time,” Fuller exhorted the reader to a reliance on Scripture alone rather than commentaries about Scripture. “If,” he wrote, “I read the Scriptures, and exercise my own mind on their meaning, only using the helps with which I am furnished when I particularly need them, such knowledge will avail me more than any other.”<sup>105</sup> Fuller also encouraged taking notes after reading for better retention.<sup>106</sup> Fuller encouraged pastors to read the Bible first to feed their souls and only after that to develop their expositional sermons.<sup>107</sup>

The importance of personal Bible study for the individual was not primarily duty to God, but the sanctification that comes through continued, regular exposure to the Word. In a sermon directed to the dejected, Fuller’s concluding exhortation was to “Read the Holy Scriptures, pray to the Fountain of light for understanding, attend the preaching of the word; and all this not with the immediate view of determining what you are, but what Christ is.”<sup>108</sup> The Bible was vital for developing Christlikeness and was to be read habitually. As Fuller noted in an essay on progressive holiness, “The more we read the Holy Scriptures, the more we shall imbibe their spirit, and be formed by them as by a model. It is thus that the word of Christ dwells richly in us in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”<sup>109</sup> Scripture was central to the shaping of the individual Christian, but also for promoting the kingdom through public discourse.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 1:672.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 1:667.

<sup>105</sup>Fuller, *Answers to Queries*, in *Complete Works*, 1:788.

<sup>106</sup>This process that Fuller recommends to the layman is very similar to the process of Bible study that he commends to the pastor preparing his sermon. Fuller, *Thoughts on Preaching*, in *Complete Works*, 1:714.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 1:713-14.

<sup>108</sup>Fuller, *Sermons and Sketches*, in *Complete Works*, 1:236.

<sup>109</sup>Fuller, *Miscellaneous Tracts, Essays, Letters & C.*, in *Complete Works*, 3:665.

### Conclusion

The theological environment during Fuller's day was filled with overt and subversive challenges to revelation. Enlightenment rationalism in its variegated forms presented a robust challenge to faith, which caused some to question at least certain parts of Scripture, particularly the recorded miracles. When Scripture was denigrated, it became necessary to exalt human ability to distill knowledge about God from general revelation if belief in a deity was to be maintained. As a result of the various challenges, Fuller's work contained a carefully developed doctrine of general revelation that emphasized the need for special revelation. Fuller's work also contained a robust presentation of the doctrine of special revelation, particularly Scripture, designed to demonstrate the significance of Scripture for authentic Christian life. Still his approach was occasional making some assembly required to obtain a systemized picture of Fuller's doctrines.

The systematization of Fuller's doctrine of revelation is possible because, beyond his limited work in systematic theology, Fuller wrote extensively on the doctrine of revelation in his various sermons, letters, and polemical texts. Particularly through his interaction with Deism, Fuller demonstrated his doctrine of general revelation, though the controversy over Socinianism also played a role in unearthing Fuller's ideas about general revelation. Fuller's doctrine of general revelation was significant because it pointed toward the necessity of special revelation.

Through an examination of Fuller's doctrine of revelation, it seems clear that Fuller's doctrines of general and special revelation were both well-developed and essential to his ministry. The controversies that Fuller faced in his life served to sharpen him theologically, and this shows through in his careful explanation of the doctrine of revelation. Were Fuller less reliant on Scripture for his spiritual life and private ministry, his arguments would have little value to the contemporary reader, except as dated artifacts of a bygone era. Instead, Fuller's work was founded on the Word of God, which continues to stand the test of time.